IV. NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR PUBLIC INFORMATION FUNCTIONS

1. Voluntary relief organisations

The large international assemblies of volunteer services are well known: Caritas Internationalis (International Confederation of Catholic Charities); Catholic Relief Services; the International Union for Child Welfare; the League of Red Cross Societies; the Lutheran World Federation; Oxfam; and the World Council of Churches. Many other smaller bodies work in the same fields.

These non-governmental organisations, known as NGO's in United Nations terminology, or 'volags' (voluntary agencies) are often deeply involved in disaster relief and rehabilitation. The most important of these is a movement composed of many organisations: the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) which is the original organisation, and the 125 national societies around the world which make up the League of Red Cross Societies,* and finance the work of the League's Secretariat.

The Red Cross operates as a dual organisation. On the one hand, it is an international body, staffed by professionals, able to provide expertise and materials, co-operating with national governments and United Nations agencies and, on the other, it is a national organisation, staffed largely by volunteers at the local level, (although local directors and area office staff are professionals).

All organisations try to maintain a good public image, and this is particularly true for NGO's which are dependent upon public funds and goodwill. The Red Cross disaster relief manual states that all information releases should be cleared with the responsible individual from the national disaster relief control centre. However, this same person is also responsible for information releases from national

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* The full title is the League of Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Lion and Sun Societies.

organisations, and may be co-operating with public information officers from bilateral and multilateral organisations, as well as with foreign journalists. Unless all these bodies act with responsibility and restraint, there are bound to be public information conflicts.

Considerable attention is paid by the Red Cross to the organisation of effective communication and public information services at the national level. National societies are urged to develop good working relations with the media and to determine the most effective ways of getting the news across to people — by media, through loudspeaker trucks or public-address systems, posters, person-to-person communication or through community leaders. News releases might include detailed information on victims, affected areas, property damage, effects on the economy, as well as information on Red Cross services.

Other public information services, according to the Red Cross manual, would include alleviating the anxieties of those affected by the disaster. Rumours or erroneous information should be publicly denied while information that is correct should be affirmed and circulated. Photographs, films and radio tapes should be obtained for possible international appeals, while particular attention should be paid to foreign press, radio and television personnel because of their effect on fund-raising and relief assistance.

2. Media in the Private Sector

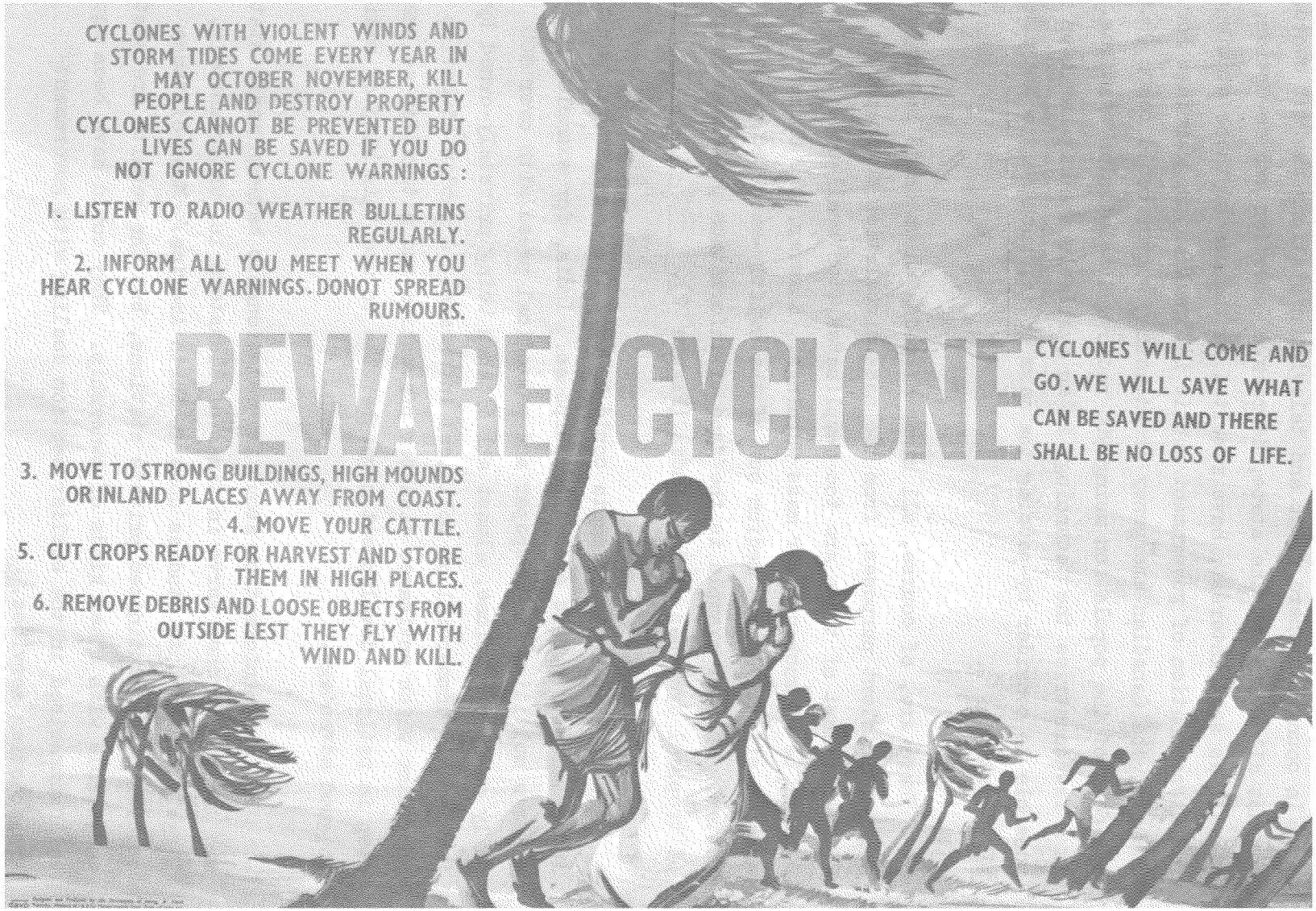
Radio has been adopted by most governments as the quickest and easiest way of informing large numbers of people about impending disasters, and of telling them what to do. Governments are comfortable with a medium which they may own or at least control and which provides an ideal means of relaying their messages to the public.

In countries where radio and television stations are not owned, (or not all owned) by the state, degrees of coercion and co-option, as well as self-interest, have resulted in the use of these stations for dissemination of government public information programming. For example, the Canadian emergency broadcasting system could reach 98.6 per cent of the population using 900 radio and television stations. In a few countries the technology is so available that it has been possible to consider by-passing the mass media, such as the American DIDS system.

There are, of course, all kinds of media which could be employed for public alert purposes, from the mass circulation newspaper to the drum, but most of these are too complicated, too small-scale, or too slow to be of much use for mass warnings. However, the Chinese have made an effective mass medium out of the swiftly-executed community poster. Another example is the type of information poster warning of tropical cyclones used in India (Figure 2).

The full panoply of media could be used for more general public information or public education purposes. India, for example, has a large multilingual newspaper and periodical press with over 800 daily newspapers alone, almost all of them being privately-owned by industrial, commercial or political interests. A public education programme which envisages disaster prevention and mitigation as one step in national development might be able to use this kind of medium to good advantage.

Reliable information about the relationship between radio stations and the public they serve in times of disasters is, unfortunately, largely confined to studies done in North America. Most of these studies have scrutinized private stations, but the results are mostly compatible with other kinds of ownership. They could have been equally well summarised in the earlier section dealing with government broadcasting services.


CYCLONES WITH VIOLENT WINDS AND STORM TIDES COME EVERY YEAR IN MAY OCTOBER NOVEMBER, KILL PEOPLE AND DESTROY PROPERTY CYCLONES CANNOT BE PREVENTED BUT LIVES CAN BE SAVED IF YOU DO NOT IGNORE CYCLONE WARNINGS :
1. LISTEN TO RADIO WEATHER BULLETINS REGULARLY.
2. INFORM ALL YOU MEET WHEN YOU HEAR CYCLONE WARNINGS. DONOT SPREAD RUMOURS.
BEWARE CYCLONE
CYCLONES WILL COME AND GO. WE WILL SAVE WHAT CAN BE SAVED AND THERE SHALL BE NO LOSS OF LIFE.
3. MOVE TO STRONG BUILDINGS, HIGH MOUNDS OR INLAND PLACES AWAY FROM COAST.
4. MOVE YOUR CATTLE.
5. CUT CROPS READY FOR HARVEST AND STORE THEM IN HIGH PLACES.
6. REMOVE DEBRIS AND LOOSE OBJECTS FROM OUTSIDE LEST THEY FLY WITH WIND AND KILL.

After a review of operational practices of 72 radio and television stations during several kinds of disasters, it was found that disaster reports were more strictly checked than normal news and that some information was withheld so as not to disturb unduly the listening and viewing public.[35] The study suggests that it is a mistake to withhold information, may lead to rumours and may expose the public to danger they might otherwise avoid.

There have been several suggested codes of procedure to be followed by broadcasters, notably one issued by the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) of the United States. However, one study suggests that there have been very few changes in station policy as a result of these codes, and that personnel are rather averse to any suggested procedure on news reporting. A later study on behalf of the NAB found that those stations with past experience in handling disaster information did the best job; that stations announcements tended to be somewhat ambiguous so as not to alarm people (though listeners usually interpreted the ambiguity in the most optimistic way); and that listeners wanted detailed information but were also able to offer information, help and guidance when they telephoned.[36]

The study includes suggestions as to how stations could best serve their communities: by stressing to local government the need for an adequate disaster plan and for advisory services to make sure that they offer accurate, detailed predictions; and by making sure that station coverage of disasters is factual and accurate. Suggestions for the stations themselves included: auxiliary power to be able to keep on the

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35/ Kueneman, Rodney and Wright, Joseph, How the News Media Views its Audience: Station Policies in Civil Disturbances and Natural Disasters, preliminary paper no. 17, Disaster Research Center, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA, 1975.

36/ Quarantelli, E.L.,"Changes in Ohio Radio Station Policies and Operations in Reporting Local Civil Disturbances", Journal of Broadcasting, p. 644-651, XV no. 3, summer 1971. Harless, James and Rarick, Galen, "The Radio Station and the Natural Disaster", paper presented at the August 1975 convention of the Association for Education in Journalism.

air; a check-back system for telephone calls asking for assistance; unencumbered telephone communication with local authorities; a written disaster plan for the station itself; and post-disaster investigation of the adequacy of government response to the disaster and the various relief programmes.

One of the more interesting studies investigated 'gatekeeping' (how and why news is selected for broadcast) at radio stations during disasters and noted that the normal information flow selection process reversed itself. Under normal conditions there is too much news and there has to be a critical selection of newsworthy items, but in disasters there is not enough news to fill air-time. News is usually fashioned by the editor at the desk, but during disasters news is fashioned by the public who request information, or who telephone in news-leads. Normally, reporters gather news from the community by telephone; during a disaster telephones are fully occupied and reporters have to gather news on foot while outsiders phone in. Usually, editors check the news stories and are reluctant to change or correct a story; during a disaster the checking is done by the listeners or viewers, and editors are pleased to be able to correct misleading information. In fact, the 'gatekeeper' situation of pre-disaster times is replaced by an 'open gate' caused by the disaster.

The enormous increase in public calling is documented in a study of the blizzard of 1971 which hit the town of London in south-central Canada. In two days a local radio station received 25,000 calls, i.e., a rate of 9 calls a minute. Normal programming shifted almost completely to accommodate the information needs of listeners. The radio station supplied two major categories of need : factual information about the effects of the disaster on the community, and emotional support for the general public, usually given in the form of reassuring messages from educational authorities, municipal services, local firms and hospitals.

An interesting table in this study compares the two programming approaches adopted by the radio station: an emergency operation which dealt with the disaster from an official point of view, including public information broadcasts, and an 'open-line' operation which dealt with the disaster from a public point of view, opening up broadcasting to individual telephone calls.

Transmission type	Intended receiver	Emergency Operation % programme time	Open line %
Diffuse one-way	General public	65.1	55.5
Specific one-way	Specific individual	7.6	0.8
	Special grouping	2.1	1.0
Two-way	Response to previous call	1.8	39.0
	Question directed at host	23.3	3.8
Total		100.0	100.0

Note : Diffuse one-way — in which a message is aired to the general public.

Specific one-way — in which a message is intended for a specific individual or a specific special grouping of individuals, (i.e., doctors in a hospital).

Two-way — in which feedback is provided via radio. Individuals respond to a previous caller (delayed two-way) or inter-act on the air directly with the host (announcer).

The two-way transmission on the 'open-line' show means that listeners respond live on the air to other listener's previous calls, or even inter-act with them on the air. This is tantamount to using radio as a public telephone system. It will be noted that 39 percent of the 'open-line' show was used in this way, compared with less than 2 percent during the emergency programming.

The host, or announcer, takes on a prominent position during the 'open-line' show and seems to perform a reassuring role for the audience which combines informative authority and a kind of 'show-business' charm. Twenty-three percent of the calls coming in during the emergency broadcasting period are directed to this host, compared with not quite 4 percent on the

'open-line' show when the public are interacting with each other.

A later study describing the impact of the 1976 blizzard on a nearby area in Canada reinforced the notion that radio 'open-line' programming fulfills a very useful dual function of informing and reassuring the public (a process in which they are themselves participants).

Mass media are used to convey official warnings, instruction and advice during disasters. They can and do go well beyond this point by providing the general public with detailed information on their community under crisis, and by allowing them to share in the broadcast drama.

This is not to say that the mass media always perform a useful and accurate task. It need not be emphasized that media have a tendency to present news quickly rather than accurately or that first news flashes, based on fragmentary and speculative reports are, more often than not, inaccurate. One study notes that the desire of the media to be colourful and to present details instead of vague generalities can lead to distortion, that inaccuracies contained in stories on crises are often highlighted by the use of headlines and that incoming calls from outside media generally disrupt communications among local officials.

It is suggested that in the pre-disaster period the media must warn the public of potential hazards and of what to do if they occur, and they must make sure that the public knows how warnings will be disseminated (and if necessary encourage local officials to make certain that these decisions are taken early enough). During the warning period the media should continuously broadcast precise instructions about the nature of the hazard and what people can do to protect themselves. In the immediate post-disaster period, they must restrain themselves from reporting news which is not known to be accurate. Media assume that local officials will be able to provide them with a quick and accurate assessment of damage, but this is not necessarily true. Media may have to be content with vague generalities.

The post-impact period presents a different kind of problem: that of an enormous number of media personnel all trying to get the same information from the same officials. Co-ordinating agencies should have a functioning communications system and a media spokesman to handle these requests, while the media may have to pool their queries to make this workable.

During the recovery period, the media should keep in mind three tasks: continuously repeating information about relief and rehabilitation services for those who might have been isolated during the earlier period; reporting on the unaffected, as well as the affected, areas which will substantially reduce requests for information from outside; and trying to correct rumours which circulate through the community as a result of false or insufficient information.