

Bad Tidings: Communication and Catastrophe. By Lynne Masel Walters, Lee Wilkins, and Tim Walters (eds.). Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associate, 1989.

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(translated from the French by **Ann Simard**)

Work on the themes of crisis and disaster has brought to light some difficult problems: How to find concrete solutions when the theoretical discussion has been rather broad. How to provide appropriate case studies when this type of work necessitates long hours of research and often in situations of extreme confidentiality. How, above the simple academic question, to identify the pertinent questions which provide a process of research that is suitable for all involved in the theme.

No one work serves to answer all questions. But *Bad Tidings: Communication and Catastrophe* does provide valuable knowledge and reflection. One must not expect it to give a theoretical summary or major reference on these types of crises. The object of the volume is explicit in the preface: While research is rapidly developing in the field, it is necessary to attempt to compile the information. The purpose is described with modesty: To permit the reader to begin to understand communication in a crisis situation while realizing that the integral work remains to be done.

The reader will find three important prospects in the text:

1. The text of Quarantelli is the most perfect example of a work of reference, reflection and analysis.
2. A concentration of factual information, also very useful, as well as a rich synthesis of the role of the media in the TMI episode.

3. Essays with person analysis by the authors on the questions of crisis, and often providing an opportunity to understand more about the author's convictions than the subject for discussion.

TOOLS FOR RESEARCH

The order of presentation helps the reader; the book opens with Quarantelli, whose text provides a solid anchor for the reader's understanding. There are contextual representations (studies of disasters), essential points revealing the truth about disasters (which often reveal the reverse of disaster myths), general analysis of disaster, and the area where Quarantelli's expertise and freshness of approach are most evident--indications and warnings on the means by which research is pursued with comments from past experience.

SPECIFIC SYNTHESIS

Sharon Friedman's contribution on TMI is also valuable. Dense, precise, in-depth, the author renders a useful and interesting synthesis in a few pages. In addition to the information itself, the text illustrates the fundamental factors which explain behaviour of different players: The cultural difference separating engineers on one side and media on the other, the insurmountable barriers which separated them, the clash of the TMI experience. The extensive analysis of the situation itself is equally instructive. It raises an interesting point that engineers, due to their knowledge, seemed to have an advantage over the media. This would play an unavoidable factor in the accident and, once again, the lessons learned could show themselves to be insufficient and false.

The text of John Lidingham and Lynne Walters on media and hurricanes brings out interesting indications on the perception of media information during these episodes. It revolves around these crucial questions: How to send out a public message when the information provided and assurances are insufficient (the predictions of point of impact vary constantly) and considering how contradictory risk messages lower the level of impact of the real call of alert (the problem of crying wolf without justification). Silence would be irresponsible, however, especially if the situation turns dangerous and finally necessitates a general evacuation. At

this stage, a bridge could be made to the other essays: In many situations media are faced with an information strategy which extends far beyond simply relaying observations. As well, a link could have been made to the essay on the credibility of the press; credibility which is strong in cases of cyclone but shown to be much lower in technological accidents. Such links, to eventually demonstrate the differences, would have been a useful line of pursuit.

The contribution of Perry and Lindell on media and the risk of volcanic activity is also highly specific but raises questions which extend beyond its scope. Certain problems are highlighted: the search for credible information sources, the integrity of the media in the eyes of emergency services, the public's need for information (on risks, measures taken, suitable behaviour in crisis situations). These are pertinent to all disaster situations, especially technological ones. In technological risk cases, it is essential, as the authors suggest, that authority figures reevaluate the quality of their communications and the channels used to disperse information, while always leaving a place for the media in the system. The system that appears to function well in cases of volcanos is much less obvious in sectors of chemistry, nuclear energy or biological risks.

In the same manner, G. Burd's analysis of editorial writers' treatment of the AIDS question is a thoughtful look at media treatment of crisis circumstances. The case is exemplary as it extends to sectors beyond AIDS and public health. The problems which emerged during the AIDS crisis were common to several other crises: At the start, the situation was poorly understood, there was strong pressure to treat the syndrome in a suitable manner (in this case, one which does not shock the public morals), a tendency to fall into sensationalization, a tendency to reassure rather than inform, an incapacity to cope with the problem once it falls outside the jurisdiction of an institution (in this case, prevention falls outside the scope of the medical field).

J. Scanlon brings in expertise (and not only in terms of outside analysis) of salient points in media treatment of hostage takings. There is an extremely useful synthesis of how media work, of the problems to solve with authorities. Also Scanlon's text enriches the broad themes, notably the idea that media are more than unobtrusive observers, but rather influential actors in the crisis. And, as put forth by a police chief, it would be ridiculous to attempt to

impose a media blackout as a means of dealing with this new situation; such a situation would produce risks which would sharply outweigh the benefits. In conclusion, the text, though it is at times too simplistic, provides an excellent starting point for all examination on the place of media in times of crisis.

P. Patterson's study of the media treatment of Chernobyl offers a good synthesis of the incident as well as simultaneously opening to more general questions. The author skillfully shows how the press' actions were dependent upon its government sources, whose concerns extended far beyond the incident itself (for example, for the United States, its tendency to attempt to demonstrate its superior American technology). The need to simplify, especially in the wake of audiovisual production, becomes more important, especially with the more complex technological systems. The inclination to use stereotypes to give meaning to foreign situations is an equally important point, discussed adequately by the author. Through the reading, the vulnerability of even the media shows in situations of great uncertainty where there is a lack of reliable and independent sources. These questions should be further studied without delay.

Russel Shain introduces a new idea: "beyond the media, become interested in culture. People give meaning to news within a cultural frame. So the meaning cannot be understood unless the culture is understood." He places the current debates on nuclear energy in their proper context of nuclear arms warfare, and sees the consequences of a failure in the field, in this case an accident, as outside the traditional realm of authorities. Such perspectives and beliefs mark the frame of reference of the public. As the author puts forth, it is not only the information offered but the culture in which information settles and takes on meaning. Such importance to information and culture reinforces the need for depth of discussion and research on the media's functioning and impact.

Lee Wilkins' essay on Bhopal uses quantitative indicators to assess the treatment of the tragedy by American media. She supports the conviction that all stories are constructed and therefore should be analyzed by breaking down their makeup, she justly outlines the focus was on populations reduced to powerlessness faced with dominant organizations; hence, it was difficult for citizens to take charge of security and development options. She also underlines how the media only mentioned the factual aspects

of the crisis while keeping silence on the context of the drama's occurrence. On this point, it would seem necessary to proceed with international comparisons; it would seem to us in Europe that such contextual aspects were immediately present. But the reader may experience some discomfort while reading; the author is so filled with convictions and affirmations that one becomes concerned with the bias of the analysis.

D. Elliot enumerates the deontological obligations of the media in crisis situations. This is a series of obligations which no one could criticize; for example, "the media must provide accurate information in a crisis." But such a route does raise some problems even though it has the advantage of restating points which could be forgotten. It may be pertinent to question the reasons why media should function in a certain way and why it does not necessarily happen in reality.