

The Annenberg Washington Program on Disaster Communications

David Webster

Senior Fellow

*The Annenberg Washington Program
in Communications Policy Studies
of Northwestern University*

In April 1986, just days after the world learned of the disaster at Chernobyl, Ambassador Walter Annenberg requested the Annenberg Washington Program in Communications Policy Studies explore how better use of communications by governments could improve their responses to international disasters. Ambassador Annenberg believed that advanced communications technologies could be used more effectively to inform the public, save lives and reduce suffering in the face of massive tragedy.

The Annenberg Washington Program in Communications Policy Studies of Northwestern University provides a neutral forum, open to diverse opinion, for assessing the impact of communications technologies and public policies. The program serves as a bridge between policymakers, industry officials, academics, the press, and the public.

In October 1986, The Annenberg Washington Program sponsored a major international forum, **Global Disasters and International Information Flows**, examining how the United States and the Soviet Union communicated with other countries, their own citizens and citizens of neighboring nations about the Three-Mile Island and Chernobyl nuclear accidents. 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.

The Program sponsored a related forum in April 1988 - **Chernobyl: Law and Communications** - at which it announced the release of a comprehensive book, *Chernobyl: Law and Communications*. In the book, Philippe Sands, now director of the Centre for International Environmental Law and legal advisor to the Program's International Disaster Communications Project, analyzed existing international legal materials dealing with early notification about nuclear and other environmental disasters with transboundary impact.

Subsequently the Program established the Annenberg International Disaster Communications Project, bringing together communications experts, relief officials, and disaster relief mitigation specialists. Five months later, The Annenberg Washington Program sponsored a special presentation of the project's preliminary results - **Disaster Communications: The Mitigation and Management of Sudden Catastrophes** - at the International Institute of Communications' annual conference in Washington, D.C. The presentation was accompanied by the release of a collection of summary 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 expanded the focus of its International Disaster Communications Project when it sponsored a 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 communication in the face of natural disasters, and the almost universal inadequacy of the political and technological response to that need.

The Program is honored to be a sponsor of the Tampere Conference on Disaster Communications and of the work of Philippe Sands in preparing the Draft Declaration on Disaster Communications. Ambassador Annenberg and the Program remain committed to improving the speed and effectiveness with which communications technologies are employed to respond to major disasters, and we welcome the opportunity for further global discussion of the Draft Convention.

The Program will continue its exploration of ways to use communications more effectively in the service of people in need with a follow-up project on the role of communications five years following the Chernobyl disaster and a new project on communications and the environment.

Opportunities and Needs: Sensitizing the Private Sector to Disaster Preparedness

*John C. Scott
President
Center for Public Service Communications*

The World Public has only relatively recently become sensitized to the variety and scope of the disastrous events that affect our planet. Historically these have been natural phenomena, but at an alarming rate they are increasingly man-induced. Destructive natural phenomena, of course, have occurred for longer than we have been around to have noticed. It is only our understanding of the magnitude and implication of Mother Nature's destructive force that is new.

Largely because of the agency of the world's media - using tools made available by the world telecommunications industry - we are able to bring these natural and man-made events into our own homes, and we are fascinated. Following disasters on television, radio and in the newspapers is, for some, a common vicarious event.

But even with this interest, that which we are exposed to only accounts for the more "extravagant" disasters because these phenomena of Mother Nature must compete with all other of life's stories for media coverage. More "moderate disasters" (to coin an oxymoron) happen with such regularity that they cannot all be covered, though they are no less disastrous for those affected.

Who does respond to all these events, and who pays the cost for the response? When we think of it, if we think of it, we probably expect that "disaster managers" in our public sectors - our national and world ministries and organizations - will organize and pay for the Herculean, exhausting, and exhaustive response efforts. But the enormity of the effort is tremendous, and after the response...What then? Response is not an effective means of preventing future disasters.

It may be that we expect the public sector to plan for and respond to disasters, but further help is needed, and there are reasons why this support should come from the private sector.

From a practical point of view the "private sector", or the business community, must not ignore the implications of natural and man-made disasters to their survival. These implications include business continuity and employee safety. Nor are these concerns limited to business located in the area immediately stricken by the disaster. Today, and for the foreseeable future, the world of business is inextricably entwined and interdependent. Business leaders who have not had to deal with the devastating effects of disasters are either new on the job, extremely lucky, or do not appreciate the many, sometimes subtle, ways in which disasters can, and do, affect them.

To make the point dramatically, let's look at a description of Tokyo, Japan and consider the implications that could result from a devastating earthquake in one of the largest cities in the world.

The following description is excerpted from a June 1989 article by Michael Lewis on the subject in Manhattan Inc. While I read, consider whether it is at all possible for businesses in Tokyo to ignore the need for disaster planning, and whether any business throughout the world relying on any facet of Tokyo's economy, should not be equally concerned.

Tokyo, now, were it a nation unto itself, would have a GNP of \$750 billion, greater than Great Britain's. The entire labyrinthine Japanese government is in Tokyo. Twelve million people live in Tokyo narrowly defined. Thirty million Japanese live in the area that is the earthquake zone; 25 percent of the nation's population is vacuum-packed into the most treacherous 3.6 percent of the nation's land. Two-thirds of Japan's businesses worth more than 5 billion yen (\$40 million) are headquartered in Tokyo. One-third of everything sold in Japan is sold in Tokyo.

The ports of Tokyo and neighboring Yokohama together export much of the chopsticks, computers, electrical appliances, machine tools, cameras, cars, and assorted gadgets that have created Japan's \$100 billion annual trade surplus. The mathematical consequence of the trade surplus over the past decade are the hundreds of billions of dollars, pounds, francs, and marks now controlled by Japan's banks, insurance companies, and trust funds. These are all headquartered in Tokyo. The branches of the world's eight largest banks, which feed funds to the world, are completely dependent, in an almost feudal way, on their head offices in Tokyo. Their cash affects us all. In other words, the fate of the average foreigner is intertwined with Tokyo's more than ever before, and more and more every day.

A single hazardous event can destroy social and economical infrastructure that may have taken years and fortunes to develop and upon whose vitality local, national and frequently, as in the case of Tokyo, international economies depend. A single disaster can also severely disrupt community lifelines -- the systems that provide food distribution, water supply, health care, waste disposal, and communication locally and with the rest of the world. The 1972 earthquake that devastated Managua, Nicaragua is an example of what can happen. Though less consequential than a disaster in Tokyo in terms of international impact, the Managua earthquake left damage equal to a year's GNP and affected virtually the entire industrial production of Nicaragua. More than 10,000 were killed, 20,000 injured, and three-fourths of the city's population of 400,000 was left homeless.

Disasters do not discriminate. They affect developed and developing countries; rich and poor; rural and urban areas; the sick and the healthy; an even the careful and the careless. But loss of life and property - the critical factors that distinguish natural phenomena from natural disasters - can be lessened significantly if well-conceived disaster response plans and mitigation strategies are in place prior to a disaster.

Individuals and agencies of the international community of disaster managers are convinced of the positive role that planning and preparedness plays in disaster mitigation management. A "front end" investment results in saving life and property and a diminished need for financing response activities. Demonstrative of this belief, international agencies concerned with disaster management, including the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, have revised their loan portfolios to identify opportunities for linkages between disaster mitigation and their pipeline of infrastructure loans. Further, in the context of its "International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction", the United Nations General Assembly called for a "shift in emphasis to pre-disaster planning and preparedness". As an example of this re-orientation from post- to pre-disaster planning at the national level, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in the United States has shifted its focus to the need to develop internal planning capacities and pre-disaster strategies in disaster-prone countries.

Until recently mobilization for preparedness has been largely a public sector affair with local authorities bearing the burden of plan formulation, financing and strategy execution. But pre-disaster plans can only be effective if disaster-prone countries are able to implement them and incorporate them into a regular institutional process. It is important to view with realism national and community capabilities - particularly in Third World countries - where frequently the capacities of the national infrastructure are strained to manage even the most basic of social and economic development programs.

Because of this weak public sector competence, and recognizing the need to generate local capacity, more attention is being given to drawing into pre-disaster planning and operations entities outside the government structure - local businesses, trade groups, voluntary organizations and community leaders. The business community, in particular, with its financial, technological, and logistical capabilities is being viewed as a valuable, and virtually untapped, resource which can no longer be ignored.

But the link between disaster planning and preparedness and business survival is new and, although gaining momentum, it needs nurturing and direction. Further, there is a need to involve the local community - as participant and benefactor - in the development of business disaster plans.

Why would businesses want to become involved in disaster planning? What is the impact of a disaster on business operations?

Businesses, at an gradually increasing rate, have been motivated to look out for the public good, but we must realize that the principal responsibility of a business is to stay in business. The goal of business emergency planning is business continuity; not just the ability to reconstitute a service that has been interrupted. The principal benefits of disaster planning are; the reduction of potential negative impact, reduction of liability, adherence to regulatory and industry standards, and protection of insurance coverage. The international management consulting firm Coopers and Lybrand has identified the following as potential tangible business losses resulting from disaster:

Loss of Revenue resulting from damage to facilities, inability to communicate with prospective markets, lack of transportation to deliver goods, etc.

Extra expense resulting from need to repair or replace equipment and facilities, need to develop alternative delivery systems, need to train staff in modified operations, etc.

Reduced productivity resulting from facilities not operating to full capacity, reduction of work force, inability of communications and transportation systems to supply raw materials for production, etc.

Lateness penalties resulting from inability to meet contract delivery requirements.

Litigation resulting from inability to pay business expenses, inability to meet contract delivery requirements, etc.

There are also intangible losses, such as loss of customer trust and confidence, embarrassment, quality of life, and loss of competitive edge.

Ways in which private sector resources can help enhance the prevention, mitigation and preparedness include:

Emergency-planning know-how: most industrial facilities have experience in establishing and implementing emergency response plans. While these plans are focused on the interest of the particular industry, they call for a variety of skills (organizing, planning, delineating responsibility, communicating, etc.) which can be very useful in helping communities mobilize for prevention, mitigation and preparedness activities.

Access to needed expertise: the managers of industrial facilities are accustomed to reaching out quickly to access a wide range of consultants and advisors to supplement their in-house expertise. The resulting lists and rosters will be of use in prevention, mitigation and preparedness planning exercises.

Access to technology: business operators often have use of, or access to, technologies of a higher caliber than other organizations in the community. This is particularly true in the case of communication systems which form an essential element in most disaster curtailment efforts.

Commitment to the community: maintaining an interest in and commitment to the local community is considered an important management function for industries throughout the world. Reaching out "beyond the fence", as in the context of prevention, mitigation and preparedness exercises, can contribute to both the short and long-term success of business operations - in addition to further preparedness.

Financial contributions: businesses are willing to underwrite elements of community activities particularly when the success of these activities can work to the benefit of their commercial enterprise. Well-executed preparedness strategies tend to yield direct dividends (e.g., employees return to work earlier after a disaster) to locally based industries.

In conclusion, collaboration with the private sector has yielded valuable insights on how to improve relief and reconstruction efforts through the use of business community resources. The

time has come to draw on this experience to improve pre-disaster planning and operations forging more direct interaction between businesses and their host communities.

Most successful and "enlightened" business managers know the advantages of cooperating with their host community. They have also weighed the advantages and liabilities, and have prepared emergency plans to ensure business continuity. Resulting from successful experience with public sector/private sector initiatives, a new objective has been developed for the disaster management community. We must identify businesses that have developed good emergency plans and find ways to aid in the transfer of the benefits of this planning and related organizational expertise to local communities worldwide. We can also shine a light on these successes as models for other businesses to follow.

Some businesses have been successful without emergency plans. They may consider themselves lucky, but they are at risk and they are liabilities to their host communities.