

DRC Preliminary Paper #

THE ROLE OF THE MASS COMMUNICATION SYSTEM IN
NATURAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL DISASTERS AND
POSSIBLE EXTRAPOLATION TO TERRORISM SITUATIONS*

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INTRODUCTION

The original task given to us was to talk about the role of the “media,” a rather open ended task. We decided to somewhat change the title, to *The Role of the Mass Communication System in Natural and Technological Disasters and Possible Extrapolation to Terrorism Situations.*” Also, our focus for the most part became on what is involved in the production of news stories.

Our approach stems from our feeling that most people have little real understanding of what goes on and what affects the production of news. As such, we are first going to set forth half a dozen important observations, derived from research, about the social institution involved. Next, we will advance a dozen generalizations about the specific operations of local mass communication systems in natural and technological disasters. Finally, we will conclude with some half dozen comments about some of the dimensions and some of the differences that have to be considered in trying to extrapolate from the journalistic treatment of disasters to how the mass communication system might deal with terrorism.

Unless we have a good understanding of what actually happens and what really moves and influences this social institution, there is little point in trying to extrapolate from disasters to how this social system might be used to counter terrorism (or deal with anything else for that matter). Bad assumptions or misunderstandings cannot lead to good policies or programs. So we will start by trying to provide some understanding of the social system which produces stories or accounts (including news) that many feel are highly questionable.

Our observations are drawn from two bodies of data. One is the fairly large number of publications on social aspects of mass communication, some of which but the majority of which are not focused on reporting of disasters (see references in the Bibliography). Our other source of information is the series of studies that the Disaster Research Center (DRC) has conducted for around two decades on mass communication almost all of whom were done in a disaster context (e.g., Quarantelli 1981, 1989, 1996; Quarantelli and Wenger 1991; Quarantelli, Wenger, Mikami and Hiroi, 1993; Wenger and Quarantelli 1989). The great majority of the statistics cited are from the DRC studies.

OBSERVATIONS OF A GENERAL NATURE

A. Research-based Observations of a General Nature:

1. For knowledge and understanding we must look at the social phenomena involved rather than its technological base. As such, the focus should not be on the “mass media,” but on the mass communication (MC) system, one of the major social institutions in the society.
2. The MC system is a social institution with a distinctive set of beliefs, values, norms, etc. that are only partly shared by the larger society.
3. This system does not mirror or simply reflect the world; it is very selective in what it depicts.
4. This selective depiction of reality apparently provides the most salient information for people about risks, hazards and disasters.
5. This social institution is in the middle of massive social changes that will lead to even more heterogeneity in most dimensions.
6. The MC system is often negatively viewed by most people, which in turn makes MC personnel somewhat resistant to making changes in their work activities.

1. As a start toward getting the understanding we seek, we should not even be talking of the “media.” That term creates a focus on the technology involved, which for the most part is irrelevant to understanding what goes on, at least in terms of our interest. It makes much more sense, as we will illustrate later, to talk of a mass communication (MC) system. This in part forces looking at the phenomena involved as a social institution. It is in the social arena not at the technology where we should look for knowledge and understanding.

There is far more here than simply substituting one word or phrase for another. Instead we are arguing that one’s perspective of what is important depends considerably on the framework that one uses. To talk of MC systems is to accept the notion that what is crucial in understanding is the social phenomena involved.

2. The MC system is a social institution, a sub-world with its own distinctive and interrelated set of beliefs, values, norms, etc.

To be sure, some social aspects of this subculture are part of American culture generally, e.g., the importance of human life, the value placed on education, widespread acceptance of the market system for economic activity, love as the basis for marriage, the Constitution as a document that can not be questioned, an emphasis on individuals as crucial in understanding what occurs--almost a Great Man or at least individualistic theory of social change and history, etc.

Some aspects, especially for MC outlets that operate at the national level, reflect the less than fully societally shared view of the economic, political and cultural elites in American society, e.g., secularism, technology as the solution to most problems, relativism of moral values, racism as an inappropriate position, science as providing certainty in its conclusions, etc.

But more important, is that the journalistic world is a social world with its own distinctive sets of norms, beliefs and values on what is news, how news should be handled, and in general how news organizations and journalists ought to look at the world. For example, that the press is the active surrogate for citizens in watching for political misdeeds, that news is primarily non-routine happenings, that MC organizations are outside reporters of the social system they are in, that good stories are action-filled and dramatic and that can be personalized, etc. One consequence is that there is a focus on isolated events rather than processes or the larger social or historical context.

All these determine what, how, when, etc. disasters and crises are covered and reported.

3. One very widespread subcultural belief, albeit an incorrect one, is that the system merely reflects the world “out there.” News stories are supposedly simply objective statements about the world. But the MC system itself is a very important actor in the social construction of reality. The system does not mirror or reflect what is out there in any sense of those two terms, mirror or reflect. It is not objective in most senses of the term. It is highly selective in what it reports, and necessarily so. What is produced is not the result of deliberate distortion or incompetence, etc. but the result of the processing of news stories according to institutional and organizational values and norms (e.g., the “gatekeeping” process which deals with finding the event in the first place to the final version of the report). The “story” goes through organizations with personnel trying to do their jobs as that subculture structures the work activity.

All areas be they science, religion, economics, etc. have beliefs that may be widely believed internally in the area, but that outside observers can seriously question. But while the social construction of reality exists in all social institutions, it is especially important when done by the MC system. This is because the “reality” of much of what people believe is drawn from the social reality set forth by the MC system (this is not true of science, for example).

4, The end product, the published news stories, are framed in particular ways, and as such provide an agenda for attention.

News stories tend to be framed or structured in particular ways. For example, there is a strong tendency to frame stories in a conflict framework. Thus, a recent study showed that 30 % of all news stories present news through a combative lens (e.g., clear-cut conflicts, winners/losers, rivalry, etc., see Project for Excellence 1999)

For most people, at least in societies where there is a very developed MC system, that system provides the most as well as the most salient information about risks, hazards and disasters. Individuals seldom acquire that knowledge from personal experience. The MC system constructs that reality for most persons, including emergency managers, disaster planners and crisis decision makers. For example, are disasters the “result” or the “fault” of what? The sequence in disaster research has gone from characterizing

them as Acts of God, to Acts of Nature, to Acts of Human Beings. In MC stories, all these tend to be used, with the particular frame structuring how the story is presented, and what will provide the agenda for attention of readers/viewers.

5. We need to note that this social institution is changing, and perhaps at a more rapid rate than others. Let us note four dimensions along which change is occurring.

(1) While the notion of objective journalism still dominates, increasingly a more advocacy point of view has spread among journalists. This is the argument that whatever is reported necessarily reflects, implicitly at least, some political values. There has always been this secondary perspective. This can be seen in populist views of newspapers in the 19th century, Marxist intellectual views in the 20th Century, and especially post-modernistic views. All argue against any possibility of objective reporting.

(2) There has also been an internationalization especially of the processing of news. This is part of the globalization process. It means that there is increasingly exposure even at the community level to sources other than local or even national ones.

(3) Because of the operation of these first two factors, there is Increasing diversity in what is being reported.

(4) Accompanying an ever increasing diversity of who and how, and also what is reported, is an ever increasing differentiation into specialized audiences. Part of this is the result of the existing ethnic and minority differences in American society. But some is the result of the growing diversity in American society, which in turn is the result of changes in lifestyles (e.g., among adolescents who are split into many subgroups who expose themselves to rather different MC outlets).

Overall, we are therefore faced in the future with ever more segmentation and differentiation, and basically a move toward ever more heterogeneity in MC systems.

6. The MC system is often negatively viewed by most people, which in turn makes MC personnel somewhat resistant to making changes in their work activities.

There is something of great importance with respect to the relationship between MC personnel and all other people. It is a fact that news persons and news organizations are often negatively viewed and often do not rank too high in most surveys. The MC system is frequently accused of being sensational, of being biased and inaccurate about practically every aspect of life about which it reports or depicts (entertainment aside, and even it sometimes and/or in other ways). Many important groups and officials are generally very wary and distrustful of the press and journalists. These include politicians, government bureaucrats, corporate executives, labor leaders, and intellectuals, and especially activists both from the political right and the left. At a more operational level, a similar distrustful view is held by emergency managers, the police and others involved in major accidents and disasters. In short, what are often called the representatives of the "mass media" and what they report are favorite objects of attack and scapegoating.

While it is possible to find negative views of any social institution, the MC system ranks near the top. Understandably this creates defensiveness on part of MC personnel. And that creates reluctance to initiating changes in work activities.

While it is not our intent here to deal with the criticisms made, it should be observed that only some are valid and others are way off base. We might simply mention that there are far more sins of omission than commission. To be sure, sometime there is factual inaccuracy but it is far less than is what is widely believed even in the reporting of disasters. For example, to this day, it is reported that the attack on the World Trade Center (WTC) attack resulted in the highest number of persons killed in a single incident in American society. This is not true. For example, as most disaster researchers know, about 6,000 persons were killed in a day in the Galveston hurricane of 1900 (and in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 recent studies indicate that at least 3,300 persons were killed). The point here of course is not to downplay the loss of any life in any situation, but simply that there should be factual accuracy in contemporary or historical accounts of loss of life. However, as just said, this kind of sheer factual misstatement is relatively rare. Those who have looked at this problem in a somewhat systematic manner have argued that factual accuracy is higher than usually believed (Scanlon, Tuukka and Morton 1978).

GENERALIZATIONS FROM SPECIFIC STUDIES

B. Generalizations Derived from Specific Studies About Local Disaster Reporting.

We will turn now to some general findings rooted in empirical studies. Some of the generalizations are exactly what might be expected. Others are counterintuitive. Still, others challenge widely held beliefs.

Keep in mind that our comments here are about local, community level MC systems. The generalizations are not fully applicable to MC organizations that operate on a national level. Many of the generalizations do hold across the board, but some do need partial qualifications when applied to national entities.

1. Disaster preparedness planning among local MC organizations is very limited and generally of poor quality.
2. MC organizations change their formal structures or division of labor in attempting to report on disasters, with the middle sized groups changing the most.
3. Field reporters have even more autonomy than usual in covering disaster-related
4. There are some alterations in the process of news gathering, especially by radio-television organizations.
5. Those organizations that provide information about disasters in their communities

provide very extensive coverage.

6. In localities with multiple MC organizations, there is considerable variation in providing disaster coverage.

7. News stories on disasters are almost exclusively provided by local personnel who have a strong proprietary sense about the news of the disaster.

8. MC organizations primarily use traditional sources of information even at times of disasters.

9. Citizen sources, employed more than usual, are used in different ways by newspapers and radio/television organizations.

10. A "command post" perspective is generally assumed, particularly by radio and television organizations.

11. There is a rather selective reporting of important emergency time related activities, with some receiving extensive treatment, and others little, if any at all.

12. MC reports, especially in television, tend to present content that perpetuates certain disaster "myths."

Let us expound a little and provide some documentation of these dozen generalizations.

1. Disaster preparedness planning among local MC organizations is very limited and generally of poor quality.

Little attention is paid to emergency and disaster planning in most such organizations. The majority have no crisis plans whatsoever, giving no consideration to problems they would have if, for example, their facilities were affected, or to the difficulties of co-ordinating coverage of a major story in an altered and turbulent social environment.

In one DRC field study which focused mostly on disaster-prone cities, only 33% of the radio stations, 54% of television stations (15 out of 28), and three of the five papers studied had any disaster plans of any kind. But even where there was some kind of planning, it was usually of inadequate quality. Typically the plans consisted only of brief documents that specified procedures of notifying and mobilizing personnel, and lists of phone numbers (often outdated) of certain but not all relevant local emergency organizations.

Furthermore, even such material frequently cannot be located at times of disasters, and the information is frequently outdated or no longer accurate. Furthermore, one DRC study found that only 37% of the organizations actually used their planning in their community disaster.

Overall then we are talking of unprepared organizations even in disaster prone localities. This means that there is nothing to build by way of disaster preparedness on in most cases.

2. MC organizations change their formal structures or division of labor in attempting to report on disasters, with the middle sized groups changing the most.

Except in the case of minuscule, semi-automated radio stations, local organizations normally have a rather specialized division of labor even in groups with an absolute small number of workers. Thus, in electronic media organizations, there usually are engineering, traffic, sales, business and programming departments who in normal times do not engage in work in other areas (and within the newsroom there is a further division of labor between the news director, producer, assignment editor, other editors, writers, reporters, photographers, and anchors, etc.).

However, at times of disasters, there are typical alterations in the normal division of labor, with personnel participating in the processing of news stories in ways they do not usually undertake on an everyday basis. In the smaller radio stations and newspapers, workers often perform a variety of different tasks. This pattern is continued during a disaster, although if the disaster is of large magnitude, there is an even more blurring of everyday tasks, and an alteration in the division of labor. Similarly, the larger the MC organization, the more likely it will be that it will have personnel for specialized tasks. This will continue during crisis times except, if the disaster is large enough, the division of labor will break down. Thus, the most drastic changes or alterations in the MC division of labor will occur in moderate size news organizations.

This is to say that the relationship between size and alterations in structure during disasters is curvilinear. Statistics support this generalization. For example, in one DRC study, out of 32 small stations, only 58% pre-empted regular programming, as compared to 83% of the large stations and 100% of the 12 medium sized stations. Furthermore, only 45% of the small outlets and 50% of the large stations increased their news staff in order to cover the disaster, while 91% of the medium stations had an increase in personnel. Finally, only 41% of the small stations and 50% of the large ones actually sent reporters into the field to report the disaster occasion, while 91% of the medium sized outlets did so.

So unlike the handling of most news stories, news about disasters forces organizational change. Thus, this is an atypical situation for the reporting of news. It should also be noted that usually there is not much conscious awareness of this among MC personnel.

3, Field reporters have even more autonomy than usual in covering disaster-related stories.

Reporters in American society tend to view themselves and are viewed by the organizations for which they work as entitled to considerable work autonomy. In fact, this autonomy is viewed as a prized characteristic of the job.

In disasters, field reporters have even more independence than usual. Given normal autonomy, this represents only an alteration of degree and not of kind. Furthermore, the

degree to which this pattern emerges is directly related to the magnitude of the disaster, the scope of impact, and the degree of disruption of normal communications. In general, the bigger and greater the scope of the disaster and the more difficulties reporters have in communicating with their offices, the more independence they have.

However, what occurs is not unique to the MC area. There is a decentralization of decision making and much initiative on the part of "field" workers in almost any group involved in a disaster response. The nature of a disaster, where initially what has occurred and what is needed is unknown to anyone, facilitates and encourages independence of actions without much checking with nominally formal hierarchical superiors.

The reporter is the point person of the MC system and has considerable discretion both in non-disaster but particularly disaster situations. However, the tendency is to deal with what is literally in front of one's eyes. Although there are exceptions and contingencies affect considerably what will be done or not done, there is relatively little seeking out what might be more important in the crisis situation.

4. There are alterations in the process of news gathering especially by radio/television outlets.

In particular the "gatekeeping" process is mostly truncated in the electronic media, with newspapers also providing more "soft" news. One of the key concepts developed in the sociology of mass communication area has been that of "gatekeeping." During normal times, the gatekeeping in all MC organizations involves a number of stages or steps in which work incumbents in various organizations mold and modify the content of a news story so that eventually it is a collective product.

An earlier DRC study on radio stations suggested that gatekeeping is truncated during disasters with news processing being simplified and skipping some of the usual editing steps and stages. The more recent research indicates that the previous finding of a truncated gatekeeping process is primarily true for the electronic organizations. In both radio and television stations there is a considerable increase in the amount of live coverage during disaster occasions, with news stories not going through the everyday filtering process. In contrast, the gatekeeping process in newspapers often becomes more elaborate or more complex during disasters than is typical of routine times. Because newspapers do not have a technological capability for immediacy of coverage, they tend to elaborate gatekeeping whereas television and radio stations with such a capability do truncate the process.

In addition, newspapers compared with radio and television stations, adopt somewhat different roles and cover different aspects of disasters. Generally, organizations that use electronic media are the primary distributors of hard news items during the early emergency or crisis time period. Where there is not a widespread loss of electrical power, television plays the prime role, otherwise it is radio stations. Furthermore, there is a definite tendency for what are often called the "mass media" to become "personal media." In many radio stations, personal messages are often transmitted from listeners concerning their safety, the well being of others, and other kinds of personal information. In contrast, newspapers become more dominant in the post-impact period. During this

period, they provide background material and analytical coverage of the disaster, and they seldom become involved in transmitting personal messages to their readers.

So the MC organizations not only change, as we indicated earlier, their structures during disasters but they also modify some of their central processes. The lessening of gatekeeping almost insures that there will be more factual errors and incomplete information in reports about disasters than in more routine time stories.

5. Those organizations that provide information about disasters in their communities provide very extensive coverage.

Disaster coverage is massive. In one DRC study, local newspapers examined in nine communities struck by disasters found the range of coverage was 44-160 stories, with an average of almost 90 stories concerning the occasion in each newspaper. Of these news accounts, 33% appeared on the front page, and 55% were within the first three pages. In addition, a total of almost 700 photographs accompanied the 904 stories.

In another DRC study which did not include all MC outlets, we examined the coverage of the radio and television stations in the community. The local television stations produced a total of 175 reports during the first two days, or about 44 reports each day per station. In both cases normal programming was pre-empted, and the disaster was given very extensive coverage. Radio coverage, during the first two days, totaled 134 reports, or about 34 stories per station.

Clearly disasters are not ignored, at least the sudden and large scale ones. In that sense, coverage of disasters involves less selectivity as is true of most other topics that local MC organizations might have available to cover.

6. In localities with multiple MC organizations, there is considerable variation in providing disaster coverage.

However, despite what we just said in the previous generalization, the MC system as a whole, very seldom, if ever, gets involved in a disaster across-the-board. Not all MC organizations cover the disaster. There is also variation in the pattern and depth of those who do present news about the occasion.

Radio in particular gets differentially involved. In fact, very typically, only a minority of stations provide special disaster coverage. One DRC study found that 19% of all stations did not cover the disaster in their own community (either going off the air or continuing with normal programming). Another 30% never pre-empted local programming, and 28% did not increase their normal time allocated for news.

In contrast, newspapers tend to add open pages and often publish special issues on their community disaster. Television coverage is not quite as extensive; some stations go off the air or do not operate (e.g., public education stations). Another DRC study found that 83% of stations pre-empted regular programming, and 96% increased the time they gave to news during the disaster period.

Thus, it is incorrect to assume that the MC system as a whole gets totally involved in the response to the disaster. Many outlets simply do not function, or they keep to their regular programming.

7. News stories on disasters are almost exclusively provided by local personnel who have a strong proprietary sense about the stories of the disaster.

In several DRC field studies it was found that not only was the disaster a local story, but the accounts were produced almost exclusively by local MC organizations. Over 95% of all stories were put together by the local staff of the MC outlets. The few stories that were not written or produced by local staffers were from state, regional and national news bureaus. News services, wire services and outside sources amounted to less than one % of the coverage, although they were producing copy and tape in many cases and this material was available although not used by the local outlets.

In a psychological sense, it is clear that local MC systems consider disasters in their own communities as “their” disasters. This is sometimes manifested in tension, if not open clashes, between local MC personnel and national network staff members. Among local newspapers there is also considerable concern evidenced over copyrighting material to insure that “their disaster” and “their coverage” is acknowledged.

These observations need a little more qualification when the disaster is not a purely local one, but cuts across different but nearby communities. On the other hand, the competition that emerges tends to hold (but this operative in other areas involving locals and outsiders be they fire or rescue personnel, etc.).

8. MC organizations primarily use traditional sources of information even at times of disasters.

There is a very heavy reliance on traditional sources. This usually means official sources, that is governmental ones. However, certain traditional sources such as wire services, press releases and syndicated services are ignored since their content is seldom relevant to local coverage of a disaster in the community. Most reporters, if possible, first turn to their normal news sources: for those covering a “beat” this is almost always the first contact. For those who are able to contact and maintain contact, the overall picture set forth is often composed from the perspective of these sources.

One DRC study found that local governmental officials were cited in 14% of radio, 19% of television and 24% of newspaper stories. Police, fire and relief agencies were also frequently cited. In contrast, local emergency management officials were infrequently cited, being mentioned in only 8% of radio, 2% of television and 3% of newspaper stories. These patterns indicate the influence of traditional “beats” in the MC coverage of disasters. Those sources that area ignored are generally unattended ruing normal day-to-day coverage. In addition, a reliance on local, as opposed to other officials, is not only consistent with traditional news gathering procedures, but is also compatible with the “proprietary” orientation that we earlier indicated is developed by many MC personnel toward their local disaster.

Thus, we see that there is not as much seeking of new sources as some might anticipate. That reporters overwhelming tend to be generalists rather than specialists reinforce this tendency to turn to normal time sources.

9. Citizen sources employed more than usual are used in different ways by newspapers and radio/television organizations.

Relative to routine times, citizens are heavily used as sources of news during disasters. However, such usage is rather complicated. Different prevailing conditions create different usages by radio/television and newspapers. In addition, the size of the MC organizations involved and the scope of the disaster also affect such use of citizen sources.

Smaller organizations, lacking relevant resources, rely more heavily than other organizations on citizens. Likewise, in localities where the nature of the destruction and disruption makes travel and/or contact with officials difficult, individual residents of the community are sometime relied upon for "new" stories. Additionally, radio stations are more likely to utilize local private citizens than do television stations and newspapers. For example, statements and information from residents tend to be broadcast immediately, and/or callers to the station are likewise quickly aired (often live). Newspapers and television stations are less likely to use citizen sources. Furthermore, these MC outlets are more likely to use citizens as sources for human interest and features stories, rather than for breaking hard-news items.

This use of citizens is typical of some other news topic (e.g., crime stories). But it is not the way most stories are handled.

10. A "command post" perspective is generally assumed, particularly by radio and television outlets.

Some earlier DRC research (Quarantelli 1981) had suggested that the local MC organizations in disasters obtained information primarily from community officials often located at the command post or emergency operations center. A consequence is a strong tendency to present almost exclusively a "command post" view of the occasion. Thus, we argued that there is a bias in reporting toward the perception of "reality" as seen only one set of actors in the situation, mostly crisis or emergency-oriented governmental officials.

However, the later DRC studies indicate that a command post perspective is more likely to be assumed by radio and television stations. One study found that within radio stations, 62% of the reports used some command post sources. For television, the figure was 54% of all stories. In contrast, only 21% of the newspaper accounts relied solely on these types of formal sources. More generally, it has been found that while reporters, especially from radio station, use more than official sources to gather information, the stories that are produced heavily cite and quote command post officials. Thus, on balance, the general point of view presented is from a command post perspective, although there is some citizen generated content.

This observation is what might be expected. However, it illustrates how unrecognized bias in reporting might occur.

11. There is rather selective reporting of important emergency time related activities, with

some receiving extensive treatment and others little, if any at all.

One consequence of a reliance on traditional sources is that the activities of non-traditional groups and entities can “slip through the news net.” For example, the activities of volunteers, and of emergent groups and organizations—who are very frequently important in the crisis time responses—are not a part of the normal “beat” system or regularly contacted for news, tend to be ignored in MC accounts of disasters.

A somewhat distorted image of the disaster can be created by this practice. The activities of emergent groups and volunteers are often not depicted because they are not part of the traditional news net, so the image that is created in MC content is that such emergency time response is primarily actions of formal organizations. For instance, search and rescue is overwhelmingly carried out right after impact by the immediate survivors, where MC accounts focus heavily on formal search and rescue efforts that are relatively insignificant in the carrying out of this task. Thus, while thousands of victims may be informally rescued, news stories may primarily discuss dog teams from the outside who may or may not find a few dead bodies. In one DRC study, it was found that only 8% of the MC stories described search and rescue, making the task almost imperceptible in most coverages.

Basically what is involved, is a bias toward traditional and formal groups. Coverage of emergent groups and informal activities gets slighted.

12. MC reports, especially in television, tend to present content that perpetuates certain disaster “myths.”

Here again, a systematic look at MC content reveals that the picture of what is set forth is more complicated than one might think. For example, a quantitative analysis by DRC of disaster news stories indicated that only a small minority of them refer to such disaster myths as the prevalence of panic, looting, martial law imposition, psychological disaster shock, increasing crime, mass shelter utilization, victim helplessness and mass scale evacuation. Generally, less than 10% of the stories in all MC outlets present these images. (which in totality constitute what researchers have come to call “disaster myths”).

However, a qualitative analysis showed a different aspect. Television in particular is prone to perpetuating disaster myths. For example, although explicit references to panic flight and to looting constitute only a small proportion of the total television content, but their presentation is very dramatic and consistent with the mythologies. In some respects the visual imagery tends to override what might be the overall textual content.

Again we stress that these observations are research derived generalization from local MC system operations during and right after disasters. While MC organizations operating at the national level will exhibit the behaviors we have described, along some lines certain qualifications have to be applied to their operations.

EXTRAPOLATIONS TO TERRORISM: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

1. The social construction of “terrorism.”
2. Implications of the fact that conflict situations do differ from natural and technological disasters.
3. The probable similar orientation of MC systems to “news” about terrorism.
4. Unclear complications from the social and technological changes in the MC area.
5. Other MC operations that we did not discuss (e.g., documentaries, disaster movies, etc.)
6. Apart from preparedness and response, what about MC coverage of the mitigation and the recovery from terrorism.

1. The social construction of “terrorism”

We are not going to open Pandora’s box by talking directly about terrorism. But we do have to say that it is inconceivable to us that anyone who is trying to address what this forum is trying to do, applying knowledge about natural and technological disasters to terrorism, must in some way face up to what they mean by “terrorism.”

But if we return to our focus on mass communication systems, we do get a hint of how the word terrorism is a social construction by noting approach to the label in two different MC systems.

The Reuters news agency by policy and the BBC in practice do not use the word “terrorism” in their news stories. BBC, for example, might let someone who they have or are interviewing use the word (e.g., Jewish officials about Arab terrorism, or Palestinian Authority personnel about Jewish terrorism), but it does not show up in their broadcast text. However, it is not only the absence of a word that is crucial. Rather it is how the rest of the news story is structured with emphasis on the perspectives of both parties and an implied view that the behavior makes sense if looked at from either perspective. How the news stories are framed is dependent on what is visualized as “terrorism.”

2. Implications of the fact that conflict situations do differ from natural and technological disasters.

The fundamental difference is that in conflict situations (war, revolutions, rebellions, riots, terrorist attacks, etc.) one or more parties in the conflict are trying to make things worst for the other side, etc. There may be differences of opinion with respect to natural and technological disasters, but no one is deliberately trying to make the situation worst for anyone.

Given the value system of MC systems, conflict situations are real grist for reporters. This means that mass communication interest will be very high, even more than for disasters. There is no problem of trying to get MC systems at all levels to pay attention to the phenomena. But as we will indicate at very end of this paper, there is far less MC interest outside of the immediate crisis or emergency time period (true of disasters also)

3. The probable similar orientation of MC systems to “news” about terrorism.

There is reason to think that most of the generalizations noted before, will be anything but a magnification of them in terrorist situations.

For example, there will be a heightening of the command post perspective because social control agencies are even more present than usual in conflict occasions. There will be even more acceptance of elite or establishment perspectives. In a recent study on reporting of the World Trade Center situation, it was found that during the periods examined the press heavily favored pro-Administration and official US positions—as high as 71% early on (Project for Excellence 2002).

However, it is necessary to keep in mind that the attack on the World Trade Center was a very unexpected and jarring happening. As an example of this, in one survey (Raine 2001) 94% of American adults, took at least one behavioral step in response to the attack. What do I mean by step? The following, 78% of those surveyed displayed the American flag at their home and/or work place. A total of 58% contributed to the relief effort, while 48% attended a religious service, and 17% tried to donate blood. These are awesome figures. It would be difficult to find these kinds of percentages which literally involve tens of millions of people, for almost any other single happening in American society.

As an additional indication of the social impact that 9/11 had on American society, we should note the following. In the two days following the AC attack, about 3/4 of all Americans reached out to family and friends. On day of attack, 51% of American adults phoned family members; 40% phoned friends.

Would another terrorist attack evoke the same range and quantity of response? It could be argued that maybe it would not since there is evidence going back to World War I that attacked populations after initial attacks took later ones more in stride. There was in short a move towards normalcy, or routinizing even threats to life. On the other hand, if a future terrorist attack involved a rather different kind of threat, such as the spread of toxic or biological agents that would directly affect health, the initial reaction might be even more dramatic in terms of reaching out to others. An examination of past historical crises such as the Black Death might give us some clues to what might be expected.

4. Unclear complications from the social and technological changes in the MC area.

When we speculate, we must say it is unclear what are the implications of the changes that are going on in the MC area. We would suggest that advocacy journalism will come even more to the fore because terrorism whatever it is involves political values. There is a likelihood that taking sides would become more prevalent.

On the other hand, the newer technologies did not come as much to the fore after the WTC attack than some might have expected. For example, there was not a massive increase in Internet usage after September 11. Based on very limited personal observation on what seemed to be happening on the Internet, this surprised me. But the data on this activity are fairly clear. In the days following September 11, the number of Americans online dropped slightly (daily from 56-54% to 51%). There was certainly no

massive increase in usage. In fact there was even a small drop in Email sending and receiving.

However, those that remained on line got more news that way than ever before. The number of web sites visited at least doubled. In some cases, this can be seen from the huge percentage increases on September 11-12. E.g., there was a 1,494% increase in the Red Cross on line site; a 2,342% increase in the Red Cross disaster relief site, a 173% increase on the FEMA web site. International traffic to some US sites certainly went up. A 206% increase in the NY Times web site; a 680% increase to the CAN web site. (Raine 2001).

The best we can say, is that there are only limited hints here and there what might happen in the future with respect to existing trends in the MC area. But it should be kept in mind that for the greatest part of social phenomena, the historical evidence is that while there might be temporary deviations at time of crises from existing trends, in the long run there is a reverting back to whatever the trend lines were.

5. There are MC operations that we did not discuss. Our focus on news stories must not obscure the fact that there is much more to the MC area than journalism narrowly conceived. For illustrative purposes, let us allude to MC efforts at education and also at entertainment.

a. Documentaries and training films. Apart from news stories, what about other MC content such as educational attempts to educate citizens about risks, hazards and disasters?. In very general terms, most such activities (totally apart from the disaster area) do not seem to be very successful in getting those exposed to change their behaviors and beliefs. On the other hand, there are occasional success stories. Until we get a much better picture of what is communicated and learned in such educational efforts, we should keep an open mind about how view about terrorism and response to it, might be affected by educational attempts using MC..

b. My own feeling is that there might be more pay off in looking at popular culture and what influence there might be from some of its products. A good example is "disaster movies." (Keane 2001) Entertainment products such as films and novels get exposed to millions of Americans. Some such content directly deal with disasters. Personally we have studied the content of films and we can say that they show the same selective reporting as in news stories. But what is important is what people get or remember about such exposures. Who knows what are short and long-run effects? It is difficult to believe that there are none.

The frequently made remark about those who saw live the planes hitting the World Center and the immediate aftermath that "it seemed like a movie" do strongly suggest the importance of exposure to movies. Does a preheld visual imagery define the perceived situation?.

6. Finally, apart from preparedness and response, what about MC coverage of the mitigation and recovery phases of terrorism?

In some respects we have strongly reflected the MC bias in our own discussion, focusing on the crisis time period. But clearly the MC system could play a role in other time phases. In fact, it almost certainly conveys images of what is responsible for terrorism.

In conclusion, if an effort will be made to extrapolate from disasters to terrorism, there is much that is known that can be applied. On the other hand, there is much that is not clear and that requires not only further but more systematic study.

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