
CHAPTER

DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

Information about flood hazards and flood-related projects can often be done most effectively through the mass media. In some cases, such as in the event of a flood, reporters are likely to seek out sources of information about what happened and what people should do to protect themselves. In other cases, such as an effort to encourage some action, the situation might be reversed with agency staff trying to interest the media in running a story to educate people about the measure and its benefits.

Dealing with reporters often causes anxiety, particularly when the reporter has unexpectedly initiated the contact. A certain amount of dread is not unusual even in situations in which an effort is being made to obtain coverage of some issue. However, some skill in communications and an understanding of how the media approach risk-related issues helps in smoothing things out.



Whether or not working with the media is a pleasure, it is a fact of life that must be dealt with on occasion. When there's a good story, the media will cover it with or without your help and the risks of ducking the media are generally greater than cooperating with them.

News stories are a collaboration between the reporter and the sources they talk to. There's not much that can be done to change the nature of journalism or the **19**

way reporters work. However, an improvement in coverage can often be brought about by proper performance of the source.

THE MEDIA'S INTEREST IN RISK

Reporters don't usually have any special interest in risk. It's just one of several things to be covered when it becomes newsworthy. Generally, the fact that some risk exists is not

particularly newsworthy. Most of us are continually at some degree of risk

“News stories are a collaboration between the reporter and the sources...”

from one or another agent and, more often than not, from several sources simultaneously.

This situation changes when the degree of risk poses an imminent threat. When a situation like a flood occurs, reporters suddenly take an intense interest in the risk and generally won't stop digging until some kind of story is developed.

When dealing with issues that are not a present crisis, the reporter's job is to come up with news, not to assist in an educational effort. Reporters are not particularly interested in how to compute flood probabilities. Flood risks that do not pose an imminent hazard usually only **20** become newsworthy when some related event

makes them so. For example, a court case on taking land for a levee might interest a reporter in doing a story on the flood problem
“...the reporter’s job is...news, that makes the levee necessary.
not to assist in an educational effort.” Without an event, and preferably one with something to photograph, it is difficult to get coverage of a flood problem that is only a threat.

There is nothing wrong with manufacturing a newsworthy event. Displays, contests and various other techniques can often be used to attract attention to an otherwise uninteresting subject.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are a few matters that should be observed when working with reporters, regardless of who initiated the contact:

- At the outset of a flood episode, reporters are primarily interested in when it will occur, its duration and magnitude, and whether people should evacuate. They are not usually interested at this point in the details about how the analysis was made, how the flood might have been prevented, or in any lengthy explanation of risk assessment. Some of those kinds of information may be of interest on the next day or the



one after that if the crisis is serious or prolonged. The interest in just bare-bones information is especially prevalent in the case of radio and television which can reach their audiences quickly with information on what is going on and what they should do. Reporters should be asked about what kinds of information are of interest and an effort made

to meet that need. *“Stories must be simple.”*

Long explanations of unasked for background, even if the reporter sits still for them, are likely to be discarded.

Stories must be simple. Covering a topic in 40 seconds on television or in 15 short paragraphs in the paper doesn't give an opportunity to describe nuances and complexities. If the source can't simplify the

story and explain it in plain English, the reporter will try to do so, sometimes with an adverse effect on accuracy. Every effort should be made before meeting with a reporter to think over the story or position being taken, strip it down to the essentials and organize it effectively. If the use of some technical term can't be avoided, the best way to explain it should be considered.

□ The reporter's thrust is usually to simplify a story to a dichotomy. The basic story is whether a situation is hazardous or not, not whether it's a little hazardous or greatly hazardous. If the situation can't support that kind of simplification, a source shouldn't waffle but, instead, explain to the reporter that the issue is not "risky or not" but rather "how risky".

□ Except reporters for the largest newspapers or broadcasting stations, those covering a story are likely to have very little science background. Their goal is usually to find out enough to put together the story and move on to the next, not to learn everything that's available about an issue.

□ Reporters usually cover two or three stories a day and have deadlines to meet. They also have to consider the amount of detail which will interest their audience and the time and space that will be given for the story. Sources should be on time for meetings, dispense with all but the barest introductory remarks and get on with the interview.

OBJECTIVITY IN THE MEDIA

Reporters are concerned about objectivity. By and large, however, they view objectivity as accurately presenting their audience with the viewpoints of those on both (or several) sides of an issue. Opposing viewpoints are usually set out in alternating paragraphs or in side by side stories. It's not the reporter's job to evaluate the information, decide on the truth, and then write only that side of the story. Whenever dealing with the media it should be expected that the reporter will seek out others with differing views.

THE MEDIA AND EXTREME VIEWPOINTS

Reporters deal with people having views on an issue ranging from one extreme to the other. Views at each end of the range are often not reported and those in the middle of the spectrum that have no strong opinion don't warrant much attention. Reporters tend to give most attention to positive and negative views that are strong but not extreme. Sources should tell the reporter which aspects of an issue are more familiar, and on which aspects the source may consequently take a stronger position.

PERSONALIZATION OF ISSUES

Stories about chronic risk tend to be uninteresting. In **24** effort to make them more interesting and to get

points across more clearly, reporters often try to personalize the issue with such questions as “have you floodproofed your home” or “would you let your family live there”. Sources should give some thought to the issue to be discussed and try to anticipate what sorts of personalizing questions might be asked and what answers might be given.