

CRISIS+EMERGENCY RISK COMMUNICATION

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CERC: Working with the Media



**U.S. Department of
Health and Human Services**
Centers for Disease
Control and Prevention

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CERC: Working with the Media

This chapter will review the following:

- The media's role in a crisis, disaster, or emergency
- Interacting with the media
- Facilitating positive media relationships
- Giving reporters what they need
- Getting emergency information to the media
- Writing for the media during a crisis
- Meeting media needs throughout an emergency
- Responding to media regarding significant errors, myths and misperceptions

Understanding the Media's Role in Disasters

Disasters are major media events. Public health emergencies will engage the media, especially if an emergency is exotic, catastrophic, or the first of its kind. The media are a constant presence in our lives and play a critical role in informing the public during any crisis or disaster. It's natural for those responding to a public health emergency to think of the media as a bother and distraction, but a better understanding of their role in an emergency will improve the relationship.

For example, if a public health emergency involves the intentional release of infectious or chemical agents, the media will spin into high gear. Because of its inherent threat, an act of bioterrorism is guaranteed to receive media attention. The public is always anxious to learn about the resolution of the health crisis and subsequent criminal investigations and will often turn to the media for this information.

The mainstream media, those media organizations that are well-known and established, have changed greatly since 2000. Many media organizations have contracted their services or merged with other organizations.¹ Audiences for print and television network news are smaller and older. Many younger people rely on Web-based news sources. Much of Web-based content

"The media can assist in pre-disaster education. They may be crucial to an effective warning process. They can provide information and advice to victims and others in the wake of disasters. They can help activate the local disaster response. They can assist in stimulating effective disaster relief."

*Joseph Scanlon,
Suzane Alldred,
Al Farrell, and
Angela Prawzick,*

*Coping with the Media in Disasters:
Some Predictable Problems,
Public Administration Review, 1985*



is driven by the mainstream media and many audiences still rely on traditional media such as print, television, and radio, as their primary news sources.² Media audiences are increasingly fragmented. No single source of information can be expected to reach everyone. In fact, there are some people who do not regularly read, watch, or listen to much news from any sources.

The Media's Role in a Crisis, Disaster, or Emergency

Most of us are familiar with the Emergency Broadcasting System. It was created in 1963 as a way to use public broadcast channels to alert the public of an immediate threat. In 1997, it was renamed the Emergency Alert System. This system alerts the public by doing the following:

- Telling the public something is happening and that they need to pay attention to receive additional information
- Directing the public to sources of additional information they can use to protect themselves from a potential risk

The Integrated Public Alert Warning System (IPAWS) aims to combine the country's public warning systems, including EAS, Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS), and National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Weather Radio All Hazards.³ CMAS uses cellular mobile device technology to deliver alerts directly to the public. While CMAS and related text alert systems will become increasingly important, the traditional media will continue to play a critical role as a source for information following an alert.

The media continue to serve as an important emergency information system during a crisis and they do this very well. Professional media representatives that recognize their role in public safety serve communities around the nation.

Because of their immediacy, television and radio are particularly important in crises that develop quickly. Radio is very resilient and flexible. In many cases, local stations have switched format to provide 24-hour coverage of an event, including call-ins. In other cases, radio stations have linked up with social media and Web systems like Google Maps to provide robust, real-time disaster information services.^{4,5,6} In the past, organizations had 24 hours to get information to media outlets. Now, media outlets can provide immediate and continuous updates on a crisis through contributions from people experiencing the crisis. These contributors provide information by calling in on cell phones and sending information, such as pictures, video, and updates on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. This has increased the demand on organizations to keep pace with information delivery. This is done by using both traditional media and social media channels to provide information and updates on the crisis response both immediately and continuously.



In a democracy, the media also serve as a watchdog. This means they report on the activities of public institutions and government, informing the public so that officials can be held accountable. During a crisis, this may translate into investigative reporting about the following issues:

- Cause
- Responsibility
- Blame
- Adequacy of the response

Typically, investigative reporting takes a back seat during early stages of a crisis. But, at some point reporters will ask more challenging and probing questions. The media generally work according to emerging and somewhat informal agendas. This means current issues will be covered and related stories will likely follow. For example, during the 2011 radiological incident in Fukushima, Japan, reporters began looking at the general topic of nuclear safety. They then reported on the safety of U.S. facilities.⁷ Similarly, influenza season or tornado season will result in a series of related articles.

Journalists have a responsibility to report information they believe is honest and objective. Public health and emergency management professionals sometimes expect the media to report in way that supports official goals. However, the media are not an adjunct to public emergency response organizations. They have their own place in a free society and their own commitment to the public. Emergency management planners should acknowledge the media's role in a crisis and plan to meet reasonable media requests. Few reporters, editors, directors, or producers will abandon their efforts to obtain information and provide perspective on a crisis just because you don't want them involved.

It's imperative that emergency operation centers (EOCs) and all government and nongovernmental organizations involved in crisis response understand the appropriate needs of the media and how to fulfill those needs as an ongoing and well thought-out part of the response plan. This approach deliberately includes the media in the response.

Can you imagine emergency response if the media were not involved? The absence of mass media would make it nearly impossible for the EOC and public officials to communicate the nature of the crisis and the appropriate actions citizens should take to limit their harm. You may find your response team in trucks with bullhorns moving through neighborhoods, telling people where to find shelter or not to drink the water from their faucets without purifying it. However, for many public health emergencies, such as those involving infectious disease outbreaks, the community infrastructure will be in place, electricity will continue to flow, buildings will stand, and roads will be clear. In these circumstances, traditional media outlets will quickly communicate important information to the public. Even with the advent of social media, most people will still want to confirm information through television and radio.



Interacting with the Media

It is important to understand that reporters will not allow you to simply feed them headlines without asking questions. They will decide what to tell their viewers or listeners about what is occurring. Don't treat them like members of your staff. Offer suggestions, but do not dictate. This will help you establish a cooperative relationship.

Reality Check

Reporters may seem sensitive to your needs and requirements. You may think reporters are eager to print only positive news about your organization or agency. The reality is that reporters have an obligation to report the facts objectively, even if they feel those facts are contrary to your organization's goals. When an issue has national significance, reporters will probably show some distance:

- Reporters have a job to do, and they will do what it takes to get it done.
- The relationship between reporters and public health communicators will be more serious.
- No favors should be expected from either side.

As a crisis unfolds, expect a widening gap between what emergency managers believe the media should cover (or not) and what reporters want to know. You should do the following:

- Remember that it is the journalist's job to provide balance by looking for alternative perspectives and interpretations of events, and ensuring that other points of view receive coverage.
- Make your points clearly and consistently. Keep it easy for journalists to do their jobs. This enhances the effectiveness of communication during a crisis.
- If the media present incorrect information, especially if it could be harmful to the public, you should quickly communicate correct information to the public and the media.
- Expect only limited success in influencing that part of the crisis coverage devoted to debate, discussion, and speculation. This is especially true in the 24-hour news arena.
- Remember that emergency managers and reporters or commentators see stories from different angles. What seem like facts to you might seem less black-and-white to reporters and commentators.

The Poynter Institute for Journalism provides useful advice for journalists covering disasters.⁸ Poynter emphasizes that reporters are often unprepared to cover events with complex scientific issues. They explain that acquiring background information is important to getting the story right. Journalists should



be aware that they are often putting themselves in harm's way when covering a disaster.⁹ A media organization may also be affected by the disaster. This means its ability to function may be impaired at the very moment the public most needs timely, accurate information. The Poynter Institute offers five tips for journalists covering disasters:

1. Be more tolerant of uncertainty inherent to a disaster.
2. Find out who is really in charge.
3. Dig for deeper context to the story.
4. Look for takeaways, including lessons learned.
5. Find evidence to support anecdotes and critically assess the evidence.

Facilitating Positive Media Relationships

Equal Access Matters

In the first critical hours or days of an emergency, fairness is of utmost importance. The most ethical way for a public agency to facilitate media relationships is to provide all media outlets with the same access at the same time. Through the use of good planning with prearranged e-mail addresses, fax numbers, and onsite media opportunities, you can maintain fairness.

Don't ignore the parameters of the journalist's job; they have space and time to fill, and deadlines to meet. One way to destroy effective professional relationships with the media is to ignore their needs. It is imperative that you provide equal access to information and help journalists acquire that information:

- Distribute messages that are essential to the well-being or safety of the public equally.
- Use teleconferencing so reporters in remote locations can participate.
- Attempt to give journalists a reasonable time frame in which new information will be provided.
- Establish a schedule for information releases. Everyone involved will appreciate some ground rules. Base ground rules on the type and phase of the crisis.
- Understand journalism deadlines and work to accommodate them. During a crisis, it is important to be available—if necessary, around the clock—to help reporters get the facts right, before their deadline.

Even print media outlets face short deadlines because of their online Web editions. In the past, response to media inquiries could be prioritized by their deadlines. Today, most media outlets have the same deadlines, and this requires a revamping of the way emergency information is provided. In general, media outlets function in real time or close to it.



Reality Check

More than 40,000 media outlets¹⁰ operate news activities in the U.S., and many of them are interested in breaking news, as well as health and medical news:

- Providing equal access to information may mean posting the information on your organization's Web page, rather than waiting several hours.
- Equal access means not discriminating between the local network affiliates and local independent TV stations.
- Equal access means including newspapers, television, and radio stations.

Make a reasonable effort to include as many local media outlets as possible in your media opportunities. Discuss credentialing of media outlets during the pre-crisis phase or early during the response to provide access to your EOC media room.

Think Local Media First

Don't ignore local media in favor of the national media and well-known reporters. National media reporters have contacts outside the local area to fill in much of what they need. They won't be shortchanged. Local media personnel count on local response officials to work with them. Local PIOs should think local first. At the state level, regional media or border media may take priority. At the national level, the primary contacts may be from the national media.

International media may also become involved. Responders working at the federal level are more likely to be contacted by international reporters. Certain events, such as an infectious disease outbreak, have the potential to directly affect people in other countries. Other events, such as a powerful hurricane, may be confined to one country but still cause significant damage and loss of life. This will spur the interest of international media even though other countries were not affected. You will need to prioritize international media, based on the nature of the event, the degree of international interest, and the extent to which other countries are affected.

The key is to have consistent information flowing back and forth among local, state, regional, national, and international levels. If the content of the message is consistent, it is possible to fulfill the needs of reporters at all levels.

During the 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak, information at the local, state, and national levels was consistent. This happened, in part, because CDC in Atlanta was very open in making information available, not only to media at all levels, but also to public health partners. Because the outbreak was global, reporting was occurring at the international level. The international information flow was not coordinated as well, which created inconsistent reports in the international media.¹¹



Reality Check

Americans have been exposed to exaggerations of the occurrence of harmful behavior following disasters, such as:

- Panic
- Looting
- Price gouging
- Scope-of-disaster estimates

Excessive media coverage of these negative incidents, or the possibility of such incidents, may lead the public to believe that these behaviors occur at a much higher rate than they actually do. Coverage analysis for Hurricane Katrina found that while national newspapers were more likely to report rumors, local and regional newspapers appeared to be more deliberate in not reporting rumors and not publishing sensational photos of the disaster.¹²

Giving Reporters What They Need

What Do Reporters Want?

Reporters want and need the following:

- Timely answers to their questions
- Access to experts
- Visuals to support their news stories

These needs are the same in an emergency, only the time pressure is much greater. When a story is seen as “breaking news,” time becomes paramount. Anticipating questions from the media can help you prepare and respond. The most common media questions in an emergency include:

- “What is happening now?”
- “Who is in charge?”
- “Are those who got hurt getting help and, if so, how?”
- “Is the crisis contained?”
- “What can we expect to happen?”
- “What should people do or not do?”
- “Why did this happen?” (Don’t speculate. Repeat the facts of the event, describe the data collection effort, and describe treatment from fact sheets.)



- “Did you have any warning this might happen?”
- “Why wasn’t this kept from happening (again)?”
- “What else can go wrong?”
- “When did you begin working on this (e.g., when were you notified of this situation, or when did you determine this to be true...)?”
- “What do these data/information/results mean?”
- “What bad things aren’t you telling us?” (Don’t forget the good.)

The more you anticipate what the media needs, the more effective you will be at the following:

- Informing the public
- Helping them understand public health actions or recommendations
- Gaining public acceptance for public health activities during response and recovery

Background information will give you a head start. This is the information that will not change during a crisis. For example, if an outbreak involves an organism that is not a new form, its description, incubation period, and methods of treatment will stay the same. It is easily retrievable, as CDC and other federal agencies have developed much of the background information reporters need.

Media Operations in a Crisis

Public health emergencies change how an agency conducts daily business. This is true for the media as well. Media outlets have their own plans to cover major breaking news, and knowing those plans helps get the right message out.

During nonemergency times, EOC managers should invite local media into the emergency operations center to explain how things work, the agencies that will be involved in the response, and how media will be accommodated when the EOC is operating. If possible, there should be a designated media room located near the command center. This could be used for media opportunities and, when agreed to, for individual interviews. It’s imperative that the EOC or the public health department leading the response remain ready for journalists.

The media onslaught could start in a matter of minutes, depending on the type of emergency. Natural public curiosity, the need to fill 24-hour news cycles, and pressure to beat the competition drive the media to thoroughly cover the event. Media are most apt to exert pressure as a group. They are all looking for answers to the same questions at the same time. If official channels cannot meet the media’s needs, experts and outside authorities will almost instantly be speculating to the media about what officials are or should be doing.

Keeping the media updated with accurate information reduces speculation and rumors.



This speculation feeds rumors that require corrections. Keeping the media updated with accurate information reduces speculation and rumors.

During an unfolding emergency, media may not react as they usually do. Expect the following:

- **Diminished information verification:** Tentative, or even incorrect, information will be broadcast without the usual confirmation from multiple sources.
- **Diminished adversarial role:** Journalists are people too. They will have genuine concerns about what is occurring. They will want to help by providing important messages to the public. Don't expect the media to continue this throughout the entire crisis. In the beginning, however, the "them" versus "us" ratio diminishes.
- **The national media might dominate:** For major crises, most people will be getting their news from the national media. Local media will be feeding information to the national media, as stations compete for coverage. Messages meant for local audiences will have to vie for airtime with national coverage. Respect local media deadlines. Keep information flowing to help disseminate local public health messages.
- **An EOC or JIC for consolidated information is expected for some crises:** Initially, the media will accept that much of their information must come from the command post. Within hours or days, depending on the crisis, the media will look for other perspectives and places from which to broadcast. If you want the media to use official releases of information, you'll have to ensure that the information is timely, fresh, and easy to access. Reporters have options about where to get information, and there are plenty of people inside and outside official channels who are willing to talk. A well-functioning media command center or JIC within the EOC that gives the largest amount of, most accurate, and freshest information will often trump other sources.
- **Inadequate scientific expertise might be a concern:** During a public health emergency or any event involving technology, most media personnel will not have the scientific background to quickly grasp new information or the nuances of that information. Be prepared to fill in the blanks, without being arrogant. Do not assume that everyone knows the technical jargon. Use plain language. For example, explain the difference between bacteria and viruses. Start with the basics and bring reporters along. They will appreciate this, and it will help them provide more accurate information to the public.
- **Person-on-the-street interviews using cell phones and cameras:** These are very common during the first moments of a crisis. The sooner official news sources are available, the less time will be given to broadcasting personal stories.
- **Journalists interviewing other media personnel:** This will be common during the initial moments of an event. Again, until official news sources are available, the media will use in-house experts to fill time.



Reality Check

PIOs may face criticism from some reporters:

- If this happens, don't hold grudges.
- Encourage others, such as leadership and spokespersons, not to hold grudges as well. During an emergency, emotions and tempers run high. If a reporter is approaching coverage of the event in an inappropriate way, find a time when cooler heads prevail to discuss it.
- Don't shut the reporter out.
- Don't refuse to provide an expert to a reporter. Situations change quickly and keeping an open line of communication is your priority.
- Follow the etiquette expected in the field when lodging a complaint or asking for a correction from a reporter and his or her editor.

Getting Emergency Information to the Media

There are many ways to disseminate information to the media:

- Press releases
- Press conferences or media opportunities
- Satellite media tours
- Press conferences by telephone and webcast
- E-mail distribution and broadcast faxes
- Websites, video streaming, and webinars
- Response to media calls
- Social media (for some types of information)

Press Releases

The press or media release is a written statement and remains one of the most common ways to announce something newsworthy. In an emergency, print information must move electronically to the media so press releases are often distributed as e-mails or are posted on websites. It is also helpful to



distribute press releases to the media at the incident site. All releases should include a time and date. If you are thinking about using a press release, consider the following advantages and disadvantages:

- Press release advantages:
 - Consistent information is distributed to all media.
 - A chronological and historical record is on hand.
 - Background information and direction to other sources of information are included.
 - The media have something tangible and in an electronic format.
 - Questions at the top of reporters' minds can be answered by using a fill-in-the-blank template (who, what, where, why, when, and how).
 - Press releases allow for the simultaneous release of information (via e-mail and Web).
- Press release disadvantages:
 - Releases take time to write and information may be changing while you are writing.
 - Clearance can be complicated and take extra time with the added layers of an official command.
 - Reporters will expect more press releases. Be prepared to consistently offer information this way.
 - The information must be organized through a command post or JIC. Otherwise, competing press releases will happen. Multiple releases from different areas of your organization may suggest a lack of clarity about who is responsible for collecting and releasing critical information.

Press releases can be released through commercial press release services. They give organizations access to national, regional, or specialized media outlets using Web-based distribution. Many of these services are available 24-hours-a-day. Consider the following advantages and disadvantages:

- Commercial press release service advantages:
 - These services reduce the need for your organization to maintain up-to-date specialized media lists or lists of media outlets outside of your local area.
 - Press releases move rapidly to news organizations.
 - A list of media outlets that received the release is available.
 - Commercial press release services provide a way to reach media outlets that may not be on your core media list but have an interest in what is occurring.



■ Commercial press release service disadvantages:

- The source of funding for using the service must be in place in advance of the emergency.
- Releases through a newswire may appear less than official for some types of emergency information. Media outlets may expect significant releases to be sent directly from the response organization to the newsroom.
- Commercial press release services may not be necessary when media outlets are actively engaged. It could be a waste of resources to use these services. However, they may be appropriate at less intense times during the emergency response.

Press Conferences or Media Opportunities

A public health emergency is an appropriate time to consider holding a press conference. The term “press conference” generally implies an event that is scheduled in advance, includes a press kit, and is designed to allow media to ask questions of the featured experts. During a crisis, however, a media opportunity is more appropriate for the early phases. One can be arranged at the site of the crisis and allows for information to be released to all media outlets. It might not require press kits or a question and answer opportunity. They have the following advantages and disadvantages:

■ Press conference advantages:

- If reporters are at the site of an event, it’s an effective way to fulfill media interview requests in one shot while controlling access to the site.
- It ensures consistency in the information released.
- The spokesperson and subject matter experts can be introduced to the public, allowing them an opportunity to express their feelings and build credibility.
- Response organizations can show there is a process in place to respond to the crisis, and that even though the event is unfolding, someone is there and ready to help with response and recovery.
- Strict rules about questions from the media can be imposed.
- If information is changing rapidly, or not enough is known for a press release, it fulfills the need of electronic media to fill space and time.
- Elected officials have a forum to present a united front.

■ Press conference disadvantages:

- It is sometimes difficult to get the right people in front of the media to give updates. Good planning can help prevent this problem.
- Information may be sketchy and response officials may hesitate at meeting with the media when they do not have the answers. Good training can help prevent this problem.



- If media cannot be at the site, they will not have the information they want or need.
- It creates expectations for additional and regular conferences with the press.
- If coordination is poor, competing media opportunities may occur. Local, state, and federal officials, and people across levels of other organizations, need to have a plan and agree to the timing of media opportunities.
- The intense rush for early news from the media will push the limits of rules set about the length of the spokesperson's availability. If a no-questions policy was appropriate, and set in place, a press conference may also push the limits of that policy. There must be an escape route for speakers out of the media area.
- Media will want to follow up with individual interviews. Consistent ground rules are important.

Satellite Media Tours

At the national or regional level (or at the local level when media in other cities are pushing for access), a satellite media tour may work well. These tours can be arranged in a matter of hours during a crisis. If satellite trucks are parked outside the door, there will be no expense for your organization, and you can get important messages out to the public. However, they may not be the best choice early in the emergency.

Media tours allow communities to talk to each other, offering support, ideas, and lessons learned. Satellite media tours are usually conducted with a single spokesperson or your field expert. They allow the local media to interview your agency's expert on a specific topic. These interviews are typically live-to-tape with special requirements. If you conduct a satellite media tour, do the following:

- Be sure your expert has access to a teleprompter identifying the reporter.
- Use the opportunity to correct misinformation on the spot.

If you are thinking of conducting a satellite media tour, consider the following advantages and disadvantages:

- Advantages of satellite media tours:
 - They allow the media to have access to the center of action with response officials.
 - They offer access when journalists are unable to be onsite or are prevented by the nature of the public health emergency to travel to the site.
 - They provide a way for local or regional media to speak in depth to your organization's experts and ask questions specific to a region or population.
 - They increase the chances that media in other areas will receive correct information directly from your expert instead of translated through others.



■ Disadvantages of a satellite media tour:

- If media satellite trucks are not at the site, satellite media tours can be expensive.
- Unless resources and agreements are already in place, they are not easily arranged.
- They have a limited reach and are not appropriate for many situations.
- After a round-robin of similar interviews, spokespersons may burn out.
- They are time consuming.

Press Conferences by Telephone and Webcast

Internet and telephone technology allow you to set up toll-free telephone numbers or webcast opportunities that the media can access at specified times. Participating spokespersons can be at different locations. In addition, the technology is interactive and can allow journalists to ask questions. This method of delivering information offers the following advantages and disadvantages:

■ Advantages of telephone and webcast conferences:

- They reach far more media outlets than just those at the site of the incident.
- Response spokespersons will be able to reach national media outlets and local media outlets in other communities.
- They are easy to arrange.
- Their cost is moderate.
- Officials are generally comfortable with this format.
- They have great flexibility in terms of when and where they take place.
- They allow public information officials to have some control over who has the toll-free number. However, the toll-free number can be forwarded further or posted on the Web.
- These types of news conferences can be regularly scheduled to satisfy media representatives by assuring them of regular updates.
- These formats allow for last-minute changes in spokesperson. This may happen if a new development requires a new expert to appear or a spokesperson is called away for unavoidable reasons. With these formats, it's easier to get a substitute.
- They allow time for questions and the questioner's name to be announced by the moderator.
- Lists of all participants, even those not asking a question, can be provided, making news monitoring and analysis easier.
- Recordings of the event can be archived and made available to the media after the fact.



- Disadvantages of telephone and webcast conferences:
 - These types of news conferences require a funding source or advance contract.
 - The cost can add up over time.
 - It is difficult to wean media from this format; regular calls should not be stopped abruptly.
 - Teleconferences do not fulfill the visual needs of TV news.

E-mail Distribution and Broadcast Faxes

Most media organizations prefer to receive information from other organizations through e-mail or by fax. Electronic distribution of information allows for efficient and rapid translation to news formats. While fax or blast fax distribution is becoming less common, they are still used by many news organizations.

- Advantages of e-mail and broadcast faxes:
 - You can almost instantly disseminate information to media outlets on e-mail contact lists at an imperceptible cost.
 - Corrections are easy to make.
 - The organization gets credit for having contacted reporters or outlets by name.
 - They provide an open channel that allows you to feed information to the media at will.
- Disadvantages of e-mail and broadcast faxes:
 - Lists require regular updating and maintenance. Media organizations and personnel move around often.
 - They provide a passive way to give the media information; some may not get to your e-mail or broadcast fax until it's too late for them or you.
 - They are not personal and may prompt further inquiries and phone calls.
 - They require cleared print information, which is time-intensive for the public information office and could slow information flow to the media.

Websites, Video Streaming, and Webinars

A variety of Internet-based tools have made media access much easier and more cost-effective. Releases can be posted to media pages on your website. FAQs, background information, and event videos can be linked to releases. Videos can be archived and streamed. Webinars can provide detailed information



and access to subject matter experts. Web-based tools have significantly bolstered access to media organizations and direct access to the public although they are time consuming, particularly during a crisis. They have the following advantages and disadvantages:

- Advantages of websites, video streaming, and webinars:
 - They rapidly update all media simultaneously.
 - The process becomes transparent because the public and media see the same information on the site. It allows the organization to speak directly to the public without a media filter.
 - Documents and information are organized and provide a record for the media and your organization.
 - This allows for links to help media personnel collect background information.
 - Rumors, myths, and misinformation can be addressed immediately without drawing undue attention.
 - Official video or pictures can be made available to media outlets in a digital format.
 - FAQs on the page provide a user-friendly way to educate during a crisis.
 - They are cost-effective tools.
- Disadvantages of websites, video streaming, and webinars:
 - They are time consuming.
 - They require frequent updating.
 - On occasion, they crash with traffic overload.
 - They may frustrate journalists if too much information is provided or if the site's organization is not clear. Journalists want it easy and immediate. You may have to walk some of them through the site the first time.
 - They are technology-dependent and may be vulnerable to glitches or interruptions by hackers. People in disaster zones may not have website access.

Response to Media Calls

The relationship between PIOs and the media is often grounded in phone calls from reporters requesting specific information or an interview. In a public health emergency, the manner in which your organization responds to these calls from reporters makes a difference in the way your organization's responsiveness or professionalism is portrayed to the public.

If journalists do not believe your response is quick or appropriate, they may reflect this in their report. Every organization must establish a workable plan to respond to a surge of media calls. Train, plan, and



coordinate continually. Let media outlets know ahead of time how the flow of information will work, how to get their requests answered, and what your PIOs can or cannot do. If phone lines are overloaded, what's the backup plan? Responses to media calls have the following advantages and disadvantages:

■ Advantages of timely responses:

- Media outlets can provide information you may not be aware of, such as information about a neighborhood leader who is complaining that the response resources are not being fairly distributed. This can happen because some disgruntled people will call the media for resolution before they will call the official organization responsible for these resources.
- Media inquiries may reflect the public's level of interest. The number of calls and frequency of subjects raised can give the response community a sense of what is important to the public and where more information resources may need to be directed.
- One-on-one contact with the media allows opportunities to emphasize key message points, direct media to upcoming issues, and correct misinformation.
- Personal contacts can help build relationships and promote trust.

■ Disadvantages of timely responses:

- Returning calls takes time, which is at a premium during a crisis.
- The potential exists for inconsistent or premature release of information. To prevent this, press officers and spokespersons must be well-trained and the release must be coordinated and cleared.
- Follow-up calls may be required if information changes before a media outlet releases it. If you neglect this, you'll be guilty of not giving the right information.
- Phone tag is frustrating to journalists working on deadlines.
- Massive prioritization is required. Reporters will know if they're not at the top of the list.

Social Media

Many mainstream media organizations are using social media as a way to generate content. They may monitor social media, such as Facebook pages or Twitter feeds, for information. Many federal agencies, including CDC and FEMA, maintain several Twitter accounts as a way to provide very timely information on events and to update audiences, including the media. Social media offer the following advantages and disadvantages:

■ Advantages of social media:

- Social media are immediate.
- They build and maintain dynamic relationships with the media.



- They can be used to dispel rumors by providing accurate information quickly.
- Social media incorporate website links where reporters can go to get more information.
- Disadvantages of social media:
 - They require personnel and technological resources to maintain and monitor social media channels.
 - They have limitations in terms of how much information is included.
 - Follow-up and continual monitoring may be required to update information and dispel rumors.

“Social media is instant information, on your time, not on the media’s time.”

*Ken Pastorick,
Public Information Officer,
Louisiana Department of
Health and Hospitals*

Writing for the Media during a Crisis

Research has shown^{13,14,15} that the public’s belief that an emergency response was effective correlates with how much access to information they had during the crisis. The fundamental challenge is speed versus accuracy where both are important. If information is accurate and released after the public has moved on to another issue, it has little value. If it’s out fast but is not accurate, the best-case scenario is to admit it and move on; the worst case is that the inaccuracy causes harm to the public. The rules of good journalism apply, with or without a crisis. There will be pressure to move the process along at a pace that reasonable reporters and other people will perceive as responsive and credible.

Acknowledge the inherent challenge of every crisis. Push the responding officials toward releasing accurate (but perhaps incomplete) information ASAP. You can begin by telling the story even if you are not sure of an ending.

The following tips should be helpful:

- Ask what can be committed to paper first.
- Start with what can be verified.
- Tell the media and the public that more information will come as it becomes available.
- If decisions are not finalized, then explain that the process to reach decisions is ongoing.
- If laboratory tests are not completed, explain the testing process.
- Keep the media and the public engaged and involved, even if the answers to the hard questions aren’t yet available.



Prepare to Provide Basic Background on Issues to the Media . . .

When a health-related disaster or event occurs, reporters who do not normally cover health and science topics will be assigned to cover the event. At that point, you will find yourself dealing with people who need basic information about the issue first. Have this background information prepared and ready to share. It will prove useful when journalists begin developing reports for the general public.

When the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami resulted in a radiation emergency from a damaged nuclear facility, the worldwide public was anxiously seeking information about potential radiation exposure in air, food, and water. Reporters were trying to cover a breaking story with obvious health implications. Like the public, they knew little about a radiation emergency and its potential health effects. CDC immediately posted a website on the situation. This site, *Japan: Radiation and Health*,¹⁶ contained fact sheets, FAQs, social media information, and even Japanese translations of various radiation emergency documents.

This helped ensure that the media received scientifically accurate and easy-to-understand information to be communicated to the public. Many people became educated about radiation risks. They knew what actions to take, or in the case of potassium iodide, what action not to take.

What Should Your Media Release Include?

During the early phases of an emergency, standard press releases are the most basic form of media communication. As the crisis evolves, consider following up with feature releases:

- Stories about individuals or units involved in the response
- Articles that illustrate outcomes and their successes
- Personal accounts of those who were helped during the crisis

An emergency press release should be limited to one page. You will need to practice to determine what information belongs in a fact sheet versus a press release. Think of press releases, from the very start, as press updates.

The press release should answer the questions who, what, when, where, why, and how. Additional information goes into an attached fact sheet or background. This method will speed up the clearance process, reduce the opportunity to introduce errors, and help the media determine which items are news and which are considered background.



When you create a press release, do the following:

- At the top of the release, include the following information:
 - Your organization's name
 - Address
 - E-mail
 - Website
 - Telephone number
 - Contact name(s)
- Give the media a 24-hour contact number. If you have a toll-free number, include it and let reporters know it's for them, not for the general public.
- Place the date on the release. If more than one release is issued during a 24-hour period, place the date and time on the release.
- Give your press release a headline. Journalists can identify quickly with headlines. Create headlines using an active voice, and summarize the core information in a few words. Never reuse a headline during the crisis.
- Use a press release number if this is standard for your organization. This may be helpful, but do not use numbers to replace unique headlines.
- Put "for immediate release" at the top under your contact information; don't make reporters or editors guess about a release time.
- Write in the inverted pyramid style, putting the most important information first. Do not use a strong concluding paragraph, the strength will be up front. A well-written press release reads like a news story.
- Provide new telephone numbers or website addresses high up in the press release. Don't assume an editor will notice it in the last paragraph.
- Limit the length of sentences and paragraphs. They should rarely be more than 20 words. A one-sentence paragraph is acceptable in a press release.
- Remember, the more syllables per 100 words, the more difficult text is to understand.
- Explain scientific or technical terms. Don't assume your audience will understand what you mean.
- Eliminate adjectives or emotionally loaded words.
- Check your facts, especially after including revisions from subject matter experts.
- Perform a security check; some information may be classified.



- Perform a privacy check; some information may violate the privacy of victims and their families.¹⁷ Consider the following:
 - Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA)
 - Your organization’s policies regarding privacy
- If names have unusual spellings, mark an “OK” note next to the name so editors know it’s correct.
- If a name has an unusual pronunciation, include the phonetic pronunciation so radio and TV reporters pronounce it correctly.
- If an error is detected in a press release that has already been distributed and there’s time to correct it, make the effort to send the corrected version right away.

Reality Check

Some concessions to journalistic tastes will be required to get press releases cleared through scientific and official response channels. It helps if you:

- Write press releases in advance
- Use fill-in-the-blank sections
- Clear them through channels (or at least have them reviewed ahead of time).

This will help officials with no media background distinguish the difference between a press release and a situation report. The clearance process often becomes an exercise of writing by committee and the result is often tortured texts. Focus on the goal of getting accurate and timely information from your organization to the media and public.

Press Statements Versus Press Releases

Press statements typically are not news. They may be an official position or perspective of the organization. They normally contain only a few paragraphs. For press statements, consider the following:

- Attribute statements to a high-ranking official in the organization.
- You can use them to counter a contrary view about an important subject related to the emergency, such as why your agency is choosing one treatment recommendation over another.
- Do not use a statement to generate a peer-review debate.



- Press statements may be a means for an official to be quoted as having responded to an issue without the need for a media opportunity.
- You can use them to offer words of encouragement to victims, responders, and employees.
- Post statements on the organization's website in the same location as press releases. They should include a contact number for the press office.
- Use statements sparingly for best impact.
- Don't state the negative that's being countered. State your organization's position without validating a contrary point of view.
- Realize that press statements require more time and a higher level of clearance.

Media Fact Sheets and Backgrounders

Fact sheets provide facts about a specific topic. Backgrounders provide the relevant background or history. When you create fact sheets and backgrounders, consider the following:

- Generally, these will be attached to a one-page press release.
- Define any scientific or technical terms used.
- Keep fact sheets in a bullet format with a logical progression from the broad to the specific about a single subject.
- Use paragraph form for backgrounders and provide historical and technical information that is too in-depth for bullets.
- Use frequently asked questions (FAQs) for fact sheets and backgrounders, if appropriate. Expect to see FAQs on media websites, so make sure they are accurate.
- Avoid including information in fact sheets and backgrounders that will likely change. Press releases are the place for updates on the ongoing situation. Fact sheets and backgrounders give the facts, as well as background or history.
- Do not use quotes from officials or subject matter experts. If you do, it will turn into a poorly written press release.
- Release fact sheets and backgrounders as official documents from your organization, via the JIC or the EOC, if activated.
- Coordinate information to make certain all parties agree on what's fact and what's background.
- Prepare in advance, when no emergencies are in sight. Coordinate your information with other agencies.



Visuals, Video Press Releases, and B-Roll

Television and websites continue to be dominant sources for news. While older audiences continue to favor television and turn to local news, younger audiences increasingly use the Web.² News outlets use visuals to support reports. Digital technology makes it easier and less expensive for official response organizations to provide visual support for the media during emergencies. Videos can be loaded on websites and news organizations can edit them into their reports.

When you create visuals, video press releases, and B-roll, consider the following:

- You might want to include 10- to 20-second video sound bites from response officials and experts that can be edited into local newscasts.
- Get key messages on tape.
- Video news releases may become dated and time consuming to produce in the early phases of an emergency.
- Try using B-roll (background video without narration):
 - B-roll is easier and faster to produce.
 - News directors often prefer B-roll, as reporters will build their own stories around the video.
 - B-roll serves as visual backdrops for a reporter's voiceover.
- Prepare B-roll in advance, if possible. Get a security check to ensure that classified information is not being released.
- Don't raise a subject in B-roll if you do not want to promote it.
- Write sound bites for spokespersons. Your spokespersons will not have time to pare the main points down to 20 seconds.
- Make sure each sound bite stands alone. No need to confuse a viewer who may see only one of five possible sound bites.
- Give the video news release or B-roll a paper and on-tape index that explains who is talking or what is being shown. For example, the index might explain that at 2 minutes into the video, a biosafety level 2 lab technician is preparing samples for testing.
- Determine distribution methods. You might consider the following:
 - Schedule a satellite feed following a media advisory.
 - Load videos on websites.
 - Provide copies of the B-roll that can be picked up by media.
 - Deliver it to the media.



- Feed it from a local network affiliate to a national network satellite, which can be fed to other local affiliates.
 - Send via overnight mail, requesting that the hard copy be returned to you.
- Produce video news releases and B-rolls as professional products to fulfill media requirements. Some in-house digital video can be displayed on your website.

Communicate Early and Often

Be proactive and provide recommendations and information to the media and the public as early as possible to establish your organization as an accurate, credible, and timely news source. Doing so will facilitate stronger relationships with the media and the public.

Example 1: In 2001, during the anthrax crisis, there was a concern that a Ft. Collins, Colorado, postal worker may have contracted the disease. Local and state health workers wanted to ease the concerns about potential exposure to anthrax bacteria, and quickly decided to distribute a press release announcing the closing of that post office and the availability of antibiotics for the other workers in that facility.

Example 2: Regardless of whether or not FEMA is in the midst of responding to a crisis, FEMA Disaster Field Offices develop and distribute a “message of the day” to help establish credibility and a rapport with the public and the media.

Meeting Media Needs Throughout an Emergency

A central question during any public health emergency: “Is a press conference, media event, or other speaking opportunity the right way to release information?”

If coordination has occurred with other responding organizations or a press conference is planned, the answer may be an easy “yes.” If the situation is unfolding quickly and there is a need for rapid information dissemination, the answer may also be “yes.”

Where to Hold the Press Conference

To determine the location of a press conference, consider the following:

- The emergency or disaster site, if it is safe for the media and it won’t interfere with recovery efforts, might be your first choice. Make certain that victims’ privacy will not be compromised.



- Press conferences may be held at the EOC or JIC if room has been set aside that is separate from the operations center. You don't want media personnel moving in and out of the emergency operations center. If the conference is held in a restricted building, try to streamline the media's screening and access to the site, even if it requires volunteer escorts for each reporter.
- Consider using a separate official location, such as the town hall, the health department headquarters, or the governor's office.
- Conferences may be held at a hotel meeting room convenient to the officials involved and the media who are likely to attend.
- Remember that sound equipment needs to be available or in place. Consider providing electrical outlets (if not using street interviews) and other specialized equipment needed by the media.

How and When to Invite the Media

The following tips will help you successfully invite the media to your press conference:

- Give the media advance notice, but not so much that the event is canceled because it's overtaken by other events. An hour is the absolute least amount of time from notice to the event, unless media personnel are all standing by waiting for a formal comment.
- If the emergency has gone on for some time, schedule a regular time for media opportunities, such as daily at 2:00 p.m., and stick to it. This will eliminate the need to contact the media each time.
- If you have something really important to release and the media may not be aware of what's coming, use the resources necessary to call reporters or their news directors and editors, and tell them why they need to come.

Send a brief media advisory about the media opportunity. It should be only a half page long and give the following information:

- Nature of the event (media opportunity or press conference; know the difference)
- Date, time, and place
- Contact person, and who is scheduled to appear (by name and title, or by position and subject matter expertise)
- The topics to be covered

Keep the advisory short. You'll get it cleared more quickly and have greater flexibility if you want to adjust messages or add topics. Be specific enough that reporters understand the urgency. This is easier early in the emergency, but may be more difficult during later phases of the crisis.



Whom to Invite

Before announcing a media opportunity, check to ensure that spokespersons or officials are available. Have backups on standby in case the spokesperson is called away.

- Invite representatives from print and electronic media outlets, and don't forget radio stations. If the JIC is hosting a press room, be sure to post a notice there.
- Attempt to limit the number of emergency response officials in attendance who will not have a speaking role. Reporters find it disconcerting to see a pack of people in the back of the room, possibly wearing response uniforms or credentials, who were never identified. Also, expect that anyone in the room from the response team could be approached by the media for comment. Another concern is that response personnel in the pack in the back of the room might privately discuss information not yet ready for release, and be overheard by reporters. "By invitation only" holds true for response personnel, too.

How to Conduct the Media Opportunity

It is appropriate to alert the media ahead of time as to whether questions will be addressed or if only statements of information from organization officials will be made. Reporters do not like to be restricted from asking questions, but they'll accept it if the information is real news and they are given access to the officials at other times to get their answers. Taking questions means giving some control of the content over to the media. In the early phases, it may not be necessary to take questions.

The following tips will help you conduct media opportunities smoothly:

- Decide the time limit, including question and answer time. Let the media know there will be a limit.
- Keep speakers out of the room until the event begins. You don't want to negotiate logistics in front of an audience. Remember, the moment principals are visible to the media, their demeanor and behavior is a matter of public record. It's natural to blow off steam and joke around, even during the heat of a crisis. Do that away from the cameras. Make sure all understand that the event is "on record." It will be reported.
- Let the media know at the start of the conference if there are controversial issues surrounding the emergency that are not going to be addressed.
- Whether the speakers sit or stand depends on the room, the length of the event, and whether they are all speaking and all taking questions. If all stand, a herd effect occurs. The group will seem more active, as if there is urgency to the situation. That's good if that's what you want to convey. It's not as good when attempting to promote a calm, reasoned response.
- A press officer may moderate the event or the lead official may do so. Accommodate the preferences of the official but be available on the side if they decide to go it alone.



- Unless the officials are nationally known faces and names, ask speakers to introduce themselves by name, title, and organization. They should repeat their names and organizations if they step forward to answer a later question.
- If your organization is going to accept questions at the press conference, select who will choose reporters to ask questions. Is it the lead official or perhaps the press officer who is monitoring the conference? Plan this in advance.

Reality Check

Be ready for the press conference to be different than you planned. The following tips may help:

- Reporters will ask whatever questions they please, despite your directions.
- Be sure the officials know who will respond to controversial questions. This is the person who will refer the reporter's question back to the appropriate organization or the subject matter expert.
- Get agreement from all of the officials involved; if the answer doesn't fall within the scope of their responsibility, they cannot respond. This may be hard for some of them, who may have a good answer to share.
- Have a backup plan for such glitches as the loss of sound equipment.
- Either before the officials enter the room or at the end of the event, tell reporters how to get more information and additional answers.
- Decide ahead of time if officials are going to do standup media interviews for individual reporters following the event. It's fine to do this if the official has the time, won't go off-message, and there's an exit plan to end the interview. For example, you might explain to a reporter that the official is pressed for time and has only five minutes before his car leaves for another appointment.
- If you allow a standup interview after the press conference, expect radio and print media to surround the TV reporter conducting the interview or vice versa. These interviews are really like another small, informal press conference. Keep control by assigning a press officer to each official. You need to know if something has been said requiring a reaction from your organization.



Using Visuals

It may be too much to ask officials to manage charts, PowerPoint presentations, or slides during the briefing. If possible, position a communications expert to manage the visuals. Reporters will want copies of any slides, graphs, or visuals used. These can be made available on websites.

Caution: If an official waves a document or report, or refers to it during the media opportunity, reporters will be asking for copies. Try to agree on what will be mentioned and what will be available, and prepare the visuals ahead of time. If practical, tell reporters ahead of time that they will get copies of what is being shown. Have paper copies of visuals in case the equipment fails.

Military briefings often make extensive use of visuals. Department of Defense press conferences are good examples of how visuals can be used effectively.

Handouts

If possible, have copies of the presentations, useful fact sheets, and backgrounders available. Reporters like to use these to take notes and write their pieces, even if they have recorded the entire statement. Don't forget to provide background information on the organization, such as a simple mission statement, organizational chart, and basic facts.

If speakers are not well known, have brief bio handouts. This helps build their credibility for reporters and the public who may read about them.

Reality Check

Record press conferences (at least on audio) if at all possible. It will help with questions and answers after the fact, and is your record of what was said. Don't rely on memory, especially during a crisis. Consider the following tips:

- Arrange for media monitoring following your conference to see if your messages were clearly reported.
- Prepare the materials needed to push those messages out as clearly and concisely as possible.
- If the topics discussed during the media opportunity remain clear, but limited, you have a greater chance that your desired messages will make the upcoming broadcast or newspaper.



Following your press conference, immediately assess the following:

- Were key messages delivered?
- Were similar questions asked repeatedly?
- How effective was the spokesperson's delivery? Consider aspects such as tone, body language, and clarity.
- Do you need to prepare for any "next day" issues?
- Is there a need to follow up with specific media outlets, based on their questions, to clarify issues?
- What can you do next time to improve the media opportunity?

Responding to Media Regarding Significant Errors, Myths, and Misperceptions

The media have a good record of getting facts correct during crises.¹⁸ Unfortunately, sometimes media reports can get facts wrong, report rumors, or perpetuate misrepresentations. Blog posts and social media status updates are unfiltered and often include inaccurate information. These mistakes may not only harm the public, they can undermine the credibility of your organization. While media rumors, myths, and errors in press reports are usually self-correcting, sometimes the correction does not happen fast enough.

You can speed up corrections using the following approaches:

1. Remain calm.

When you talk to the media, you are speaking for your agency or organization. No matter how angry you are, do not react thoughtlessly. Doing so will reflect negatively on you and your organization. It detracts from your mission of communicating accurate health information to the public.

Some reporters may believe that only sensational, negative stories are news. "If it's good news, it's no news" and "if it bleeds, it leads" are two quotes frequently associated with this type of reporting.

Also, reporters do not always have time to get their facts checked. Their jobs may depend on turning the report around quickly. If they spend a lot of time on research, a competing reporter may release the story first.

"Declaring war on the press, tempting as it may sometimes be, is a game you can't win."

*Stratford P. Sherman,
Fortune Magazine*



Reporters are just trying to do their job, so don't take negativity personally. Always try to think in terms of educating the media and, thereby, building bridges to promote accurate stories in the future. After all, media outlets are an important communication link to the audiences you are charged to serve. To do this, you need a strategy.

2. Analyze the situation.

Ask the following questions:

- **What is your relationship with this reporter and media outlet?** Is the publication, television, or radio program credible? Have you worked with the offending reporter previously? Following a negative news report is not the best time to make a “cold call,” to speak to reporters or work with media outlets for the first time. Expressing a complaint to someone who knows you as a credible person is easier and more productive. If the media outlet is unwilling to listen, consider trying to get the point across to the audience through an alternative source. Try to understand the reporters' point of view and that they do not serve as your public relations firm. Reporters have no obligation to report only positive stories for you. However, they do have a responsibility to provide accurate information to their audience. You can and should appeal to their sense of community service and journalistic integrity if the stories they are running are not in the public's best interest. Remember who you are trying to reach. Do not try to win a contest with media representatives. Try to serve the public interest by disseminating accurate information to promote public health. No matter the response from reporters, keep anger in check.
- **Did the news report attempt to express both sides of the issue?** To many reporters, a balanced report is one that examines opposing sides. Whether one point of view is an extreme position and the other generally accepted may not be a relevant question. As long as reporters attempt to present both sides, they often consider this fair.
- **Was there truly an inaccuracy, or did the reporter simply present the facts with a negative slant?** Correcting a factual error is relatively simple and straightforward. Reporters and media outlets want to do their jobs well. They do not like mistakes. However, a difference of opinion about a subject is not as easy to counter. Statements perceived as biased, uninformed, or sensational may not be viewed by reporters as an error on their part. You can still respond to the article; however, your strategy will differ from one required to correct a factual error.
- **Is the news report true even though it may be negative?** You would prefer that only positive stories appear in the media, but that is not always possible. There will be times when you will not have a response to counter a report that provides negative news. There is an old saying, “in order to prevent the perception of covering up bad news, the good news must get out fast and the bad news faster.”

When there is bad news to report, it is important not to withhold or counter the information. Reassure the public that no matter what the issue, positive or negative, being open and responsive to the public's need for accurate information is a priority. Do not attempt to win a



contest with the media or a popularity contest with the public. Rather, communicate accurate health information to the public. This event may be simply the time to “take it on the chin” to satisfy critics who are also served by the media.

If the report is mostly accurate, and mistakes made by the reporter are minor, consider letting the story run without comment. Arguing with a reporter over a minor point when a news item is otherwise accurate will not help you build bridges for future positive stories. Consider contacting the reporter to establish a dialogue for future, more accurate stories.

3. Know what to request.

Once the situation has been analyzed and it is decided that action is necessary, decide on your options to resolve issues. There are only a few possibilities available for a reporter to respond to complaints. Decide, ahead of time, your ideal, as well as your minimal, solution. Think of this as a negotiation. Here are some possible requests:

- **Ask for a retraction or correction:** A retraction is only reasonable when a serious factual error has been made and you have supporting material to refute the report. If this happens, ask for an immediate correction that runs as prominently as the original piece. Although this is not likely to happen, it’s possible you will discourage the editor from burying the retraction.
- **Ask for another piece to air that presents your perspective on the issue:** A follow-up response is a reasonable request if an important point of view was completely ignored or misrepresented in the original report. The best way to get a report redone is to provide reporters another angle for the story. Reporters are not likely to present a follow-up piece that simply contradicts a story they recently ran. They will not want to lose credibility. If you give them a fresh perspective, a new angle, or new information—while also giving them a way to maintain credibility—they are more likely to develop a follow-up story.
- **Ask for an apology:** Sometimes reporters make unintentional mistakes. If the errors are not endangering a person’s life or reputation, perhaps an acknowledgment of the mistake over the phone by the reporter is enough. Establish yourself as a source for this reporter and develop rapport that could lead to accurate, more positive stories in the future. The reporter may call to verify the accuracy of a forthcoming story before running it. This provides an opportunity to avert future inaccuracies in that reporter’s stories and provides forewarning if another questionable news story is about to run.
- **Ask that a correction note be placed in the permanent record:** Ask the reporter or editor to file a written correction with the original piece in the permanent record. If the mistake is a factual one, it should not be repeated (even if a correction is made). Ask the reporter or editor to officially tie the correction to the original report. Reporters often go back to do research, and they may report the mistaken information again if they do not realize that a correction was made.



- **Ask that a letter to the editor or guest editorial be printed:** If an important message concerning the issue reported is needed, a letter to the editor may be the right choice. Letters to the editor are widely read, and publications are usually quite willing to print opposing views. Keep in mind that the message must be concise or your opportunity to correct an error could be lost in editing. Make the strongest points early and keep the letter brief and to the point. Editors who are rushing to meet a deadline cut from the bottom up. Be sure to seek approval from subject matter experts within your organization before sending your letter. Coordinate with your public affairs office.

4. Know whom to contact.

Media outlets have a chain of command. Starting at the top is not usually the best approach. Follow the chain of command when contacting the media to respond to an article or broadcast piece.

- **Talk to the reporter first:** Always give the reporter the first opportunity to respond to concerns. Perhaps the reporter is frustrated because an editor changed a piece without his or her knowledge. Perhaps the producer who put together the nightly news teaser misunderstood the reporter's message or sensationalized an originally balanced report. Let the reporter have an opportunity to respond and explain. Know the reporter's position before taking any action.
- **If the reporter can't be convinced:** Ask to speak to the news editor or producer. Keep moving up the chain until satisfied or until convinced that satisfaction is unlikely.
- **If you have doubts about the integrity of the media:** If the reporter or media outlet that presented the negative or inaccurate report is known to lack journalistic integrity, consider going to another media outlet. Of course, go to them with a great story idea, not just a complaint about the other media outlet.
- **Consider reaching your public through alternative outlets:** If all else fails in efforts to set the record straight with the offending media outlet, redouble your efforts to get messages to the public through other means, such as the following:
 - Use the Web, which makes direct communication much easier.
 - Set up a public forum.
 - Invite partners to write letters or make phone calls.
 - Offer articles for community newsletters.
 - Work to establish contacts in competing media outlets.



5. Know what you want to communicate.

When you decide to counter a questionable news article, you must thoughtfully develop the message you want to send. Know the audience and the message the audience should receive:

- Develop messages and have them screened by advisors and subject matter experts. Remember, your organization should speak with one voice to maintain credibility. Confer with interested parties within your organization to avoid cross purposes with colleagues who have a different perspective or additional information.
- Make sure to frame the message in a positive way. If appropriate, include a call to action.
- Focus on the audience, which is the public, and the purpose, which is to promote public health.
- Keep anger at your critics or the media out of the message. The media are neither the message nor the audience.

Convincing a reporter or producer to air a message requires being prepared to communicate that message without delay.

6. Have a plan before you need it.

If an objection is to be effectively heard, express it as soon as possible. Know the important issues within the organization and the basic arguments of critics. Prepare messages on the various issues ahead of time, especially when an issue is controversial. Draft letters to the editor that could be altered slightly and submitted within hours of the appearance of the offending piece. Consider releasing articles on these issues before reporters have the opportunity to run inaccurate or negative stories.

- **Put the media on notice that you are paying attention:** The media has a stake in responding to the need for correct information. They need to know that their actions are being watched and their stories are carefully read. Maintain regular contact and call reporters to praise good stories. Remember to build relationships with the media at every opportunity. They are a critical link to the public because they can facilitate your efforts to promote public health.
- **Let the media know that you're a potential source for the future:** Don't just ask for an immediate airing on the subject; invite reporters to call for interviews in the future. Make sure of availability and give credible and constructive interviews. Develop internal sources of interview candidates that you can offer to the media when issues surface. Be willing to deal with tough subjects. Don't minimize the arguments of your critics. Remember to focus on getting your message to your audience.



Monitoring the Media for Public Response to Crisis Management

When CDC's Joint Information Center was activated to respond to the 2009 H1N1 crisis, the communicators immediately began gathering information from the media to determine what was being said. This helped them create health messages for the media and through CDC online channels, such as their website, Twitter, and Facebook pages.

Once the initial messages were disseminated, CDC conducted daily media monitoring of print, TV, blogs, Twitter, and other Internet sites to determine if the information was being reported accurately. When information didn't always include what they thought the public needed to know, they held additional media events that reinforced accurate information.

Because of the length of the H1N1 crisis, CDC also had to monitor the media to make sure to keep H1N1 in the public eye. They also monitored media outlets to make sure the public had the most up-to-date information concerning at-risk populations, vaccines, school closing procedures, and preventative measures.

Conclusion

Disasters are media events. Despite changes in the media and the fact that social media continue to expand, print, television, and radio serve a pivotal role during disasters. The media typically serve two broad functions:

- They monitor and inform the public of risks.
- They serve a watchdog function for public agencies and government.

Although working with the media during a crisis is almost always very challenging, some strategies and techniques can enhance the flow of accurate and timely information. In addition, it is important not to develop an adversarial relationship with journalists. Instead, recognize that reporters are professionals who have an important role to play during a crisis.



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