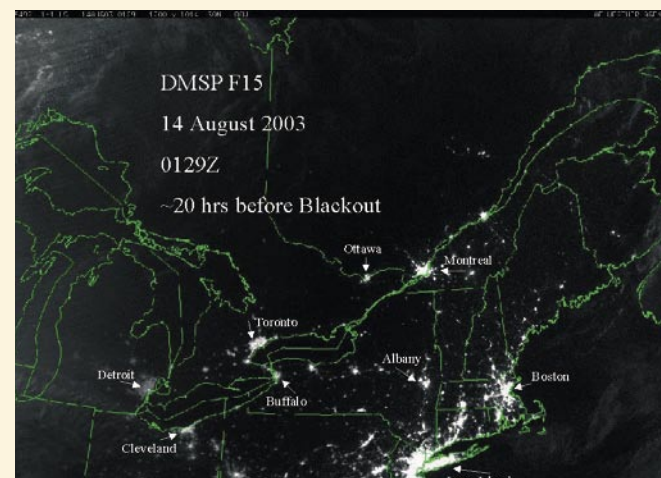


The borderline of chaos

Continuing *CRJ*'s series of discussion articles, **Patrick Lagadec** says that we must acquire the new aptitudes called for by the rapid changes in the world of risks and crises on every front, whether they be intellectual, psychological, managerial, political or cultural



information with transparency and humanity. Today's challenge is to discern what information means when emotional overkill, sensationalism and the fact that events happen on a world stage, have become the key criteria of relevance and quasi exclusive economic imperatives.

When we are thus stripped of our referential blueprints – our private little gardens in which we envisaged risks and crises – our visions, our approaches, our tools, are simply and rapidly shattered. We must rebuild them, and fast.

Scientific aberration

The task which lies before us is immense; what follows are a few key starting points:

■ **New intellectual moorings:** The essential no



Power outages, the tsunami, Chernobyl, SARS, a voracious media that risks emotional overkill – these are just some of the emerging factors in a new global turbulence

longer lies in the 98 per cent of regularities in the normal run of things; the two per cent of irregular, unreadable and unprecedented information ("They were learning to take-off, and not at all to land" à propos of 9/11). Information which we have learnt to neglect as 'non-significant anecdote', 'scientific aberration' or 'optical illusion' – is precisely that which has become vitally important. The notion of discontinuity is increasingly pushed to the forefront, and demands intellectual reference points often in opposition to those we most cherish;

■ **Strong involvement at levels of governance:** Given such changes in the vital bedrock, no progress can be made without an exemplary leadership and taking charge at the highest level of all institutions. This requires a revolution in our cultures of governance, which tend to leave these issues to specialist or subaltern levels;

■ **Dynamic partnerships:** The logic according to which "The State draws up its plan, informs the operatives and the latter comply" can no longer prevail. In this regard, we have a long way to go.

Words have yet to be put into practice.

■ **Rapid Reflection Forces:** Leaders must have people at their disposal who are highly experienced in the domain of rupture and abrupt change, able to engage in open and networked reflection as soon as a poorly readable situation crops up. Certain initiatives in this regard are under way (for instance at EDF – French Electricity Board– in France) and merit more widespread development.

■ **Civil society – a veritable reversal:** The chasm to be crossed is an imposing one: it is no longer a question of 1990s style 'communication'. Now, human groups themselves must find responses to the challenges they will have to face. If their creativity is not



mobilised, if civil society is not harnessed and brought actively to bear, then vital and indispensable advances cannot be made. Trust is a vital springboard: "He had more faith in us than we had in ourselves" was one quote describing Mayor R Giuliani – and so his city did not go under. We cannot meet the challenge of a pandemic with a state plan, whatever its quality;

■ **The media must rise to the challenge:** Though the subject is taboo, the issue of genuine coverage of out-of-the-ordinary situations must be tackled, before information becomes mere wallpaper, a zero-credibility component of a global news show, making up for vacuity by way of a frenzied zapping of images and sound-bites;

■ **Daring initiatives:** Progress will not be made via global models but through precise actions that enable new skills and trust to be built. This could take the form of experiential feedback, simulations, or public hearings on the most difficult issues. For example: the initiative

undertaken with La Poste, (French Post Office) in 2002, soliciting international experiential feedback in the wake of the 2001 Anthrax attacks in the US, and the thousands of alerts in Europe. Or, with the backing of EDF (French Electricity Board), international experiential feedback missions concerning the ice-storms of Quebec, the lessons learnt from the SARS outbreak in Toronto in 2003 in the light of a possible pandemic, or the critical infrastructure lessons learnt in Louisiana from Katrina. There is no shortage of such avenues to be followed up: henceforth a key challenge is to actively undertake such initiatives in the field; and

■ **Training:** As long as these issues are not dealt with in the context of initial training, it will be very



difficult to put them on decision makers' agendas. At a deeper level, the crucial question is perhaps the following: what skills must future leaders and citizens be equipped with to give them the vision, balance, competence and attentiveness to enable them to navigate the turbulent waters of our times?

Aptitudes

On every front – intellectual, psychological, managerial, political, cultural – we must acquire the aptitudes called for by the ever more rapid changes in the domain of security. And we must do so in a climate of confidence. The confidence that we have the resources – firstly in terms of personal and collective determination – to rise to the challenges of our history, its risks as well as its potentialities.

A piecemeal response will not work. Success calls for a mutation in the very nature of discontinuity handling. Pragmatic responses must be searched for and found, "they will not simply fall as the gentle rain from heaven".

■ **Dr Patrick Lagadec will be speaking at IDER 2006, held in Rome this October, in a session on the media and news reporting chaired by Emily Hough of Crisis Response Journal. See page 66 for more details**

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“ **I**n 1914, we were caught totally unprepared. In 1940, we were fully prepared – for the First World War,” according to a member of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, Cabinet Office, London, UK. Between the world of risks and crises of 1970 to 1980 – when we began to forge the benchmarks currently in effect – and the world of today, there is the same discrepancy as there was between World War I and the end of World War II. We must not overlook the great strides made in recent decades and must redouble our efforts to acquire – or at least to maintain – the basic capacities needed (though an audit would probably show that much crisis management know-how acquired in the late 1990s has been partly lost).

Breakdown

We must not allow ourselves to become outstripped or outclassed: we are undergoing a sea change in terms of vulnerability. Our immediate task is to understand the intrinsic mutations of the problems so as to implement the required 'mutations' in how we respond.

Here we are, thrown into a world that is losing both its bearings and its frontiers. We have moved from the accidental – a specific breakdown on a globally stable terrain – to the chaotic: a deeply

Twenty years on, the after effects of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster are still having a profound impact upon life in the region. In Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan, Ardak, who is 33, suffers from a rare bone disease that has made his body shrink by more than 30cm

and lastingly de-structured terrain, a matrix ridden with security problems whose laws escape us. Yet a number of dimensions – which interplay – underlie and determine this terrain of chaos.

From local to global and global to local: the opening round was fired 20 years ago at Chernobyl (1986). Yet, increasingly, global turbulence also affects particular potential risks; a threat inherent in all 'whirlwinds', whether climate, environment, public health or terrorism.

■ **The network:** With the dovetailing of vital infrastructures upon which we are increasingly dependent, both on a national and international scale, we are seeing the emergence of vulnerability scenarios. These scenarios go radically beyond our current habitual frameworks in which everything is relatively compartmentalised (See *CRJ* Vol.1 Issue 4 for report on North American and Russian blackouts and the hazards of interoperability);

■ **Speed:** SARS showed us that a virus could join forces with air transport in a matter of days. A global information technology blackout would oblige us to reconfigure our references in the domain of the kinetics of events – impact within the minute. Yet it takes a good ten days to get our systems back on track in the case of an unforeseen or freak event;

■ **Ignorance:** The expert, in the face of these rapid mutations, has moved increasingly from a state of incertitude to one of ignorance. He or she has much greater difficulty in assessing the threat and formulating a prognosis: the laws of probability no longer work;

■ **Off-the-scale complexity:** Hurricane Katrina was totally out of the ordinary, causing flooding, industrial disasters, unprecedented problems of public security and the partial loss of a city;

■ **The inconceivable:** This, above all, is what is most destabilising. We expected missiles; instead, we were confronted by box cutters. We thought we had won out over disease, yet we are faced with the possibility of a pandemic that could threaten to undermine the world economy – a threat further complicated by the application of the just-in-time principle across the board; and

■ **Pulverulent media:** Yesterday's issue was whether those in charge were capable of giving