

**Hindrance or Help? A Model for the Involvement of Politicians in Communicating
with Publics During Disasters.**

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Australia has experienced a number of significant natural disasters during the past few years with politicians increasingly involved in the provision of information to publics before, during and after disasters. Drawing on data from interviews with senior executives of Australian emergency management agencies we explore how these organisations manage the involvement of political actors in the public communication of disasters. We also investigate how emergency agencies manage their relationships with their political leaders in the recovery phase. We identify that improvements can be made to the ways politicians communicate with publics about disasters and we outline a preliminary best practice model for the involvement of politicians in delivering disaster warnings and information in the lead up to and during a disaster, and in the recovery process.

Keywords: Disasters, public, communication, best practice, politicians.

Introduction

Recently politicians in Australia, and internationally, have been increasingly involved in the provision of information via the media to various publics before, during and after disasters. In Australia, where this study originates, the former Premier of the State of

Queensland, Anna Bligh's leadership and engagement with the media to communicate with various publics about the 2010/2011 floods in Queensland was lauded by media, politicians and emergency services (de Bussy and Paterson 2012), as was her contribution during Cyclone Yasi in Queensland in 2011 (Arklay 2012). However, there are times where political involvement in public communication about disasters via the media has been perceived as being problematic (de Bussy and Paterson 2012). In this paper we present the preliminary results of a study in which we examine the involvement of politicians in the various phases of communication with publics about disasters because anecdotal evidence points to the increasing involvement of political figures in communicating with publics about disasters. There is relatively little research into how emergency management organisations handle the involvement of political actors in communicating about disasters. In particular, we were unable to locate any research about the type of information politicians should provide to the public via the media before, during and after disasters and there is a dearth of research into when and why politicians should get involved in communicating to publics about disasters. This paper presents the findings of the first stage of a larger project, which explores the issue of political involvement in public communication about disasters across five countries.

We explore the aforementioned unanswered questions to develop a model that explicates the role of politicians in public communication about disasters. We believe our model could be adopted and adapted by emergency management organisations because, at least amongst the organisations we spoke to, few have formal policies or guidelines in place to deal with the increasing involvement of political actors in communicating with publics about disasters. We acknowledge that our model is in the preliminary stages of development and that as we continue to gather data as part of our larger study that further refinements may be made to the model. This paper draws on data collected through interviews with senior executives of emergency management organisations in Australia.

The manner in which emergency organisations communicate with those who are about to be and who are affected by disasters has significant ramifications for effecting action before and during disasters, and for the recovery process (Lowrey et al. 2007). The news media is, we recognise, only one tool to communicate with the public, with emergency managers increasingly using social media to connect with those affected by disasters (Bruns et al. 2012). However, traditional media remains an important source of information about disasters (Ewart and Dekker 2013). Australia, and more specifically the State of Queensland, has experienced a number of disasters in recent years including bush fires in Victoria in 2009, severe floods in Queensland in 2010/2011 and again in 2012 and Cyclone Yasi, which impacted on North Queensland in February 2011. While observing news media coverage of these events we noticed the increasing involvement of politicians in communicating to publics via the media about these events in their three phases: pre, during and post disaster. That observation prompted us to consider the issue of political involvement in media communication to the public about disasters.

Political involvement in disasters can be helpful or it can be a hindrance. For example in the Australian State of Queensland the then Premier Anna Bligh was lauded for her leadership during the aforementioned floods (Greenwood 2011) and during Cyclone Yasi (Wright 2011). While Greenwood admires her leadership, Wright discusses Bligh's public performance as a leader, saying the then Premier's leadership was 'stellar' and that she constantly communicated with the public about the approaching disasters via the media. Wright elaborates (2011, p. 71-72):

Never before had a state or national leader shown such stellar leadership in an extreme weather event, and never had a state government seemed so well prepared for what was about to happen: another freak of nature, another extreme climate event, another tick to climate change. Anna Bligh had already dealt with major flooding in southern Queensland only weeks previously, leading people every step of the way in a style of leadership so rarely seen in Australia today.

However, not everybody was impressed with Bligh's involvement in those disasters. Peter Rekers, (Interview 2011) who heads the Australian organization, Emergency Media and Public Affairs, whose members include government media advisors, emergency practitioners and academics, argues that a political lead in disaster communication potentially sends the wrong message. He cites Cyclone Yasi as an example of politicizing disaster communication when Premier Bligh fronted most media conferences from the Emergency Management State headquarters. However, criticism of the Queensland Premier's media approach during Cyclone Yasi is not shared by all emergency communication leaders. Director of Western Australia Police Public Affairs Neil Stanbury argues that "on the whole she was an excellent spokesperson and acquitted herself very well". He continues (Interview 2011):

Probably she was a little bit too much in the operational space and I think that's a valid criticism, but you know in the midst of a crisis you go with what's working for you and sometimes it's dependent on the personalities who are in the game.

We return to some of the compliments about and criticisms of Bligh's involvement in communicating about these disasters later in this paper. The pitfalls of political involvement in disasters were highlighted during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Poor situational awareness by political leaders, combined with media broadcasting of unsubstantiated rumours, diverted the priorities of officials from rescue to law enforcement. As CNN (2005) reported during Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans Governor Blanco declared that law and order would be restored with battle-hardened troops equipped with 'M16's and they're locked and loaded'. Research has identified media

coverage in the weeks following Hurricane Katrina focused on blame and responsibility, with much of the criticism levelled at government (Maestas et al. 2008, p. 615).

Literature

While we recognise that there is a significant and growing body of research around disasters, particularly to do with communicating about disasters, our focus in this article is on news media coverage of disasters and the role of politicians in communicating with various publics about these types of events. We also focus on the issue of source credibility in information provision about disasters as this is closely related to our study.

Media and Disasters

There is little doubt that traditional media continues, despite the emergence of social media, to play an important and valuable role in the provision of information to the public before, during and after disasters (Cohen, Hughes and White 2006; Cretokis et al 2008; Ewart and Dekker 2013; Keys 1993). Radio, television and newspapers go beyond the mere provision of information during disasters, to connecting people and communities at such times (Ewart and Dekker 2013; Littlefield and Quenette 2007). While television is an important source of information before a disaster (Piotrowski and Armstrong 1998) radio has continually proven to be a vital link during disasters especially when power supplies are disrupted (Perez-Lugo 2004). There is a wealth of research into the roles various media play in the different phases of a disaster and the associated positives and pitfalls of that coverage (Bainbridge and Galloway 2010; Mitroff 2004; Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen 2007; Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski 2006; Vasterman, Yzermans and Dirkzwager 2005). There is evidence that local media provide residents in disaster-afflicted areas more useful information about protection and recovery, than national media (see for example Anthony and Sellnow 2011). Anthony and Sellnow (2011) interviewed Mississippi residents affected by Hurricane Katrina, highlighting that trust in local media was partly due to public perceptions that these types of media are part of the community and motivated by reasons other than profit. Anthony and Sellnow (2011) identified that while the residents have faith in local media and local government, the flip side of the coin is that there is widespread distrust of national media and national and state government.

Crisis management Models

There are various models that explain the different stages of a crisis. We find Coombs' three stage model of crisis communication (2010) useful as a way of understanding and contextualising our study because our focus is on political involvement in public

communication during the various stages of a disaster. Coombs (2010, p. 20) explains that crisis management occurs across three distinct, but interrelated stages: “pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis”. The pre-crisis situation involves identifying risks, planning to manage the crisis and training a range of people to handle the various tasks associated with managing the crisis. Coombs (2010, p. 20) elaborates on the communication function of crisis management:

Crisis communication includes the collection and processing of information for crisis team decision making along with the creation and dissemination of crisis messages to people outside of the team (the traditional definition of crisis communication). Post-crisis involves dissecting the crisis management effort, communicating necessary changes to individuals, and providing follow-up crisis messages as needed.

Coombs suggests that these phases provide a means of taking into account the complexities of crisis communication.

There is also a wealth of research into best practice models for disaster communication, particularly in the pre-disaster phase and as a disaster unfolds. Contributions to the field have been made by academics in the areas of risk and communication management and government centres charged with securitisation of food and disease control and prevention (see for example Cole and Fellows 2008; Heath 2007; Littlefield and Cowden 2006; Reynolds 2009; Seeger 2006; Anthony and Sellnow 2011). However, these best practice models do not deal directly with the issue of political involvement and, more specifically communication, in disasters, therefore we now turn our attention to the few researchers who have dealt with the issue of source credibility and political involvement in communication about disasters.

Source Credibility and Disasters

Our study deals with issues around reliability and authority of sources who provide information to the media in the lead up to, during and after disasters. Wei et al (2010, p. 1016) in their study of the effective use of television to transmit crisis information to audiences found that from a communications standpoint, the important elements of disaster response are not only the content of the communication... but also the channels of communication, the source of the communication, and the message distribution or delivery strategy.

They (Wei et al. 2010, p. 1016) also identified that the information provided during a disaster is “always a political decision”.

One study that has implications for our work is that of Cole and Fellows (2008) in which they looked at the errors that occurred in communication to various publics about

Hurricane Katrina. Cole and Fellows (2008) point out that much of the research into source credibility in relation to risk communication indicates that intelligence, character and good will are key in respect to audience trust and the level of credibility they give to a source. Of significance to our work are their findings about confusing messaging from different types of sources and the lack of source credibility, particularly in relation to government officials (including politicians). Cole and Fellows (2008, p. 218) say that, “in the minds of these residents, neither government promises nor active attention had materialized and its image of openness and honesty had been damaged”.

Furthermore, they identified inconsistent use of terminology and unclear messaging, all of which failed to motivate residents to leave the area. Cole and Fellows (2008, p. 219-220) found that the “lack of motivation may be attributed to inconsistent and/or lack of messages from disaster officials and spokespersons (e.g., mayor, governor) and lack of spokesperson credibility”.

Significantly, these researchers identified that an important aspect of disaster planning was “collaboration with community leaders” (p. 225). Reynolds (2009, p. 2) suggests that in disaster and crisis communication organisations should expect the public to immediately judge the content of an official emergency message in the following ways: “Was it timely?” “Can I trust this source?” and “Are they being honest?”

This also has considerable implications for the involvement of politicians in public communication about disasters. Reynolds suggests in a discussion of scientists as spokespersons and how leaders in general should communicate that (2009, p. 55):

A leader has the ability in a crisis to rally his or her community. A leader who is sharing the risk, a part of the affected community, can call on his or her community to shoulder the burden and help others.

Politicians and Disasters

One of the more interesting aspects of media and disaster research is the work that has been undertaken on the tendency for media to seek to lay blame for a disaster (Erikson 1994; Hood 2002; Knobloch-Westerwick and Taylor 2008; McMullan and McClung 2006; Olson 2000). The news media judges the operational and political management of disasters, which in turn sets up the authority for the media to assign blame for a disaster (Littlefield and Quenette, 2007). Consequently, how politicians publicly respond to and handle a disaster equates with the apportionment of blame by the public (Arceneaux and Stein, 2006). Where members of the public believe politicians have erred in preventing a disaster Arceneaux and Stein note (2006, p. 50) that the public is “willing to attribute blame and punish incumbents accordingly”. Thus the way politicians communicate to publics before, during and after disasters is crucial in shaping the way members of those publics respond to a disaster and later apportion blame for it.

In the management of communication during Typhoon Morakot in 2009, Cheng (2013) found there was poor communication between Taiwan's central and local government, with a failure to manage communication proactively from the time the government was warned of the approaching typhoon. She drew on public speeches, press releases and media interviews with President Ma, to compare his performance with research findings about the leadership of New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani during 9/11 and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin in Hurricane Katrina. Griffin-Padgett and Donnetrice (2010) also examined the leadership of Mayors Rudolph Guiliani during 9/11 and Ray Nagin during Hurricane Katrina using the concept of 'restorative rhetoric' to analyse the rhetorical styles of both leaders. These researchers identify the characteristics of rhetorical rhetoric and its function in "describing unique rhetorical situations like natural disasters and acts of terrorism" (p.378). Restorative rhetoric, Griffin-Padgett and Donnetrice (2010) does not deny the existence of a crisis nor provide leaders with justification for their decisions and actions, rather it is aimed at assisting those affected by disaster to cope. They found that both Mayor Giuliani and Mayor Nagin created identities in the public sphere that allowed them to emerge as leaders of the crisis event. While Giuliani reacted decisively making public statements aimed at getting people to act (by leaving the area or staying away from it) and reassuring people, Nagin's ability to demonstrate similar leadership was impeded by a lack of information about the severity of the hurricane. Griffin-Padgett and Donnetrice (2010, p. 389) identified that a significant feature of Nagin's crisis-management style was his visibility. He maintained his presence through constant interviews on television and local radio - to communicate up-to-the-hour reports on the state of the city and surrounding areas. The mayor not only used media to help him frame the crisis situation, but also to critique the slow rate of response and the lack of resources.

While strong leadership is important in communicating about disasters, other factors contribute to disaster management as Seneviratne, Baldry and Pathirage (2010) found when reviewing the literature about disaster management. They organised the successful factors they identified into eight categories: technological, social, legal, environmental, economic, functional, institutional and political. Importantly, they found that the political situation in a country could contribute to or mitigate the success of mitigation/preparedness, relief/recovery and reconstruction/rehabilitation in a disaster. Political influences include "aspects related to politics or parties or politicians in the context of disaster management" (Seneviratne, Baldry and Pathirage 2010, p. 387).

While relatively little attention has been paid to research about political leaders taking a lead role as the official spokesperson during a disaster, there has been some work on the separation between Ministerial and departmental media advisers in the context of public relations and the notion of 'spin doctoring'. Stockwell (2007) proposed the idea of a Chinese wall, suggesting that departmental advisers could be drawn into the Ministerial and political environment, contributing extensive resources in order to distribute the

political message to various publics. In the context of a disaster response, Wilson (Interview 2010) argues that there are two 'separate' approaches in disaster response: the 'political' and the 'program' levels. As with Stockwell's Chinese walls analogy, Wilson contends that the lines are becoming blurred with increasing control over departmental media teams by Ministerial staffers. This presents problems for those charged with emergency management as senior disaster communications officer for the Australian Federal Government Alistair Wilson explains:

Now that means that the Ministerial advisors, the media advisors in particular, have a good deal of power. The days of an individual department or agency or division's spokesperson talking (to the media) is being a little bit diminished and that's perhaps a sad trend in that the people in the media want an operational person to talk (Wilson, 2010).

The blurred lines of responsibility and accountability are not exclusive to the Australian context. In the United Kingdom, the Independent Review of Government Communications noted:

The breakdown in the level of public trust in, and credibility of, government communications and the disengagement from the political process pose questions to politicians and to the media as to how they conduct their legitimate, but very different, roles and responsibilities (Phillis 2004, p. 2).

Furthermore in relation to the politicisation of disasters Keys (2009, p. 3) argues:

It is common in Queensland for tactical decision-making to be undertaken by political figures who may seek to influence the deployment, for example, of defence force assistance in contradiction of standing arrangements between the Commonwealth and the states. In the process, local emergency services' personnel can be marginalised: a case, perhaps, of managers not being thought to have the necessary expertise. Rather politicians, untrained and inexperienced in emergency management, direct responses to severe storms and makes for many problems in applying educational initiatives.

O'Connor (2011, p. 58) also comments on the increasing tendency toward the involvement of politicians in disaster communication:

Where we once could rely on frank and fearless advice from independent experts, we now see media conferences run by the politician with nameless noddors in the background. To move from the Premier to the spokesperson sends a very different

message, and even her staff would have to accept she's had a few credibility issues lately, so you're potentially not reaching those audiences who question that credibility.

de Bussy and Paterson (2012) analysed the leadership styles of the then Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the then Premier Anna Bligh during the 2011 Queensland floods, by looking at Twitter posts mentioning the pair. They suggest that their findings hold implications for "strategies instilling pride and gaining respect and trust" for political leaders during disasters. Tweets praising Bligh used language consistent with the four dimensions of transformational leadership: charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. Twitter descriptions of Bligh's handling of the crisis were overwhelmingly positive, clearly alluding to the charisma and inspiration factors of transformational leadership. de Bussy and Paterson's study (2012, p. 328) identified that Tweeters described being 'very moved' by the premier and words such as 'class act', 'bloody legend' and 'inspiring' appear frequently. de Bussy and Paterson (2012, pp. 328-329) found that Bligh's leadership ability was mentioned repeatedly, and her role in responding to the 2011 floods was likened to that of Rudy Giuliani in responding to the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York. Above all, it was Bligh's ability to display emotion and articulate her state's proud sense of self-identity that really seemed to resonate. Contrastingly, de Bussy and Paterson (2012, p. 329) found Gillard was perceived as 'cold and robotic'. Rather than a transformational leadership style, the tweets frame Gillard as a transactional leader, attending to the work of government but without inspiration or charisma. The results of de Bussy and Paterson's study suggest Bligh's success was due largely to her ability to personify two of the key dimensions of transformational leadership: charisma and inspiration.

While the aforementioned research gives us some insight into political leadership styles during disasters, our study makes a unique contribution to the field because it examines this issue from the perspectives of those tasked with managing the demands of politicians who want to be involved in the various phases of a disaster. We were unable to locate any studies that had approached the issue of disaster management and communication from this perspective and believe that our research and its findings offer new insights for those charged with managing disasters and for those researching such events.

Methodology

This paper draws on data from interviews with six senior executives of emergency management agencies in Australia and one interview with a community development officer Anne Leadbeater from the Murrindindi Shire, which was affected by bushfires, known as the Black Saturday bushfires, in Victoria in 2009. While the senior emergency

managers offer valuable insights the issues at the heart of our paper, we included Leadbeater in our study because she made substantial contributions to the recovery efforts of one of the affected areas and in that role had significant contact with media and politicians. Her reflections on the involvement of politicians in the various phases of communication about disasters provide an important and valid perspective. The Black Saturday bushfires were also some of the most severe bushfires to occur in Australia and Leadbeater's involvement in assisting her community to recover was significant. The larger study we are currently undertaking will draw on interviews with other community development officers where appropriate. Open-ended, conversational style interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) were used because they allow for in-depth discussion of the issues associated with the research topic. An interpretative approach to the interviews was taken, because it allowed for deep insights into the complexities of the lived experiences of the interviewee from their own perspectives (Andrade 2009; Schwandt 1994). The interviews allowed an exploration of how emergency management organisations manage the involvement of political actors in disasters and their role in communicating with the public before, during and after disasters.

Both authors have professional backgrounds in disaster and crisis management and so were able to draw on their experiences in managing crises and disasters when developing the guiding themes for the interviews. The authors also observed media coverage of several disasters including a cyclone and two severe flood events in their home State in 2010/2011 and 2012 respectively. Interviewees were offered a choice of having their names attached to their comments or commenting without having their names attached to those comments. Interviews took between 30 minutes and an hour. The interviews and conference presentations were transcribed by a professional transcription service. Both researchers read through the transcripts of the interviews and conference presentations and developed a set of common themes so that the data could be organised and coded.

Findings

In this section of our paper we present our findings from our study using the five best practice principles we have developed as a result of this research in relation to politicians' involvement in information provision during the various phases of a disaster. It is widely accepted by disaster and emergency managers interviewed for this research that politicians have a role in communicating disaster information with the public. There is, however, debate on the scope of that role, the content of messages, at what stage of a disaster they should be involved and how the needs of political actors should be resourced, particularly at the height of a disaster response. From the perspective of those we interviewed political communication in disaster management is largely part of the 'democratic process', where politicians have a right and responsibility to represent citizens, particularly in times of calamity. One senior emergency manager observes that

politicians represent society as part of a democracy. The same point resonates with Anne Leadbeater, who notes (Interview 2013): “(it) doesn’t really matter whether it’s the Prime Minister or the local ... councillor. There is a role to be fulfilled in terms of leading by example”. The role of politicians in a disaster is also acknowledged by Anthony Clark, Group Manager, Corporate Communications, New South Wales Rural Fire Service. He argues that disaster and emergency agencies are ultimately “responsible to the Minister, the Premier and the people. It’s not something I think anyone can just look at and go, ‘We don’t want a politician involved’” (Interview 2013).

Non-disaster periods offer the best, and most productive, opportunity to build relationships between political actors and disaster agencies.

There appears to be few, if any, written rules governing the structure of relationships or the management of information during a disaster between political actors and disaster agencies, beyond the traditional hierarchal reporting structure. Our interviews reveal that this relationship across all phases of disaster management – prevention, preparation, response and recovery – is based largely on cooperation grounded in mutual acceptance of the political role and on-going verbal or email communication, intensifying during the response phase with situation reports. This communication is principally between agencies to their communications (media and public relations) personnel and Ministerial staffers (media and policy advisors) to their political master. Although there is a flurry of communication activity in the response to a disaster, emergency managers note that the relationship is most productive in the periods between disasters, where they welcome political interest in their activities, which can result in increased funding and a better understanding of operational procedures and limitations. A senior emergency manager described the importance of building a relationship before a disaster this way:

You can’t build a relationship and help them understand your business when the disaster happens. We have a system in my particular state where there are fortnightly Ministerial meetings, when all the media staff get together. We go through issues. We look at opportunities to make sure that the politicians are able to get the exposure they want, that the agency can get the exposure they want to get from having the politician there, and that we understand each other’s business. You can’t just have them turn up on the day of the event and expect everything is going to go smoothly (Interview 2013).

Another disaster agency official interviewed for this research agreed that the positives outweighed the negatives in engaging with politicians before a disaster and that relationship can then be embodied within the overall operational response. He continues (Interview 2013):

One of the things that we try and emphasise is that the politicians, while they may bring some short-term pain, bring a lot of long-term benefits to the organisations through the potential for funding. If you really want the politicians to understand your business then having them there actually as part of that, seeing what you're doing and understanding what you're doing, is actually a good long-term investment, not the embuggerance that you may regard it at the time.

The benefits of a healthy pre-disaster relationship between the emergency communications manager and political staffer can manifest during the pressure of information sharing in the response phase. Noting that “one of the key things with politicians is no surprises”, a senior emergency manager explains (Interview 2013):

When politicians do get cranky it's because they hear about things on the radio rather than hearing it from the emergency services. And to me that's one of the critical things that we as agency members have to do, is to make sure that their media staff are kept well updated, both on the phone as well as with written material that the politician is similarly kept well updated. Generally that's not only us. It's the Commissioner as well who will ring the appropriate Minister or Premier as well. But at least for us, making sure the media staff are happy is important.

Again, in the periods between disasters, agencies encourage and welcome political support for, and involvement in, community safety and disaster awareness campaigns. This particularly applies to politicians who are good communicators and are popular with high levels of electorate support. For example, NSW Rural Fire Brigade's Anthony Clark, says (Interview 2013):

I think anyone who doesn't try to capitalise on the strength of a political figure to get a message to the community, you're misdirecting your attention, really. A premier, a minister, a prime minister, being able to get a message out on our behalf, it's fantastic. It's the old saying: one message, many voices. So there's definitely a space there for the politician.

The establishment of good working relationships between emergency services and politicians before a disaster occurs, can assist significantly in the management of public communication when a disaster strikes as the next section of our findings reveal.

Political actors should be actively involved in the pre-impact and recovery phases, but take a step back during the response phase.

Politicians were perceived by those we interviewed to have very specific roles in relation to the type of information and public comment they should provide before and after disasters strike. For those we interviewed this was closely related to the issue of source credibility, which is a critical platform of effective disaster messaging (Cole and Fellows 2008; Reynolds 2009; Wei et al 2010). A New Zealand study on credibility in evacuation messaging using a simulated flood found that evacuation orders issued by the disaster agency, rather than the Prime Minister, were more trusted (Lamb et al. 2012, p. 278). This resonated with Leadbeater who said that trust was a factor in political communication in the disaster setting. While some of the senior emergency managers we interviewed acknowledged that politicians do not typically enjoy high levels of trust, Leadbeater argues this factor would reduce the credibility of warnings issued by political actors. She elaborates:

I think what can happen is, depending on the relationship that I as a community member have with that elected representative, I may or may not process the warning information in a way that's entirely intended. So if my relationship is constrained by bad experience or a negative perception, or a lack of trust, then I might be inclined to second-guess the warning however relevant, by virtue of whoever is delivering it. If on the other hand, I have a huge amount of respect and regard for that person, they might be the ideal person to be giving me that warning.

Our research has found distinct phases as to when political actors should be actively involved in - or pull back from - disaster communications and tours of impact areas, usually accompanied by a large media contingent. Philip Campbell, assistant director, assets, NSW SES, observes that the impact phase of a disaster is the least favourable time for such political activity. He finds that politicians generally agree with this, and are usually prepared to take a step back to allow the response agencies to deal with the situation in which lives and property are at greatest risk. He notes: "politicians very rarely become involved when the weather is absolutely awful and the rain is pelting down" (Interview 2013). In his experience, the relationship with political actors is based on mutual cooperation and intense periods of communication with Ministerial staffers, such as media officers. He explains (Interview 2013):

We are on the phone to Ministerial staff probably up to half a dozen times a day with updates and information. We'll have discussions as we go about when we think it's a good time for the Minister to come along, which inevitably is once the worst of the operational response is over and once we're looking at starting to transition into recovery.

Although the relationship with the Minister directly responsible for his agency may be strong, involvement by other politicians less familiar with operational activities and resources can be challenging. For example, Campbell points to the genuine interest of the Prime Minister, Governor-General and politicians of other political persuasions who seek information about the disaster and opportunities to tour impact zones. These requests are generally handled ‘through the appropriate channels’ (Interview 2013). Clark agrees disaster agencies do ‘everything possible’ to facilitate political visits to disaster zones when timing is appropriate and resources are available. A request, however, may be declined if ‘it is too early’ for a political visit based on safety and the information and resource needs of the impacted communities. Clark (Interview 2013) observes that:

What the people on the ground are actually wanting is information, not just photos in the local papers, for instance. It’s a very simplistic way of looking at it, but that’s a reality of it. Sometimes (for a political visit) it’s just too soon and working in communications you’ve got a pretty good idea of when something is a bad idea.

Emergency managers are acutely aware of timing and perceptions when it comes to managing political interest during the response phase of a disaster. Some of the pressure to go to the scene of the disaster is driven by political staffers rather than the politician, with one disaster response manager (Interview 2013) noting, “ninety-nine per cent of the time it’s their staff” who want media exposure of their political leader on the ground.

Although emergency managers agree that there is a distinct and valuable role in active political involvement in the disaster recovery phase, they point to a downside. One senior emergency manager described dealing with politicians at this time as ‘incredibly distracting’ and ‘time consuming’ when resources should be devoted to dealing with the disaster. He describes the pressure this way (Interview 2013):

There are times when (our) media team have felt a little bit like travel agents for the politicians rather than getting on with our role of getting the message out...we also find that operations staff can equally be frustrated that they have to take time out from their day to get senior personnel who are running the operation to spend three or four hours showing around a politician when they really would rather be getting back into what they’re doing.

Although politicians may be regarded as distracting but necessary, disaster agencies have adopted a formulaic approach to meeting the needs of politicians who wish to visit the scene of disaster. It is described this way by one senior emergency manager - airport pick up and briefing, a flight over the disaster scene, tour of the operations centre,

shaking the hands of emergency responders and, finally, a media conference. He continues (Interview 2013):

That pretty much is the tried and tested formula because a politician is not going to do a media conference as soon as they arrive, before they've seen the damage or spoken to anyone. So we expect that now in our agency, and other agencies pretty much expect that same sort of formula. You learn to live with it and you know that inevitably the politicians are going to turn up at some point during a major operational response and that you're going to need to find those particular resources.

The influence of the media, both good and bad as discussed previously, has not escaped the attention of disaster and emergency managers. Leadbeater describes the interaction between politicians and the media as a "dance that is getting done" pointing to media driving political decision-making in the disaster recovery phase. She describes 'the dance' in this way (Interview 2013):

The media reports some perceived or real problem with disaster recovery; government responds, puts a range of measures and processes in place to address that. The media then either picks up on that again, or picks up on some new issue. But at no point is what's actually needed on the ground factoring into that necessarily.

Leadbeater asserts that the priority must be the community in a crisis and they should be the focus of communication 'rather than the loudest voices'. She explains:

If you put the community in the middle, and you say 'this is not about you politicians, it's not about you media, this is about these guys, and we're going to listen to them, and then our response to what happens next will be informed by what we hear, and not just what we hear from the loudest voices. It's really about refocusing our energies and our thinking around the people who actually should be at the centre and who's agenda we would all want to serve, rather (than) competing for who gets to take pot shots and who, or who gets to make the biggest announcement, or the best photo op.

As the recovery process rolls out following a disaster, emergency agencies regard the sustained involvement of politicians as increasingly important. For example Clark asserts politicians need to remain throughout the 'wash-up', when media turn from portraying agencies in the fame frame to the blame game. He says (Interview 2013), "when the knives start coming out that's not the time for the politicians to go running ... you've got

to take the good with the bad. Campbell agrees that politicians should support disaster-impacted communities for the long haul because it can take “many months, a long period of time, after which the community is still recovering”. He cites the on-going recovery process following the 2011 Christchurch earthquake as an example (Interview 2013):

A couple of years from a significant earthquake, that sort of community would still need people there engaging with the community at a political level, reassuring them that the recovery is still on track, that the government is still there to support them and is still interested in their needs and their problems.

While emergency managers have firm ideas about when politicians should get involved in communicating about disasters, they also have strong views about how politicians should communicate with publics affected by disasters. We turn to this issue in the next section of our findings.

Political messaging should be about empathy, support and reassurance.

Several emergency managers argued the communication abilities and personality of the political actor is critical to their role in disaster communication. Clark (Interview 2013) points to Christchurch, New Zealand, Mayor Bob Parker, who led public communications following the 2011 earthquake,

becoming the face on TV each night and that’s because he’s a fantastic communicator and he can get a message across very clearly. So it’s about identifying the strengths and going, “Actually, you know what? Here’s someone who can get the message out.” And I think sometimes agencies do need to step back a little bit and go, ‘Let’s not try to control it quite so much’. If someone like that is there and willing to do it why aren’t we using them, whether it’s the local mayor or a State MP or a premier?

Leadbeater agrees that personality plays a key role in effective political communication, noting that Premier Bligh could have galvanised communities under threat from Cyclone Yasi “even if she was ... (an) ordinary citizen” (Interview 2013). Helping people in disasters should ‘add value’ rather than make a situation worse, according to Leadbeater. She argues that it is the role of emergency and disaster agencies to guide politicians “to help them understand what useful and meaningful and helpful leadership looks like in (as disaster) setting” (Interview 2013). Although politicians are involved in disaster communication, it does not mean they should take control. Therefore, Leadbeater (Interview 2013) argues that the key lesson for political actors is: “be there, but don’t then take on that mantle of managing the emergency because if you do that you

might be undermining the, not the authority, but the way the people who are expert in that are regarded". Further to this, Leadbeater asserts that political support needs to be meaningful and pragmatic. For example "we don't want to hear that we're going to be given millions of dollars to build new community assets, because we don't know where we're going to eat tonight". Although such statements may be welcome in the later stages of recovery, Leadbeater suggests that the initial post-impact phase the political messaging should be (Interview 2013) "we're here for you and our job is to try and help you get what you need to just make it through the first week, the first month and so on".

Our research found that emergency managers addressed some of the political trust and credibility issues discussed earlier in this paper with a strategy of what we have termed "tandem information delivery". This model involves both the politician and senior uniformed emergency officer co-hosting a media conference, public meeting or other activity. In other words, the public information sphere is shared at the one time, thereby reducing the risk of mixed or confusing messaging. This, we argue, enhances source credibility (Cole and Fellows 2008), accommodates the political aspects of disasters (Wei et al. 2007) and the authority of the messaging (Wei et al. 2010). Three essential disaster-messaging criteria (Reynolds 2009) also flow from this approach: leadership (operational and political), empathy (political) and directions for action (operational). One of the senior emergency managers in this study (Interview 2013) asserts that having politicians 'flanked' by uniformed officers "strengthens their credibility and also, more importantly, it reassures society more effectively". This dual delivery approach was applied frequently by Queensland Premier Anna Bligh leading up to, and during, the landfall of Cyclone Yasi, when she was accompanied before the media by uniformed officers, who fielded questions pertaining to operational issues, while Bligh offered reassurance to the point of describing imagery about the effects of the cyclone. As Leadbeater observed (Interview 2013) Premier Bligh,

did a sensational job and the reason that she did is because she had her senior emergency managers there and she deferred to them. She didn't say, 'well this is what the police is going to be doing.' She actually said, 'here's the Police Commissioner, he's the man that knows this stuff'.

Leadbeater further argues that Premier Bligh successfully used 'empowering messaging' to reassure communities under threat that they were not alone. For Leadbeater, these words used by Premier Bligh exemplify the very core of supportive and reassuring political communication during a disaster: "we're going to do this, we're going to get through it, we're going to be okay, it's what we do, it's who we are".

Empathy, support and reassurance were considered by the emergency managers we interviewed as the cornerstones of the messages politicians should deliver during

disasters, however some were less keen on politicians involving themselves in operational matters associated with the various phases of disasters.

Operational messaging should contain warnings, operational data and instructions for people on how to help themselves.

Rather than taking a traditional operational role, such as issuing warnings, a senior emergency manager argued that political participation in disaster messaging needs to focus on “supporting response agencies” with, “we’re here to make sure they’ve got what they need to be able to get the job done” rather than “trust me. I’m a politician and I know what I am doing” (Interview 2013). Moreover, one of the senior emergency managers we interviewed (Interview 2013) points to the approach taken by New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who framed his crisis messaging post the 2001 9/11 terrorist attacks in four steps:

- this is what we know,
- this is what we don’t know,
- this is what we are doing, and
- this what you can do (Red Cross 2010).

That manager argues this model is “the safest and clearest line that any politician can use” because it serves to enhance credibility by stating what is not known, offers reassurance that response is underway and empowers survivors with instructions on how to help themselves (Coombs 2012, p. 146-147). The media, too, can add stress to the relationship between agencies and politicians when they choose to interview an operational person rather than a politician, who may not be a good communicator. For example Clark found “it always puts us in a difficult position because of that political relationship, but I suppose the media really dictates it” (Interview 2013).

To ensure effective communication between politicians and various publics those we interviewed believe politicians should frame their key messages around the themes of support for the agencies dealing with the disaster and being able to assist with resourcing response and recovery efforts. However, managing the demands of politicians who want to be seen to be actively involved in responding to the disaster is, as the next section of this paper highlights, a delicate balancing act for emergency managers.

Emergency agencies should manage political demands according to how they would be perceived by various publics by asking the question: “How would this look?”

Emergency managers interviewed for this research noted that politicians are ‘driven by perception’ and that they were able to use that as a way of managing the involvement

of public office holders in the various phases of a disaster. Asking politicians how their activities would appear to the public was one way of dissuading a premature visit to a disaster location. The argument against a visit can be won using a strategy of painting a picture of perceptions. In other words, posing the question of what would the community think of a politician using valuable resources to access a disaster site when local people who had been evacuated, remained barred from their homes? One emergency manager (Interview 2013) noted this approach often worked with political staffers:

You might think that's a good idea now, but as soon as one community member finds out that there was a helicopter trip in there with the Minister and the Premier and six cameras in tow, yet you're not letting someone who has lost their home to a fire or it's been flooded, you're not letting that person in there I mean, that's when you start having issues and when you actually explain that to them, most of the time they get it.

Rather than outright refusing a visit, another tactic used by an emergency agency is to offer an alternative option, such as a visit to the operations centre or the marshalling area of emergency responders. As one emergency manager noted, refusing a political request can have negative career consequences. He put the situation this way (Interview 2013):

... if you just keep on saying no your career is probably going to be a very short one. And I know there's been plenty of situations where people have just consistently said no, no, no. And you never hear of them again. They become the disaster. Yeah, so providing that alternative is quite often the best tactic.

Leadbeater agrees that allowing politicians and media into an area where evacuated residents are not yet allowed to return is problematic, but needs to be balanced with politicians and media quickly obtaining a clear picture of the disaster impact. This then could result in a myriad of benefits for survivors. She asks (Interview 2013): "If you don't have your Premier there going, 'oh my goodness, this is terrible' ... how does he, in good conscious, put the stamp on the form that says you've got an open cheque book?"

Our findings suggest that emergency managers are involved in complex negotiations with politicians about when, what and how to communicate with the various publics affected by disasters. However, they also suggest that these negotiations occur on an ad hoc basis, rather than being guided by a model of best practice.

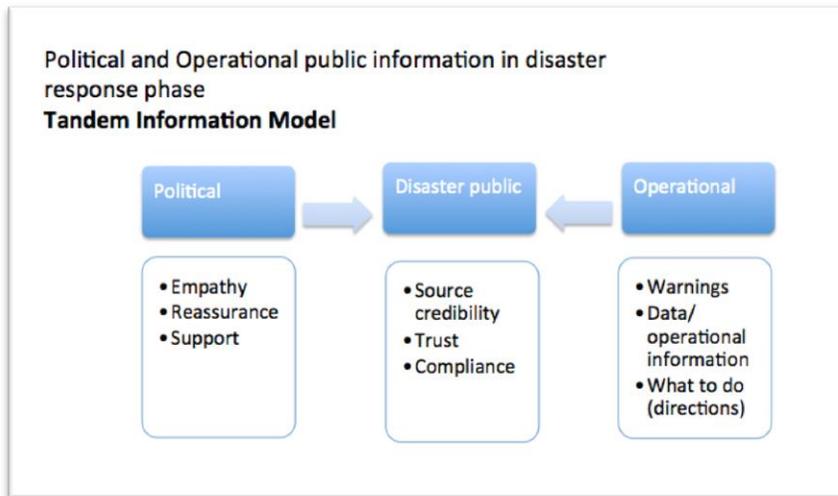
Best practice political communication in a disaster

Based on the findings we have presented in this paper, we suggest the following model for best practice in political involvement in public information provision during a disaster.

- Non-disaster periods offer the best, and most productive, opportunity to build relationships between political actors and disaster agencies.
- Political actors should be actively involved in the pre-impact and recovery phases, but take a step back during the response phase. Those communicating in the various phases of a disaster need to be seen by the public as a credible source of information.
- Political messaging should be about empathy, support and reassurance. The focus should be on the right source providing the right message, at the right time.
- Operational messaging should contain warnings, operational data and instructions for people about how to help themselves.
- Emergency agencies should manage political demands according to how they would be perceived by various publics by asking the question: “How would this look?”

Our tandem delivery of disaster information model provides a workable, mutually beneficial platform for both operational and political communication.

Importantly this model reduces the potential for mixed or confusing messages, which Cole and Fellows (2008) identified as a key reason why people did not evacuate during a disaster. Further, as identified by one of our study participants (2013), the model enhances trust and credibility of the political actor, who is flanked by uniformed operational personnel. As noted by Cole and Fellows (2008) high levels of trust and credibility motivate people to comply with operational disaster instructions, such as evacuation orders. Thus, the politician may, in fact reinforce the operational aspects of the disaster response (Leadbeater Interview 2013).



Conclusion

While we acknowledge that this study is in its infancy and the findings presented here only encompass the Australian phase of our larger study, our results and the model we present in this paper go some way towards filling a significant gap in the research into communication about disasters. In particular our preliminary findings contribute to knowledge about how emergency services manage the involvement of political actors in public communication before, during and after disasters. Emergency managers face a number of competing demands as disasters unfold and managing politicians and public communication are important aspects of that process. Our study shows that there is a role for politicians in public communication about disasters. Understanding how politicians can be best integrated into the public communication process is vital given the increasingly politicised nature of responses to disasters. The lessons learned by the emergency managers we interviewed in relation to negotiating the involvement of politicians in communication about emergency situations are valuable for those charged with such tasks regardless of the type and location of the disaster. While we are expanding our study to several other countries, we believe these preliminary results and suggestions will be useful for those emergency managers tasked with managing disasters.

We hope to expand our research to include some non-Western countries because their political systems may lead to variations in the ways emergency managers in such countries deal with the complexities of their relationships with politicians. Despite the limitations of our findings to date, we believe that they have implications for those charged with managing and responding to disasters and for academics that are analysing the way that public communication occurs before, during and after disasters. This is important because we need to learn lessons from previous events to improve the response

and management of future disasters. Research that examines how emergency management agencies implement and use the model we have developed would be beneficial. Additionally, studies that explore how audiences respond to the involvement of politicians in the various phases of communication about disasters would be revealing. We also believe there is significant scope for investigating how politicians perceive their role in public communication about disasters.

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