

Media in Disasters, A Disaster in Media

Sean Hawkey

The recent earthquakes in El Salvador and India might be called "sexy" by some journalists. They provide sellable high-impact images of landscapes strewn with debris and faces of desperation and grief. They also give us the gripping drama of daring rescue teams working against the clock to save trapped and buried survivors before they die. Presenting the technical and political lessons learnt from previous disasters or educational programmes contributing to the prevention of disasters is far less "sexy", so sadly they get much less attention.

The common media focus portrays disasters as "Acts of God", independent of human influence, as if there was nothing we could do about them. A more empowering media approach to disasters highlights our part in disasters. Earthquakes are natural phenomena, over which we have little influence, but they are not disasters. Disasters occur as people are hit by falling masonry from man-made buildings, built to man-made designs in the context of un-enforced or inadequate building regulations.

The level of destruction and loss of life caused by natural phenomena is largely determined by how much we learn from previous disasters, our planning for the inevitable occurrences of natural phenomena, our disaster preparedness, early warning systems and the coordination and readiness of responses, all of which are factors determined by people rather than "Acts of God" beyond human control. Simple techniques adoptable by even the poorest of self-builders can stop a building from collapsing and save lives. The truth is that disasters from earthquakes, floods, landslides can be reduced, mitigated and even avoided.

The recent disasters in El Salvador and India are the most recent in a long history of disasters which are well studied but there remains much to do to disseminate the lessons learnt. The role of the media, in promoting a cultural atmosphere of disaster-prevention, in showing the responsibilities of public services and civil society, and in education for disaster prevention is vital. Prevention is better than cure, and a lot less expensive.

The failure of media to assume these preventative functions is simply disastrous.

More information on disaster prevention: PREDES, Martín de Porres 161, San Isidro - Lima 27, <http://www.siperu.org/predes/predes.htm>

ARPAS Radio in Earthquake

From communication with José Alemán, Executive secretary of The Association of the Participative Programmes and Radios of El Salvador, ARPAS, and member of the Latinamerican Association of Educational Radio, ALER, and World Association of Community Radios, AMARC.

While mainstream journalism ran a spectacular media circus focused mainly on the hard hit neighbourhood of Las Colinas in the capital, Community Radios affiliated to ARPAS opened up the microphones to the earthquake survivors all over the country. For many people the only thing they took from their houses as the disaster struck was their radio, the radio is frequently the single item of greatest value in people's homes and for many it became a lifeline and source of vital information. The effects of the earthquake in villages, on public buildings and on roads were

disseminated by radio allowing vital early planning of interventions by national and international bodies.

News on the refuges for the homeless and information on available resources for victims was publicised. Messages on public health and safety were frequently transmitted. The radios made chain transmissions of ARPAS' "Emergency and Information Network" every half an hour for four days and then in half hour blocks throughout the day. Network correspondents were linked from member radios over the country including Monseñor Romero, Victoria, Cooperativa, Eco Pavas, Zaragoza, Presencia, Sumpul, La Klave, Acaxual, Teo Radio, Izcanal, Milenio, Segundo Montes, Atúnal y Tehuacán. This coverage gave agile dissemination of information all over the country.

Though El Salvador is a relatively small country, the "Tom Thumb" of Central America, the Salvadorean community is spread very wide and has approximately 2 million people in the United States. One of the roles assumed by the radios, through telephone and internet connections, was to put people in connection with family and friends, nationally and overseas, often letting them know if their relatives were dead or alive.

Through the crisis the Community Radio reporters and researchers have worked tirelessly in providing not easy-sell sensationalist emergency coverage but a real service to their people. Without a doubt the community radios will emerge strengthened by the crisis and this will help them undertake further important functions for their communities with respect to the earthquake.

The role of the communities and their radios in the social auditing of humanitarian aid throughout the country, as well as in the reconstruction process is also expected to be very important. Radio Cooperativa in Usulután, lost everything. Other seriously damaged radios are Izcanal also in Usulután, Eco Pavas in Cojutepeque, Milenio in Santa Ana, Atúnal in Sonsonate, Zaragoza in La Libertad, Maya Visión and Doble F in San Salvador. ARPAS is stretched in human and financial terms to the limit and makes an appeal for support.

El Salvador Radio Guanacaca: <http://www.radioguanaca.com>

Independent Salvadorean newspaper Diario Co-Latino: <http://www.colatino.com.sv>

ARPAS e-mail: arpas@arpas.org.sv

Radio Cooperativa e-mail: r_cooperativa@elsalvador.com

India Gujarat state earthquake information: <http://www.gujaritindia.com>