

FOSTERING COMMUNITY DISASTER RESILIENCE A FACT SHEET FOR JOURNALISTS AND NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

Disasters can be chaotic, confusing, and frightening events for those who experience them directly, for the journalists who cover them, and for individuals who learn about them through the media.

The news media play an important role in individual and community preparedness before a disaster, in disaster response during an event, and in fostering recovery and resilience afterward.

Before a disaster, the public depends on news media to provide information about risks and to broadcast disaster warnings. During and following an event, emergency officials and the public rely on the news media for accurate information about what is happening and what is needed for recovery.

Done well, disaster journalism can:

- Save and protect lives
- Reduce the psychological impact of disasters
- Inform disaster response
- Foster community recovery and resilience
- Identify unmet community needs

However, done poorly, disaster journalism can:

- Impede the recovery of individuals and communities
- Exacerbate psychological reactions of disaster survivors
- Spread the stress of a disaster beyond those directly experiencing the event

This fact sheet provides suggestions for how journalists and news organizations can serve their communities when disaster strikes – from guiding preparations before an event to fostering resilience during and after.



DISASTER JOURNALISM

Journalists and news organizations commonly experience several challenges when preparing for and covering disasters. These challenges include:

- » A lack of training on how to report on community risks and threats.
- » Insufficient coordination with government agencies and officials in communicating about community emergency plans.
- » A lack of consultation with other key actors in disaster preparedness and response efforts, such as local non-profits, disaster responders, businesses, and other news organizations.
- » A tendency to focus on the most sensational aspects of a disaster such as death, injury, and destruction.
- » Repetitive use of distressing images and video such as burning buildings or overturned cars.

These challenges can hamper the dissemination of accurate information and can foster public fear and anxiety.

Below are some steps to address these challenges:

DISASTER PREPARATION BEGINS EARLY

Disaster preparation for journalists and news organizations should begin before a disaster occurs. Just as individual households should prepare emergency supplies and plan evacuations before an event, journalists and news organizations can prepare with the following practices:

- **Embrace the idea that covering disasters may require different modes or styles journalism.** During a disaster, traditional newsgathering approaches may be stressful for interviewees and the public, so journalists should incorporate empathy into their reporting of disasters. Coverage should be uniquely tailored to individual events.
- **Listen to the community.** The public should be thought of as an equal partner in creating news content. Create dialogue early.
- **Establish closer working relationships with community organizations and officials before a crisis hits.** Journalists and newsrooms should stay in regular contact with public health and other governmental agencies, emergency response managers, and community organizations, and know how to get in touch with these individuals and organizations during an emergency. If possible, get home and cell numbers for relevant contacts. Building trust with these individuals before an emergency will foster cooperation later. Having a diverse information-sharing network is important because even high-ranking officials may not have all of the pertinent information during an event.
- **Have a plan.** In advance of a disaster, estimate how your workforce will be used in an emergency and determine how many extra staff may be needed to minimize overworking journalists. Hiring freelance journalists to increase capacity during a disaster may be helpful. Do not simply send every reporter into the field. Work with government, emergency, and community officials to know how and where journalists can be the most helpful and least obstructive. When possible, participate in community disaster and emergency drills and readiness exercises with local agencies.

HELPING THE COMMUNITY PREPARE FOR A DISASTER

Journalists and news organizations play an important role in individual and community disaster preparedness by cultivating public awareness of the need for disaster preparedness and by instructing the public how to prepare.

- **Promote personal and family preparedness.** The public cannot wait until disaster is imminent to begin

disaster preparation. Without being alarmist, and in coordination with government agencies, journalists and news organizations can periodically inform individuals and families about preparedness activities such as how to prepare a family disaster kit and what evacuation plans exist in a community. Be specific in this reporting: for example, tell citizens what should be included in a kit, rather than simply telling them to prepare one.

- **Encourage seasonal inspection of kits and plans.** Disaster preparation is not a one-time task. Disasters that are more likely to occur during different times of the year will require differing preparations (for example, an evacuation plan for a hurricane may not work during a wildfire). Families should periodically inspect all items in their kits: food expires and batteries die.
- **Be specific when warning the public.** When communicating warnings of possible disasters, clearly explain the situation. Similarly, give clear, precise instructions. Do not simply say, “Take cover.” Explain how and where to take cover. Tell people how to evacuate, not just that they need to evacuate.



REPORTING DURING AND IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING A DISASTER

- **Report on and treat disaster survivors with sensitivity, dignity, and respect.** Be honest and empathetic when reporting on and engaging with disaster survivors. Individuals affected by disaster rely on journalists and news organizations to act as advocates. When interviewing survivors, treat them as people, not as victims or objects of pity. Objective journalism may not always be the most useful approach after a disaster, so consider sharing your own feelings, concerns, and sympathy with survivors and audiences. When possible, rather than speaking for survivors, let them share their own thoughts and feelings.

- **Minimize intrusions.** Local residents and emergency officials will need space for rescue operations, cleanup, and rebuilding, as well as for more personal aspects of recovery like grieving; be careful not to impede these efforts. Do not block roads or affected areas with equipment or vehicles, as this can hamper recovery and antagonize members of the community. Show respect and concern for survivors' well-being by asking permission to use stories and pictures, by ensuring that interviewees are not misrepresented, and by complying when possible with community requests (for example, not to photograph specific events). Do not violate privacy, hassle community members, or exploit survivors' grief in pursuit of a good story.
- **Don't sensationalize.** Sensational journalism may seem compelling, but it can also harm survivors, the public, and recovery efforts. Avoid making a disaster sound exciting and don't focus solely on the damage, casualties, and suffering resulting from the disaster. This type of coverage can spread fear and dehumanize those who experienced the event.
- **Diversify coverage.** Addressing a range of disaster-related topics and utilizing different perspectives can improve disaster journalism. Consult a variety of sources (not just disaster survivors, but also emergency workers and community officials), and pursue multiple types of stories. Up-to-the-minute information, search and rescue reports, instructions for what the public can do in similar situations, human interest stories, and explorations of community resilience are all important parts of disaster journalism. News organizations should coordinate their reporters' stories so that there are not gaps or overlaps in coverage.

- **Keep disaster coverage accurate, clear, and consistent.** Inaccurate or inconsistent information can cause fear or can delay rescue efforts, so disaster media coverage across all platforms (the Internet, social media, and traditional media) must be up-to-date, accurate, and consistent. Even minor distortions or slightly unclear messages can have serious negative effects. Collaboration between journalists (including those working with national and local media) can result in more consistent coverage, and coordination with credible sources ensures more timely, accurate, up-to-date information.

AFTER A DISASTER

In the weeks following a disaster, journalists should continue to provide the public with thoughtful and informative news stories. While many stories will continue to address the disaster itself, journalists and news organizations also have an opportunity to help foster recovery in the affected community and to voice the community's emerging concerns. Thus, news organizations should:

- **Continue to work with the community.** Meeting with and interviewing individuals with a variety of disaster experiences may result in a fairer and more diverse representation of the affected community and its residents. Journalists and news organizations should periodically follow up on stories (for example, after six months, one year, two years, and so on).
- **Help to foster healthy narratives.** Disaster media coverage will greatly influence the narratives that communities use to understand and remember a disaster. Journalists and news organizations can provide community members with the necessary space and opportunities to create their own narratives. Journalists might also share stories that encourage compassion and empathy as part of the community's collective memory of the disaster event.
- **Advocate for the affected community.** Let the public know exactly how they can assist (and not interfere with) the affected community. Also, let the affected community know how they can access post-disaster services.
- **Report on response failures and ethical breaches.** Journalists and news organizations should feel empowered to confront colleagues who act unethically at a disaster site. One person's unethical conduct can slow recovery efforts, cause further distress to victims, and drive community members away from working with news organizations. Similarly, as appropriate, journalists should investigate officials and response organizations, and highlight real or potential failures ranging from poor management and inadequate supplies to illegal or unethical activity.





SUMMARY

- » Have a plan.
- » Promote personal and family readiness.
- » Work with community organizations and listen to local concerns before a disaster occurs.
- » Report on and treat disaster survivors with sensitivity, dignity, and respect.
- » Diversify news coverage of a disaster.
- » Ensure accuracy, clarity, specificity, and consistency.
- » Advocate for and work with the community.
- » Report on response failures and ethical breaches.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma:
<http://dartcenter.org/>

Disaster and Crisis Coverage - International Center for Journalists: <http://www.icfj.org/resources/disaster-and-crisis-coverage-english>

Steffens, M., Wilkins, L., Vultee, F., Thorson, E., Kyle, G., & Collins, K. (2012). *Reporting disaster on deadline: A handbook for students and professionals*. New York: Routledge.

Breaking News Coverage - National Public Radio:
<http://digitalservices.npr.org/post/how-breaking-news-handbooks-guide-member-stations>

REFERENCES USED IN THIS FACTSHEET

Houston, J. B., Pfefferbaum, B., & Rosenholtz, C. E. (2012). Disaster news framing and frame changing in coverage of major US natural disasters, 2000–2010. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 89, 606–623.

Lowrey, W., Evans, W., Gower, K. K., Robinson, J. A., Ginter, P. M., McCormick, L. C., & Abdolrasulnia, M. (2007). Effective media communication of disasters: pressing problems and recommendations. *BMC Public Health*, 7, 97.

McLean, H., & Power, M. R. (2014). When minutes count: Tension and trust in the relationship between emergency managers and the media. *Journalism*, 15, 307–325.

Quarantelli, E. L. (1997). Ten criteria for evaluating the management of community disasters. *Disasters*, 21, 39–56.

Scanlon, J. (2006). Unwelcome irritant or useful ally? The mass media in emergencies. In H. Rodriguez, E. L. Quarantelli, & R. R. Dynes (Eds.), *Handbook of disaster research* (pp. 413–429). New York, NY: Springer.

Copyright © 2015 Koch MA, Horton MA (Disaster and Community Crisis Center at the University of Missouri). All rights reserved. You are welcome to copy or redistribute this material in print or electronically provided the text is not modified, the authors and the Disaster and Community Crisis Center (DCC) at the University of Missouri are cited in any use, and no fee is charged for copies of this publication. Unauthorized commercial publication or exploitation of this material is specifically prohibited. If you would like permission to adapt or license these materials, please contact DCC at houstonjb@missouri.edu or 573.882.3327.

This work was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

The views, opinions, and content are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.