Tristan L. Emery

26 Smith School Road

New Harmony, IN 47631

(812) 459-5150

temery@purdue.edu

Purdue University

Sophomore

Over the past twenty years, sudden-onset disasters—earthquakes, floods, tidal waves, and volcanoes—have killed nearly three million people and caused incalculable suffering and untold damage. More people have been killed by such catastrophes than in the wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, or Iran/Iraq (Webster, n.d.).

Thousands of lives could be saved from disasters through the use of the latest communications technology, but this technology too often is not available or, if available, not put to use. The reasons—understandable or not—are political, financial, and institutional (Webster, n.d.).

The United States has the most open government in the world. Anchored securely by the First Amendment, openness is reinforced every day by a free press that publishes even classified information without punishment. At the same time, however, the US government maintains a massive secrecy system (Aftergood, 2000).

Several concerns of government officials exist when it comes to the open flow of information concerning disaster mitigation and preparedness, two of the four steps of emergency management. These distresses are: the need to protect sensitive disaster information or the need for the public to know, the idea of providing possible terrorists with important security information that could result in a disaster, and the impact of incorrect or exaggerated information released to the public or individuals misinterpreting disaster information.

- *Protect Sensitive Disaster Information or the Need for the Public to Know*

Thirty member nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development met in early 2004 to develop emergency plans for disasters such as, evacuation of shoreline areas susceptible to huge tidal waves. One panelist advocated government secrecy if a warning would

come too late and make no difference in the outcome. “If you can’t do anything about a warning, then there is no point in issuing a warning at all,” contended Geoffrey Sommer, of the Rand Corp., Santa Monica, California. “If an extinction-type disaster is inevitable, then ignorance for the population is bliss” (Aftergood, 2000).

Lee Clarke of Rutgers University, an international authority on civil defense and community responses to disasters, took a different tack. He said that policymakers have yet to accept that people rarely lose control when faced with a disaster. “People are quite capable of following plans, even in the face of extreme calamities, but such plans must be there. We have five decades of research on all kinds of disasters—earthquakes, tornadoes, and airplane crashes. People rarely lose control,” Clarke said, noting that human nature tends to shine brightest in adversity (Woods, 2003).

In an emergency, people depend on and expect information for physical and emotional comfort. For this reason, it is the responsibility of disaster officials to provide emergency communication that is timely, accurate, and clearly stated (FEMA, 2003).

- *Providing Terrorists With Important Information that Could Result in a Disaster*

The issue of allowing potential terrorists too much information about our nation’s disaster plans is a serious one. Air Force Maj. Joseph D. Jacobson stated in his master's thesis submitted to the George Washington University School of Law, "The road that restricts access to information leads us to a destination where the public is blissfully unaware of the dangers surrounding them while terrorists carefully research targets for maximum potential impact. The other road allows an informed public to prepare for potential attacks, plan responses, and put

pressure on industry to change practices and processes in a meaningful way, thus reducing the likelihood of attacks" (Jacobson, 2002).

The overwhelming majority of federal Web sites that reveal information about airports, power plants, military bases, and other attractive terrorist targets need not be censored because similar or better information is easily available elsewhere. A taxpayer-financed study that was funded by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency discovered that news (Sniffen, 2004).

The Rand Corp. takes the same type of stance as Jacobson on restricting federal Web pages due to the chance that they may be useful to terrorists. A study, conducted between mid-2002 and mid-2003, said restricting federal sites that disclose information concerning toxic chemicals would “diminish the public good that comes from providing local communities access to information that can significantly affect the well-being of citizens” (Sniffen, 2004).

- *Impact of Incorrect or Exaggerated Information Released to the Public or Individuals Misinterpreting Disaster Information*

Preventing the release of incorrect or over exaggerated information can help prevent widespread panic before, during, and after a disaster occurs. Rumors are started by expansion, deletion, amplification or modification of words, exaggeration or interpretation. An example of exaggerating a disaster issue occurred during the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) dilemma.

On March 12, 2003, the World Health Organization issued a global alert about a new atypical pneumonia. It was on March 15, that SARS became worldwide news. “SARS is now a worldwide health threat," Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the World Health Organization's (WHO) director general, said in a statement issued in Geneva. "The world needs to work together to find

its cause, cure the sick, and stop its spread" (CBS News, 2003). At the time of the alert, there had been 150 cases reported to the WHO, and only a handful of deaths (Lyons, 2003). Noteworthy, maybe, but was it case enough for a worldwide panic?

The impact of the SARS panic has been overwhelmingly negative. Economies have been disrupted, cities have been quarantined, people's daily lives have been organized around avoiding a disease that has been unlikely to infect them, and even less likely to kill them (Lyons, 2003). Those responsible for communicating about disasters and hazards should be timely and factual to reduce the spread of rumors. However, exaggeration of the situation should be discarded and accurate data, based on truth should be presented to the public.

During the outbreaks of West Nile Virus in recent years, diagnostic laboratory officials and animal health experts discovered that certain birds can serve as carriers of the virus. These birds carry the virus for 5-8 days and then die from its effects. Officials turned to the public for help identifying the types of birds affected. People began finding dead birds in their yards and on their farms, sending them to diagnostic laboratories hoping to know if they were susceptible to West Nile Virus. A flood of birds arriving at the labs crippled the diagnostic procedures and ultimately harmed the timeliness of information.

Purdue University Communication Specialist, Steve Cain recently stated in an interview, "Incidences involving West Nile Virus, as well as other plant disasters, have shown that effective communication reduces the public's tendency to bog down the diagnostic capabilities from false positives."

- *Effects of Proper Communications During Disasters*

Lessening the losses in life and property caused by natural hazards is a compelling objective now receiving worldwide attention. Scientists and engineers now believe that the knowledge and technology base potentially relevant to the mitigation of natural hazards has grown so dramatically in recent years that it would be possible, through a concentrated cooperative effort, to save many lives and reduce human suffering, dislocation, and economic losses. Communications are central to this effort—for public education, early warning, evacuation, and post-disaster relief (Rattien, n.d.).

Mass communication is inextricably entwined with disasters and hazard mitigation. The electronic and print media, reflecting great public interest and concern, provide extensive coverage of natural disasters, particularly those with strong visual impact. The media have significantly improved the level and sophistication of their pre- and post-disaster coverage in recent years by using new technology and consulting technical experts better able to describe the causes and mitigation of disaster (Rattien, n.d.). However, one should remember that the media and disaster-mitigation agencies are in essentially different businesses. The media "tell how bad things are" while the disaster-relief agencies "make things better" (Wenham, n.d.).

We must continually challenge those with the messages, whether disaster officials or the media, to remember the audience. The following are a few lessons learned (and sometimes re-learned) with each disaster.

Above all:

- All communications have to be timely.
- The message has to be clear, concise, and creative.

Preparing before the disaster:

• Develop a relationship with the media as a resource.

• Prepare as much as possible for the most likely disaster in your area.

• Know what your institution has to offer on the most likely disasters for your state/area.

• Have a plan and designate a communications coordinator.

• Gain as much general knowledge as you can about disaster education and how others have and have not done it. The following resources are helpful:

• *EDEN*: www.agctr.lsu.edu/eden

• *Natural Hazards Center*: www.colorado.edu/hazards

• *Journal of Extension*: www.joe.org

• *FEMA:* www.fema.gov

• *USDA*: www.usda.gov

• Know the news media's needs.

• Have a great team.

• Share expertise. Give the media and Extension educators and agents what they need to answer questions. If your institution doesn't have it, participate in the network and find out whose does.

• Don't stop communicating too soon. People reach their teachable moments at different times.

• Repeat information.

• Go to the people who need the information. Don't expect them to

come to you.

• Show compassion. It's important to recognize–and acknowledge–what your audience is experiencing.

Don't:

• Don't wing it or shoot from the hip.

• Don't be silent. In critical circumstances, silence is NOT golden. The media and/or your audiences may be relying on your expertise.

As communicators, we can help our institutions and the public who suffer from a disaster win back as much as possible (Cain & Koch, n.d.).

Overall, effective, reliable communications are vital to disaster reduction. Communications technologies, skills, and media are essential to link scientists, disaster mitigation officials, and the public; educate the public about disaster preparedness; track approaching hazards; alert authorities; warn the people most likely to be affected; assess damage; collect information, supplies, and other resources; coordinate rescue and relief activities; account for missing people; and motivate public, political, and institutional responses (Cate, n.d.).

To be effective, emergency information must be timely, accurate, and clearly stated. Information is a cornerstone of public safety. Studies show that during an emergency, information is as critically important to people as food or water. Not only can accurate information mean the difference between life and death, it can provide reassurance that response and recovery are truly underway (FEMA, 2003).

Aftergood, Steven. “Openness and Secrecy: The Pendulum Swings.” Washington, D.C. 2000 http://www.fas.org/faspir/v53n1.htm

Cain, Steve, & Koch, Becky. “Flirting with Disasters: When Communication Comes to Life.” http://www.aceweb.org/jac/v87n4/874-3.htm

Cate, Fred H. “The Media and Disaster Reduction: Roundtable on the Media, Scientific Information and Disasters at the United Nations World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction.” n.d. http://www.annenberg.nwu.edu/pubs/disas/disas3.htm

CBS News. “Pneumonia Alert.” Vietnam. 2003. http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/03/16/health/main544150.shtml

FEMA, “Independent Study Course.” www.fema.gov

Jacobson, Joseph. *Safeguarding National Security through Public Release of Environmental Information: Moving the Debate to the Next Level*. George Washington University Law School. 2002.

Lyons, Rob. “WHO’s to blame for the SARS panic?” London. 2003. http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000006DDA8.htm

Rattien, Stephen. “The Role of the Media in Hazard Mitigation and Disaster Management.” n.d. http://annenberg.nwu.edu/pubs/disas/disas7.htm

Sniffen, Michael. “Study: Federal Web sites offer little data for terrorists.” Washington. 2004. http://www.usatoday.com/tech/webguide/internetlife/2004-05-10-fed-sites-ok_x.htm

Webster, David. “An Introduction with Four Proposals.” n.d. http://www.annenberg.nwu.edu/pubs/disas/disas4.htm

Wenham, Brian. “The Media and Disasters: Building a Better Understanding.” n.d. http://annenberg.nwu.edu/pubs/disas/disas6.htm

Woods, Michael. “Mass hysteria mainly the stuff of Hollywood.” Pittsburgh, PA. 2003.

http://www.post-gazette.com/nation/20030214panicnat4p4.asp