_____

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DISASTER MANAGEMENT

David Venter
International Negotiation Academy

"The media may not be very successful in telling people what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling its audience what to think about."
Adapted quotation from Bernard Cohen

INTODUCTION

Although there may be some who accept the importance of the media as a core variable in the successful implementation of a disaster management strategy, the majority of stakeholders unfortunately do not understand how to effectively interact with the media. They are oblivious of the need for dedicated communication strategies and plans as the means to optimal media interaction. In stead of intentionally reaching out to the media as a powerful ally, they consciously choose to evade the media, only availing themselves of media contact when they have no way of circumventing the media. They are the victims of media fear created by ill-informed persons who excel at villianising the media. The negative media frames they are trapped in subconsciously compel them to adopt the negative media attitudes and behaviours that are prescribed by these frames.

One of the worst legacies of the apartheid era is the degree to which it distorted media relations. Those in power saw the media as a threat and often blatantly attempted to prescribe to the owners, editors, producers and journalists, while those who opposed the regime came to see the media as *their* instrument. Despite the new constitutional order both the newly empowered and now disempowered groups find it exceedingly difficult to break out of their old media paradigms. They consequently continue to harbour misguided expectations about the role of the media. The disempowered group now distrust the media more than ever before, while the newly empowered group is utterly disgusted by the refusal of the media to continue to grant them *most favoured status*.

Disaster managers, be they in government, non-governmental organisations or the private sector, need to understand the principles and processes/procedures that govern the role of the media in democratic societies. Antagonism will blunt one of the most important tools they need to execute their responsibilities.
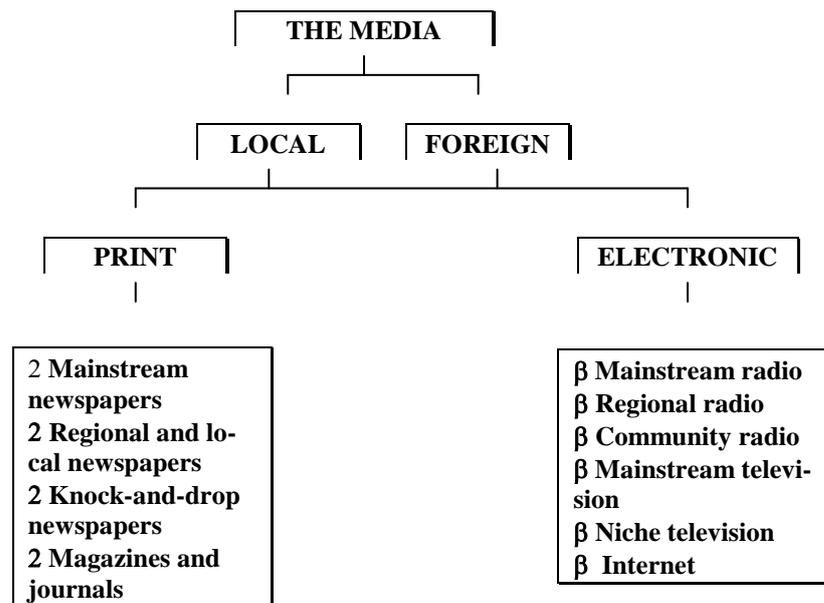
The following quotation from a recent book by Robert I Rotberg and Thomas G Weiss, <u>From Massacres to Genocide,</u> underscore the importance of the media in disaster management:

"News of the devastating Los Angeles earthquake reached President Clinton forty minutes after the first shock waves on the morning of January 17, 1994. The president was informed not by officials from the White House, the National Security Council, or even the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Instead, the call came from Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros, who was in the CBS television studios in Washington. After calling his brother in Los Angeles, the President turned

_____

_____

for information to the television. 'I was able to watch it unfold on television. It was really something.'"

WHO AND WHAT IS THE MEDIA?

In order to ensure that disaster managers understand how best to interact with the media, it is crucially important that the media be disaggregated into its different constituent components. Only by understanding the different elements that constitute this concept, will disaster managers be able to proactively plan interactions that are mutually advantageous to the media and to their cause. Ignoring the variegated nature of the media obfuscates rather than facilitates an understanding of this complex phenomenon.

```
                          ┌──────────────────┐
                          │   THE MEDIA      │
                          └──────────────────┘
                   ┌─────────────────┴─────────────────┐
              ┌──────────┐                    ┌───────────┐
              │  LOCAL   │                    │  FOREIGN  │
              └──────────┘                    └───────────┘
        ┌──────────┴────────────────────────────────┴──────────┐
   ┌──────────┐                                        ┌──────────────┐
   │  PRINT   │                                        │  ELECTRONIC  │
   └──────────┘                                        └──────────────┘
```

2 **Mainstream newspapers**   2 **Regional and local newspapers**   2 **Knock-and-drop newspapers**   2 **Magazines and journals**

β **Mainstream radio**   β **Regional radio**   β **Community radio**   β **Mainstream television**   β **Niche television**   β **Internet**

Although it may to some seem strange and superfluous to even draw a distinction between local and foreign media when discussing disaster management as it pertains to South Africa, there can be little doubt that new media technologies and the easy access to foreign media necessitates this distinction. Apart from the fact that the foreign media are a very valuable additional channel of communication to specific South African market segments, they also largely determine the perceptions of South Africa abroad. Given the propensity of all media to afford priority to disaster type material, disaster management institutions would do themselves a great disservice if they fail to recognise this important communication avenue. Not only could this lead to ill-informed and potentially damaging reporting, but it could undoubtedly also impact on the availability of foreign assistance at times of disaster.

It is furthermore essential that disaster managers draw a clear distinction between print and electronic media when planning media interaction. This will not only ensure the necessary differentiation in their approach, but will also optimise the benefits they achieve. By seeking to understand the specific preferences of the gatekeepers of the print and electronic media, disaster managers can ensure that they have the necessary feel for what is likely to be reported and how it will be reported.

A clear understanding of the advantages and limitations of the print and electronic media is a precondition for successful media planning and media interaction.

_____

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORIES	ADVANTAGES	LIMITATIONS

Newspapers	- Mainstream: Dailies
	        Weeklies
	        Weekenders
	- Community
	- Knock-and-drop
		- Ability to convey complexity of issues (mainstream)
		- Ability to stimulate debate by imparting context and meaning
		- Ability to explore ranges of options and thus set the scene for a meaningful change of public thinking (mainstream)
		- Access to opinion formers (mainstream)
		- Reasonably good reach in urban areas
		- Speeds up the dissemination of information
		- Strengthens public and political concern for disaster related issues
		- Motivates decisive political action (mainstream)
		- Credibility of messages
		- Sound understanding of specific communities (community and regional newspapers)
			- Short shelf life
			- Primary focus on current news (mainstream)
			- Lacks intimacy of TV
			- Episodic and capricious quality of news coverage
			- Shallow and misinformed conclusions
			- Shameless manipulation
			- Distortions in the information conveyed leading to bad policy decisions
			- Focus on negative aspects leads to public frustration and cynicism about the ability to prevent or mitigate disasters
			- Economic realities that require newspapers to tell a 'good story' ever more quickly and compellingly than competitors
			- Low literacy level amongst large sections of most vulnerable population
			- Financial constraints that limit access amongst large sections of most vulnerable population
			- Importance of development journalism not yet fully appreciated

CATEGORY	**SUB-CATEGORIES**	**ADVANTAGES**	**LIMITATIONS**

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORIES	ADVANTAGES	LIMITATIONS
Magazines/journals	- General - Subject specific	- Credibility - Shelf life - Greater in-depth coverage - Strong development/educational focus - Repetitive coverage of topics	- Low literacy levels amongst large sections of most vulnerable population - Financial constraints that limit access amongst large sections of most vulnerable population - Limited reach - long lead times
Radio	- Mainstream - Regional - Community	- Greatest reach of all media - Interactive - In-depth coverage of topics - Repetitive coverage of topics in news and other programs - Dedicated developmental/educational programs - Coverage in all main languages - Credibility - Wide range of choices for listeners - Immediacy of reporting	- Entertainment style voyeurism - Manipulation by mixing fact and fiction - Limited public service coverage (especially mainstream stations) - Lack of niche coverage - Easily exploitable
Television	- Mainstream - Niche channels	- Focuses national and international attention on disaster issues - Instigates public concern - Immediacy - Visual impact - Reach - Genuine/perceived credibility	- Bland and predictable in its cliches - Not very informative - Hours of unedited live footage that pose a severe test for viewer patience - A preoccupation with the medium - A greater emphasis on the presenter than on the 'story' - Guess-formation and infotainment masquerading as journalism - Sleaziness and questionable ethics - Reliance on visual grusomeness to put messages

_____

			- across
			- lack of professio-nalism and integri-ty
			- Journalists who dominate their re-porting and fail to maintain sufficient distance from the 'story'
			- Tendency for journalists to re-gard themselves as key players and judges in terms of policy
			- Failure to distin-guish between re-porting and the mere portrayal of the journalists per-sonalities
			- The assumption that 'live' is accu-rate
			- Preconceived notions
			- Excessive cre-dence granted to officials or con-tacts far removed from the scene
Internet	Dedicated web sites	- Ability to dissemi-nate information in self-chosen format - Ability to ascertain number of persons accessing web site - Ability to motivate public, political and institutional res-ponses - Cost effective way of disseminating infor-mation - Interactive	- Limited access for most vulnerable section of popula-tion - Access dependant on availability of sophisticated equipment and in-ternet access - Difficulty to au-thenticate infor-mation - Difficulty to iden-tify sources - Difficulty to de-termine accuracy of information - Reliability of technology - Capacity

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL ROLES THE MEDIA CAN PLAY IN THE

_____

IMPLEMENTATION OF DISASTER MANAGEMENT?

Of all the instruments available to disaster managers the media is potentially the most powerful. The degree to which the media contributes to disaster management is, however, heavily dependent on the quality of the *relationship* between disaster managers and the media. If this relationship is characterised by *mutual trust*, *visibility* and *flexibility* it is highly likely to be mutually beneficial.

Given the market reach the print and electronic media have, they constitute the ideal vehicle to *educate* and *sensitise* audiences to measures they need to adopt to prevent disasters or minimise the effects should disasters occur. As the concept of *public/civic journalism* develops, the media stands to play an increasingly important preventative role. Repetitive media coverage of *self-protecting measures* will over time gradually *condition* audiences to become more discerning when interacting with potential dangers in their environments.

The nature of the media is such that they will undoubtedly be present when disasters occur. Their involvement will depend on the *relationship* disaster managers have established with them prior to the disaster occurring. If disaster managers have *involved* them in disaster planning and *openly shared* with them the potential threats that exist, they are likely to adopt an *informed* and *constructive* approach. Should they, however, have been ignored and their access to a disaster site impeded, they are likely to be *instinctively aggressive*. They will then tend to be *suspicious* and focus on *uncovering* 'hidden' inadequacies, rather that merely reporting the situation in a way that could minimise further damage and loss of life.

The quality of the relationship between disaster managers and the media will also determine the approach the media adopts in the *aftermath* of a disaster. If the relationship is *mutually beneficial*, the media will, without in any way compromising its independence and integrity, seek to highlight aspects of disaster management that could in future be *improved*, rather than merely *tearing strips off* the disaster management agencies and thereby fueling *public cynicism* about such agencies.

When a mutually beneficial relationship exists between disaster managers and the media, the media will strongly assist disaster managers in performing their *proactive*, *reactive* and *post-active* responsibilities.

THE CONVENTIONAL APPROACH TO THE MEDIA

Even a superficial study of media relations in our country reveals that such relations were until fairly recently characterised by *wooing* the media, *stonewalling* the media, *playing journalists off against each other* and a reliance on *hype rather than substance*. Aboveboard, straightforward behaviour towards the media and the public was rare.

In both the public and private sectors, many managers still continue to believe that the media can and should be *controlled* and *manipulated*. For them, communicating with the media entails disseminating information that is to their liking. Their desire to establish a particular image often rides rough shod over the public's real concerns. For them their primary focus is to maintain control over outcomes, agendas, and the way issues are defined and questions answered. *Sharing power* with the media and meeting the needs of the media falls outside their media paradigm.

When managers adopt the typical default position in dealing with the media – *stonewalling, whitewashing and sending up smoke screens* - they squander the opportunity to interact with the media in an aboveboard, non-adversarial manner.

The media as an adversary

Misguided public-relations theory has unfortunately led to many managers viewing the media as *adversaries*. In their interactions with the media they have often been advised to at best treat the media as a *passive observer*, and, at worst, as an *enemy to be ignored, neutralised and attacked*.

The media game our managers have been taught is based on the incorrect assumption that any interaction with the media is bound to produce *winners and losers*. They consequently tend to adopt measures to *disempower the media* and thereby compel the media to respond accordingly. The most unfortunate part about such a power struggle is the fact that it prevents reason, argument and truth from coming to the forefront.

The media as a tool

Many managers see the media as a *channel for innuendo* rather than information; as a *place to convey image rather than substance*. They treat the media as a mere *instrument of propaganda* forgetting what Christopher Lasch once pointed out:

".… when words are used merely as instruments of publicity or propaganda, they lose their power to persuade. Soon they cease to mean anything at all."

The media as something to be controlled

Unfortunately many managers have been so indoctrinated to control outcomes when dealing with the media that they are unable to escape from the assumption that the media is somehow controllable. They fail to appreciate that the *media are not unequal subordinates*, but are in fact *equal peers* that are more open to persuasion and argument than to manipulation.

When the media become aware of '*spin doctoring*' strategies as a means of manipulating their reporting and public opinion they inevitably see these strategies as attempts *to silence criticism* and *hide the truth*.

Media policy by default

Although there are public-relations practitioners that renounce the assumption that a particular view or image can be projected onto a suggestive public by means of the media, many remain still locked into this frame. Their thought closure leads to frequent utterances such as:

- Don't admit mistakes;
- Don't reveal your failings or shortcomings;
- Charge ahead regardless of;
- Withhold documents and prevent access to decision makers;
- Deny any possibility of responsibility or liability; and
- Challenge and attack all claims made by critics.

_____

From these misguided views media attitudes/tactics such as the following usually emerge:

- The media is gullible;
- Employing reputable supporters and so-called experts will ensure that management's views prevail
- Stonewalling access to information and erecting smoke screens will detract media and public attention and conceal the negatives of a story; and
- Attack is the best approach when dealing with the media.

Unfortunately many managers fall prey to a barrage of legal, public-relations and advertising opinion when developing a media policy. This leads to inconsistent action that is often interpreted as irresponsibility, defensiveness and an unwillingness to cooperate.

James Gruning believes that the following attributes are essential elements of an effective behavioural relationship when dealing with the media:
- Reciprocity
- Trust
- Mutual respect
- Openness
- Mutual satisfaction
- Mutual understanding.

Successful disaster managers employ *well thought-out media strategies and plans* that are impregnated with the aforementioned behavioural attributes. They do not rely on reactive defenses.

A MUTUAL-GAINS APPROACH WHEN DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

Bear in mind the interests of the media

Disaster managers need to appreciate that journalists have a very important task to perform and that this task requires them to *meet deadlines* and *please their editors*. As James Gannon on occasion said:

"I think the difference is that those people have a better understanding of what the press needs and wants, and they recognise that it is in their own interests to work with journalists, even at the risk of an occasional bruise or bonehead play."

Information is the fuel that drives the media. Denying the media access to information obstructs them in the execution of their task and merely motivates them to embark on *uncovering everything* and, in the case of devious journalists, to undertake so-called '*exploratory reporting*'.

When disaster managers show appreciation for the fact that journalists do not only need *good information*, but also *good stories* that elevate them to prominence in their media, they are often surprised by the positive influence this appreciation has on their relationship with the media.

_____

Treating the media as an enemy is a strategy that is destined to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Tell the media what you know and don't know

Honesty is a basic prerequisite for good media relations. A simple 'don't know' is always less damaging than attempts to give unsubstantiated assurances.

Over-optimistic claims, semi-truths and outright denials often result in anger, criticism and a loss of credibility. The media have come to believe that it is their task to expose unduly positive projections and promises, especially when these emanate from powerful organisations or institutions.

Managers must come to appreciate that the media will, despite their best efforts to control information, uncover any negatives or potential dangers that exist. Given the media value of good surprises, the media need little encouragement to dredge up mistakes and wrongdoing.

By underestimating the public's ability to understand a situation, disaster managers inadvertently or purposely withhold information because of their perception of the danger of a crisis mentality where no such possibility exists. This undermines the trust the media and the public place in them and often leads to the very mentality they fear.

Provide spokespersons that can openly share views

The media want to hear from persons who know what is happening and have the authority to answer questions. They are not interested in spokespersons that have been coached to tell a sugarcoated story. Their need is for *real people* to tell the *real story*.

Key spokespeople who are knowledgeable, non-defensive and have the authority to make commitments are extremely important. Whereas the right persons contribute to building trust and credibility, the wrong persons easily erode credibility and damage reputations.

When interacting with the media the '*who*, *how* and *what'* are crucial variables.

Work at convincing the media that it has an educative role

Managers need to look beyond the media's tendency to fan the flames of conflict by focusing public attention on the extreme views in every debate. They should:

- deliberately encourage the media to assist them in educating the public about potential disasters and appropriate responses to such disasters;
- convince the media that their responsibility extends beyond merely reflecting a broad spectrum of views to also explaining the content and context of a public debate; and
- purposely promote civic discussion.

By approaching the publishers and owners of the media with a request for their support in educating the public about potential disasters and appropriate responses, and simultaneously offering to ensure that the media will forthwith enjoy unimpeded

access to information and persons of authority, a culture of educative journalism can gradually be developed. Providing that this is an honest attempt to inform the public and not a veiled attempt to manipulate the media or the public, the media is, given its need to rebuild its public image as a positive change agent, highly likely to avail itself of this mutually beneficial partnership.

Set an example for the media to follow

If surveys done after the O. J. Simpson trial are anything to go by, – 56 percent of the respondents indicating that they had lost respect for the media – there undoubtedly is room for disaster managers to set a positive example for the media by ensuring that they are honest, tell the truth, acknowledge the concerns of others, accept responsibility and build long-term relationships.

Disaster managers could, by encouraging the media to join them in an educative partnership, assist the media in shaking of the image of an institution that deliberately polarises debate, turns complex issues into over-simplified sound bites and often vulgarises the search for justice.

A PLAN OF ACTION

Develop and articulate a media strategy and plan

Every governmental, non-governmental and private sector organisation involved in disaster management should develop a dedicated media strategy and plan to optimise their interaction with the media. In the absence of such a strategy and plan media interactions become uncoordinated, ad hoc affairs that are only triggered when crises arise.

Media strategy

In order to ensure the most coherent and productive interaction with the media, every disaster manager should proactively develop a media strategy that comprises the following main elements:

- **A vision**

Example:
- To optimise public awareness and preparedness with regard to potential disasters.

- **A mission**

Example:
- To create a mutually beneficial and enduring relationship between the media and disaster managers that will ensure a continuous and positive flow of objective information to the public.

- **Goals**

Examples:

- To involve the media in all disaster management planning.
- To continuously relay all disaster management planning information to the media.
- To motivate the media to, in addition to its information and entertainment role, adopt an educational role with regard to disaster management.
- To ensure that all disaster managers are trained in how to positively interact with the media.
- To, in conjunction with the media, draw up a code of conduct for disaster managers that interact with the media.
- To ensure that spokespersons destined to interact with the media have a clear understanding of how the media operates and what the media requires to perform its task.
- To communicate the agreed media strategy and plan to all media.
- To augment free media coverage with paid advertising and advertorials.
- To continuously evaluate and amend the agreed upon media strategy.

- **Environmental scan**

- Strengths (examples)
  - Openness
  - New legislation
  - Good existing relationship with certain media
- Weaknesses
  - Media reluctance/fear
  - Old culture of secrecy
  - Poor understanding of the media
  - Media antagonism
- Opportunities
  - Establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with the media
  - Fully accessing the educative power of the media
  - Enhancing media understanding of disaster management
  - Better use of the available 'free' media coverage
- Threats
  - Irresponsible reporting
  - Public apathy
  - Inadequate provision of information resulting in guessformation
  - Entertainment style voyeurism

- **Target groups**

Examples:
- All owners editors and relevant journalists attached to mainstream newspapers.
- All owners editors and relevant journalists attached to regional and local newspapers.
- All owners editors and relevant journalists attached to mainstream electronic media (TV and radio).
- All owners editors and relevant journalists attached to regional, local and niche electronic media (TV and radio).
- All owners editors and relevant journalists attached to relevant magazines and journals.
- All internet users by way of dedicated web sites.

▪ **Responsibilities**

Example:
- All disaster managers in governmental, non-governmental and private sector institutions/organisations.

▪ **Time scales**

Example:
- A planning session involving representatives of all relevant media once per year during the first quarter.
- Yearly visits to media owners and editors to develop a culture of public/civic journalism.
- Yearly seminar involving representatives of all relevant stakeholders to improve the interaction between the media and disaster managers.
- Ongoing dissemination of all relevant disaster related management and prevention information to all relevant media.

▪ **Instruments**

Examples:
- Face-to-face interviews
- Meetings
- Seminars
- Correspondence
- Newsletters
- E mail
- Internet
- Phone calls
- Paid advertising
- Market research

▪ **Evaluation**

Example:
- Yearly evaluation of media strategy together with representatives of all stakeholders to determine the degree of success and adaptations that may be required.

Media plan

In order to facilitate the implementation of the media strategy a media plan comprising the following elements should as a next step be compiled:

_____

SAMPLE MEDIA PLAN

Goal: To involve all the relevant media in disaster management planning.*

ACTIVITIES	AIMS	TARGETS	INSTRUMENTS	RESPONSIBILITIES	TARGET DATES	REMARKS
- Identify all relevant mainstream, regional and local newspapers	-To set up meetings with owners, editors and relevant journalists attached to said media	- Owners, editors and relevant journalists attached to mainstream, regional and local newspapers	-Telephone and fax - Face-to-face interviews	- Disaster managers	- before 1 February 2000	
- Negotiate a mutually beneficial agreement with mainstream, regional and local newspapers	- To motivate mainstream, regional and local newspapers to adopt a more educative role in relation to disaster management and prevention - To build an enduring relationship with mainstream, regional and local newspapers	- Owners, editors and relevant journalists attached to mainstream, regional and local newspapers	- Face-to-face meetings	- Disaster managers	- Before 1 April 2000	
- Identify all relevant mainstream, regional, local and niche electronic media	- To set up meetings with owners, editors and relevant journalists attached to said media	- Owners, editors and relevant journalists attached to mainstream, regional, local and niche electronic media	- Telephone and fax - Face-to-face interviews	- Disaster managers	- Before 1 February 2000	
- Negotiate a mutually beneficial agreement with mainstream, regional, local and niche electronic media	- To motivate mainstream, regional, local and niche electronic media to adopt a more educative role in relation to disaster management and prevention - To build an enduring relationship with mainstream, regional, local and niche electronic media	- Owners, editors and relevant journalists attached to mainstream, regional, local and niche electronic media	- Face-to-face meetings	- Disaster managers	- Before 1 May 2000	
- Identify all magazines and journals relevant to disaster management	- To set up meetings with owners, editors and journalists attached to said media	- Owners, editors and journalists attached to relevant magazines and journals	- Telephone and fax - Face-to-face interviews	- Disaster managers	- Before 1 March 2000	
- Negotiate a mutually beneficial agreement with relevant magazines and journals	To motivate relevant magazines and journals to adopt a more educative role in relation to disaster management and prevention - To build an enduring relationship with relevant magazines and journals	- Owners, editors and journalists attached to relevant magazines and journals	- Face-to-face meetings	- Disaster managers	- Before 1 June 2000	
Develop and set up dedicated web sites and appropriate links	- To access the rapidly increasing internet audience	- Internet users, especially opinion formers	- Disaster managers	-- Disaster managers	Before 1 July 2000	

Detail planning of a similar nature to be done for every goal in the aforementioned media strategy.

Develop a field guide for the media

A user-friendly field guide would provide journalists, especially those new to the disaster management arena, essential information about disaster relief, coordination mechanisms and operational principles. It would go a long way towards ensuring that they know the issues and the actors involved.

Expand relationships

Governmental, non-governmental and private sector organisations involved in disaster management should seek to establish a strong working relationship with the media based on mutual trust and the recognition of differences in characteristics, goals and

_____

needs. Such a relationship could be entrenched by ensuring regular and effective two-way communication before, during and after disasters.

Regular formal and informal exchanges between disaster managers and the media will ensure that disaster managers develop an appreciation for approaches best suited to the media and are sensitive to the way the media prefers to receive information. In addition, these exchanges would also serve to better inform the media about the issues and constraints that confront disaster managers.

Train persons involved in disaster management to work with the media

Disaster management organisations should, as a matter of priority, ensure that their field workers are trained in how to interact with the media in order to ensure timeliness, quality and accuracy of reporting. Field workers should be empowered to assist the media to identify and report important stories accurately and sensitively, evaluate news items, and correcting inaccurate stories or supplementing incomplete ones. Their knowledge of the environment could also be put to good use to provide the media with indigenous spokespersons and logistical support.

Provide reliable and useful information

Disaster managers would do well to always bear in mind that the media have limited resources. By providing the media with timely, concise, reliable and useful information they are best able to *‘control the edit’* without in any way trying to indulge in counterproductive manipulation.

Identify themes and trends

Disaster managers should seek to identify specific themes and messages and link these to newsworthy items that are know to receive good media coverage, e.g. important parliamentary speeches, meetings of the heads of state of the Southern African Development Community, etc.

Journalists need to be encouraged and assisted to analyse the events behind the dramatic headlines, and to scrutinise issues such as the unique and positive ways in which communities respond to disasters, how loss of life was averted and how a successful recovery program was implemented.

Editors and journalists should furthermore be motivated to pay greater attention to public/civic journalism and to moving the emphasis of their coverage away from disasters as such towards encouraging people to eradicate the consequences thereof.

Evaluate media content

Disaster managers should continuously evaluate media coverage for accuracy, quality, timeliness, professionalism and completeness. When inaccuracies or misrepresentations occur they should either directly contact the media and journalists involved or address letters to the editor or appropriate columns.

Create alternative programming

In addition to ongoing media contacts to ensure frequent and accurate reporting, disaster managers should also consider commissioning print and electronic materials that could, by arrangement with the media, receive exposure, e.g. a video on how disasters are managed.

Regularly evaluate the standard of communication

Governmental, non-governmental and private sector disaster managers must regularly measure the effectiveness of their communication efforts against a set of standards to ensure continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION

The media is an indispensable resource in establishing an 'interactive' link between disaster managers and the publics they serve. Without the media it would be nigh impossible to educate and motivate the public as to their disaster management responsibilities.

Now that a new legislative framework is in place, disaster managers need to creatively devise practical ways of persuading those responsible for information gathering and dissemination – editors, producers, directors, journalists – to in future report disaster issues in a manner that will empower specialised and general audiences to better understand and respond to these issues. They should plead for consistent, straight coverage and professional integrity, not the saturated and sensationalist one-off coverage we so often see.

Disaster management is a challenge that poses immense responsibilities. If approached correctly it could become one of the most important elements in building a sustainable society. By elevating the ultimate goal beyond merely keeping people alive, disaster management could become a decisive part of the societal rebuilding and transformation our country desperately needs.

Disaster management agencies have a crucial role to play in securing the future of our country. They can either choose to support past stereotypes and patterns of domination and dependence, or deliberately elect to be part of a future orientated process of positive, sustainable change. Disaster managers and the media need to discard the bad habits that developed over many years. On the one hand the media needs to adopt a different approach when reporting disaster management issues, while on the other the unholy alliance between non-governmental agencies and the media needs to be broken to open the way for sustainable long-term change. What is needed is a clear recognition that the people and institutions of society, not disaster managers and the media, are the main actors in building stable and sustainable societies.

_____

REFERENCES

Neuman, Johanna: <u>Lights, Camera, War</u>. St Martin's Press, New York, 1996.
Rotberg, R.I. and Weiss, G. W.: <u>From Massacres to Genocide</u>. The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C. and The World Peace Foundation, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996.
Susskind, L. and Field, P.: <u>Dealing With an Angry Public. The Mutual Gains Approach to Resolving Disputes</u>. The Free Press, New York, 1996.

"If a man begins with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties."
- Francis Bacon

_____