

REACTION TO AN UNINTENTIONAL  
PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT OF AN EARTHQUAKE WARNING:  
HIRATSUKA CITY, JAPAN, OCTOBER 1981

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1. INTRODUCTION

An earthquake warning was announced unintentionally in October 1981 over a public address system in Hiratsuka City, Japan, as a result of an unexpected malfunction of the system. The warning spoken by the Mayor on a tape recording, was broadcast from loud-speakers set up at various places in the city. Because of the time of day (late evening on Saturday in autumn), the information was heard directly by only 10-14% of the citizens. According to later investigations by sociologists, nearly half of the population who received the warning did not believe it. This was probably because the people knew that if it were genuine, either the situation would already have been discussed on TV and radio, or at least the warning would have been issued simultaneously by the mass media. More than 60% of the inhabitants who received the firsthand information paid special attention to TV and radio broadcasts thereafter. A certain number of people tried to check the information by telephone. Had the event occurred in the daytime, the number of people who took such action would have been far larger, and would probably have jammed the telephone system.

At 21.02 on Saturday, October 31, 1981, an emergency announcement by the mayor was broadcast to the public from a large number of loud-speakers installed at various places in Hiratsuka City and linked to a tape recorder located at the city office. The essential contents of the announcement were as follows: (1) an "earthquake warning statement" had already been issued by the Prime Minister, (2) the Mayor himself was speaking, (3) the city office was on the alert according