

The Common Disaster and the Unexpected Education: Delta Flight 1141 and the Discourse of Aviation Safety

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News coverage of transportation disasters, such as the crash of Delta Flight 1141, reveal the disaster behavior of passengers, flight personnel and rescue workers. Within a mystery framework, the Flight 1141 discourse provides clues that readers can use to construct their own disaster behavior awareness. The media must expand their pedagogical role beyond natural and technological disasters and begin providing basic airplane safety behavior information.

At 9:00 a.m. on August 31, 1988, Delta Flight 1141 crashed on take-off in Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas, killing 13 and leaving 94 survivors. The flight, destined for Salt Lake City, Utah, originated in Jackson, Mississippi, and had a scheduled stop-over at Dallas/Fort Worth. This disaster, like Three Mile Island, the Challenger space shuttle and Bhopal, was a specific kind of tragedy: sudden, unexpected, and wholly inexplicable. Unlike the other disasters, however, the crash of Delta 1141 was one of many transportation disasters covered by the mass media and was one of the many *survivable* crashes that have occurred throughout aviation history. Survivable crashes are those where passengers survive the impact of the crash. According to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), lives lost in airplane disasters deemed "survivable" are attributed to inadequate evacuation plans, lack of communication among parties or lack of passenger awareness as to role expectations (*Safety Study* 1985).

In disaster situations the mass media serve as warning agents, relayers of disaster/hazard information and as educators (*Disasters and the Mass Media* 1980; Quarantelli 1989; Sorenson 1983). Disaster research, however, has focused on natural disasters, the community affected and/or the role of the media. Studies of disaster news have centered around the inadequacies of disaster coverage and the perpetuation of disaster myths (Blong 1984; Quarantelli 1989; Wenger and Friedman 1986). Such myths include the portrayal of helpless individuals and organizations who are unable to deal with the weather, or the political and economic policies that

threaten them (Wilkins 1985, 1986). Others have noted that some disasters occur within a complex system making them hard to capture in their raw form (Walters et al. 1989). The media, as a result, break disasters down into simple explanations lacking in social, political and technological context (Altheide 1976). During the Three Mile Island incident, for example, CBS presented technological danger within a “nightly warning, nightly explanation” format whereas ABC presented a fable of a threatening nightmare that the elite could not handle (Nimmo 1984, p. 64). Disasters, such as Three Mile Island, also create rhetorical crises wherein technological reasoning can fail to offer the communicative processes we need to solve our modern problems (Farrell and Goodnight 1981). Others, such as the Challenger space shuttle explosion, create situations of “‘inappropriate death’ grief reactions” for the nation and the media play a role in the social mourning and grieving process (Goldzwig and Dionisopoulos 1986, p. 181). Finally, some disaster news narratives perpetuate disaster myths (Quarantelli 1988; Wilkins 1985, 1986) and others, such as airplane crash stories, encourage “naive beliefs about the safety of air travel” (Vincent et al. 1989, p. 24).

While these studies have furthered our insight into the mass media and disasters much work needs to be done. We must go beyond natural disasters and nuclear accidents and examine the mundane, the everyday—the mass transportation disaster. Furthermore, we need to broaden our understanding of the disaster narrative. People read or watch these stories to learn about the disaster and the people involved yet the discourse as a voice of disaster education has not been explored. In other words, we have not asked: What are the media telling the public about the event and the behaviors we should engage in during a disaster? In this paper we begin to address these issues by focusing on the crash of Delta Flight 1141.

Disaster News as Interpretive Packages

The stewardesses or stewards, if you got them, will come out and say: here’s how you work your oxygen thing, the little thing that comes out of the ceiling. Well, probably half will just plain blow that off, because if they fly at all they’ve seen it all before. The little yellow thing comes out of the ceiling and they put it on. Yet, somehow or another, when the plane has crashed or the passengers become aware they are in some kind of danger, or there is a sudden cabin deflation and fire and those things come out of the ceiling, I bet half of them don’t know what to do because they’re panic stricken. That’s what happened in *Airport*, that movie. That’s

probably a pretty accurate film because news stories tell us the same thing (Interview, September 1992).

Do news stories tell us the same thing? Interviews, like this one, indicate that as we struggle to understand events we can not (and do not want to) experience we draw upon a variety of resources including the media. Disasters, such as airplane crashes, are abstractions for most people. Nonetheless, they become part of our common stock of knowledge through personal, shared and mediated experience. "People construct and modify their understanding in an active environment that is constantly offering them images and potential schemata, suggesting how an issue is to be understood and what should be done about it" (Gamson 1988, p. 171). That the mass media tell us how to behave before, during, and after a disaster event is a common belief (*Disasters and the Mass Media* 1980; Quarantelli 1988, 1989; Sorenson 1983). Yet, perhaps because the belief is so widespread, this area of disaster discourse has never been studied. Disaster researchers and practitioners alike have been acting like teachers without a lesson plan; aware that something should be said but unaware of what it is and how it might be interpreted.

We can begin by examining the 1988 crash of Delta Flight 1141. The 1141 crash was selected because it was a "typical" plane crash in that it occurred on take-off (most crashes occur on take-off or landing) and because there were survivors (most plane crashes are survivable) (*Safety Study* 1985). The focus is not on the most recent airplane disaster or the largest; rather it is on the most common or "typical" disaster. The question is: How was this discourse framed by the print media? That is, what did the media tell us was the basic issue or concern of the crash? What frames explained the disaster to those experiencing, and those far removed from, the event? Finally, what did the discourse tell us about the safety of flying and how we should behave in a disaster? By examining this issue we can broaden our understanding of the various interpretive packages that the media present to us in their attempt to explain such unexpected, yet wholly common, events.

The study focuses on the first three days of Delta 1141 crash coverage (August 31–September 2, 1988) by six newspapers: *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Dallas Times Herald*, *The Houston Post* (crash site papers), *The Clarion Ledger* (Jackson, Miss.), *The Jackson Daily News* (flight origin papers) and *The Salt Lake Tribune* (flight destination paper). Location of the disaster, flight origination and flight destination determined newspaper selection. The largest amount of coverage occurred during this period and totaled in 351 state, local and AP news stories, photographs and diagram

stories. It should be noted that Fensch (1990) also conducted a study of the 1141 crash, however, he focused solely on AP reporters and their news stories. This study goes beyond Fensch's and examines the published discourse available to the public at large.

Analyzing the continuous record of this discourse allowed us to outline the central frames that shaped the national and local public's acquaintance with the crash. All media elements tied to a topic can become part of our interpretive package or parcel that we carry about disasters. As Gamson and Modigliani (1989) state, "media discourse is part of the process by which individuals construct meaning" (p. 2). That is, each news story, each conversation about the 1141 disaster, is much like the food stuffs we pack into a grocery bag. Each item (package) in the grocery bag is different but together the items form the contents of our bag and our meals. Following Gamson (1988), we argue that the Delta 1141 disaster discourse, like other discourse, has its own culture in which there are competing and constantly changing packages available for interpretation. The newspapers and stories used in this study serve as an indicator of the packages people can use to construct their interpretation of the Delta crash. Most of us would not read all of these publications, but they were available to those who wanted to make sense of the crash through local, national and personal discourse.

Story Frame

Determining the overall story frame, or central point of the story, allows us to conclude the context in which safety information appeared. "The frame suggests what the issue is about. It answers the question "what is the basic source of controversy or concern on this issue?" (Gamson 1988, p. 165; van Dijk 1988; Pan and Kosicki 1993). The 351 news stories, photographs and diagrams covered every topic from victim lists to stories about media coverage of the crash. The ten overall story frames identified are shown in table 1. As seen from table 2 below, the most common story frame was the passenger story. The overall frame of "other" had a higher number of stories but this was due to the mix of stories related to the crash but not to the study. Table 2 totals to more than 351 stories because some stories had two key story frames (e.g., Passenger Story and Accident Crash).

Aviation Safety Themes

Because disaster news narratives can serve as a voice for disaster education we looked for text that related to issues of aviation safety. Federal Aviation Administration and National Transportation Safety Board studies, the Sioux City, Iowa, crash in 1989, and our research on respondent understanding of aviation safety, served as a foundation for theme devel-

Table 1. Transportation Disaster Story Frames

Frame	Description
Accident/Crash	The crash event itself; crash recap
Crash Site Rescue	Rescue efforts at the crash site
Crash Site Plane	Examination/investigation of the plane
Passenger Stories	Passengers' experiences, their lives, etc.
Victim Stories	Those who died in crash; victim lists
Rescue Workers	Rescue worker training, work prior to, or during, the crash
Other Aid	Crash site community stories; witnesses; hospitals; hotels; aid to passengers, victims, families
Previous Crash Stories	Stories about previous plane crashes
Op/Ed	Articles about the crash on Op/Ed page
Other	Crash stories that did not fit other categories

Table 2. Overall Story Frames

Frame	No. Stories
Passenger Story	70 (24P/6D)*
Crash Site Plane	49 (22P/9D)
Rescue Workers	30 (18P)
Accident/Crash	26 (13P/1D)
Other Aid	26 (7P/1D)
Previous Crashes	25 (5P/1D)
Victim Story	24 (8P)
Crash Site Rescue	12 (9P)
Op/Ed	6 (0P/0D)
Other	107 (16P/9D)

*P = photograph; D = diagram

opment. Aviation safety discourse involves four key themes: passenger safety, flight personnel safety, plane safety and rescue. Briefly, passenger safety themes are references to such activities as using seat belts, storing items on board the plane, opening emergency exits, and/or helping others exit the plane. "Many of the passengers, however, reportedly escaped the wreckage on their own, many of them through the emergency exits. Some, however, had trouble with the doors" (Pusey 1988, p. 1) is a good example. Flight personnel safety themes are references to pilot or flight attendant training, years flying, age, and/or activities after the crash. "He did not get the proper readings from one of his engines. He decided to go back to the gate..." (Gamboa 1988, p. 1) is a flight safety statement. Plane safety themes are references to the probable cause of the crash, to meeting industry standards, and/or to the safety of similar airplanes. An example is: "Three years ago, a Delta L-1011 crashed at the same airport..." (Shannon 1988, p. 2). Finally, rescue themes are references to rescue personnel training, availability to victims and/or rescue actions. For example, "D-FW airport rescuers arrived within three minutes after the jet went down" (Kerr and Laws 1988, p. 14) is a rescue theme.

In addition to full sentences, we identified phrases, lexical meanings, metaphors, similes, and so on. To provide a sense of how prevalent safety themes are within the news discourse we counted the number of paragraphs where safety theme references were found. Of the 351 stories studied 43 percent were found to also contain at least one aviation safety theme. A total of 613 paragraphs were identified as safety theme paragraphs; 34 percent were passengers themes, 24 percent were flight safety, 29 percent were plane safety and 14 percent were rescue safety themes. As can be seen from table 3 below, some safety themes were stronger than others but together they serve as a voice of disaster education.

Story frames, more often than not, contained a mixture of all aviation themes. The four strongest story frames, and the aviation themes that appeared, are discussed below.

Reading the Delta 1141 Story

An airplane crash disrupts the normal fabric of everyday life and everything we know and trust ends or is severely jarred. While this is especially true for those directly affected by the crash, it is also true for those of us who read about the crash. At a very basic level, airplane crashes remind us that things go wrong and we can die. The Delta 1141 news stories served as a constant reminder of this fact as they worked to frame the disaster as a mystery to be solved. By mystery I mean an "unknown." The mystery of

Table 3. Safety Themes within Story Frames

Story Frame	TP*	Passenger	Flight	Plane	Rescue
Passenger	703	137	25	24	11
Crash Site Plane	397	16	39	45	1
Rescue Workers	285	8	1	2	29
Accident/Crash	360	38	9	15	10
Other Aid	281	5	0	1	20
Previous Crash	242	0	8	7	8
Victims	253	2	1	3	0
Crash Rescue	107	14	4	11	12
Op/Ed	62	2	3	1	2
Other	1431	20	67	72	7

*TP = Total story paragraphs; theme numbers refer to paragraphs containing a safety theme reference for that category.

the crash is, after all, a real one; for during the first three days (and often months) after the crash both the cause of the accident, and how passengers survived the crash, remains unknown. The news stories reflect this fact in both a real and literary sense by reporting the facts of the crash, and tales of passenger survival, within a predictable dramatic framework of setting (crash site), actors (pilot, passengers, FAA officials), plot(s), and a "to-be-continued" ending. The ending helps to establish a mystery framework like that in the game of *Clue* (e.g., was it Colonel Mustard with the candle stick in the library?). The use of the mystery frame is not intended to be a formal typology but rather a means of ordering my interpretation of the news stories (Goffman 1959, 1974; Young 1990).

A Mystery is Established: Accident/Crash Stories

Accident/crash stories are usually the lead stories on the first day of coverage and focus primarily on piecing together what happened and why. Ultimately, the story frame serves primarily as a prelude, or introduction, to the other Delta 1141 stories. The lead story in the *Dallas Morning News* on September 1, is a good example. The article "Piecing together the tragedy" (Minutaglio and Jacobson 1988, p. 1A) retells the story of the crash chronologically, beginning with a depiction of the scene before the crash ("a beautiful morning for a flight") as being normal and routine. This scene changes "in just a few minutes" to "a harrowing experience of fear, courage and unanswered questions." These stories are typically the first ones pub-

lished when information is at its thinnest; when little is known about the exact number of survivors (if any); and even less is known about the cause of the crash. Because of these conditions a to-be-continued ending to the story is inevitable and works to establish the mystery both explicitly and implicitly. Used in the retelling of the event are speculations by unnamed sources ("fire in the left engine"), eyewitness and passenger accounts of the crash ("the least injured climbed out on their own") (Makovy 1988, p. A1), and secondary information about past airline and airport disasters (Delta 191 crash; American DC10 aborted takeoff). The Delta 1141 discourse provides readers with clues to the mystery of the crash and passenger survival through descriptions of the plane ("it burst into flames"), of passenger behaviors ("we jumped on the wing"), of possible villains (pilot, mechanic, Mother Nature) and, finally, the promise of a solution to the mystery (NTSB "would remain at the scene") (Pego 1988, pp. 1, 2). The promise to solve the mystery continues in the other story frames, especially the Crash Site Plane Stories. Even more importantly, the aviation themes (passenger, flight personnel, plane and rescue safety) appeared repeatedly throughout the narratives. The Passenger stories, for example, provide the strongest sense of what it would be like to survive a crash and then escape the airplane.

A Struggle for Survival: Passenger Stories

Passenger stories concentrated on the Delta 1141 survivors, allowing the reader to "experience" the crash through the retelling of the event. Passengers' thoughts and behavior, before and after the crash, give the reader a composite view of the crash and what it would be like to survive and to escape the plane.

Within this retelling of experiences the passenger safety theme was the strongest. Phrases such as "You were just looking for a way to get out of the plane and hope you weren't going to die" or "Thompson saw someone struggling to pry open the emergency hatch..." conveyed not only what was happening but the steps that people took to escape the plane. Found within pictures and phrases were the actions Delta 1141 passengers had to take, or wanted to take, during the event. These phrases and images conveyed what passengers did (escape); the problems they meet with (locked doors); whom they relied on and the various ways they responded to the crash. All of these stories showed that most of the passengers escaped the wreckage on their own; some through holes in the fuselage, others through the emergency exits. "On their own, most of the survivors had fled the plane by the time emergency workers arrived, officials said" (Tomaso and Crawford 1988, p. 27).

Glim and his wife released their seat belts and made their way to the first class section, but they couldn't get out. ... [Bob Jones] was in Seat 4C, just behind the emergency exit on the right side of the plane. ... People were panicked, but nobody was pushing or shoving," he said. "It was every man for himself. None of the crew came on the public address system to give any information about what was happening or how to get off the plane." ... [Jerry Galloway] moved toward the back of the plane, where the flames were, to help a woman who seemed to be struggling with her seat belt. She escaped without his aid, so he moved to the front of the plane and helped people climb through the hole in the fuselage (Woolley 1988a, p. 1, 18).

Some passenger safety statements also include plane safety or flight safety themes. For example, "The stewardess began screaming. 'Get off! Get off!' survivors told him, and 'instincts took over and they followed orders'" (Tomaso and Crawford 1988, p. 27). References within the stories to flight personnel, other than the pilot, are rare but this is a good example of flight personnel providing the guidance most passengers seem to expect after a plane crash. It also illustrates the kind of image that most airlines wish to convey; that is, the sense that if there is a crash, there will be someone to help you and guide you (usually a flight attendant). This appears to be an image most passengers carry with them (*Safety Study* 1985). It is, however, inaccurate, for flight attendant survival is no more insured than passenger survival.

The statement: "Bettes said he was in seat 19A, a window seat one row in front of an emergency exit" (Pusey 1988, p. 1) is a good example of the passenger and plane safety theme. The statement conveys two images: First, the plane does provide avenues of escape and one of the survivors sat near this avenue. Second, for his/her own survival, it would be wise for the passenger to sit near an exit. This corresponds to a popular belief, by many who fly, that one part of an airplane is safer than another. Encouraging this belief further are plane safety statements such as the following: "NTSB officials said they planned to examine the seating assignments to see if a pattern of survivability emerges. Dr. Nizam Peerwani, Tarrant County's medical examiner said, however, that all of the victims had been seated in the rear of the plane" (Pusey 1988, p. 14).

The story by Minutaglio and Jacobson (1988) ends with the quote: "I'm a firm believer that when it's a man's time to go, it's his time. ... It wasn't my time." The idea this imparts is that there is little one can do to prevent these events from happening and if caught in such a situation, whether you

survive is a matter of luck or destiny. NTSB research shows that this is not the case; that a passenger's knowledge of safety practices and procedures helps to ensure his/her life, as well as the lives of their fellow passengers. Despite the underlying tone of fatalism within these stories, there is another message—that of self-help.

Christensen said she was sitting next to an exit door, and after the crash "I pulled it open but it was on fire. The flames just jumped in."

... Christensen said she ran across the aisle of the Boeing 727 and took the sizable jump down to what seemed like very unsafe ground (Flood 1988, p. 14).

Pictures of survivors, and images of passengers sliding down wings, finding exits (through doors or gaping holes) and aiding others, convey the idea that passengers respond to the situation and do not wait for the flight attendants or rescue personnel to assist them. This is a true-to life image of what these situations require, but it is not one the airlines want you to have nor is it one many passengers themselves have (*Safety Study* 1985).

The Plot Thickens: Crash Site Plane Stories

Crash site airplane stories focus on the plane itself, the wreckage, the crash investigation, comparisons with similar models or accidents, and the airplane's history. While the mystery theme is, at least, implicitly present in all of the stories, it is especially strong in these stories because they focus on the crash and a search for an explanation. Mixed with images of NTSB investigators inspecting the crash and speculating as to the cause of the crash (trying to solve the mystery), are reports of previous crashes involving similar planes, with similar engines. Not surprisingly, also within these stories are the plane safety and flight safety themes.

Was it the plane? Plane safety themes focus on all aspects of the crash (cause, investigation, history) but in the Delta 1141 crash they centered primarily on the "plane's engines and wing flaps." References to history of either the 727s or the engine on these planes framed much of the dialog. As the sample below highlights, these stories begin with a statement that the Delta 1141 plane was a "common and normally safe transport." The story continues by citing previous problems and crashes and concludes with the somewhat reassuring statement that, again, only minor problems have occurred throughout the plane's history.

The plane was a Boeing 727-200, a commonly used aircraft with a good safety record and powered by engines found on two thirds of the nation's commercial jets. ... The jet was equipped with two

versions of the JT8D, which many industry experts considered a reliable power plant. ... In August 1985, a JT8D engine on a British Airtours Boeing 737 burst open when the jet was on its takeoff roll at Manchester, England, causing the jet to catch fire. ... The Milwaukee crash in September 1985 involved problems with spacers in the turbines of a different version of the JT8D engine on a Midwest Express DC-9. The aircraft used for Flight 1141 had had only minor problems in the last five years, FAA reports show (Garcia 1988, p. 28)

The theme also focuses on where surviving passengers or flight personnel sat or escaped from, and where the victims died. The following statement about flight attendant Dixie Dunn, illustrates this point. "But Wednesday, she was training a junior employee in first-class, so Dunn was sitting in the back jump seat of Flight 1411 to service the rear of the plane, where 11 of the 13 fatalities were killed by flames and smoke" (Needham 1988, p. 16). The next example indicates that seating can determine your fate but there is no guarantee.

Edmond and Marian Fadal, like their traveling companions Frank and Jean Nix, gave no thought to where they would sit during Delta Flight 1141. But those seat assignments defined who lived and who died. ... They arranged in advance to sit together—Jean Nix in window seat 20A, her husband next to her, Edmond Fadal, 63, took the aisle seat and wife Marian 65, sat just across the aisle. ... [After the crash] Edmond Fadal and the Nixs unfastened their seat belts and tumbled from the plane [Mrs. Fadal died] (Zamichow 1988, p. 16)

The *Dallas Times Herald*, like the other papers, used diagrams to help tell the story of this crash. The diagram, "Cross-Section of Flight 1141" (*Dallas Times Herald* 1988, p. B5), for example, illustrated the damage to the plane itself, the location and status of emergency exits (open or closed), as well as the victims' locations. Such diagrams locate for the reader areas of damage to the plane, as well as areas where passengers lived and died and, like the above statements, indicate for the reader that some areas of the plane are safer than others.

Was it the crew? The mystery theme is refueled again, within crash site plane stories, by references to previous crashes caused by pilot error and speculations as to the role the flight crew or pilot in this crash. These speculations, however, also promote flight safety themes by focusing on the flight crew's and pilot's years of experience and training; the actions the pilot took just before the plane crash; as well as actions other pilots had

taken in crashes of a similar nature. References to the pilot's record, personality or temperament and age are especially common, as are references to flight crew training and expertise.

Capt. Larry Davis is a calm man. He's very thoughtful. He doesn't panic. ... Davis, 48, has at least 21 years of flying service. He has no history of accidents or safety violations (Woolley 1988b, p. 18).

Also reported were the onboard announcements the pilot or the flight crew made about upcoming events or appropriate actions (e.g., keep calm), and their heroic actions after the crash (escaping, aiding others, etc.).

Suddenly in the smoky darkness, he realized that the plane's pilot was buried under several feet of metal and debris. And, miraculously, the pilot was calmly, slowly guiding his passengers while he was pinned down: "Slow down, watch your step," the pilot said (Minutaglio and Jacobson 1988, p. 15A).

Not all the flight safety themes, however, were positive or supportive of the flight crew, or Delta Airlines. Newspapers reviewed the safety history of both Delta and D/FW International Airport and found room for improvement. *The Houston Post*, in particular, noted the problems that Delta had had in the past (at the same time it also noted Delta's overall reputation).

The Delta jet crash at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport Wednesday eerily resembled the Delta L-1011 smashup at the same airport precisely three years ago last month, raising questions about the air carrier's safety record. ... [Berry] said the carrier's overall record is "quite good." Some industry analysts agreed, saying Delta has a reputation of a well-run, safe and financially secure airline. ... But Baron, head of the New York-based air safety group, cited a series of problems that have plagued Delta, including an instance last July when the crew of a Delta jet shut down two engines, told the passengers to get ready to crash and nearly caused the plane to plunge into the Pacific Ocean off California. There was nothing mechanically wrong with the plane (Loddeke 1988, p. 13).

Help: Rescue Worker Stories

Finally, the rescue worker stories center on rescue personnel such as paramedics, firemen and clergy. They focus on rescue efforts at the scene of the crash as well as at the hospital, crash site shelter and morgue. Most of the rescue images, however, deal with how fast the emergency personnel responded, the actions they took upon arrival, and other rescue or aid efforts.

Robert Seadore, with the department of public safety at D/FW Airport, received an Alert 3 signal close to 9 a.m. ... In three

minutes, Seadore and other department officers were the first paramedics on the scene (Minutaglio and Jacobson 1988, p. 15A).

Photographs complimented these images by depicting rescue workers tending survivors, priests and ministers providing comfort and last rites, as well as fire fighters and medics transporting survivors to area hospitals. These images convey the sense that help is available and people will be there to tend to you, once you get off the plane. This is not to say, however, that those trapped, injured, or unable to escape were without aid.

Taylor said he and other DPS officers arrived at the scene about three minutes after the crash. He entered the plane through the passenger door and, as the plane continued to burn and fill with smoke, Taylor and the other rescue workers found Davis unable to move and complaining of back pain (Brumley 1988, p. 29).

Along with the speed at which rescuers responded to the crash were references to learning from previous crashes at the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. The August 1985 Delta 191 crash, for example, provided a training ground, as well as a guide, for the 1141 rescue efforts.

Within minutes after Wednesday morning's crash, Delta Air Lines officials began applying lessons they learned from the crash of Delta Flight 191 ... (Van Zelfdon 1988, p. B2).

Seadore credited the generally quick rescue action to lessons learned from the 1985 crash of Delta 191 (Pusey 1988, p. 14).

Even as emergency crews arrived, clergymen of several denominations began heading for the airport. Many had counseled relatives of victims of Delta Flight 191 (Sunde 1988, p. 21).

Implications

Airplane crashes shake the peaceful foundation of our everyday life. The resulting news stories are an interesting mix of voyeurism, affirmation and reassurance about the safety of flying and transportation. The stories are voyeuristic because they fulfill our hidden desires to know about the grotesque details of life, death and mutilation. We read how the plane tumbled, crashed and burned; how some died, their bodies found near a partially opened but jammed exit and how others survived and escaped. Survivor stories, told in detail, reveal their destination, their thoughts as the plane crashed, and their actions as they escaped.

The stories are affirming and reassuring because, against a backdrop of drama, they speak of a tradition of strong planes and flight crews. Like the captain of a ship, the pilot was the last off the plane and despite severe injuries guided passengers through the escape hatch. We also learn the plane

was a model of durability and, with the exception of a few problems, a safe one. In other words, the plane was okay when it left its place of origin and was historically safe. But something went very wrong. Something went wrong, when the pilot was good, the plane was strong, and the weather was fair. A mystery is established in real life and in the newspapers. Stories note repeatedly that investigators are searching for clues and “will not speculate as to the cause of the crash.” Yet, within those same stories are further conjectures as to the crash’s cause. The mystery is refueled as the story reassures us that someone is trying to solve it.

The study reveals that disaster news narratives contain more than inaccuracies, disaster myths and a means for grieving. The culture of airplane disaster discourse also tells us what to expect when a plane crashes and what we might do if we are in a plane crash. Also included are images of normalcy tragically disrupted by the crash as well as images of relief personnel and aviation officials working to restore order. Presented as a breakdown in our social order, the disaster conveys a clear sense that rescue workers restore order in the short-term and aviation officials restore it for the long-term.

In short, airplane crashes, such as Delta 1141, remind us that the system can fail and people die. Yet, the airplane disaster news stories reassure readers because authorities figures, such as the FAA, NTSB and the airlines, are depicted as being in command. Vincent, Crow and Davis (1989) argue that this news frame is “responsible” because it protects the public from being “needlessly” alarmed. On the other hand, it also encourage the perpetuation of disaster myths; encourages the public’s belief that flying is safe and there is little they can do about their own safety; and encourages the belief that authorities are in control and are insuring public safety when, in fact, this may not be happening at all. This “faith” in the FAA and the NTSB and the ritual of investigation into the “mystery” of the crash may actually help to preserve the status quo. News stories do not challenge the institutional process but merely give the reader a sense that aviation officials have command of the system even when it is demonstrating failure. The discourse, then, is ultimately hegemonic.

This is especially true when one considers the fact that despite their protests to the contrary, the airline industry does not want the public to be aware of the fact that when a disaster does happen passengers will most likely have to respond on their own. The airlines actively encourage the belief that airline personnel will be there to assist passengers in a disaster and subtly encourage the belief that the safety briefings, and the information contained therein, will not be needed (*Safety Study* 1985). Yet, NTSB studies have shown that flight crew survival is no more insured than

passengers' *and* most passenger deaths are not attributable to the crash itself but rather to passengers' lack of familiarity with safety procedures leading to their inability to escape the plane (*Safety Study* 1985). In other words, passengers can achieve some control over their fate if they know what to do and are willing and able to take action.

While it is clear that disaster news narratives contain information that readers can draw upon to shape their own disaster behavior awareness, several issues and questions remain. The first issue is the perception of risk. Airplane crashes have several features which separate them from other "types" of disasters—including unique risk perception characteristics (as outlined by Fischhoff et al. 1981). Flying, for example, is perceived by the public to be more dangerous and inherently deadly than driving a car; in part, because people flying on airplanes often lack the false sense of security and control that they feel when driving a car; and in part, because non-survivable airplane crashes receive more visible and sensational treatment by the media (Fischhoff et al. 1981; Garner 1992). In addition, the perceived high risk of flying is tempered by the perceived "need" to fly and the belief that airplane crash responsibility, response *and survival lies solely* with aviation officials (FAA, NTSB, the airline industry).

The second issue, and first question, is who is responsible for educating the public about airplane safety issues? For the most part this issue remains outside the jurisdiction of state, county and municipal emergency managers. On the federal level, the FAA and NTSB 's context for managing airplane crashes differs from that for managing most technological and natural disasters. Here the focus is on "response" by aviation officials *after* the crash happens; not on disaster preparation or mitigation. The disaster preparation and mitigation practices that do occur focus primarily on airplane technology and flight personnel training. Worthy areas to be sure but the emphasis is on the prevention of something that can not *always* be prevented. In all three cases (preparation, mitigation and response), the role of the public at risk is limited. There is little the public can do to prevent a crash and random factors determine survival so the public's role consists mostly of getting out of the airplane if they survive impact. This one act requires preflight safety and adaptive behavior preparation; a need the FAA recognizes by their regulation that airlines deliver this information, in the form of safety briefings, to on-board passengers by "trained flight personnel." Yet, these individuals are not emergency *managers* and as studies by the NTSB show (*Safety Study* 1985) in-flight safety presentations and skills are highly variable across flights and members of the public at risk. The end result is

no one is formally in charge of educating the public about risks, vulnerabilities, safety responses on airplanes in a systematic and effective way.

This leads to question two: Does the mass media have an obligation to educate people about transportation disasters, floods, earthquakes and other potentially dangerous situations? The answer is yes from at least four vantage points. First, because that is ultimately what media do—they educate the public about local, national and international events—be they politics or disasters. Second, the nature of the intended audience is one they have, at least historically, been able to reach fairly well. Unlike in the case of floods, volcanoes, or nuclear power plants, the “threatened” population lacks clearly defined geographic parameters. Technically, everyone who flies is vulnerable to airplane crashes; the result being that the audience in “need” of airplane safety information is a mass audience that is ill defined at best. Third, the lack of clear responsibility for communicating aviation safety information, coupled with the vaguely defined audience, presents a formula that inevitably leads to the mass media doing a better job than the current agencies, especially since relatively few of them feel that they have a specific charge or duty to educate the public about this issue. Finally, the media already serve as disaster warning agents (e.g., Emergency Broadcast System) for natural disasters and many have a “disaster plan,” developed in conjunction with local emergency planning boards (Carter 1980); providing educational programs on disaster/hazard/risk mitigation and preparedness (Kreps 1980, p. 36). The media already provides earthquake and tornado preparation guides, they could also provide their readers with transportation disaster guides. This does not mean that the media should have a “disaster plan” for transportation disaster evacuations. It does, however, mean that editors should be aware of their pedagogical role and provide the public with basic airplane safety behavior information (exit locations, crash positions, etc.). It also means that an effective, proactive, partnership would need to be developed between the FAA or NTSB and the media to ensure presentation of the most accurate and understandable information needed.

This call, however, raises another issue; the reluctance of the transportation industry to acknowledge disasters and the need for preparation. As Molotch and Lester (1974) observed, accidents foster “revelations which are otherwise deliberately obfuscated” and they provide us with “an important resource for learning about” events of which economic institutions would rather have us remain unaware (p. 109). News coverage of airplane crashes results in the periodic reminders that flying is potentially unsafe; the aviation industry system is not perfect; and that people can die if they

fly. These reminders usually have short term consequences for not only the airlines (lost revenue) but also for related entertainment and travel industries (such as hotels, car rental agencies, etc.). Indeed, some may worry that media discussion of plane safety behavior issues could create the impression that air travel is always unsafe; thereby further threatening the larger political economy for which the media are also responsible (Gans 1980). While such concerns are valid, they tend to promote inaction rather than action. The media do not create the disasters, they report them. When they do report them they can be careful about the passenger behavior reported and they can remind readers that survival is possible *but* they need to learn certain adaptive behaviors. This would not stop people from flying (*Safety Study*, 1985) and would save lives. As the latest round of crashes reminds us, planes and trains are potentially unsafe; but it is equally important to recognize that mass transit use will increase and passengers need to be told clearly and repeatedly how to respond to a disaster. This would probably not please the industry, but it would the rest of us who must ride on the wings and rails of fate.

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