

A Broadcaster's Guide to Planning for a Natural Disaster. Washington, D.C.: National Association of Broadcasters, 1974. 19 pp.

The theme of this manual, prepared by an association of commercial broadcasters in the United States, is that disasters *can* happen anywhere and that broadcast media should prepare for them. The manual suggests this preparation should include both alerting a community to possible hazards (and how to deal with them) and developing a plan for meeting the heavy demands on broadcasting during a crisis.

There are some useful points: care must be taken in choosing an appropriate on-air person during a crisis; code systems – worked out in advance – can help prevent the broadcaster from being taken in by false messages; tapes – audio and video – prepared in advance can speed disaster response; and the Federal Communications Commission (the United States government body responsible for regulating broadcasting) can make special provision for emergency broadcasting outside of normal broadcast hours. There are also specific examples of the kind of information to be given out during a flood or various kinds of storms.

There are, however, some areas that are dealt with a bit uneasily and there is at least one rather glaring omission.

Since the National Association of Broadcasters is a commercial association, the author (or authors) seem to have found it necessary to underplay cooperation during a crisis. The manual suggests “the development of plans for working together with the other broadcasters in your community” but it does not, in my opinion, emphasize the urgent need for coordinated information to avoid confusion.

Secondly, although the manual naturally

stresses the important role broadcasters play (“people depend on broadcasters”), it somewhat neglects the research which has shown just how vital this role really is. There are now sufficient studies of communication in crises to allow a much stronger emphasis than is given by this manual.

But the really serious omission is the total neglect of the area of convergence – and therefore no discussion of the incredibly serious problems that may be created by broadcasting very legitimate appeals for aid. There is a great deal of evidence that broadcasters, like everyone else, will try very hard to serve their community in a crisis. A manual covering disaster broadcasting and designed to inspire public service should contain a careful warning that all messages must be evaluated not just as to accuracy or need, but also against a possible over-reaction.

Third, there is one strange comment: that a warning siren has only one meaning – turn on your radio or television. Surely, such research as *The Occasion Instant* has made absolutely clear that messages such as sirens are interpreted in many ways and that these vary by community and by the previous experience of the recipient.

Finally, our own research at Carleton has led us to propose some rather new approaches to broadcasting during a crisis. For example, we have suggested that rumors be reported and specifically discounted or denied rather than just ignored. It is unclear whether such a proposal was rejected or whether, as seems likely, the manual was prepared before our work became public.

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