

# ***Mass media communications and mass reactions to emergencies and disasters***

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# Overview

**Introduction:** Mass reactions to emergencies and disasters – issues and implications

1. The problem of **information**
2. The question of **trust**
3. **Source** and target relationships
4. The **discourse** of mass emergencies

**Conclusions:** Facilitating **collective resilience** through mass communication

## The 'pathology' model of crowd behaviour in emergencies

***Mass panic***, i.e. in the face of threat:

- 'Instinct' overwhelms socialization
- Emotions outweigh reasoning
- Rumours and sentiments spread uncritically through 'contagion'
- Reactions are disproportionate to the danger
- Competitive and selfish behaviours predominate
- Lack of co-ordination and disorder results

# But!

- Panic is rare in crowds
- Co-operation, altruism and order are common
- The 'pathology' model of crowd behaviour is now widely rejected

Current models conceptualize crowd behaviour as:

- Meaningful
- Cognitive
- Social

The different models of mass behaviour each have different implications for mass media communication in emergencies

# 1. Information

*If* crowd behaviour is understood as pathological (i.e., irrational, over-emotional and prone to panic etc.) then:

- Withhold information about danger
- Restrict information about danger

# 1. Information

BUT

The assumption of crowd pathology is part of the problem!

In general, collective behaviour is *adaptive* the more information available

‘When people die in fires, it’s not because of panic, it’s more likely to be the *lack* of panic.’

(Neil Townsend, Divisional Officer, London Fire Rescue Service, 2003)

# 1. Information

## Examples:

- Lack of response to alarms and the danger of delayed action
- Study of Newcastle Metro found more effective evacuation with more information (Proulx & Sime, 1991)
- Use of radio code-words (e.g. 'Mr Sands') good for keeping professional composure and reducing public anxiety. BUT no evidence people stampede if they hear 'FIRE'!
- Practical information (e.g. about location of danger) is key

# Hurricane Gustav



‘You need to be scared, you need to be concerned, you need to get your butts moving out of New Orleans now! ... We are ordering a mandatory evacuation of the city of New Orleans starting in the morning at 8am on the West Bank... we give you four hours to evacuate’

(Ray Negin, Mayor of New Orleans. 31<sup>st</sup> August 2008)

## 2. Trust

- The presumption of ‘mass panic’ implies a *lack of trust* in the crowd and the public.
- This informs the practice of withholding information from ‘the masses’.

## 2. Trust

*BUT*

- There is already a contemporary public distrust of the authorities and cynicism towards the mass media
- Withholding information risks creating further distrust!
- *Reverse 'crying wolf' syndrome*: The public won't trust and act upon *genuine* information!
- *Examples*: Controversies around 7/7, 9-11, Katrina

## 2. Trust

The need to build trust is particularly important in **CBRN**

Information on:

(a) quarantine (not dispersal) and

(b) decontamination

needs to be communicated, trusted and complied with for the safety of the wider population!

# 3. Source

## **Interrelation of information, trust and *source***

- Example: MPS post 7/7 use of media: *one* spokesperson (reassuring, confident, authoritative, articulate)

### Problems:

- Assumes a homogenous 'public' (e.g. in attitude, culture and language)
- Assumes a shared mass media source
- Assumes the police are always the appropriate face of authority in an emergency

# 3. Source

## Example of managing CBRN

- CBRN: Issues of novelty, information, trust and compliance
- Having the police as the 'public face' of CBRN emergency services risks 'public safety' becoming 'public disorder' (i.e. issues of legitimacy, rights, power, confrontation)

## 3. Source

### **Managing CBRN: A new paradigm**

- CBRN is a **medical / health** issue
- Hence **medics** should be the public face of authority and information
- This will enhance trust and compliance, and encourage the public to organize their own safety and protection ('self-policing').

## 4. Discourse

- Talk is *performative* (functional) not just representational
- Discourse has consequences
- Hence we need to consider the *language* of the *message* in mass media communications in emergencies

# 4. Discourse

## ***The discourse of 'mass panic'***

- Coupled with mistrust, the advice '*don't panic*' makes us believe there is something to 'panic' about! (Wessely, 2005)
- References to '*panic buying*' in the media construct those around us as acting over-emotionally and selfishly
- Reports of such 'panic buying' therefore *encourage* us to act simply in our own personal interest and *against* the collective good
- Instead, 'the problem of the commons' needs to be reported factually, without clichés and in terms of *public* (i.e. collective) *interests*.

# 4. Discourse

## *Talking about Katrina 2005*

- The media construction of the Katrina survivors as 'barbarians' may have shaped the perceptions of rescuers, who treated them as less than human
- The outraged, violent response of survivors to rescuers becomes a *self-fulfilling prophecy*

## 4. Discourse

Pathologizing the 'masses' through discourse feeds into practice in the authorities and the public themselves.

Such discourse is therefore *counter-productive*, producing the very lack of cooperation and anxiety that the authorities are afraid of.

# Conclusions

**How might we use mass media communications to facilitate *collective resilience* in the crowd and the wider public?**

A definition:

**Collective resilience** refers to the way shared identification allows groups of survivors to express and expect solidarity and cohesion, and thereby to coordinate and draw upon collective sources of support and other practical resources, to deal with adversity (Drury, Cocking, & Reicher, in press)

Collective resilience is therefore the social-psychological basis of both

- **individual** resilience/recovery and
- **organizational/structural** resilience

- Collective resilience is largely **endogenous** (i.e. arises 'naturally' from shared experience)
- The key to collective resilience is **shared identification**
- BUT certain media (and other) practices can facilitate (or undermine) this shared identification and hence resilience

# **Undermining shared identification and resilience?**

- Excluding the public (authorities versus public)
- Distrusting the mass
- Restricting information
- Prioritizing 'public order' over 'public safety', health and civil liberties
- Pathologizing the mass and the 'other' in our midst

## **Facilitating shared identification and resilience?**

- Including the public (catering for the public desire to help)
- Trusting the crowd and the public to self-organize
- Providing information
- Prioritizing 'public health' resources over social control
- Promoting unity: 'we' (the authorities, public etc.) are 'all in the same boat'

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Take-home message:

**Mass media information and sources are  
trusted by the masses when the  
sources themselves trust the masses.**