
International Disaster Communications:

***Harnessing the Power of
Communications to
Avert Disasters and
Save Lives***

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Editor

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Foreword

Disasters continue to ravage the world with increasing frequency and severity. There are the natural disasters such as earthquakes, typhoons, volcanic eruptions, floods, drought, etc., and the man-made ones such as technological disasters (Bhopal and Chernobyl); and political disasters that may trigger civil wars with unprecedented scope for destruction. And that is not all, for we have a mix between naturally occurring hazards and man-made disasters, causing pollution, deforestation, desertification, and global warming, with potentially more calamitous consequences to our small planet.

Natural hazards are inevitable natural phenomena, and their transition into disasters is often a result of the organization and behavior of our society. Disasters do not have to cause such considerable loss of life and property as well as social dislocation. Some disasters can at best be prevented, and the impact of others largely mitigated or reduced. Communications of all sorts, especially specialized application of telecommunications and associated information technologies in remote sensing, radar and telemetry, broadcasting and other media, meteorology as well as communications for disaster logistics management, early warning systems, and public education on disasters

all have a pivotal role in reducing loss of life and property arising from disasters.

Concerted effort by the international community is of crucial importance in harnessing the power of communications for disaster mitigation. Efforts already undertaken under the auspices of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), in particular through The Annenberg Washington Program, the Tampere Declaration on Disaster Communications, and the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World as well as the Roundtable, The Media, Scientific Information and Disasters, are concrete actions toward ensuring that humanity is served by the communications technologies and services now at our disposal. It is our common responsibility to reduce disasters and the aggregate of their direct and collateral damage. We now have the means to do so.

The International Telecommunication Union will cooperate actively with all national and international actors and agencies concerned in order to fully exploit the telecommunication potential to avert disasters and to save life and property.

*Pekka Tarjanne
Secretary-General*

International Telecommunication Union

Preface

News of the devastating Los Angeles earthquake reached President Clinton exactly 40 minutes after the first shock waves were felt in Los Angeles 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 preparing for an interview on empowerment zones. 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," the President said.

President Clinton's experience highlights the inextricable link between communications and disaster mitigation. Communications technologies, skills, and media are essential to link scientists, disaster mitigation officials, government officials, and the public; educate the public about disaster preparedness; track approaching hazards; alert authorities; warn the people most likely to be affected; assess damage; collect information, supplies, and other resources; coordinate rescue and relief activities; account for missing

people; and motivate public, political, and institutional responses.

The Annenberg Washington Program first explored the link between communications and disaster mitigation in 1986. Just days after the world learned of the disaster at Chernobyl, Ambassador Walter Annenberg suggested that the Program explore how better uses of communications could diminish the impact of international disasters. The Program—which provides a neutral forum, open to diverse opinion, for assessing the impact of communications technologies and public policies—serves as a bridge between policymakers, industry officials, academics, the press, and the public. Ambassador Annenberg believed that such a bridge could help facilitate the more effective use of advanced communications technologies and skills to inform the public, save lives, and reduce suffering in the face of tragedy.

In October 1986, the Program sponsored GLOBAL DISASTERS AND INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION FLOWS, the first in a series of meetings and publications exploring the more effective use of communications in response to the release of radioactive material at Chernobyl and Three-Mile Island nuclear power stations and other natural and man-

made disasters. Participants from Canada, China, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and the United States addressed methods for improving the speed and accuracy of post-disaster communications.

At its April 1988 forum—CHERNOBYL: LAW AND COMMUNICATIONS—the Program announced the release of Chernobyl. Law and Communications, by Philippe Sands, now Director of the Foundation for International Environmental Law and Development, which analyzed international legal materials dealing with early notification about nuclear and other environmental disasters with trans-boundary impact. In his foreword to the book, Annenberg Director and former Federal Communications Commission Chairman Newton N. Minow summarized both the promise and the need for the more effective use of communications in disaster prevention and relief:

International response to Chernobyl—the influence of public opinion, the uncensored flow of information, and the quick signing of multinational conventions—has shown the constructive influence of new communications technologies. They offer great power and opportunity for the sharing of insight and information, for averting disaster, and for promoting a humane response when disaster does strike.

In September 1988, the Program sponsored a panel—DISASTER COMMUNICATIONS: THE MITIGATION AND MANAGEMENT OF

SUDDEN CATASTROPHES—at the International Institute of Communications' annual conference in Washington, D.C. Led by Annenberg Senior Fellow David Webster, the presentation was accompanied by the release of a collection of draft papers, International Disaster Communications Initiatives for Greater Effectiveness in Mitigating Sudden Catastrophes. The final papers were published by the Program in May 1989 under the title Communication When It's Needed Most. How New Technology Could Help in Sudden Disasters.

The Annenberg Washington Program sponsored another forum in March 1989, LESSONS IN EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE DISASTERS OF 1988. The devastating earthquake in Armenia and the flooding in Bangladesh gave tragic testimony to the importance of international communications in the face of natural disasters and the almost universal inadequacy of the political and technological response to that need. In the face of related international activities, including proclamation of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) and the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator's International Conference on Disaster Communications in Geneva in March 1990, the stage was set for broader, multinational initiatives.

From May 20-22, 1991, the Program cosponsored the Conference on Disaster Communications in Tampere, Finland. Together with the International Institute of

Communications and Aamuhlet Group Ltd., with substantial support from the Government of Finland, United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator, International Telecommunication Union, World Meteorological Association, World Health Organization, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, among others, the Program brought together 120 experts in communications and disaster management from more than 25 countries. At the conclusion of three days of intensive discussions, the conference participants issued The Tampere Declaration on Disaster Communications, addressing the urgent need to coordinate and improve national and international communications capabilities to reduce loss of life and damage to property and the environment as a result of natural and man-made disasters. The Declaration called for the negotiation of an international Convention on Disaster Communications.

In September 1991, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies asked the Program to examine the strategic use of communications and information by the Federation and among the Federation's more than 150 national organizations. Annenberg Senior Fellow Dale N. Hatfield conducted a thorough study of the Federation's communications assets and needs, including interviews with Federation personnel in Geneva, visits to the Federation's

communications and information management facilities, and extensive reviews of Federation documents. Hatfield's report to the Federation—Disaster Communications and Information Management in the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies: A Strategic Assessment—was published by the Program in 1992.

In 1993-94, The Annenberg Washington Program sponsored the project, MEDIA, DISASTER RELIEF AND IMAGES OF THE DEVELOPING WORLD. Senior officials from the American Red Cross, BBC, CARE, CNN, the International Broadcasting Trust, the Federation, U.K. Overseas Development Administration, National Public Radio (NPR), Save the Children, and other leading media and relief organizations met in Washington and London to consider practical, specific strategies for both the media and relief organizations to improve the accuracy, timeliness, quality, and cost-effectiveness of the information they disseminate about developing countries. Their recommendations were published in March 1994 in the Program's report, Media, Disaster Relief and Images of the Developing World, written by Annenberg Senior Fellow Fred H. Cate.

On May 24, 1994, the Program, in cooperation with the IDNDR Secretariat, convened an international Roundtable, THE MEDIA, SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION AND DISASTERS, at the United Nations World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction in

Yokohama, Japan. The Conference—the largest disaster-related meeting ever, with more than 5,000 participants and delegations from 148 countries—was the key mid-decade event in the IDNDR. The Roundtable examined important issues about the roles of, and the relationships among, the media, scientists, relief organizations, and government officials, in generating, transmitting, and responding to disaster-related information.

In September 1994, the role of communications in disaster mitigation will again be the subject of international discussion at the 25th anniversary meeting of the International Institute of Communications. It is fitting that this meeting takes place in Tampere, Finland, the site of the 1991 Conference on Disaster Communications. Despite the designation by the United Nations of the 1990s as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, there is still much to be done to realize the full potential of communications to reduce the impact of disasters.

On the eighth anniversary of The Annenberg Washington Program's first meeting on international disaster communications, and the third anniversary of the Conference on Disaster Communications in Tampere, the Program is delighted to publish International Disaster Communications. Harnessing the Power of Communications to Avert Disasters and Save Lives. The volume includes a report

on the Roundtable, THE MEDIA, SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION AND DISASTERS at the United Nations World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Yokohama as well as excerpts from previous Annenberg publications on the many facets of communications in disaster reduction.

The essays in this volume reflect the efforts of many people. Although they are too numerous to list all of them here, The Annenberg Washington Program is grateful for the opportunity to have worked so closely with each of them, and particularly with Dr. Pekka Tarjanne and the International Telecommunication Union, Dr. Frank Press, Dr. Stephen Rattien, Dr. Caroline Clarke Guarnizo and the National Academy of Sciences, Dr. Peter Walker and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Institute of Communications, the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction Secretariat, and the many other dedicated individuals and organizations who have given generously of their considerable knowledge and experience.¹ The Annenberg Washington Program shares their commitment to improving the speed, accuracy, and effectiveness of humane communications to save lives and reduce human suffering in the face of disasters throughout the world.