

Communicating during Emergencies in the United States

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Communicating with the public is one of the critical tasks facing emergency management agencies (EM Agencies). Reaching the widest possible audience with the most up-to-date, credible information can save lives and property, reduce public fears and anxiety, and maintain the public's trust in the integrity of government officials. We recently conducted a survey of how EM Agency communicators had fared during a number of national disasters and terrorist attacks. Our concern about the adequacy of Agency communications planning has been heightened by a striking change in the intensity of media coverage. In describing their work with the press, our respondents used imagery very much like that they applied to the emergency event itself. They found themselves swamped by a veritable "tidal wave" of reporters almost literally beating down their doors. In this article we review the findings of our survey and interviews, and lay out the principal suggestions we received from a cross-section of EM Agencies on putting the personnel and infrastructure in place to execute robust, flexible communication plans.

Methodology

This article is based on responses to a questionnaire which we received from communicators involved in the following recent natural disasters or terrorist attack, including interviews in most cases with the principal spokesperson involved:

- Tropical Storm Allison, Harris County Texas, Office of Emergency Management, Mayor's Office, June 5–10, 2001
- The Hayman forest fire, Colorado, Public Affairs, U.S Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Region, summer 2000

- Attack on the Pentagon, northern Virginia, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Public Affairs and Media Relations, U.S. Department of Defense, September 11, 2001
- Attack on the Pentagon, northern Virginia, Capitol Police, September 11, 2001
- Sniper attacks, Washington, D.C. metro area, Media Services, Montgomery County Police Department, fall 2002
- Anthrax attack on Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, DC, October, 2001
- Anthrax attacks, Office of Communications, Division of Media Relations, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, fall 2001
- F4 level tornado, La Plata, Maryland, Maryland Emergency Management Agency, April 28, 2002

Planning

Creating a communication plan on the fly during a crisis is an extremely daunting task. The absence of a plan virtually guarantees that communicators will not be able to reach the public as effectively as they would if they had a plan in place.

Producing a workable written plan is inherently an agency-by-agency process, contingent on available personnel, budget limitations, etc. By soliciting critical review of the plan from all the affected participants—the public, the press—other government agencies—EM Agencies have the opportunity to produce the best possible plan under the circumstances.

Some of the EM Agencies we talked with had highly elaborate communication plans. But regardless of length, they all agreed that their plans made them more effective during emergencies. And the EM Agencies who had been through a trial by fire without a written communications plan were equally adamant about putting such a plan in place as soon as possible.

* Note: Research support for this paper was provided by Lauren Block, Tracy R. Bolo, Amina Chaudary, Brain D. Cogert, David DeCicco, Aspasia Papadopoulou, Robert Paxton and Michael Stinziano.



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People

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Given the increasing intensity of media coverage, the media spokesperson plays an increasingly important role in ensuring the overall effectiveness of an EMA. To maintain the spokesperson's credibility as a source with the media, the spokesperson needs to be "at the table" for all senior management decisions. If reporters believe that a spokesperson is not fully integrated into the decision-making process, they will inevitably be more suspicious of the information they receive.

By participating in decision-making, the spokesperson can also play a vital internal role by making sure that decision-makers have fully considered how their decisions may play out in the media, giving them a better chance of avoiding public relations blunders.

After the terrorist attack on the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, Arlington County officials significantly upgraded its top public communications official. The change was more than just a title change (from Assistant County Manager for Public Information

to Director of Communications and Public Affairs.)

The county also raised the position's salary, and provided that the new Director would report directly to the County Manager. The job description for this new position includes the development of "a comprehensive communications program that will provide a cohesive image, identity, and brand message both externally and internally by optimising the use of existing electronic resources (internet, intranet, and cable television) and non-electronic sources (print media) as well as developing new communications venues."

If possible, one person should be the principal spokesperson (the single voice-single face model.) Nothing is likely to be more confusing to the media or the public than dealing with a constantly changing array of talking heads. (There's a reason almost all the daily White House press briefings are handled by one person!)

Media Training

Learning to be a media spokesperson in the middle of a crisis is risky. There is no substitute for practical media training before a crisis arrives. In Harris County, Texas, the three authorised spokespeople had all been through a FEMA-approved 32-hour Public Information Officer (PIO) course offered through the Texas Department of Public Safety's Office of Emergency Management. The Forest Service spokesperson during the 2002 Hayman forest fire had had roughly 50 hours of formal media training. In addition, the agency's public affairs staff worked with him on "war game" crises, creating what he called "murder boards" to put him through the kind of tough questioning he would encounter in a real crisis. And the Capitol Police officer who handled the

anthrax attack on the Senate Hart Building was a media trainer himself with over 160 hours of training.

Infrastructure

Building an Emergency Operations Center

Just as some jurisdictions had no written EM plan, some did not have an Emergency Operations Center (EOC), although there was broad agreement that having a well-equipped EOC was the physical foundation for an effective communications effort.

For planning purposes, the EOC should have redundant communications capabilities, both internally and with the outside. No communications technology works every time. Land lines can fail; during the attack on the Pentagon, there were frequent problems with mobile phones.

Without a well-equipped EOC, crisis managers face difficult hurdles staying on top of what is happening. After the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon, local officials found that their EOC was ill equipped for the emergency management team to communicate with first responders, or to receive accurate information from the scene. Phone lines were down, and the room was not equipped with radios or televisions. They were forced to delay press briefings until they could verify facts with first responders and people onsite.

EOCs should be designed with the media in mind. The Harris County, Texas EOC has an on-site press room with telephone and computer access. EOCs can make life easier for television reporters by preparing video footage (called “B-roll”) of scenes that reporters could use, like the interior of the Emergency Operations Center. EOCs can also prepare fact sheets and other printed background materials on the major threats that the agency has identified.

Communicators can also provide the press with special support if necessary. During the Hayman forest fire, the Forest Service gave out personal protective equipment to reporters (hard hats, fire clothes, etc.)

Carving through the Jurisdictional Jungle

The communications plan provides a framework for mapping and, where possible, negotiating communication procedures about how to handle one of the most common problems of the EM Agency universe, overlapping jurisdictions. Such overlaps are inherent in the nature of almost every large-scale emergency event. A comprehensive plan must include not only local, state, and federal law enforcement and emergency management agencies, but also the spectrum of veterinary and public health agencies (in light of the threat of the use of biological, chemical, or radiological weapons by terrorists.)

In the aftermath of the anthrax attacks, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention has published a useful analysis of the similarities and differences in public health and law enforcement investigations, and the steep learning curves for both sets of agencies in their collaborations. (*Collaboration Between Public Health and Law Enforcement: New Paradigms and partnerships for Bioterrorism Planning and Response*, Jay C. Butler et. al., <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/EID/vol8no10/02-0400.htm>). The authors emphasise the importance of pre-existing relationships between law enforcement and public health agencies, the need for practise exercises, and call for adding liaisons who are cross-trained in the public health aspects of communicable diseases and in law enforcement and criminal investigations.



Even without a written communication plan, an informal prior agreement can be helpful in reducing confusion. In the case of the anthrax attack on the Hart Senate Office Building, there was no written plan. But the Capitol Police Board and the House and Senate leadership had previously determined that the Capitol Police would be the designated agency to handle media inquiries after any terrorist or criminal incidents within the Capitol complex. Members of Congress—a group not known for being media-shy—conferred with the police spokesperson before holding their own press conferences, and the spokesperson attended these events, off camera, to provide guidance as needed.

In our study, several communicators highlighted the importance of maintaining clear channels of communication with all of the government agencies involved, regardless of which agency had been designated the lead communication agency. This cross-

agency communication is essential for keeping everyone “on the same page,” so that reporters do not get confusing or conflicting information from their contacts at other agencies. Up-to-date email and fax lists are a relatively cheap way to distribute breaking information to other agencies in a timely way.

The Office of Emergency Management in Harris County used an internet email and pager software they developed to reach more than 140 media outlets in the region, 125 law-enforcement agencies, 54 fire departments, 29 cities, and selected individuals throughout the surrounding 41 counties. After Tropical Storm Allison, the office expanded the list of individuals requesting real-time information, adding more elected federal, state, and local officials and media outlets. (Copies of the Harris County plans can be downloaded from <http://www.hcoem.org>)

Working with the Media

Building Prior Relationships

The media play an integral part in EM Agencies outreach efforts to keep the public informed and up-to-date. But without pre-existing relationships with reporters, it's not uncommon or unexpected that in the heat of the moment, EM Agencies might come to look upon the press in a crisis as adversaries engaged in a “feeding frenzy” for new facts.”

Planning is essential to building relationships with the media, so that EM Agencies and the media understand each other's needs and operating styles, and how to

work together as much as possible as allies. Both EM Agencies and the press share a deep concern about protecting the health and welfare of the public. Far from being adversaries, reporters can be valuable allies, particularly in devising an effective communications plan in the first place.

Harris County's Office of Emergency Management had a policy of inviting reporters in twice a year to talk about how the agency could better meet the needs of the press. Such conversations are no guarantee, of course, against future disagreements. But such meetings do allow for EM Agencies and reporters to share each others' perspectives in a non-stressed environment, reducing the possibility of misunderstandings later on during crises. And such exchanges also allow EM Agencies to plan to meet the media's needs where possible. Another useful technique for improving media relations is to schedule meetings with the editorial boards of local media outlets.

Conserving Credibility with the Media

Credibility is a dynamic asset in a crisis; a spokesperson can lose credibility quickly if the media and the public come to believe they're being misinformed, or under-informed. Every effort should be made to ensure that whatever information is released to the public is accurate and up-to-date. As one PIO told us, his goal was to be “the first and best source of information, especially if it's bad news.”



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Misinformation only compounds one of the other common communication problems during crisis, the rapid spread of unfounded rumours, which can take up valuable time rebutting. During the Capitol Hill anthrax attack, many Capitol Hill reporters—who were used to covering policy debates, not terrorist attacks—were anxious about their own medical conditions, having been in the “hot zone” at some point. Congressional staffers, their usual sources of information were also anxious about their own health, provided information often based on rumour, outside their areas of legislative expertise. Reporters, frustrated with what seemed to them to be the slow release of information, would go with these rumour sources, and end up being forced to backtrack later. Many of the communication managers in our survey said that combating such rumours was one of the most difficult tasks they faced during a crisis.

Limiting the amount of information that reaches the public poses a different kind of challenge. It is not uncommon for government or corporate managers to use the control of the release of information as a way of gaining or preserving bureaucratic power. But in a crisis, this withholding tendency can aggravate the public's anxieties. In Arlington County, Virginia, after the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon, officials found that although they might not have any new, more specific information about what might happen next, the public citizens still wanted frequent updates and reassurances from their county government.

In a crisis management setting, withholding information may well result in a loss of power and control. Our respondents agreed that one should lean in the direction of making more, rather than less, information available, consistent with law enforcement and public safety considerations.

In a full-blown media circus, even a vigorous attempt at openness may not be enough to halt a media feeding frenzy. One of the more striking examples of this press intensity came from the Montgomery County, Maryland police during the fall 2002 Washington DC area sniper attacks. The department was already providing frequent media releases, one-on-one interviews, web updates, and as many as four press briefings a day.

But reporters wanted more. Some went so far as to peer through a half-inch opening in the window shades at the operations centre, stealing a look at text on a white board. Within seconds, they were questioning Montgomery County police chief Charles Moss about the information they had gleaned, showing little concern about whether their questions might endanger public safety.

Keeping Alternative Media Channels Open

In addition to the traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers), EM Agencies have access to newer media like email, websites, and local cable TV, which can

be used to reach the public directly. Because these tools also do not reach as wide an audience as traditional mass media, they should be seen as adjuncts, not substitutes.

These unmediated channels can be very effective tools for providing the public with a great deal of information without tying up large numbers of the EM Agency's staff. However, if an EM Agency is using a website, it is essential that staff update the site on a frequent basis; stale information drives users away.

The agencies we surveyed reported a wide range of satisfaction in using new media tools. In some cases, results were disappointing because too few people were aware of the local cable TV channel or did not know the agency had a website. On the other hand, one agency reported over 1.6 million contacts on its website from press, first responders, and the public, and regarded the website as a valuable component of its overall communication strategy.

Conclusion

Communicating during emergencies is necessarily fraught with uncertainty: the unexpected is most likely to happen. No emergency communication plan can fully encompass all of the scenarios that may arise. But the findings from our survey show that EM Agencies can take steps to create a robust communication plans, train spokespeople, and build the infrastructure that will enable EM Agencies to roll with the punches and maximise their effectiveness at getting their messages to the press, the public and other government agencies.

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