V. PUBLIC INFORMATION-THEORY AND PRACTICE

1. What is public information?

Public information is usually defined by what it does, rather than what it is. The United Nations, for example, states that

"the activities of the department of public information should be so organised and directed as to promote...an informed understanding of the work and purposes of the United Nations among the peoples of the world".

Public information is not public relations, publicity, press-agentry, public affairs, advertising or propaganda, though it may share some of the qualities of several of these. Public information tries to develop understanding and good will between the organisation which has the public information function and the general public. The British Institute of Public Relations' self-definition describes information as

"The deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics".

Public information grew from departments of various national governments which created public information officers to communicate the work of those departments to the public. Public information officers almost always represent governments or publicly-owned organisations. (Private corporations have public relations officers).

Public information officers have the task of informing the public
and responding to a clear and growing demand on the part of the public
for information about government and how it affects them.

"In a democratic society there is no more important principle
than the people's right to know about their government. The role
of the press and communication in the governing process has been
important since the earliest days". [37]

One of the surest ways of mitigating the consequences of a violent
natural phenomenon, perhaps even avoiding the disaster itself, is to
provide information before, during and after the event. Adopting this
procedure means preparing and pursuing a public information campaign
in conjunction with a public education programme aimed at preventing or
mitigating disasters. Public information about disasters is not only
a function of government public information officers but includes all
information aimed at general and specialised publics.

Chapter III briefly described the public information functions of
various government departments carried out by scientists, technical
personnel, administrators, and armed forces personnel who perform
a public information role as part of their disaster-related duties.
The same can be said of public service officials at other levels of
government, such as policemen, firemen and other municipal officials.
Sometimes these functions are performed by government information
officers, broadcasters, or temporaritly recruited government staff
as their sole duty during and after the crisis period. Public
information is often carried out by professionals working for the
voluntary organisations and, during emergencies, by other non-governmental
workers, such as radio operators, broadcasters and unpaid volunteers
working for community groups, as described in chapter IV. Long-term
public education work might be entrusted to teachers, extension officers,
social workers, journalists or audiovisual technicians.

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[37] Lee, John (ed.), Diplomatic Persuaders : New Role of the Mass Media
in International Relations, John Wiley and Sons, New York, USA, 1968.

Government public information officers have usually been trained as journalists, or other kinds of communicators. They have often worked in the mass media before being recruited into the ranks of government. They have assimilated a professional training but often lack social science skills. There is no body of public information theory, and ideas are drawn from anthropology, psychology, sociology, political science, public administration and other disciplines. There is no basic public information text, and most government information officers may depend on a departmental manual or respond in an ad hoc way to their political and civil service superiors.

However, information officers are often attached to the highest offices of government and are often on policy planning committees. During the last decade many schools of journalism and departments of communication have sprung up in developing countries, giving rise to workshops, seminars and conferences on information flow or communication for development. One result has been an improved image for the public information officer, and for public information work generally.

2.   Dissemination of warnings

The general public bears the brunt of damage to property and loss of life during disasters. They have a right to be informed of what may happen to them, and what they can do about it. They should be taught how to recognise warning signs. They should have enough information so that they can take the necessary precautions. But, as the background paper prepared by UNDRO for the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, held in 1976, noted:

"The public is largely ill-informed of even the basic steps necessary for adequate preparedness, and often has no awareness of the most rudimentary preventive measures. There is all too often a fatalistic view of natural calamities, sometimes acquired from centuries of experiencing such phenomena...Many Governments [also] have not accepted the responsibility for initiating appropriate measures and promoting a national consciousness of, and an active interest in, disaster prevention".

A good definition of warning is "the transmission to individuals groups or populations of messages which provide them with information about (1) the existence of danger, (2) what can be done to prevent, avoid or minimize the danger".

Warning can be divided into the following stages:

(1) Detection and measurement or estimation of changes in the environment which could result in danger of one sort or another;

(2) Collation and evaluation of the incoming information about environmental changes;

(3) Decisions on who should be warned, about what danger and in what way;

(4) Transmission of warning message, or messages, to those whom it has been decided to warn;

(5) Interpretation of the warning message by the recipients and action by recipients;

(6) Feedback of information about the interpretation and actions of recipients to those issuing the warning messages;

(7) New warnings, if possible and desirable, corrected in terms of responses to the first warning messages. [38]/

Four essential components to warnings have been suggested:

(1) They should be available, i.e., disseminated through many channels so that everyone can have access to them).

(2) They should be immediate (any delay may be interpreted to mean that the danger is not real or imminent).

(3) They should be consistent (there should be no ambiguities within the message, and it should not contradict other messages).

(4) They should be 'official' i.e., people will more readily believe warning messages if they come from sources that are normally believed, or are believable. [39]/

[38]/ Williams, Harry B. Jr. op. cit.

[39]/ Worth, Marti and McLuckie, Benjamin, Get to High Ground: the Warning Process in the Colorado floods, June 1965, Historical Series no.3, Disaster Research Center, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA, 1977.

The content and form of warning messages may be the following:

(1) They should be specific, i.e. they should give specific local
    information about the threat which will not allow listeners
    to conveniently forget them). Sirens, for example, are non-
    specific and are easily imagined to be something else, or not
    very important.

(2) Warning messages should be urgent (they should get people
    moving and not allow time for rationalising the warning away).

(3) They should spell out the consequences of not heeding the warning
    (probably in explicit detail) so that people cannot casually
    dismiss them.

(4) They should pay attention to the phrasing of the probability
    of occurrence, since people tend to pay little attention to
    something labelled 'a probability'. It should be remembered
    that one warning is not enough, that they should be continuous,
    and that people also need later warnings to tell them what is
    happening and to move them in a different direction, if necessary.

Three interlocking warning systems have been described which may be
set in motion at different times.[40] (1) An inter-organisational warning
system is designed to alert those organisations which are particularly
vulnerable to the damaging effects of the phenomenon, such as schools
and hospitals, or those which need pre-warning time (such as police
departments or the military). (2) An intra-organisational warning system
should inform members of a particular organisation that they are to
respond to disasters as they have been trained; this might include members
of a regional emergency measures organisation, an amateur radio operators'
club, or a police department responding to the first kind of system
described above. (3) A public alert system is designed to warn the general
public as individuals. The public alert system may use a variety of
devices: sirens, bells, buzzers, lights, loudspeakers, flags, church bells,

car horns, house-to-house calls or the mass media. On one small island in the South Pacific region, for example, church bells and village bicyclists form part of a simple but apparently effective public alert system for tropical storms.

Many people are often warned by directly detecting and interpreting the environmental cues, particularly if they are accustomed to a recurring hazard. One writer on the subject of warnings distinguishes between technical signals, sensed disaster cues and verbal messages.[41/] One problem with these natural cues is that they are non-specific and this results in ambiguity. People often interpret these signs as something else: escaping gas which brought headaches as a first symptom has been interpreted as physical illness; the roar of the wind as a passing train; flood water as normal river sound; and sirens as police business.

3. Warning response

A public information programme is only effective if it reaches the public and produces some change. For example, women accustomed to purdah may resist orders to leave their homes. Some 15,000 deaths were initially reported in India in November 1977 when cyclones struck the coast. Many of these deaths were said to stem from villagers' refusal to heed warnings.

Those involved in public information must be aware of audience needs. It is necessary to know what kind of people are there, what they need to know and what they think they need to know. Also, it is necessary to know how people respond to warnings — to remember that they will try to confirm what they have heard on the streets, or over the radio; and that they are often sceptical of anonymous predictions and instructions. There are specific public information lessons to be learned from social science

41/ Hammerström-Tornstam, Gunhild, Varningsprocessen (warning process), Disaster Studies no. 5 (summary in English), University of Uppsala, Sweden, 1977.

findings, as, for example, the difficulties people have in accepting the possibility of death through disaster. The tornado study previously referred to showed that people can 'forget' warnings that they have actually heard, or they interpret them as meaning something quite different.

A research assessment of warning systems in the United States concluded that the effectiveness of warning systems gradually decreases, partly because of the lack of contact between those at various levels of the warning system during non-disaster times. Efficiency could be maintained if the system were used more frequently, possibly by using it for non-hazard functions, or by deliberately increasing the routine interaction of those concerned.

Those people who normally disperse public warnings, such as mayors, police chiefs, and radio and television broadcasters usually,disseminate warnings in terms of their own past experience of disasters, tempered by the kind and amount of information that they receive. The effectiveness of warnings might be improved by formalising guidelines on how, when and what messages will be released to the public.

The content of these messages should encourage adaptive response in a populace and should be consistent with other messages so that when individuals try to confirm what they have heard they do not receive contradictory reports. A list of social science findings of interest to broadcasters, together with a series of recommendations for broadcasters on what to do and what not to do, is included as Annex III.

4. Public opinion and persuasion

There are a number of reasons why public information campaigns fail.
  (1) There are groups in the population that are not normally reached (for example, migrant workers, outcasts, minority groups, urban fringe groups, young people and those of the

lowest socio-economic level who are outside the mainstream
of society). This becomes a dissemination problem of
identifying these special groups and carrying out strategies
to reach them (by using alternative media, for example).

(2) There are a number of people, some of them in the above groups,
who cannot understand the public information material they
receive (illiterates, mentally-handicapped, or those using
only minority languages). Some of these people can be reached
by special instructions to institutions, welfare workers, and
others who have responsibility for them; or in the case of
minority languages, by enlisting the aid of group members to
translate for the others.

(3) There are a number of people who have little or no interest
in public affairs, government information or anything beyond
their immediate day-to-day concerns, or who have difficulty
in believing official advice because of past grievances, or
encounters with hostile or indifferent officials. The problem
here is to reach them under enforceable circumstances (on-the-
job training), or when they are most accessible (at home), or to
couch the messages in terms that will make some impact.

(4) Other reasons are not so easily dealt with. For example, people
tend to assimilate information that is compatible with what
they already believe and to reject what they do not already
believe. People perceive, interpret, and behave under stress
quite differently one from the other.

This last category touches upon difficult areas of attitude, public
opinion and persuasion. There are many reasons why people hold the
attitudes they do. A theory of cognitive dissonance explains why people

might avoid making decisions because they are in contradiction with what they already believe, or are in the habit of doing. 42/

Some knowledge of the literature on public opinion, attitude formation, attitude change, motivation, persuasion and propaganda might well be useful in setting out public information policy. Some useful generalisations about public opinon and some suggestions for changing attitudes and persuading people to take a particular course of action are included as Annex IV.

5. Communication and Planning

Most public information practices involve some form of communication, using a particular medium to transmit information about disaster prevention to a particular public. This might vary from a series of rural radio talks to briefings for school officials.

Seven principles of communication have been proposed which apply to all these activities:

(1) Credibility: the recipient must have confidence in the source, and this may involve building a climate of belief between the sender and receiver;

(2) Context: the communication programme must form part of the normal environment of the audience. Context must confirm, not contradict, the message;

(3) Clarity: the message must be in simple terms, and the further it must travel the simpler it should be;

42/ Festinger, Leon, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, Harper and Row, New York, USA, 1957.

(4) <u>Continuity and consistency</u>: messages should be repeated and they should be consistent with one another;

(5) <u>Content</u>: the message must have meaning for the receiver. It must be compatible with his value system and must be relevant to his problems;

(6) <u>Channels</u>: established channels of communication should be utilised, particularly channels that are used and respected by the audience; and

(7) <u>Capability</u>: the messages must take into account such factors as the audience's availability, habit, degree of literacy and knowledge of the world.

A public information campaign or a long-term public education programme needs planning because hasty, insufficient, unco-ordinated action will quickly undermine public confidence, confuse those taking part, and lead to a public information calamity when a real disaster strikes. Planning requires careful study: backwards to determine the major factors which led to present conditions; in the present, to consider the forces with which the programme must come to terms; and forward to set out a series of targets.

Public information planning usually fails for several specific reasons: failure of the planners to include the practitioners in discussion of what is possible; lack of clearly-agreed objectives; lack of time to accomplish those objectives; lack of budgetary or other needed support from the administration; and frustrations and delays which face those who have to carry out the programme, usually because of co-ordination problems.

Planning of course leads directly to planned resources to carry out the programme. This might have to include such items as a referral or information centre, centralised mailing lists and collections of press clippings or press digests.

6. <u>Ways and means of carrying out programmes</u>

A shopping list of information activities would probably include most of the following, and perhaps others not on the list below. Planners must make their own lists, keeping in mind their own resources, resources available through co-ordination with other groups (including possible need for translations), and the nature of the audience.

(1) Use of major mass media through a press relations programme (including press kits): radio, television, daily newspapers, features and books.

(2) Secondary mass media: regional or local broadcasting, weekly newspapers and other periodicals, documentary or news film, 8mm film, video, or phonograph records.

(3) Audio-visual services: photography (stills, transparencies, slide-sets, TV-stills sets, photo packages, etc.), audiotapes, audio-cassettes.

(4) Exhibits and displays, information racks, closed-circuit television showings, travelling exhibits.

(5) Design - building towards an effective image through the use of logos, letterheads, etc.

(6) Other channels to the public: speeches; letters to the newspapers; questions raised in parliament; articles in magazines; establishment of a radio forum or newspaper column; community discussion groups.

(7) Various internal communication programmes to (a) administrators, (b) employees in disaster-related jobs, (c) and employees in general, using company publications, bulletin boards, etc.

(8) Leaflets, manuals, handbooks, reference guides, brochures, booklets and books which give basic facts on disasters to be faced and procedures to be adopted, such as 'lists of first-aid supplies', 'eleven steps to survival', 'self-help during flooding', etc. These might be in many forms from the comic-book format to the formal, institutional report. Distribution should fit the objectives of each particular item.

(9) Wall-sheets, posters, billboards, bulletin board notices, wall-newspapers. (See examples below and on next page).

During the passage of the cyclone, stay in a sheltered place and listen to the radio.

Fig. 3 - Wall-poster prepared by the Government of Madagascar.
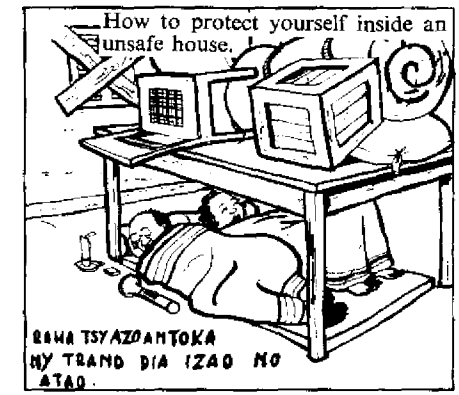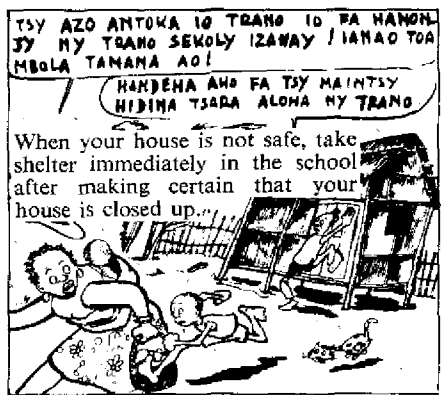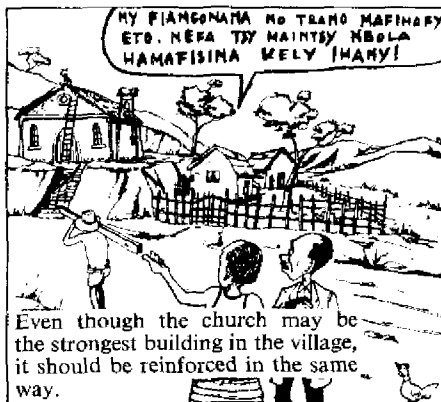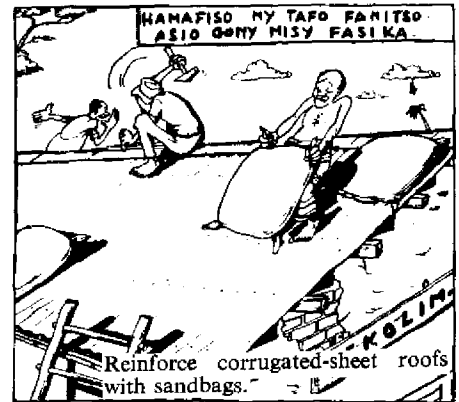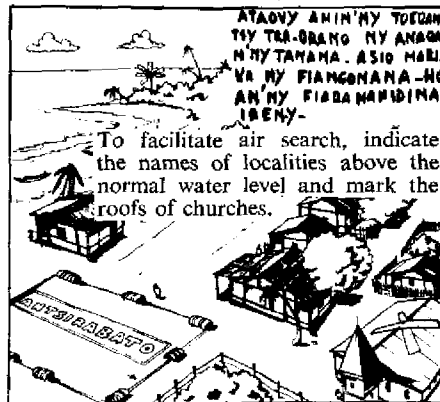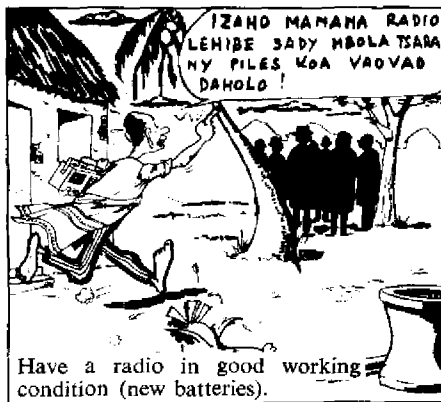
FITSIPIKY NY FILAMINANA
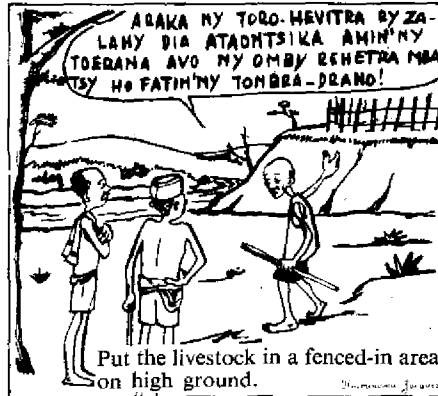
Fig.4 – Wall-poster showing safety instructions before a cyclone. (Government of Madagascar).

(10) Inserts and enclosures in other forms of communication, like magazines and books.

(11) Advertising, direct-mailing or telephone surveys.

(12) Meetings, seminars, briefings, conferences.

(13) Organised talks, i.e. 'Speaker's Bureau', radio talk series.

(14) Telephone answering services, i.e., recorded messages.

(15) Public address systems.

(16) Special events: disaster simulations; a national disaster information day, or a series of days in which communities are visited in turn; visiting days at government advisory services, or public service agencies like the fire station.

(17) Folk media (story-telling, dance, song, puppet-shows, music, street entertainment, posters, etc.)

(18) Folk network ('the grapevine', the family, community leaders, community groups, clubs, associations, religious organisations, etc.).

Some of these items are part of any continuing public information programme, while others would more probably be used as part of a short-term campaign. Any continuing programme should build up at least the following capabilities:

(1) To establish a system in which accurate and relevant information on disaster prevention and mitigation is constantly disseminated through appropriate channels;

(2) To develop a capability for technical assistance, advice and
consultation through other government departments and to provide
information guidelines and materials for use by other levels
of government and non-governmental organisations;

(3) To provide a central point for mass media where they can get
prompt, reliable answers to their questions; and

(4) To maintain a measure of attitudes and needs of the general
public, and how these can best be met.

Many of these techniques or approaches have been
prepared for urban audiences in developed countries. Comparable approaches
have to be designed for rural audiences in developing countries. These
rural audiences may prefer multi-coloured covered leaflets, pamphlets,
and brochures with realistic and familiar illustrations, generously
illustrated formats with adequate accompanying textual explanations; posters
and flip-charts on white, glossy paper; texts written in the dialect of the
province or district that suggest or give straightforward solutions to
village problems (such as that on page 68); up-to-date information on
innovations that details the conditions under which these are adaptable;
mutually supportive texts and illustrations; and step-by-step accounts
of how to use any innovations. In general, the rural audiences place
greater value on personal channels, while urban audiences would seem to
prefer the mass media — radio, television, newspapers and film.

Much of the work done in community development or family planning
would be of direct interest to public information people working in the
disaster area. The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF),
for example, has developed excellent material for use in carrying out
information programmes at the local level. Grassroots Radio is an
excellent practical manual which enables non-professional broadcasters to

use local radio stations for their information purposes, and
Communicating Family Planning is a practical handbook on producing
information material for rural African audiences. 43/

7. Dealing with the mass media

There are a number of useful guides to dealing with broadcasters
and journalists. Particularly useful for disaster personnel is one
issued by the British Red Cross Society entitled A practical guide to
publicity which gives guidance to working with radio and television,
provincial and local newspapers, as well as use of promotional material.

When preparing written releases, use an official letterhead; have
'press release' appear at the top of the first and subsequent pages;
put the name, address and telephone number of the author (source) of the
release at upper left; give the date of issue of the release as well as
release date (this should usually be 'immediate' and there must be a good
reason for asking editors to withhold the release until a certain time);
use wide margins and spacing to allow editing; number the release but
don't expect it to be used; do not go over one page (two pages at most)
unless absolutely necessary; put 'more' at bottom of pages to be continued;
remember stories will be cut from the bottom - put your major items
of information in the first few paragraphs; proof read every typed page
carefully before it is reproduced; try to get news releases to editors
before their deadlines; make sure the end of the release is clearly
indicated.

Oral information given in person, or over the telephone should
contain the same facts. It would be wise to use a check-list of items,
and to keep track of the caller's name and time of enquiry.

43/ Keating, Rex. Grassroots Radio : a Manual for Field-workers in Family
    Planning and Other Areas of Social and Economic Development,
    International Planned Parenthood Federation, London, United Kingdom,
    1977; and Communicating Family Planning : a practical handbook based
    on the workshop on Family Planning Education in Africa, held in
    Accra, Ghana, November, 1970; Rawson-Jones and Salkeld (eds.), Inter-
    national Planned Parenthood Federation, London, United Kingdom, 1972.

A few general rules have been suggested for dealing with the mass media:

(1) Impartial treatment — try to convey the same information to all media, regardless of personal attitude toward them.

(2) Responses to specific inquiries can, of course, depart from this impartial treatment.

(3) If speeches or public addresses are being given, try to determine whether the press will be covering the event. It might be desirable to give out copies to them, or be prepared to answer their specific queries afterwards.

(4) Public information is not just the prerogative of public information officers — administrators, scientists and technicians should also be willing to help with public information programmes.

(5) There should be a central point where newsmen know they can find a reliable source who will help to find out what happened, or in checking their stories. This suggests pre-disaster working relations between information officers and journalists at the local level.

(6) The central point should become a full-scale information centre if disaster strikes, in constant contact with the operations centre.

(7) Press identification during disasters as well as emergency working facilities for journalists and news briefings might be considered. Such information as simple life-saving instructions, descriptions of the exact extent and nature of the disaster, and casualty information might be featured at regular news conferences; the presence of an informed and well-briefed official to answer press queries is also advantageous.

(8) Similarly, it is useful to have facilities for tape-recordings and still-photography, since a visual and aural record of events will be extremely helpful during any post-disaster analysis.$^{44/}$

In any long-term public information programme a calendar of events could be developed which might be of interest to mass media, such as seminars or conferences, disaster exercises, new programmes, speeches, forecasts of seasonal hazards, or a review of the year's activities. Local political leaders, officials or other opinion leaders could support the programme in their official pronouncements.

44/ Stirton, Alex; "Dealing with the Mass Media", paper prepared for Emergency Planning Canada, External Affairs Building, Ottawa, Canada , and delivered to the Saskatchewan Public Information Conference, Saskatoon, Canada, August 1976.