

PUBLIC VIEWS ON DISASTER RESPONSE AND THE NEWS MEDIA -
SOME AUSTRALIAN EXAMPLES

R J Blong
School of Earth Sciences
Macquarie University

INTRODUCTION

The news media play a number of vital roles in disseminating information about natural hazards in warnings of impending hazard impacts, descriptions of the death and destruction caused by disasters, charting the course of relief and recovery, and assisting in public education to ameliorate the effects by reporting disaster preparedness and hazard mitigation techniques (Rogers, 1980; Kreimer, 1980). The role of the news media in relation to natural hazards also varies with the type of hazard and with the various stages from warning through impact to rehabilitation. However, the present concern is with only one relatively narrow facet - news reporting in Australia of natural disasters as viewed by the public. While four aspects are considered, (myths about disasters, reporting of overseas natural disasters, public recognition of local emergency services, and control of the media during disasters) the principal investigation concerns myths about disasters.

In 1975 Dennis Wenger and associates at the University of Delaware published a paper in Mass Emergencies under the title "It's a matter of myths: an empirical examination of individual insight into disaster response". They conducted telephone interviews with 354 respondents in New Castle County, Delaware, an area with very limited disaster experience - that is, they interviewed non-victim respondents in a non-disaster setting. The central aim of the investigation was to examine whether the public exhibited "the lack of insight and acceptance of myths about disaster response that has been attributed to it by numerous investigators", notably E L Quarantelli and R R Dynes (1972). In brief, the majority of the individuals in the sample believed that controlling panic flight and looting in the aftermath are major problems facing disaster officials, that most people evacuate willingly, that the crime rate rises after the impact and that disaster victims are in a state of shock and unable to help themselves. The majority of the sample also believed that the news media accurately portrayed the amount of devastation resulting from a natural disaster.

This report presents the results of a very similar survey conducted in 1982 in Sydney and draws comparisons with the Delaware results. The results in some related surveys undertaken in Sydney are also presented and discussed. Some implications for the media and for disaster management are drawn from these findings.