Research about the Mass Media and Disaster:
Never (Well Hardly Ever) The Twain Shall Meet

Joseph Scanlon
Professor Emeritus and Director,
Emergency Communications Research Unit,
Carleton University,
Ottawa, Canada

Abstract
A review of two areas of scholarship into the role of the mass media in crisis and/or disaster reveals a dichotomy. There is substantial research by scholars in a number of disciplines and by scholars in Journalism and Mass Communications. The two appear unaware of what each other is doing. Cross-referencing is rare. The scholarship shows that the media can play a critical role before, during and after such incidents. The media are essential, for example, for warnings to be effective and may be the single most important source of public information in the wake of a disaster. The scholarship also shows that media reports that distort what happens in a disaster and lead to misunderstandings. Failure by officials to issue a warning, for example, may be a result of the myth that people panic, a myth perpetuated by the media. Media scholarship also shows however that in one area where the media are often criticized they are not guilty as charged: the limited research available suggests many victims and relatives of victims welcome the presence of the media and do not see journalists as intruders.

> Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.
> -- Rudyard Kipling, "Ballad of East and West"

Research about the role of Journalism in disaster has been done by disaster scholars from a number of areas of social science *and* by Mass Communications or Journalism scholars. The result is a dichotomy. The general social science literature on media and disaster rarely focuses on issues – such as ethical concerns -- that dominate the Mass Communications and Journalism literature. The Journalism/ Mass Com literature includes information that supports the findings from social science research but the authors do not make that connection. There is, in short, a great deal of information about the role the mass media play in crisis and disaster but it is found in two compartments.

When Tom Drabek reviewed the literature in the disaster field, he discovered a number of publications about mass media and disaster, but he also discovered that only a handful were published in Mass Communication or Journalism scholarly journals (Anderson, 1969; Drabek, 1986; Kueneman and Wright, 1975; Scanlon, Luukko and Morton, 1978; Waxman, 1973) or in monograph or book form (Singer and Green, 1972; Scanlon, 1976; Scanlon, Dixon and McClellan, 1982; Okabe, 1979). Similarly, when the author reviewed the main scholarly journals in the Mass Com/ Journalism field -- *Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly, Journalism and Mass Communications Educator, Journalism Studies, Newspaper Research Journal, Quill, Mass Communications and Society, Public Relations Quarterly* and *Canadian Journal of Communication* – he discovered there were few articles about crises or disasters. When an article did appear even if it overlapped the disaster literature, the authors did not indicate that. Until September 11, 2001, that would have been the end of the story. However, since 9/11 the media have been giving massive attention to terrorism and to ethical issues related to terrorism – and the Mass Communications and Journalism literature has echoed that shift. But, once again, this new scholarship has not acknowledged the existing and relevant research.

This chapter reviews what is known about the media and crisis and/or disaster, whether this comes from the general social science literature or the Mass Communications and Journalism literature. It does not show – as the quote from Kipling implies – that the twain never meet. It does suggest a dichotomy. This is an important finding for, as E. L. Quarantelli has pointed out, practically everyone is willing to express

views or opinions about what will happen in disasters yet the great majority of people in Western society have only limited experience with disasters.

> So where do people get their images of disastrous phenomena if they do not base them on personal experiences? Some of the pictures they have undoubtedly come from deeply rooted cultural beliefs…. But we think a strong case can be made that what average citizens and officials expect about disasters, what they come to know on ongoing disasters, and what they learned from disasters that have occurred, are primarily it not exclusively learned from mass media accounts (Quarantelli, 1991, p. 2).

The social science literature has established that the media play a key role in many aspects of crisis and disasters. Mass media participation is critical, for example, for effective warning and the mass media may be the glue that binds societies in certain occasions. Yet the media are also responsible for many of the misconceptions that exist about disaster, misconceptions that may lead to errors of judgment when disaster strikes. A review of texts suggests Journalism scholars are unaware of this. Strangely, the one area where media scholars have shown the most concern – the way journalists deal with survivors and relatives of victims -- is the area where the limited available research suggests the media are not as guilty as painted.

Media Response to Disasters

It is now fairly well established what media do when disaster strikes. The media hear of the event, try to obtain more information, use their own files to add background to their stories, dispatch reporters and report anything they are told. Often they devote all their air time or much of the space available to that single story (Scanlon and Alldred, 1982). To gather material to fill this expanded news hole, the media draft anyone

available. When two teenagers killed 15 students – including themselves -- and wounded 13 others at Columbine High School in Colorado, KCNC-TV in Denver used every staff member available for its 13 hours of non-stop coverage:

> Well over 150 newsroom regulars and extras pitched in to make the extensive coverage possible. Off-duty employees came into the station without being summoned and took up posts. Newsroom hierarchies were discarded. Everyone, intern and news director alike, answered phones and responded when a need arose (Dean, 1999, p. 24).

On such occasions, the media will also use its technical resources and ingenuity to gather information. For example, when Mount St. Helen's erupted, NBC took a helicopter into the crater and persuaded a geologist to view and comment on the resulting tape. At Three Mile Island, staff from the Philadelphia *Inquirer* copied the license plates of all vehicles in the parking lot, traced the owners and started phoning them. Many were belligerent but 50 agreed to interviews (Sandman and Paden, 1979, p. 48).

All media monitor what their competitors are reporting and copy it if they think it is newsworthy. There are also many interconnections among the media. For example, almost all Canadian newspapers belong to the Canadian Press (CP) news agency. Everything is shared with CP which means any story produced by one paper is made available to every other paper. The electronic media have similar agreements. That's why visuals shot by one media outlet soon appear on stations around the world. These interconnections also mean that a false report can generate headlines around the world.

That, in fact, is exactly what happened in November, 1973, when Swedish radio broadcast a program about the nuclear power station at Barseback. The power station was still under construction but the program included dramatic fiction – *set nine years in the*

future – about a radioactive release. That night and the next day all major Swedish media reported that the program led to widespread panic and that story was carried around the world by Reuters news agency. All those reports were based on an unsubstantiated report filed by one regional correspondent in Malmo:

> Panic was the main theme of his [report] panic in a whole country, perhaps two. [Malmo is just a short ferry ride from Denmark]. The telephone exchanges of the police stations, fire stations and mass media in two countries were reported to be jammed. People queuing before the civil shelters. Large crowds in the communities around Barseback taking to the roads. People in Malmo collecting their valuables and heading southward in their cars (Rosengren, Arvidson and Struesson, 1974, p. 12).

The story led to widespread comment and editorials, even questions in Parliament about how future similar panics could be avoided. The report in short was accepted as true because of the widespread belief among journalists that people do panic in crisis situations. But the researchers who interviewed 1,089 respondents found that while persons had reacted to the broadcast, there was not a single incident of flight or panic.

> The "behavioural" reactions to the programme as a rule consisted in contacting family members, relatives or neighbours, over the telephone or face-to-face. Other reactions were to close the windows, think over what to bring along in case of a possible evacuation, etc. No case of telephoning to the mass media, to the police or other authorities were found…. Nor did we find anyone having fled in panic (Rosengren, Arvidson and Struesson, 1974, p. 6)

The Barseback "panic" was a media invention that spread 'round the world.

One reason why such a distorted account can be so readily accepted is that when a major stories break, there is also widespread cooperation among reporters. That was true at Three Mile Island:

> From the moment the Harrisburg press corps heard about the accident [at Three Mile Island]…we all shared information. We got drawings and pierced together events…. We went out and got books on nuclear energy and compared them and discussed how a reactor works (Sandman and Paden, 1979, p. 16).

It was the same in Dallas, the day President Kennedy was assassinated.

> Throughout the day, every reporter on the scene seemed to do his best to help everyone else. Information came only in bits and pieces. Every one who picked up a bit or piece passed it on. I know no one who held anything out. Nobody thought about an exclusive. It didn't seem important (Wicker, 1996, p. 28.)

Warnings and Rumor Control

In his review of the behavior of mass communications systems in disasters, Quarantelli concluded that passing on warnings is "Without doubt, the clearest and most consistent role [of mass media] in a disaster… (Quarantelli, 1991, p. 23). Warnings are effective only if they are specific about the threat, specific about who is affected and specific about what to do and – because persons hearing a warning from one source are inclined to check with another – they are effective only if they come from all possible sources. At Mount St. Helens, Perry and Green found that 80 per cent of those who received a warning tried to confirm it with another source (Perry and Greene, 1983, p. 66). Since one source used to check is the media, an effective warning must come through the media as well as other channels.

When Peel Regional Police ordered an evacuation of Mississauga, just west of Toronto, they announced that there had been a train derailment and some cars were leaking chlorine and that there had been propane explosions and there could be more. The threat was clear. To make certain everyone knew if he or she was affected by this

warning, they went door to door and were very clear about what residents should do -- leave! Persons were told either to use their own vehicles or accept a ride on a Mississauga Transit bus. [Buses were coming along each street with police.] The warnings were reinforced by police cars using loud hailers alerting residents to the threat and the evacuation order.

Most important, instead of telling the media when they had ordered an evacuation, Peel Police told the media when they were *about* to order one – and provided maps so television could show precisely what area was to be evacuated next. Many residents first received the evacuation message over radio or television. Some heard first via a phone call from someone who had heard or seen a news reports (Scanlon and Padgham, 1980). They were ready to leave when the police arrived at their door.

The mass media can also play a vital role in keeping people informed after disaster strikes. When ice jams blocked the river and water poured over the dykes in Peace River, Alberta, officials ordered evacuations of several residential areas, schools and part of the downtown business section -- almost at the same time. Families were separated – some were still at home but some were already at work -- and some agencies had trouble locating their staff. [Their employees had been forced out of their homes and their offices had also been evacuated.] Everyone tuned in to local radio: 100 per cent of a sample reported that was how they kept informed. Many said the only time they were really worried was when the local station temporarily went off the air. It was one of the businesses evacuated and had to re-establish in a building above the flood plain (Scanlon, Osborne and McClellan, 1996).

The media can also be critical in putting down rumours. When a severe windstorm hit Nova Scotia, there was a rumour that the ferry between North Sydney and Port aux Basques, Newfoundland, had sunk. The rumour stopped when the mayor sent a reporter from the one radio station still on the air to interview the ferry captain at the docks. The captain said that the voyage had been a rough one but his ship was fine (Scanlon, 1977). That killed the rumor.

Convergence

The media not only cover dramatic events, they cover them in a massive way. Within 24 hours, there were 325 media personnel in the isolated Newfoundland community of Gander after an air crash involving the 101st Airborne, several thousand media in Lockerbie, Scotland after the crash of Pam Am 103. There were media-created helicopter traffic jams over Coalinga, California after the earthquake and a media city with its own mayor and Saturday evening entertainment near the Branch Davidian compound during the stand-off at Waco. John Hansen, the assistant fire chief, handled media relations after the bombing at Oklahoma City:

> By the second day, we had nicknamed the media area "satellite city" as there was almost a two square block area of nothing but satellite trucks and live trucks lined up side by side. Several prestigious network television journalists told me they had never seen that many media trucks covering any single incident, including the O. J. Simpson trial…. As more and more reporters arrived from all across the country, I admit that I was in awe. On the other side of the microphones and tape recorders were the voices and faces we all know from "Nightline", "20/20", "Dateline," "48 Hours" and other shows (Hansen, 1998, pp: 56-57).

In 1957, Charles Fritz and J. H. Mathewson labeled this type of massive response to disaster as, "convergence". They said that in the wake of a disaster there are three types of convergence: personal convergence – the actual physical movement of persons on foot, by automobile or in other vehicles; informational convergence – the movement or transmission of messages; and materiel convergence – the physical movement of supplies and equipment. (Fritz and Mathewson, 1957) They said all these forms of convergence cause problems – for example informational convergence jams telephones making emergency communications difficult.

> [In Lockerbie] massive congestion to the public telephone network…brought normal telecommunications almost to a standstill [because of] an insatiable demand for telephone lines for emergency and support services and for voluntary agencies and the media (McIntosh, 1989).

Fritz and Mathewson said convergence is a direct result of media reports partly because early media reports are not specific enough to satisfy the needs and curiosity of those hearing them.

> One of the most effective ways of securing such lead time would be to delay public announcements of disaster until the organized units would have had an opportunity to arrive on the scene… The possibility of this type of coordination between the broadcast media and official disaster agencies should receive further consideration (Fritz and Mathewson, 1957, p. 75).

This conclusion was largely accepted for nearly 40 years; but it is flawed. For one thing, in a disaster the initial response is not by emergency personnel but by survivors and in a real disaster with *widespread* damage and destruction, there is no scene. But the major weakness with this conclusion is that convergence is not triggered solely by the media. In a study of a tire fire – 14 million used rubber tires burned for 18 days – Scanlon identified

hundreds of responders, all legitimate: for example, 12 police detachments and three police forces, 26 fire departments, 27 federal government agencies, 60 voluntary agencies. None of that was triggered by the media. In fact media reports were, in the initial stages, quite limited (Scanlon and Prawzick, 1991).

Similarly, when a downtown office building filled with gas and exploded in North Bay, Ontario in 1975, there was no news coverage until 19 minutes after the explosion. In those 19 minutes, news spread by word of mouth so quickly that 80 per cent of those interviewed by students belonging to Carleton University's Emergency Communications Research Unit (ECRU) reported they had first learned of the explosion by word of mouth. Only 20 per cent first learned through radio or television.

> Asked if they had seen the disaster site, roughly half the people in the sample said, "Yes". A great many of them also said they got there very quickly. Eight point two per cent…said they had seen it within half an hour. Assuming that the sample was reasonably accurate, this means somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 persons were at the site within the first hour… Of those who went, about 45 per cent said they went from simple curiosity…. Only a small percentage – eight per cent – said they went because their jobs took them there (Scanlon and Taylor, 1975).

Since most of those persons learned through interpersonal sources, convergence was not solely or even mainly a result of news reports. Incidentally, those high speed informal networks have their usages. For example, the passengers on the hijacked aircraft that crashed in Pennsylvania on 9/11 learned what was happening through calls on their cell phones. And it was informal rather than formal networks that led to such a quick response from neighbouring communities after North America's worst catastrophe, the 1917 Halifax, Nova Scotia explosion. [Approximately one fifth of the residents were

killed or injured when a French ship carrying munitions caught fire, then exploded in the city's harbour.] Within hours relief trains were en route from nearby centres. Convergence is not just a short term problem. At Halifax, it was a problem for weeks and, at one point, passengers on all incoming trains were screened to block all but authorized arrivals. After 9/11 emergency services became almost frantic trying to stop volunteers – many of them emergency professionals – from flocking to the scene. Though the media are not responsible for much convergence, they can add to the problem by making unwarranted assumptions. It is not uncommon for media to say that nurses and physicians are desperately needed or that blood donors are wanted even though no such requests have come from official sources. The result is further convergence.

If the media are their first source of information, people turn to other sources. A study of how persons learned about two hurricanes showed that more than 60 per cent first saw both warnings on television, 17 and 25 per cent heard first on radio.

> Apparently the warning messages [the ones seen on television or heard on radio] triggered the formation of a kind of hurricane culture…. …residents turned from the media to more personal communications channels, while maintaining environmental surveillance through the media….. Residents acted in accordance with their own perceptions of the situation, and those perceptions drove, and were affected by, all that they saw and heard (Ledingham and Masel Walters, 1989, p. 43).

Similarly, if other sources come first, people turn to the media (Kanihan and Gale, 2003, p.89). On 9/11 when persons were informed by word of mouth about the attacks, they turned immediately to the mass media, especially television.

> Technically any single communication channel can not meet the information demands…. Our data on citizen preference suggest two important conclusions. First, a mix of channels should be used to send messages. Second, the

news media need to be systematically incorporated into this mix. (Perry and Lindell, 1989p. 62)

Media, Victims and Relatives

While the media perform a number of useful roles in crisis and disaster, there is one thing they do that arouses considerable criticism – and that is the way they treat victims and their relatives. When Pam Am 103 went missing over Lockerbie, Scotland, journalists waiting for information about the flight were cordoned off near the first class lounge at New York's Kennedy Airport. Seeing them, a woman asked what the fuss was about. An official said a Pam Am plane had crashed. She asked the flight number. He replied, "1-0-3". She collapsed on the floor, screaming, "Not my baby. Not my baby." While her husband tried to shield her, photographers and television crews recorded her grief.

> All I remember is losing control… I remember lights all over. I felt like I was being raped by the media. I am usually a woman who is very much in control. I'll have to say that was one of the few moments in my life where I was out of control. And I felt the media chose that moment. I felt violated. I felt exploited. And there was no one there to protect me (Deppa, 1994, p. 29).

When she finally left Kennedy airport, she noticed something on her taxi's front seat:

> I saw a newspaper   -- I can't remember what the headlines were but it had to do with Pam Am – so I asked the driver, "Can I see that newspaper?" It was the *Daily News.* And there on the front page was a picture of myself on the floor of the airport, and I was actually appalled. I just couldn't believe it (Deppa, 1994, p. 33).

Incidents like that made Everett Parker of the United Church of Christ openly critical of the mass media during meetings of the Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media:

> Day in and day out, we see reporters bullying statements out of stricken people; they take pride in their ability to do so…. It is dehumanizing to stick a camera and a microphone in the face of an injured or bereaved person and demand a statement. It is unconscionable for reporters and editors to use the human elements in disaster to feed the morbid curiosity of viewers, listeners and readers (Parker, 1980, p. 238).

Yet the media are not as guilty Parker charges. Although there is a widespread perception that in the wake of incidents the media act as ghouls, harassing victims and the relatives of victims, showing no sensitivity, this perception is misleading. Both anecdotal and research data suggests some victims and relatives welcome a chance to talk to reporters. After the 1985 Gander air crash – a crash that took the lives of US soldiers – an officer was assigned to media relations at the soldiers' home base, Fort Campbell, Kentucky. He told the media that the military intended to protect the privacy of the soldiers' families. They would have access to families only if the families requested it. To his surprise, a number of families did ask to speak to the media. This same approach was used by Oklahoma State University after basketball players and athletics staff was killed in a plane crash:

> While the media were given new information whenever it became available, they were also asked to respect the privacy of families involved in the tragedy. During the university's memorial service on Jan. 31, 2001, PIO staff members ensured that the media were restricted to a specific designated area. Media were asked not to harass family members; however, family members who felt comfortable talking to the media were not discouraged (Wigley, 2003).

Although they are pressured by editors to do such interviews, reporters find approaching such persons distasteful.[*] Kim Brunhuber recalled shooting visuals of relatives of the victims of the Swissair crash off Nova Scotia. Brunhuber was outside the Lord Nelson Hotel, where the relatives were staying:

> She catches sight of our camera 20 feet away, lowers her head, pulls back part of her black dress to hide her face. When we put our report together we stay with the shot until the moment she shields her face. Saving us the public acknowledgment of our grim voyeurism. Days later, what I suspect becomes clear. I can edit the shot, but I can't edit my guilt (Brunhuber, 1998).

Though many may share Brunhuber's guilt, reporters often discover they are made welcome when they approach relatives of those who died. These relatives are anxious to talk to someone and the reporter is anxious to listen. The result can be a relationship satisfying to both parties. When the Broadcast Standards Committee of the United Kingdom interviewed 210 victims of violence and disaster, including 54 who had been interviewed by reporters, three-quarters said they were not offended. That was especially true of those involved in a disaster. Most who complained were upset with newspapers, especially tabloid reporters, not with broadcast journalists. Survivors said they were prepared to be interviewed if the stories had a purpose, for example, "exposed the human frailties and negligences that had contributed to major disasters and so help to minimize the danger of such disasters happening again" (Shearer, 1991).

---

[*] After 16 children and a teacher were killed at a school in Dunblane, Scotland, some reporters who had been ordered to interview victims' families made sure their approaches were noticed by police officers who ordered them to leave. This allowed them to explain their failure to their editors.

Intrusion Resented

There have, however, been cases where the intrusion was obvious and journalists and Journalism organizations are becoming wary of this. After the Pam Am l03 crash, for example, there was a vigil in the Hendricks chapel at Syracuse University because a group of Syracuse students was among the victims:

> As the chapel filled, the media were asked to stay away from the area in front of the raised platform, where chaplains and representatives of the various faiths would lead that service. Photographers were asked not to use flash. But the emotion generated by the event, especially in the moments of meditation between scriptures and sacred music created compelling pictures, and the whir or the automatic levers advancing film echoed from both sides of the sanctuary. Soon flashes began going off. Upstairs, at the back of the balcony, a local television reporter "went live" over protests of students in the area (Deppa, 1994, p. 51).

It is because of incidents like that two widely shared codes of ethics now caution against insensitive approaches.

> Professional electronic journalists should treat all subjects of news coverage with respect and dignity, showing particular compassion to victims of crime or tragedy [and that] Professional electronic journalists should refrain from contacting participants in violent situations while the situation is in progress (Radio Television News Directors Association Code, 2000).

> Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects. Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief (Society of Professional Journalists).

However, reporting texts have described approaching survivors and their relatives as difficult but necessary:

> One of the toughest things that a reporter has to do while covering a disaster is to interview the families of the victims. At no other time does the public's right to know seem to come into direct conflict with people's right to privacy. Professionals realize that if they handle the interviews with a great deal of sensitivity, they can offer survivors an opportunity to grieve openly and to eulogize a loved one (Itule and Anderson, 1984, p. 348).

One journalism publication – *Nieman Reports* – produced some guidelines for such approaches. It suggested reporters ask for permission to do such interviews and that they should stop taking notes or recording if the interviewee asked them to. It also suggests the journalist state precisely what the interview will be about before starting. These things, it says, will give the interviewee a sense of power and reduce their uneasiness (Cote and Bucqueroux, p. 27). Interestingly, the woman whose photo was taken at Kennedy airport agreed to talk to reporters in Syracuse after she returned home:

> I think it was the way the media approached me on the phone…. They were not pushy. They asked permission… They knew it was a difficult time and they would accept the fact if I chose not to….And soon after that there was some information that Pam Am had received a warning about this, that Pan Am had received notification. At that point…I had a sense of anger that needed to be acknowledged. So I think that was another factor that influenced my decision, (Deppa, 1994, pp: 33-34).

Human Interest Stories

By making such approaches and using the information they acquire to write about the victims as individuals, the media play another role that is largely ignored in the literature. They do what might be called "humanize" events.[*] They do this by not just providing a broad overview of what has happened but by focusing on the individuals

---

[*] I am indebted to a former researcher, David Tait, for this idea: Tait is now a member of faculty at Carleton University.

involved. *Life Magazine* did that on the Viet Nam war when it ran the photo of every service person killed in a single week. The *New York Times* did that after 9/11 when day after day it ran photos and brief articles about those who died as a result of the terrorist attack, material later incorporated into a book (New York Times, 2003).

However, this "humanization" process – especially when it is done immediately after an incident – can have a down side. It can lead to a distorted impression of the impact of an event. Noting that "human interest" stories are staple items in disaster coverage, Wenger, James and Faupel suggests they tend to focus on those who were most severely impacted:

> Such stories detail the plight of the individual who has been 'wiped out' by the disaster, who has lost their family, or suffered great misfortune. Of course, such individuals are covered by the media because they "stand out" from the other victims; they are sought by the media. However, these atypical cases are often presented as if they were typical…. Death, economic loss, human suffering, and social disruption are the standard themes in the media's portrayal of disaster. For the audience, the apparent image is one of total destruction (Wenger, James and Faupel, 1980, p.40)

Another aspect of this humanization process is that the attempt to link an event elsewhere to the publication's perceived audience. Journalists call this searching for a "local angle". This means events are more likely to be reported if they occur close to the place of publication and more likely to be reported by media in a specific country if that country's nationals are involved. For example, when Gladys and Kurt Engel Lang reviewed the 139 disasters included in a book illustrating front pages from the *New York Times,* they found:

> Of the 18 really big stories…those for which coverage ran over four different pages – 5 occurred within the New York

area. Because only 7 of the 139 disasters were in the New
York area, it seems evident that the local ones get special
treatment in the *Times* (Lang and Lang, 1980, p. 217-272)

Anyone watching American, Canadian and British television after the tsunami hit

Asia would have been acutely aware of this phenomenon. The media in all three

countries tended to focus on stories about victims from their own countries and about

response activity by their own personnel including military personnel.

Human Behaviour

Disaster research has shown that victims are *not* dazed and confused and in shock

but instead do most if not all of the initial search and rescue. It has shown that panic is so

rare it is difficult to study and that the real problem is not panic but an unwillingness to

believe the clearest possible warnings (Quarantelli and Dynes, 1972). For example, when

the freight train derailed in Mississauga, even though they could smell chlorine and could

see and hear propane tanks exploding and flying through the air like flaming missiles, a

few still refused to leave. Research has also shown that looting in the wake of disasters

does happens – it did after Hurricane David – but it is extremely rare. Usually, crime

rates fall (Scanlon, 1992). When hundreds of passengers were diverted to Gander,

Newfoundland as a result of the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001,

there was not a single crime reported while the passengers were in that community

(Scanlon, 2002).

The few reporting texts that have touched on disaster coverage appear unaware of

this research – they assume the myths are true:

The enterprising reporter covering a disaster can often add
color to a story, using quotes from survivors telling of their

escapes, tales of courage or cowardice, descriptions of carnage and panic (Metz, 1991, p. 297).

Another difficulty is the emotional nature of the event: tragedy, destruction, pestilence and death are emotion-packed news events. In the midst of fear, panic and loss, sources become confused and antagonistic (Stone, 1992, p. 144).

Kueneman and Wright found reporters felt it was their duty to shape their stories to avoid panic:

The following comments from interviews are characteristic of their orientation. "You must be very careful that you don't over-emphasize what is 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" (Kueneman and Wright, 1976, pp: 671-72).

Others have suggested reporters should be sympathetic to officials with the same goal:

Because official sources are often worried that the press is going to distort the story, they may sanitize information before releasing it. At the same time, reporters must realize that public officials are trying to avoid unnecessary panic (Itule and Anderson, 1984, p. 97).

The media may downplay negative stories, especially in their own communities. For example, in the wake of Hurricane David in Dominica, there was substantial looting; but journalists covering the hurricane tended to ignore that and, even when they did not ignore it, their reports tended not to be broadcast:

The rampant looting behavior during the hurricane's strike on Dominica in Roseau [Dominica's capital], and later the looting of stored relief supplies in both Roseau and Melville-Hall Airport, was common knowledge among

local officials and residents. It was even observed first hand by several reporters. However, this…received minimal attention in most news reports (Rogers and Sood, 1981, p. 65).

That type of caution showed up on television networks in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001:

There is no point in allowing this thing to appear worse than it is, it is already horrendous, and we don't need to make it worse by misstating numbers and we want you to keep that in mind -- CNN anchor Aaron Brown.

Tom as you point out we try not to exaggerate very much in this circumstance, and yet in many ways it's hard not to exaggerate just the things we have been seeing and the things we are told -- NBC reporter Pat Dawson talking to Tom Brokaw (Reynolds and Barnett, p. 698).

None seemed aware that people find it easier to cope with the truth, with clear factual accounts of what is known about what is happening. It is lack of clarity and confusion not accuracy that makes persons uneasy. Yet this same misunderstanding showed up in an article published in *Journalism Quarterly*, the leading scholarly journal:

At Three Mile Island, reporters 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 (Stephens and Edison, 1982, p. 199).

Scanlon concluded:

A review of Journalism text books suggests that the authors who deal with disaster coverage often state as fact what disaster scholars have shown to be inaccurate. Perhaps that explains why the myths about disaster are perpetuated in the media. Most likely, the students who used these texts were influenced by the inaccurate representations…when they became reporters (Scanlon, 1998, p. 45).

Wenger found that those who learned about disasters mainly through the media were more likely than others to believe the myths (Wenger, 1985) though this does not seem to affect what disaster-stricken individuals do. While they believe the myths they do not act as if they do. They believe there will be panic but do not panic. They believe looting will occur but do not loot. Unfortunately, the same is not true for organizations. For example, emergency agencies hold back warnings for fear of panic. This happened in China:

> Officials in Amuer were frightened that a false warning [of a forest fire] might panic local residents. Unfortunately, district fire officials did not recognize the seriousness of the threat and no warning was issued. When the fire reached Amuer at 11 p.m., nearly four hours after it struck Xilinji, many persons had gone to bed. That made it much more difficult to alert everyone and organize an evacuation. There were 25 deaths (Xuewen, 1996).

Command Post View

Quarantelli concluded that media ignorance may lead to what he calls the "command post" view of disaster. By that he means that since journalists don't know the important role that survivors play in search and rescue and initial transport to hospital – and are unaware how limited a role emergency personnel play in early response – they will assume that emergency officials know what is going on. Their reports will reflect the official view of what has happened and is happening. Journalism texts seem knowledgeable of this problem but not how to solve it:

> Writing the first story of a major disaster such as an earthquake or a tornado presents a particular challenge. Officials are often unsure and can only guess (Harriss, Leiter and Johnson, 1992 p. 293):

>...when tornadoes slice through cities, efforts may be concentrated on finding those trapped in the rubble of buildings. No one may be certain who is trapped or where they are or, for that matter, whether anyone is trapped at all (The Missouri Group)

...the safest thing for any reporter...is to say quite frankly what people can see for themselves that no one has any accurate casualty figures and that it may take some time to arrive at an accurate count. (Hohenberg)

>The enormity of destruction is so vast that no one source can accurately assess the toll in human lives until the disaster begins to abate and energy can be devoted to gauging human and property losses. (Mencher)

Rich agrees much early information is unreliable, but suggests reporting it anyway:

>**Estimated costs of damages and property loss:** Initially these accounts – from insurance agents, fire departments, police officials or state officials – are often inaccurate, but they add an essential element to the story (Rich, 1997, p. 489).

She also suggests reporters should check into looting:

>Check with the police to find out about looting or other post-disaster crimes.... (Rich, 1997, p. 489).

Most authors either imply or state that eventually there *will* be accurate figures on injury and death, which is not correct. UPI correspondent Jack Virtue reported in the aftermath of an earthquake in Guatemala that "The number of lives lost may never be accurately tallied. Many bodies will never be found." Similarly, Janet Kitz, author of *Shattered City*, a book on the catastrophic 1917 Halifax explosion, wrote:

> I am frequently asked how many people died in the explosion, but I am reluctant to give a definite answer. I have come across so many different figures; for example, 1,635 or 1,963. No list I have seen has ever included all the people I know to have died. I believe the figure was higher than 2000 (Kitz, 1989, p. 15).

If the death toll can not be calculated with precision, it would be harder still to calculate the injury toll because in the wake of disaster many victims decline to go for medical help for what they see as minor injuries. Even those who do go for help are often not recorded accurately. In disasters, record keeping is one of the first casualties (Scanlon, 1996).

Another problem with the "command post" approach to coverage of disasters is that it tends to ignore non-traditional activities such as search and rescue, conducted mainly by volunteers working in emergent groups. Wenger and Quarantelli found that only 8.6 per cent of newspaper articles on disaster and 8.4 per cent of electronic media reports on disaster mention search and rescue. When search and rescue *was* mentioned, those stories inevitably relied to some extent on non-traditional sources. In other words, to cover search and rescue activity, reporters would have been forced to use non-traditional sources for their information. These sources were often missed so an important activity was given rather slight attention (Wenger and Quarantelli, 1989, p. 62).

The lack of understanding of disaster was reflected in another way. Most media did not have disaster plans for their own organizations – no plans as to how they would continue to operate in such conditions, no plans as to how they would deal with the demands of disaster coverage:

> Even in the minority of those outlets that had engaged in prior planning, it was generally of inadequate quality…. Furthermore, those plans were usually outdated, never exercised and often could not be located by the staff (Wenger and Quarantelli, 1989, p. 33).

On 9/11 the *Wall Street Journal* proved an exception. The *Journal* had a back up facility with equipment installed and the decision to get it up and running was made as soon as the first plane hit the first tower.

> The facility…had been outfitted in the past 18 months with a couple of classroom sized spaces full of computer work stations. And in recent months, *Journal* editors under Pensiero's direction [Jim Pensiero is the Journal's assistant managing editor] had spent a couple of Saturday mornings making up the paper there, in case of emergency.
> The South Brunswick offices seemed from another world – a comfortable, modern, suburban campus with expansive green lawns. The two "emergency" newsrooms were ready to go, and staff had prepared additional ones, so that 55 workstations were operational – most with Hermes pagination and edited software…. the *Journal's* copy chief, Jesse Lewis, was on the premises (Baker, 2001, p. 13).

The move was handled so well that the Journal managed to deliver to his subscribers all but 180,000 of its normal 1.8 million copies. The paper was somewhat smaller than usual – two sections instead of three – and had one other unusual characteristic. For the second time in the paper's history it had a banner headline:

TERRORISTS DESTROY WORLD TRADE CENTER, HIT PENTAGON IN RAID WITH HIJACKED JETS

The only previous banner headline was for Pearl Harbor.

It might be assumed that when disaster occurs, all media would cover it, especially if it occurred in their coverage area. That is not the case -- at least for radio. Wenger and Quarantelli found that while newspapers and television provided extensive

coverage of disaster – 83.3 per cent of television stations pre-empted regular programming – many radio stations ignored disasters, even local ones:

> A total of 18.6 per cent of the radio stations [examined for the study] did not cover the disaster in their community at all. Three of these were small stations with no news department; they continued with their normal programming…. Thirty per cent of the stations who covered the disaster in their area never pre-empted local programming, and 28.3 per cent did not increase their normal time allocated for news (Wenger and Quarantelli, 1989, p. 39).

While all television and print media tended to expand news coverage – television replaced regular programs, newspapers enlarged the space for news – the two did so differently. The electronic media tended to reduce the normal gate-keeping function by which editors control what goes over the air. Reports are broadcast live and interviews with those calling in or reached by phone are run without editing (Waxman, 1973; Sood, Stockdale and Rogers, 1987).

> Video tape was not edited as carefully as usual and significantly more live coverage was aired. One station we studied, for example, devoted hours to live coverage of a major toxic spill from its own helicopter. Raw tape brought to the station was aired in unedited form. Another station in the immediate aftermath of a tornado aired live footage shot out of the station's back door, and also placed raw tape taken by a citizen with a home videocamera on the air (Wenger and Quarantelli, 1989, p. 14).

In contrast, print media assign the task of "rewrite" to reporters who normally would not perform that function. Those rewrite persons take material filed by reporters in the field and shape it. Then the stories pass through the normal gate-keepers, editors and copy editors. Editors' perceptions about disaster still controls what appears in the paper. Stories that challenge editors' misconceptions will not be published (See Breed, 1955).

Journalism Literature

Very little of the material cited so far comes from Mass Communication or Journalism publications or from authors located in Schools of Journalism and/or Mass Communications published before 9/11. The exceptions were three books -- *Bad Tidings Communications and Catastrophe* a book by Lynne Masel Walters, Lee Wilkins and Tim Walters (Walters, Wilkins and Walters), *The Media and Disasters Pam Am 103* by Joan Deppa and others at Syracuse University (Deppa, 1994) and *Media Ethics Issues* by Philip Patterson and Lee Wilkins Philip (Patterson and Wilkins, 1998) -- and a few articles: Scanlon's article critiquing reporting texts, Shearer's review of how survivors felt about the media, Wigley's report on how Oklahoma State University dealt with the media after a fatal plane crash and Sood, Stockdale and Rogers' articles about how the news media operate in natural disasters.

There were a few other articles in the major Journalism journals prior to 9/11 – and some add a little to our knowledge of the media in disaster, usually in relation to ethics. These include: a study of unethical use of visuals in television coverage of crises (Smith, 1998); a review of media coverage of an earthquake prediction (Showalter, 1995); and a review of media coverage of two mass fatalities, one at the Hillsborough football grounds in Sheffield, the other at an elementary school in Dunblane, Scotland (Jemphrey and Berrington, 2000).

Smith reviewed coverage of several incidents to see if television used archival visuals that portrayed an inaccurate image of current conditions without identifying the

fact the visuals were dated. This is against network news guidelines. He found more than

1,000 visuals used more than once; only seven of the thousand properly identified:

> Among stories about the Exxon Valdez oil spill, 23 separate video clips of oiled shorelines were recycled more than once, including a scene of oily rocks used 16 times by CBS and a helicopter shot of oiled shoreline used 10 times by NBC. None were labeled as file footage though it was sometimes apparent from the reporter's narration that the video did not represent current conditions (Smith, 1998, pp: 252-253).

Showalter described what happened when Iben Browning claimed conditions

were ripe for an earthquake in the New Madrid Earthquake Zone – on December 3, 1990.

> …Browning was not a geologist or seismologist, he had no formal training in climatology, his doctorate was in zoology not physiology, he had not predicted the Loma Prieta earthquake, and what he called his projection was based on a widely discredited theory (Showalter, 1995, p. 2).

Nevertheless the Browning projection received widespread coverage, partly because –

though all stories included someone challenging him – the challenge and his "prediction"

were given equal play.

> ...it appears that the different ways journalists and scientists define balanced coverage will remain a problem. For journalists, it is sufficient to present two opposing viewpoints. For scientists, such a practice represents biased reporting because it places a single individual on one side of an issue on equal footing with hundreds if not thousands of scientists on the other side of the issue (Showalter, 1995, p. 10).

It's an issue that also shows up in coverage of terrorist activity. A statement by

previously unknown persons is matched by a statement from an authority, perhaps even

someone as important as a White House spokesperson or the President. This raises the

status of the hostage takers. It is possible to argue that the best approach might be for the

media to ignore something but this, too, raises issues. However there may be a "catch 22": Ralph Turner found that when the media disregarded rumours about earthquakes, this might have been counterproductive:

> A substantial minority of the population believes that the scientists, public officials, and news people know more about the prospect of earthquake than they are willing to tell the public – and that responsible public leaders are withholding information indicating that awful things are going to happen…. By ignoring rumors rather than airing them and presenting authoritative contradiction, the media may have fostered the conviction that valid information was being withheld (Turner, 1980, p. 283)

Another article concluded that perceptions influence journalistic behaviour and news reports. After the Hillsborough soccer crowd crush incident [96 persons died as a result of overcrowding at one end of the field], the media were aggressive in going after survivors and the relatives of victims because they saw the deaths as a result of hooliganism and alcohol. After a massacre at an elementary school in Dunblane, Scotland, the media were far more sensitize about grief, even agreed to leave the community before the funerals.

> Pre-existing negative impressions of Liverpool combined with journalistic selectivity were crucial in shaping press coverage…. Initial accounts focused on football hooliganism (an important political issue at the time) and alcohol as primary casual factors, therefore established those involved as less-than-innocent victims…. Early reports…stated unequivocally that Liverpool supporters had 'forced a gate' leading to the crush inside the ground. In cross-examination during the Home Office Inquiry…Chief Superintendent Duckenfield, the senior officer in charge, admitted he had lied about supporters forcing the gates and 'apologized for blaming the Liverpool fans for causing the deaths'. Despite this denial Duckenfield's initial comment established an international reported myth which still persists (Jemphrey and Berrington, 2000, p. 473).

This was in sharp contrast to Dunblane where a man shot and killed 16 children and a teacher and shot and injured 13 other children and three adults:

> The positive and sympathetic portrayal of the community had an effect on the behaviour of journalists, particularly the British press. The agreement to leave before the funerals took place was described by journalists as 'unprecedented'… Such a decision by the national press is unusual, though the local press may be more sensitize to community feeling… (Jemphrey and Berrington, 2000, p. 481).

Post 9/11

The morning of September 11, 2001, changed the amount of attention in the media *and* the media literature given to untoward events. Jack Lule found that New York *Times* editorials were consumed by the attack for more than a month afterwards (Lule, 2002).

> From 12 September to 12 October the paper published eighty-four editorials, usually three a day. Of these eighty-four, fifty-eight (69 percent) were directly related to the consequences and aftermath of the terrorist attacks. For the first eight days after the attack every editorial confronted some feature of September 11. No other issue was worth of consideration. And for seventeen days, the only other issue that merited attention was the New York mayoral race to decide the successor to Rudy Giuliana, a race ultimately shaped by the attacks (Lule, 2002, p. 280).

Another scholar found the same concentration in the issues of three news magazines and found that the coverage followed a pattern:

> During the month following the attacks, these three magazines [*Time, Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*] told a cohesive story of the tragedy and its aftermath, a story that moved from shock and fear to

inspiration and pride. They did so by using testimony from readers and mourners across the country, as well as from victims and witnesses of the attacks. These actors participated, along with the journalists themselves, in the performance of a ritual with symbolic visual representations of candles, portraits of the dead and the American flag…. Overall, this coverage corresponded with the stages of a funeral ceremony. In that sense, it provided evidence that journalism plays an important role in – and can in certain circumstances be a form of – civil religion (Kitch, 2003, p. 222). [There was a similar approach after the assassination of President Kennedy.]

There was continued attention to ethical issues. The Kratzers interviewed editors to determine how they decided it was appropriate to use photos of persons trapped in the upper floors of the twin towers or photos or photos of individuals jumping to their deaths:

The results reveal that many of the editors…engaged in debate about running the photographs and the main issues that emerged were reader response, the victims' privacy, and the ability of the photographs to communicate the story. Although many editors found the photographs disturbing, the overwhelming reason for publishing them was that they added to the visual storytelling of what happened. Many editors believed that readers needed to be exposed to the disturbing images in order to fully comprehend the story of the day (Kratzer and Kratzer, 2003, p. 46).

This was in line with what Deppa and others found in their study of coverage of Pam Am 103 at Lockerbie, specifically when a body was brought down from a roof:

"The day they brought the body down, the photographers were running around stupid," a neighbourhood resident recalled. "They were running through my garden, up onto my step to get as near as they could to a photo of it being brought down. That was really ghastly and I thought they were pigs at the time."

Three print publications – *Time, Newsweek* and the *Washington Post* – used those photos.

Scottish television was more discreet:

> …my cameraman actually got a very close-up shot of it [the body]. I thought we can't use this. I said, "Can you imagine how the relatives of this particular person would feel if they saw that?" The cameraman…agreed. He said not to show the close-up of the body.

Television was equally discreet in its coverage of the Columbine school incident in Littleton, Colorado.

> Nor did the station opt to show gore. KCNC editors had plenty of film to exploit had they wanted. In particular, cameramen captured one police SWAT team dragging two of the victims' bodies across the school lawn – images that never once aired. In the heat of the story chase, newsroom editors talked about their responsibilities to decency and community values. No one dissented (Dean, 1999, p. 24).

Because print photographers are unable to match the immediacy of radio or the drama of movement conveyed by television, they tend to be aggressive in trying to get visuals others don't have. Pijnenburg and Van Duin noticed that in Belgium in the wake of the Zeebrugge ferry accident:

> Some journalists behaved also rather badly when a funeral chapel was installed in Zeebrugge's sports centre. They had to be dissuaded to enter the building "manu militari" by the police forces and emergency services' personnel. But it was impossible to prevent aggressive photographers from pursuing and harassing completely distressed relatives of victims on their way to and entering the funeral chapel (Pijnenburg and Van Duin, p. 342).

Rumours Not Reported

Although after 9/11 print editors were willing to print photos that seem marginal, they did not, according to Lasora, publish many rumors. He scoured the web looking for post 9/11 rumors.

> ..someone rode a piece of the World Trade Center to safety, that gasoline prices would soar, that terrorists would attack a major shopping mall on Hallowe'en, that additional terrorist were thwarted at the New York area airports, that Jews working in the tower were warned ahead of the attacks, that the hijacked jet that crashed in Pennsylvania was shot down by U.S. forces, that videos of Palestinians celebrating the attacks was fake, and that Nostradamus predicted the attacks (Lasora, 2003).

He also found stories that persons – in one case firefighters, in another police – were found alive in the rubble of the World Trade Center, days after the collapse.

> In the aftermath of the terrorist strikes, major newsmagazines, newspapers, broadcast news stations and cable news stations reported scores of stories related to the attacks. Yet despite unusually difficult reporting circumstances these media did a remarkably good job of separating out false rumors. This study found only four cases where the mainstream news media carried false reports. Furthermore, while they were disseminated widely, these stories were in most cases corrected quickly, once the truth was uncovered (Lasora, 2003, p. 14).

The rumors that were published were all about persons found alive in the rubble. Even though every report was wrong, there were "good news stories" editors could not resist.

Lasora notes that the media usually corrected the rumours as more information became available. This is in line with disaster research which suggests rumours spread in the wake of a disaster may persist until they are contradicted. And, though he did not mention this, his findings also fit with disaster research that shows that, in time of

disaster, print media tend to maintain the traditional gate keeping functions[*] but

electronic media do not. And it was television that captured the bulk of the audience after

9/11. Wilson found that young and old alike, no matter what their previous media habits,

turned to television – and others found that it was there they heard the rumours:

> Frequency of TV use before the attacks was not a significant predictor of the degree of dependency on TV after the attacks. Apparently, individuals who used radio, print media and the web during normal times relied on TV to a greater degree in the months following the crisis, and the leading force in this change was the perception of threat. It is clear that TV is the medium of choice in a national crisis, and this preference is not simply the result of habit (Wilson, 2004, p. 354).

Those ties to television developed very quickly, often within minutes of the

attacks.

> Half of our respondents first learned of the attacks from the broadcast media (28 per cent from television and 16 per cent from radio). Interestingly, we found that 6 per cent of our respondents found out from a mix of broadcast and interpersonal channels: These respondents indicated that someone (often a parent) telephoned them and simply told them to "turn on the TV". The magnitude of the events was so large, incomprehensible, and, at first unclear, that some people alerted others interpersonally but quickly instructed them to see the images on television to explain the catastrophe. Almost half (48 per cent) of our respondents learned about the tragedies from another person (Kanihan and Gale, 2003, pp: 82-83).

And – just as disaster scholars would have predicted – the electronic media

allowed rumors and commentary to be broadcast:

---

[*] The concept of gate keeping was first elaborated roughly 50 years ago. See, for example, David Manning White (1950) "The 'Gatekeeper': A Case Study in the Selection of News" *Journalism Quarterly* Vol. 27 No. 4 pp: 383-390

> …journalists who covered the breaking news of the September 11 terrorist attacks used multiple roles to deliver information including that of expert and social commentator; they reported rumors, used anonymous sources, and frequently included personal references in their reporting regardless of which role they assumed…. The content of breaking news reported live is fundamentally different than the content of news stories that are produced with more time to check for violations of journalistic conventions. Further the role of the journalist is less clear during breaking news (Reynolds and Barnett, p. 669).

Terror

Recently, US media have had to deal with the fact that many destructive events are not caused by nature or human frailty but are deliberate acts. Despite Pam Am 103 – the plane that crashed at Lockerbie – and the bomb at the World Trade Center and Oklahoma City and other incidents elsewhere, that message was been slow to sink in. However, the aerial attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center drove it home. Destructive events are now covered in two ways. There is coverage of the aftermath of the incident. And there is coverage of those who state openly that they caused it and the government reaction to that. In the past, when incidents involving human error occurred, the media often searched for a scapegoat, for someone to blame (Bucher, 1957). They no longer have to look. Terrorists are not only willing to admit responsibility for their acts; they plan them for maximum attention.

The reason Black September took Israeli athletes hostage at the Munich Olympics was because the media were on hand. One reason why Al-Qaida flew aircraft into buildings in New York City is because New York City is a media centre. Massive coverage was guaranteed. The Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO)

representative at the United Nations said that the first PLO aircraft hijacking "aroused the consciousness of the world to our cause and awakened the media and world opinion much more and more effectively than 20 years of pleading at the United Nations" (Hickey, 1976, p. 12).

How rapidly the media are taken over by even minor incidents – and how quickly they allow those involved to set the agenda – was shown in March, 1977, when Hanafi Muslims occupied three Washington, D. C., buildings, killing one man and taking hostages. CBS in Chicago got a call from a man stating he was an Hanafi Muslim at the Chicago Muslim temple. Without checking, CBS allowed him live on air:

> The young man who could have been Santa Claus, for all the reporters knew…was addressing nearly two million people…. As it turned out he had much to say but it did not pertain to the siege in Washington (Jaehnig, 1978, p. 719).

The fact so much attention is given to these incidents raises the question of whether this leaves the impression that these persons are much more powerful than they really are. Al Qaida' s attack on 9/11 was successful in the sense it caused massive damage in New York City and led the US government to take actions which disrupted North American and trans-Atlantic air travel. Yet other terrorist groups have managed to get a very high profile though their numbers were very small indeed:

> …anxious newspaper readers…were led to believe that the German Baader-Meinhof group, the Japanese Red Army, the Symbionese Liberation Army…were mass movements that ought to be taken seriously indeed…. Yet these were groups of between five and 50 members. Their only victories were in the area of publicity (Lacquer, 1976, p.102).

Since 9/11, many terrorist groups have used a similar approach to Al Qaida. They have selected a high-profile target and they have gone after a Western country, often a country, like Spain with a connection to the United States. There was the bomb that killed 202 persons, many of them Australians in Bali on October 12, 2002. There were the incidents at the theatre in Moscow and the school in Beslan, and the hijacking of two Russian aircraft, all the work of Chechens. There were the bombings at Luxor and Taba in Egypt, the second linked to the first incident at the World Trade Center. [A leaflet left at the scene demanded the release of Umar Abd al-Rahman, who was imprisoned by life after being convicted in connection with it.] There was the prolonged hostage taking in Lima by Peru's Marxist-Leninist Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement. There was the attack on the Central Bank in Colombo, Sri Lanka, which was tied to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelan. And of course there was the attack in Madrid, which *was* tied to Al Qaida.

The ability of terrorists to create an event which catches the media's complete attention indicates another significant role the media play in disasters – and in disaster research -- agenda setting. As Bernard Cohen pointed out in *The Press and Foreign Policy:*

> It [the press] may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*. And it follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors and publishers of the papers that they read (Cohen, p. 13).

In fact when it comes to disasters, the agenda setting function is greater than this. To a large extent – as Scanlon pointed out in the foreword to a forthcoming book *What is a Disaster?* and Rogers and Sood pointed out much earlier – the agenda setting power of the media determines which events come to public attention and which do not:

> The media have the ability to tell us that some issue of topic *is* news today, and by their silence, that millions of others are *not*. Certain media like the *New York Times* set the agenda not only for their own readers, but for many other of the mass media. By their very decision to cover (or not to cover) a disaster, or some aspect of a disaster, and by the prominence (or lack of prominence) given such coverage, the media wield great influence on authorities' decisions to seek (or not to seek) more information concerning that disaster (Rogers and Sood, p. 2)

And this is not true for just the authorities or the public. Those who study disasters are also influenced by the attention paid by the media. That is why events in countries like the Soviet Union did not influence disaster scholarship because they were never reported. Chernobyl, for example, became important because the increased radioactivity it caused was noticed in Sweden.

The most serious ethical issue raised by 9/11, however, is probably the one that showed up only in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. The *Review* reported, for example, that Condoleezza Rice had convinced editors not to broadcast in full tapes released by Osama bin Ladin or his associates. She told TV executives that those tapes might contain coded messages and she added they that could increase anti-American sentiments among Muslims in the United States and elsewhere. The executives went along with her request. The *Review* also raised the issue as to whether the so-called

"war on terrorism" meant that reporters writing about domestic issues had to consider whether their stories would give aid and comfort to the enemy.

> As veteran war correspondents already know, information is a weapon of war. One has to assume that terrorists have constant access to the Internet and CNN. Premature disclosure of a U.S. operation…could cost the lives of American combat troops…. It is now clear that reporting risks are no less serious on the domestic front…. U.S.-based journalists – whose first impulse has always been getting out the news fast – now need to pause and filter it like any other war correspondent. No matter what the topic, they must ask: Does the public's need to know outweigh the harm it might cause…? This question might well influence how much detail to include when news outlets break stories about, say, oil tanker construction, Amtrak procedures, building ventilation, pesticide factories. (25)

The *Wall Street Journal*…ran a massive piece on September 28 detailing inconsistencies in security precautions at airports across the country… Many editors say the *Journal* performed a public service. The story certainly could have put useful pressure on the FAA and airport authorities to make the security more stringent and consistent. The problem is of course that one man's public service article is another man's tip sheet for murder (Hanson, 2001, p. 25)

Information Critical

There are however two other aspects to reporting terrorism. First, in some cases, high speed mass communications may be critical to public safety. That's because incidents such as chemical contamination change the nature of the threat. In normal mass casualty incidents, most initial search and rescue and transport to hospital is done by the survivors. There is some risk to victims in being handled by unskilled persons. However, on balance, the victims are more likely to survive if they reach hospital quickly. During

an incident involving chemical contaminants, this situation changes dramatically. Now every person who comes into contact with a contaminated victim risks becoming another victim. That's exactly what happened during the Sarin gas attack in Tokyo: the victims included thousands of passers-by who tried to help those who were attacked, scores of firefighters and para-medics and even more than a dozen emergency physicians at the closest hospital.

> When the first call reached the Tokyo Fire Department, it dispatched all available equipment (Pangi, 2002, p. 17). On arrival, firefighters, despite seeing victims gasping for breath, rushed into the station without taking precautions. Of the 1,364 firefighting personnel dispatched, 135 – 10 per cent – became affected by direct or indirect exposure. In addition, 135 (9.9 per cent) of EMTs showed acute symptoms and had to be treated (Okumura et. al., 1998; Nosaki et al., 1995).

When a TV crew started shooting visuals of victims at one transit station some persons shouted at them that they should be assisting rather than reporting. The crew ended up loading some victims into their van and transporting them to hospital. When they arrived at the hospital, they discovered that no one there had been informed.

A review of past incidents suggests that the first emergency agency to identify the problem – and the threat of widespread contamination of civilian and other responders – may be a hospital emergency ward. It will then be up to that hospital to advise other hospitals, other emergency agencies and the public. If that is to happen, the warning message will need to be transmitted accurately and quickly over all possible channels – partly because many responders will be transporting victims in private vehicles.

> It is inevitable in such situations that Good Samaritans will assist, and will drive some victims to hospital, unaware that

> they, themselves are in danger. They must be warned. To do this may require some sort of warning over car radios plus the AMBER Alert now used in criminal cases (Scanlon, 2004, p. 33).

This will work only if there is careful planning and if the media understand what needs to be done and why and why it must be done so quickly. Given the fact the media adopt a command post approach to coverage of such incidents this should not be difficult.

> Informants from radio and television were both willing to accept a partial responsibility to serve as a communication link from emergency officials to the general population. They acknowledged that the nature of their technology allowed for the rather immediate transmission of emergency messages to citizens (Wenger and Quarantelli, 1989).

The second problem is that terrorist incidents may also involve journalists and their sources as victims and this may complicate the information gathering and sharing process. During the anthrax incidents on Capital Hill in Washington, both journalists and their usual sources – Congressional staff – were worried about their own safety. Inevitably they shared rumours with each other and, in the absence of credible information those rumours were reported (Bullock, Haddow and Bell, 2004, p. 7). There was a closer connection between journalists and terrorists at NBC in New York City when a woman working for Tom Brokaw opened an envelope containing a white powder that turned out to be anthrax. Robert Windrem sat at the next desk:

> …the day careened from one development to another. Press conferences were held; reporters and satellites trucks gathered outside our windows; studios were shut down; CDC epidemiologists armed with clipboards and swabs walked through the newsroom; hundreds of NBC employees were herded onto a floor below for interviews with police detectives, testing with nasal swabs, and dispensation of Cipro. Just after 6 p.m., as I watched, the FBI formally taped off the news desk where the envelope

had been opened three weeks before. It was now a crime
scene (Windrem, 2001, p.19).

Windrem said the event finally struck home when he realized he could just as easily have

been the victim.

Summary and Conclusions

As shown in this book, scholars in many disciplines – Sociology, Geography,

Political Science, Law, Public Administration, Economics to name just a few – have

discovered a great deal about human and organizational behavior in crisis and disaster.

Some of that scholarship has focused on the role of the mass media and, as a result, we

know a great deal about the roles media can and do perform before, during and after

disasters. This includes warning, keeping people informed in the aftermath of disaster,

correcting rumours. Journalism scholars have added to that knowledge, pointing out, for

example, that journalists are often troubled by ethical issues, that television is becoming

the source of first choice in crises and that there is a great deal of interaction between

media and interpersonal sources. Scholars in more than one discipline have shown that

electronic media perform differently than print media in crises: the latter have more time

to shape the news using established Gatekeeping procedures.

Yet much of the knowledge that scholars in other disciplines have acquired about

the media and disaster has not made it into the reporting texts and much of the

scholarship by media scholars has not been integrated into the disaster literature. Thus,

while news stories all too often reflect these myths both in what they include and what

they omit, others still misunderstand the effects of journalistic behavior and the way it

impacts on victims of disaster. A review of the role of the media in disasters suggests that

the media and disasters are inevitably intertwined but in many ways they are still strangers.

These findings do suggest two lessons for those in positions of responsibility during crises or disasters. The first one is that the media can play a critical role before, during and after such incidents. The media are essential, for example, for warnings to be effective and may be the single most important source of public information in the wake of a disaster. The second lesson is that the media have to be monitored and handled with care because it is media reports that distort what happens in a disaster and lead to misunderstandings. Failure by officials to issue a warning, for example, may be a result of myths created by the media.

References

Anderson, William A. (1969) "Disaster Warning and Communication Processes in Two Communities" *Journal of Communication* Vol. 19 June pp: 92-104

Baker, Russ (2001) "The Journal on the Run" *Columbia Journalism Review* November/ December pp: 16-17

Breed, Warren Breed (1955) "Social Control in the Newsroom" *Social Forces* Vol. 33 pp: 326-335

Brooks, Brian, George Kennedy, Daryl R. Moon and Don Ranly [The Missouri Group] (1992) *News Reporting & Writing* New York: St. Martin's Press p. 228

Brunhuber, Kim (1998) "The real story at Peggy's Cove" *The Sunday Herald* September 13 [Quoted from a clipping, no page number available.]

Bucher, Rae (1957) "Blame and hostility in disaster" *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 62 pp: 467-475

Bullock, Jane A., George D. Haddow and Richard Bell (2004) "Communicating During Emergencies in the United States" *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management* Vol. 19 No. 2 p. 7

Cohen, Bernard (1963) *The Press and Foreign Policy* Princeton: Princeton University Press

Cote, William and Bonnie Bucqueroux "Tips on Interviewing Victims" *Nieman Reports*

Deppa, Joan with Maria Russell, Donna Hayes and Elizabeth Lynne Flocke (1994) *The Media and Disasters Pam Am 103* New York: New York University Press p. 29

Fritz, Charles E. and J. H. Mathewson (1957) *Convergence Behavior in Disasters: A Problem in Social Control* Washington: National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council

Hansen, John "Handling the Media in Times of Crisis: Lessons From the Oklahoma City Bombing" Philip Patterson and Lee Wilkins (1998) *Media Ethics Issues Cases* Boston: McGraw Hill pp: 56-57

Hanson, Christopher (2001) "Over Here We're All War Correspondents Now" *Columbia Journalism Review* November/ December pp: 25-28

Harriss, Julian, Kelly Leiter and Stanley Johnson (1992) *The Complete Reporter: Fundamentals of News Gathering, Writing and Editing* New York: Macmillan Publishing Company

Hickey, H. (1976) "Terrorism and Television" *TV Guide* July 31-August 7

Hohenberg, John (1983) *The Professional Journalist* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston p. 142

Itule, Bruce and Douglas Anderson (1984) *Contemporary News Reporting* New York: Random House

Jaehnig, Walter (1978) "Journalists and terrorism: Captives of the Libertarian Tradition" *Indiana Law Journal* Vol. 53 p. 719

Jemphrey, Ann and Eileen Berrington (2000) "Surviving the Media: Hillsborough, Dunblane and the press" *Journalism Studies* Vol. 1 No. 3 pp: 469-484

Kanihan, Stacey Frank and Kendra L. Gale (2003) "Within 3 Hours, 97 Percent Learn About 9/11 Attacks" *Newspaper Research Journal* Vol. 24 No. 1 p. 89

Kitch, Carolyn (2003) "'Mourning in America': ritual, redemption and recovery in news narrative after September 11" *Journalism Studies* Vol. 4 No. 2

Kitz, Janet (1989) *Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion and the Road to Recovery* Halifax: Nimbus Press

Kratzer, Renee Martin and Brian Kratzer (2003) "How Newspapers Decided To Run Disturbing 9/11 Photos" *Newspaper Research Journal* Vol. 24 No. 1

Kueneman, Rodney M. and J. E. Wright (1975) "New Policies of Broadcast Stations for Civil Disturbances and Disasters" *Journalism Quarterly* Vol. 52 No. 4 pp: 670-677

Lacquer, Walter (1976) "The futility of Terrorism" *Harper's* March p. 102

Lang, Gladys Engel and Kurt Lang (1980) "Newspaper and TV Archives: Some Thoughts About Research on Disaster News" *Disasters and the Mass Media* Washington: The National Research Council pp: 269-280

Lasora, Dominic (2003) "News media Perpetuate Few Rumors About 9/11 Crisis" *Newspaper Research Journal* Vol. 24 No. 1 pp: 10-21

Ledingham, John A. and Lynne Masel Walters (1989) "The Sound and Fury: Mass Media and Hurricanes" Lynne Masel Walters, Lee Wilkins and Tim Walters, eds. *Bad Tidings Communications and Catastrophe* Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates pp. 43

Lule, Jack (2002) "Myth and Terror on the Editorial Page: The New York Times Responds to September 11, 2001 *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* Vol. 79 No. 2 pp: 275-309

McIntosh, Neil (1989) *Lockerbie: A Local Authority Responds to Disaster* Dumfries: Dumfries and Galloway Regional Council

Mencher, Melvin (1981) *News Reporting and Writing* Dubuque: William C. Brown Company, Publishers p. 491

Metz, William (1991) *Newswriting From Lead to "30" Englewood* Cliffs: Prentice Hall p. 297

Mileti, Dennis S. and E. M. Beck (1975) "Communication in Crisis: Explaining Evacuation Symbolically" *Communication Research 2* January pp: 24-29

New York Times (2003) *Portraits: 9/111/01: The Collected 'Portraits of Grief" from the New York Times* New York: Henry Holt and Company

Nosaki, H. S. Hori, Y. Shinozawa, S. Fujishima, K. Takuma, M. Sagoh, H. Kimura, T. Ohki, M. Suzuki and N. Aikawa (1995) "Secondary exposure of medical staff to sarin vapor in the emergency room" *Intensive Care Medicine* Vol. 21 p. 1032 [1032-1035]

Okabe, Keizo *et al.* (1979) *A Survey Research on People's Responses to an Earthquake Prediction Warning* Tokyo: Institute of Journalism and Communication

Okumura, Tetsu, Kouichiro Suzuki., Atsuhiro Fukada, Akitsugu Kohama, Nobukatsu Takasu, Shinichi Ishimatsu and Shigeaki Hinohara (1998) "The Tokyo Subway Sarin Attack: Disaster Management Part I: Community Emergency Response" *Academic Emergency Medicine* Vol. 6 No. 8 615 [613-617];

Pangi, Robyn (2002) "Consequence Management in the 1995 SARIN Attacks on the Japanese Subway System" Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs Discussion Paper 2002-4 Harvard: John F. Kennedy School of Government p. 17

Parker, Everett C. (1980) "What is Right and Wrong with Media Coverage of Disaster?" *Disasters and the Mass Media* Washington: The National Research Council pp: 237-240

Paul, Mary Jae (2001) "Interactive Disaster Communication on the Internet: A Content Analysis of Sixty-Four Disaster Relief Home Pages" *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* Vol. 78 No. 4 pp: 739-753

Perry, Ron and Marjorie Greene (1983) *Citizen Response to Volcanic Eruptions: The Case of Mount St. Helens* New York: Irvington Publishers

Perry, Ronald W. and Michael Lindell (1989) "Communicating Threat Information for Volcano Hazards" Lynne Masel Walters, Lee Wilkins and Tim Walters, eds. *Bad Tidings Communications and Catastrophe* Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates p. 62

Pijnenburg, Bert and Menno J. Van Duin (1990) "The Zeebrugge Ferry Disaster: Elements of a communication and information processes scenario" *Contemporary Crises* Vol. 14 pp: 321-349

Prince, Samuel Henry (1920) *Catastrophe and Social Change* New York: Columbia University

Quarantelli, E. L. (1991) *Lessons From Research: Findings on Mass Communications System Behavior in the Pre, Trans and Postimpact Periods* Newark: Disaster Research Center

Quarantelli, E. L. and Russell Dynes (1972) "When Disaster Strikes (It Isn't Much Like What You've Heard and Read About)" *Psychology Today* Vol. 5 No. 9 pp: 66-70

Reynolds, Amy and Brooke Barnett "This just in… How National TV News Handled the Breaking 'Live' Coverage of September 11 *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* Vol. 80 No. 3 p. 698

Rich, Carole (1997) *Writing and Reporting News A Coaching Method* New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company

Rogers, Everett M. and Rahul Sood (1981) *Mass Media Operations in a Quick-Onset Natural Disaster: Hurricane David in Dominica* Boulder: Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center

Rogers, Everett M. and Rahul Sood (1980) "Mass Media Communication and Disasters: A Content Analysis of Media Coverage of the Andhra Pradesh Cyclone and the Sahel Drought" *Disasters and the Mass Media* Washington: The National Research Council pp: 139-157

Rosengren, Karl Erik, Peter Arvidson and Dahn Struesson (1974) *The Barseback Panic* Lund: University of Lund

Rotbart, Dean (1999) "An Intimate Look at Covering Littleton" *Columbia Journalism Review* May/June pp: 24-35

2000 RTNDA Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (adopted September 14, 2000)

Salwen, Michael J. 1995) "News of Hurricane Andrew: The Agenda of Sources and the Sources' Agendas" *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* Vol. 72 No. 4 pp: 826-840

Sandman, Peter M. and Mary Paden (1979) "At Three Mile Island" *Columbia Journalism Review* Vol. 18 (July-August) p. 48

Scanlon, Joseph (2002) "Helping the Other Victims of September 11: Gander Uses Multiple EOCs to Handle 38 Diverted Flights" *Mass Emergencies and Disasters* Vol. 20 No. 3 pp. 369-398

Scanlon, Joseph (2004) "High Alert Chemical terrorism and the safety of first responders" *Royal Canadian Mounted Police Gazette* Vol. 66 No. 2 p. 33

Scanlon, Joseph (1996) "Not on the Record: Disasters, Records and Disaster Research" *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* Vol. 14 No. 3 November pp. 265-280

Scanlon, Joseph (1998) "The Search for Non-Existent Facts in the Reporting of Disaster" *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator* Vol. 53 No. 2 p. 45

Scanlon, Joseph and Angela Prawzick (1991) "Not Just a Big Fire: Emergency Response to an Environmental Disaster" *Canadian Police College Journal* Vol. 13 No. 4 pp. 229-259

Scanlon, Joseph and Brian Taylor (1975) *The Warning Smell of Gas* Ottawa: Emergency Preparedness Canada

Scanlon, Joseph and Robert Hiscott (1985) "Not Just The Facts: How Radio Assumes Influence in an Emergency" *Canadian Journal of Communication* Vol. 11 No. 4 pp. 391-404

Scanlon, Joseph, Gillian Osborne and Scott McClellan (1996) *The Peace River Ice Jam and Evacuation: An Alberta Town Adapts to a Sudden Emergency* Ottawa: Emergency Communications Research Unit

Scanlon, Joseph with Massey Padgham (1980) *The Peel Regional Police Force & The Mississauga Evacuation* Ottawa: Canadian Police College

Scanlon, T. J. (1992) *Disaster Preparedness Some Myths and Misconceptions* Easingwold: The Emergency Planning College

Scanlon, T. Joseph (1977) "Post-Disaster Rumor Chains: A Case Study" *International Journal of* Mass *Emergencies and Disasters* Vol. 2 pp. 121-126

Scanlon, T. Joseph (1976) "The Not So Mass Media: The Role of Individuals in Mass Communication" G. Stuart Adam, ed. *Journalism, Communication and the Law* Scarborough: Prentice-Hall of Canada pp: 104-119

Scanlon, T. Joseph and Suzanne Alldred (1982) "Media Coverage of Disasters: The Same Old Story" Barclay G. Jones and Miha Tomazevic, eds. *Social and Economic Aspects of Earthquakes* Ithaca: Cornell University and Ljubljana: Institute for Testing and Research in Materials and Structures pp: 363-375

Scanlon, T. Joseph, Rudy Luukko and Gerald Morton (1978) "Media Coverage of Crises: Better Than Reported, Worse Than Necessary" *Journalism Quarterly* Vol. 55 No. 1 pp. 68-72

Scanlon, T. Joseph with Kim Dixon and Scott McClellan (1982) *The Miramichi Earthquakes: The Media Respond to an Invisible Emergency* Ottawa: Emergency Communications Research Unit

Shearer, Ann (1991) *Survivors and the Media* London: John Libbey & Company Limited

Showalter, Pamela (1995) "One newspaper's coverage of the 1990 earthquake prediction" *Newspaper Research Journal* Vol. 16 No. 2 pp: 2-13

Singer, Benjamin D. and Lyndsay Green (1972) *The Social Functions of Radio in a Community Emergency* Toronto: Copp Clark

Smith, Conrad (1998) "Visual Evidence in Environmental Catastrophe TV Stories" *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* Vol. 13 No. 4 pp: 246-257

Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics

Sood, Rahul, Geoffrey Stockdale and Everett M. Rogers (1987) "How the News Media Operate in Natural Disasters" *Journal of Communication* Vol. 37 pp: 27-41

Stone, Gerald (1992) *Newswriting* New York: Harper Collins p. 144

Stephens, M. and N. Edison (1982) "News coverage of the incident at Three Mile Island" *Journalism Quarterly* Vol. 59 p. 199

Turner, Ralph (1980) "The Mass Media and Preparations for Natural Disaster" *Disasters and the Mass Media* Washington: The National Research Council pp: 281-292

Walters, Lynne Masel, Lee Wilkins and Tim Walters, eds. (1989) *Bad Tidings Communications and Catastrophe* Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates

Waxman, Jerry (1973) "Local Broadcast Gatekeeping During natural disaster" *Journalism Quarterly* Vol. 50 pp: 751-758;

Wenger, Dennis (1985) "Mass Media and Disasters" *Preliminary Paper # 98* Newark: Disaster Research Center

Wenger, Dennis, Thomas James and Charles Faupel (1980) *Disaster Beliefs and Emergency Planning* Newark: Disaster Research Center

Wenger, Dennis and E. L. Quarantelli (1989) *Local Mass Media Operations, Problems and Products in Disasters Report Series # 19* Newark: Disaster Research Center p. 62

Wicker, Tom (1966) "The Assassination" Ruth Adler, ed., *The Working Press* New York: G. P. Putman and Son*s*

Wigley, Shelley (2003) "Relationship Maintenance in a Time of Crisis: The 2001 Oklahoma State University Plane Crash" *Public Relations Quarterly* Vol. 48 No. 2 p. 40

Wilson, Lowrey (2004) "Media Dependency During a Large-Scale Social Disruption: The Case of September 11 *Mass Communication and Society Vol. 7 No. 3 pp: 354*

Windrem, Robert (2001) "'They Are Trying to Kill Us'" *Columbia Journalism Review* November/ December pp: 18-19

Xuewen, Sheng "The 1987 Daxinganling Forest Fire" Paper presented in Amsterdam at the International Conference of Local Authorities Confronting Disasters and Emergencies, April 22-24, 1996