

63

Media, communication and disasters

Tim Radford

JOURNALIST, BASED IN LONDON, UK

Ben Wisner

Introduction

Until 8 May 1902 Marius Hurard was the editor of a local paper called *Les Colonies*. When all about him in Martinique the skies darkened and citizens began to react, he interviewed a science teacher at the local *lycée* (secondary or high school), a certain Gaston Landes (Scarth 2002). The interview ended with the conclusion, ‘Mont Pelée offers no more danger to the inhabitants of Saint-Pierre than Vesuvius does to those of Naples’. Not content with glossing the science teacher’s faulty information (M. Landes believed that Pompeii ‘had been evacuated in time’), M. Hurard then in the same edition commented on the fourfold increase in the number of people taking the steam ship to safety and asked, rhetorically, ‘Was there a better place to be than Saint-Pierre?’

History supplies the answer: yes, absolutely anywhere, especially at 8 am on 8 May, when a *nuée ardente* (pyroclastic flow) sent a wall of flaming rock dust and gas at temperatures of up to 450° C racing from the mountain at around 500 km an hour (see Chapter 28). Within two minutes, Saint-Pierre had been incinerated and more than 27,000 people scorched to death. An editor always has the final say, and by that time M. Hurard had certainly published his last word.

History may judge him harshly, but many newspapermen would have a sneaking empathy. Newspapers have an investment in the community they serve. They rely on advertising, reader loyalty and community support to cover overheads and pay reporters. A newspaper—Benjamin Franklin’s *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Lenin’s *Iskra*, H.L. Mencken’s *The Baltimore Sun*, C.P. Scott’s *The Manchester Guardian*—is an expression of optimism, of the belief that the people who read it today will be here to read it tomorrow. Disaster risk reduction and management was a phrase absent from M. Hurard’s vocabulary, quite possibly because it rarely crossed the lips of any of his readers. Quite possibly, nobody ever bought a newspaper hoping or expecting to read the words ‘disaster risk reduction’ (DRR). Since newspapers are successful because they accurately

reflect the needs and preoccupations of their readers, the reasonable conclusion is that they are not consciously interested in DRR.

Several questions arise from these observations and are the focus of this chapter. If DRR is not part of the media agenda or the readership's, should it be? Can it be?

The case for media involvement with DRR

The answer to each question is yes. The first is a simple moral issue: a free society is inseparable from a free press, a phrase that must include broadcasting and internet media as well as printed publications. People read media for information and for diversion, but, ultimately, they expect—and would certainly prefer—media to alert them to any threats to their lives and to their freedom, and therefore to any folly, corruption and incompetence in the governments that claim to uphold that freedom. Newspaper titles often incorporate the idea of vigilance and warning: *Argus*, *Sentinel*, *Observer*, *Guardian*, *Beacon*, *Messenger*, *Clarion*, *Tribune*, *Spectator* and so on, an implicit recognition of a newspaper's responsibility to monitor a community's sins of commission and omission (Pilger 2005).

Journalism contains people as disparate as any other human profession, trade or vocation, but the evidence from direct conversations with journalist colleagues from Russia both before and after 1990, and from China, India and Africa, suggests that journalists everywhere seem to have instinctively similar attitudes to authority and to the readership. After the Sichuan earthquake of May 2008, China's journalists asked the same kinds of questions that might have been expected from US, British or Japanese news media (Watts 2008). They did so because the readers they represented needed answers. The answers they got were unsatisfactory, but they asked. So much for 'should'.

Now, the second question: could DRR ever become a topic at a morning editorial conference, or a radio phone-in programme, or an evening news bulletin 'special'? The answer is, yes of course, but it is most likely to do so in the wake of an event. This, of course, is invariably the moment at which it becomes clear that there has been insufficient attention to disaster risk. There is a widespread assumption within the media that readers and viewers are simply not interested in disasters until after they have happened. In democracies, the material normally found in the media tends to reflect popular pre-occupation: football, economic depression, political scandal, fashion, celebrity misbehaviour and so on. People are moved, and shocked, by the disasters that overtake others, but unless constantly reminded of danger, most people will not regard hazards as frequent enough, or sufficiently probable, to be an urgent threat to themselves. Earthquakes, until they happen, are invisible, unpredictable events. Most people do not live in the shadow of a volcano, and the story of the editor of *Les Colonies* reminds us that even those close to violent eruption can persuade themselves that they are safe. There is well established psychological and sociological research that has ascertained the general disconnect between 'objective' measures of risk and the 'subjective' assessments and rankings given by the general population (Gardner 2008).

So does that mean that DRR is a niche topic: a no-go area, a subject to be marked only by a few pious but perfunctory editorial sentiments on World Disaster Reduction Day? (UNISDR 2009d) The answer is no. Attitudes can be changed, and journalists have traditionally been part of the machinery of change. The mistake is to think that these things can be done overnight. It took three decades to establish the widespread but still incomplete public acceptance of the link between smoking and health. It has taken so far two decades to persuade most political leaders to accept that climate change represents a political problem so serious that they must actually commit to effective political action at some future point. In both of these instances, the media

Tim Radford and Ben Wisner

played an important and perhaps decisive role, but in both of these instances the media responded to energetic and persuasive pressure from informed campaigners (Siegel 1998). So if DRR ever becomes a normal part of the news desk agenda—that is, becomes a routine theme at daily editorial conferences, as such themes as environment and health are—it will do so because engineers and scientists have made the subject seem compelling, exciting and urgent (see Box 63.1).

Potentials for media engagement with DRR

The press and broadcasters have, on occasion, seen trouble coming and said so. After the human tragedy, political farrago and civic fiasco that followed Hurricane Katrina, it became obvious that some experts and some reporters had warned of the threat to New Orleans (McQuaid and Schleifstein 2002; Laska 2004). Hindsight always provides perfect focus, and sadly most elected officials and other authorities became conscious of these warnings after the event. Therefore Hurricane Katrina offers a bleak lesson for politicians, lobbyists, reporters and newspaper readers concerned with disaster risk: to say something only once or twice is almost the same as not saying it at all. People need to be convinced. To convince people, you have to persuade, and then go on and on persuading. Information involves a campaign of attrition. What the media can, could and should do is play a role in this process. It helps to be able to tell the same story—and reiterate the same message—in as many different ways as possible.

Following up on the same story later is also effective, but it is seldom done. For example, farming techniques in the mountains of Nicaragua and locally run warning systems have made these rural people safer than they were when Hurricane Mitch struck in 1998 (see Chapter 14). However, it is generally hard to convince editors that a disaster that does not occur is news. Not only editors, but donors, development professionals, government officials and politicians find that the bad thing that has been avoided is less salient than the good thing achieved. Even the risk-bearers themselves, in this case the farmers on the steep volcano slopes, would have been far less likely to take up the soil and water management technologies that prevent landslides if they had not seen increased production and income. Livelihoods are foremost in their minds and more important, generally, than risk, just as for publishers it is the sale of newspapers, for politicians it is votes, or for broadcasters it is listeners and viewers.

One must therefore ask, what is in it for the media? In the first place, good stories; in the second place, a new and interesting audience; and in the third, an imprecise but not insignificant personal satisfaction for those reporters, broadcasters and editors who believe that journalism is more than just a form of daily entertainment, and that in a democracy, journalists have an obligation to support, defend, inform and above all, alert society. Press censorship has been shown to create silences in which disasters such as famines can go unnoticed (Article 19 1990). Sen (1990) wrote that there had never been a famine in a country with a free press, and elsewhere that 'a free press and an active political opposition constitute the best early-warning system a country threatened by famines can have' (Sen 1999: 222). The situation is more complicated, however. Myhrvold-Hanssen (2003) points out that the literacy rate among the population is of great importance; writing about Kerala state in India he notes that high life expectancy is correlated with high literacy rate. He continues:

What conclusions can we draw from this correlation? It is not unreasonable to state that a more educated people will have more ability to express their views and current living conditions. Moreover, the news media will have more incentives for producing reliable *and*

Media, communication and disasters

important news about the social and economic status of a community, since this news will certainly be read and criticised.

(Myhrvold-Hanssen 2003: 6)

Opportunities for such good stories come along almost every day. On average over the past decade, a disaster precipitated by the combination of natural hazard and lack of human preparedness has been more than a daily event. For journalists, gross statistics tend to conceal practical reality rather than highlight it. Every one of those deaths was potentially a powerful story; every one of those survivors a potential reader, a potential news source, or a potential friend; and every one of those dollars a depleted investment in communities that deserved better from national government, better from civic authorities, and better from the media. The bottom line is that disasters occur on average more than once a day, and there are perfectly good reasons why newspaper reporters and broadcasters should be prepared, should have done their homework on DRR.

The reporter who has taken the trouble to learn a little about earthquakes and earthquake engineering, about meteorology and storm damage, about the practical response to floods, avalanches, ice storms and volcanic eruptions, is a reporter who can make the most of the awful moment when the ground begins to shake, or the river bursts its banks. Simply from a self-centred, venal career point of view, a journalist's investment in the practicalities of disaster hazard can be a rewarding one.

The reporter who knows what questions to ask, which places and communities must be most at risk, which authority is most immediately responsible, and which sources will be the most immediately helpful, is not only doing his or her job well. She or he is reminding the readers and listeners why a free press is, ultimately, a matter of life and death for a community. For journalists, modest intimacy with DRR ought to be straightforward: they can do their jobs, multiply their audiences and quite possibly save human lives, all at the same time.

Constraints to media engagement with DRR

Why has this not happened already? Why do media not already have DRR correspondents, in the way that they have technology and show-business reporters, political commentators and economics editors? One possible answer is that mainstream media organisations are, like farmers, essentially conservative, in that they tend to focus on what delivered a harvest of listeners and readers (and advertisers) the last time, and the time before that. Social observers frequently express alarm at the unhappy mix of populist political conservatism, disproportionate power and shameless irresponsibility that characterises the modern Western corporate media as well as the influence that economic interests have over what gets covered (Chomsky and Herman 2002). Because of lack of space this chapter cannot delve deeply into the political economy of media. The question will have to remain open as to whether similar constraints face media workers in the non-profit sector (for example, National Public Radio in the USA or the BBC in the UK) and also what influences there are on the presentation of DRR where the press is controlled (to one degree or another) by the state (e.g. Cuba, Iran or China).

This mix is not modern, however, and nor is the unhappiness. The British politician, Stanley Baldwin, eighty years ago coined a memorable phrase, when he accused two press barons, the Lords Beaverbrook and Rothermere, of 'power without responsibility, the prerogative of the harlot through the ages'. Newspapers and broadcasters have always been conservative, but that does not mean the media is unresponsive to pressure or incapable of change.

Tim Radford and Ben Wisner

There is also a great tradition of campaigning journalism, and a great tradition of investigative reporting. Inertia can be overcome. A loose conspiracy of the informed and the concerned, the expert and the interested, the scientist and the journalist, could make DRR as amusing or as provoking as the misadventures of a Britney Spears or a Lady Gaga; as exhilarating as the presidential campaign of Barack Obama; as urgent and demanding as the sudden apparent world-wide collapse of the banking system.

This would be enough to put DRR on the political and media agenda within a fortnight. Could it be done? Probably not in a fortnight, but it could be done, by addressing the issues of DRR whenever there is an opportunity, and in as many imaginative ways as possible. In the course of the last four decades, journalists in Britain, Europe and the USA have become unevenly, but increasingly, interested in the politics and economics of the developing world (the journalists in Africa, Asia and South America, of course, were already on the case) (George 2009; PANOS 2010). There has been over the same decades a parallel growth of interest in the state of the global environment, and swift recognition that the two issues—development and environment—are intimately linked. DRR connects these issues even more intimately. Disasters interfere with, often setting back, sustainable development (see Chapter 14). Quite separately, the intensity and frequency of some extreme meteorological events could increase with global warming (see Chapter 18). There is a loop simply waiting to be closed by media workers as well as others.

In some respects this will not represent a change of direction. It is the duty, as well as the delight, of journalists to expose folly, tardiness, inconsistency and dishonesty in national and local government. Some 168 nations have signed up to the Hyogo Framework for Action, an international instrument that promised action on DRR, so there will potentially be 168 governments that are doing things inadequately or not at all (see Chapter 50 and Chapter 60). Newspapers, broadcasters and bloggers are—although they are properly wary of conceding such a thing—part of the public education programme, and over the decades have played interesting and sometimes decisive roles in influencing public attitudes to health behaviour, nuclear energy and space research (see Chapter 41).

SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, provides an example. It threatened to become a deadly pandemic in 2002 (WHO 2003). By 2003, the drama had more or less ended. Thousands had been infected and hundreds had died, but the infection was contained by urgent government and international action made considerably more urgent by worldwide news coverage. While more controversial, the media frenzy around the H1N1 virus in 2009 may also have played a role in international and national response that contained the epidemic (Council of the European Union 2010).

In democracies, politicians and public officials respond to public alarm, and the media both raises the alarm, and provides a useful index of the intensity of this alarm (Sen 1999). In countries that are not democracies, governments and autocracies are usually uneasily aware of the clamour from the free press in the neighbouring democracies, and will often respond anyway.

Journalists have already played an important part in promoting awareness of the forthcoming energy crisis, of environmental pollution and of climate change. Questions of DRR are only extensions of these larger programmes. In a wider sense, they are part of the media diet, because natural hazard and disaster risk encompass all the great news themes: sudden violence on a colossal scale, tragic death, widespread suffering, poignant human drama, sensational pictures and revelations of gross governmental failure. The challenge is to get them onto the news pages before the death and the suffering happen. This requires a certain amount of bridge building between the professional disaster community and the media. However, there is the challenge: an analysis of 200 English-language newspapers found that the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami

generated more column inches in six weeks than the total for the world's top ten 'neglected' or 'forgotten' disasters in the previous year. Tim Large, editor of Thompson-Reuter's AlertNet, suggests these 'tricks of the trade' for journalists to bring attention to neglected disasters (Wynter 2005). Advice on how scientists can best communicate with journalists (another link in the communication chain) is provided in Box 63.1 below.

Box 63.1 How scientists can best communicate with journalists

Tim Radford

Think of an encounter between Dr Grant Application, of Sanctimony College Milwaukee, and Ruthless Griller, scourge of news bulletins. The scientist is at home among caveats, uncertainties and very long answers, while the radio reporter prefers rasping questions to be answered in a single sound bite. However, Dr Application knows the answers, and the reporter does not, so he must use the air time constructively.

RG: 'But Professor Application, do you think the ground is really going to open up and swallow Oberlin, Ohio?'

GA: 'Stranger and more terrible things have happened. I think right now that earthquake hazards in Oberlin are not great, but in dozens of cities around the world people live in daily risk of dreadful destruction. Cities in the shadow of a volcano may be engulfed by fire, whole communities on the river deltas could be swept away overnight by sudden, overwhelming storm surges, and we can all imagine the terrible consequences of a powerful quake in Tokyo, or San Francisco ... '

Just think: you have sidestepped the silly question, and got to the issue of disaster risk management just by adopting the form 'Yes, but ... ' Your audience will have started to listen to you, not to the urbane Griller. *Remember:* nobody listens to long words. Make it clear and vivid.

RG: 'Surely an earthquake of this magnitude is quite mild?'

GA: 'Imagine hundreds of you crowded into a jerry-built apartment block. Seismic waves race through the city at hundreds of miles an hour. First the ground moves up and down. A second or two later, another set of waves shake the building from side to side. If your home is just breeze-blocks stacked one on top of another, then you are about to become a statistic. The whole place is likely to fall upon you ... '

Just think: you have painted a picture. Listeners have begun to see the world as more dangerous because of corrupt government and shameful building standards. Did you use phrases such as 'longitudinal oscillation subsequently impacted by shear wave radiation'? No, you have them hanging on your words. *Remember:* you know what you want to say, so get the message across before he can interrupt.

Tim Radford and Ben Wisner

RG: But professor, could people ever protect themselves against volcanic eruption?’

GA: ‘If you see a 200 foot-high wave of superheated gas and molten rock racing towards you at thirty-three metres a second, as people did in Saint-Pierre in Martinique in 1902, there is not much you can do, except wish you’d spent more on research, more on a master plan, more on ways to evacuate a city. The trick is not to be there when the mountain erupts. That is why we are pushing the government to think about disasters before they happen ... ’

Just think: you told them about a disaster that really did happen, and you told them about an initiative to make cities safer. Go on talking like that, and maybe cities will become safer.

- *Invest in media relations*, communications training and expertise, down to the local level.
- *Keep up a dialogue with the media:* provide background material on complex emergencies, but not fifteen minutes before the deadline.
- *Put a number on it:* death tolls give journalists pegs on which to hang their stories, and they go some way towards quantifying the unimaginable.
- *Bring in the big names:* it’s controversial, but enlisting celebrities can work. The press follows the famous face and ends up reporting on the cause.
- *Make it visual:* nothing sells a story like a good picture. In disasters, aid agencies may have the only photos available.
- *Be creative and proactive:* tell the bigger story through the eyes of individuals. Fit what you’re doing into the news agenda. Organise trips for reporters.
- *Never give up:* in this game, persistence really does pay off.

News organisations, corporate or otherwise, are not monolithic states; they are loose and sometimes slightly anarchic republics, and each republic contains a number of ambitious individuals on the alert for good stories from unexpected sources. The disaster community in turn contains a rich mix of United Nations (UN) propagandists, national civil servants, government geophysicists, hospital medical officers, university social scientists and development charity chiefs with a flair for handling the media.

Mainstream, routine coverage of DRR will not happen in a hurry and, at a guess, when it does, it won’t involve phrases such as ‘disaster risk management’ or ‘disaster risk reduction’. Such polysyllabic labels somehow obscure meaning. Truly effective DRR may very well have to begin with a change of language, a switch to emotional and vivid words and phrases that will fall somewhere between the overdramatic and the sensationally lurid. Academics have no great fondness for emotional language, and journalists are often accused of hyperbole, but what could be more lurid than 50,000 deaths in an earthquake, or more hyperbolic than a tsunami that sweeps a quarter of a million people from the beaches, ports, shores and marinas of the Indian Ocean?

Support for the journalist willing to try

Protection of the journalist

Media workers are killed and imprisoned every year. As the lines continue to blur between civilians and combatants in conflict, and as natural hazards continue to threaten conflict zones, the journalists covering a disaster may become more insecure (see Chapter 7). Harassment and possible imprisonment is also a risk to media workers who ask awkward questions about disasters. In China, for example, despite some early increase in media openness (Gang 2009), journalists have been imprisoned for pursuing the story of collapsed schools during the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 (Branigan 2010) (see Chapter 5).

Technical assistance for the journalist

Once upon a time, journalists had to go looking for experts to consult. Things have changed. National bodies such as the British Geological Survey (BGS) and the United States Geological Survey (USGS) have been open, helpful and innovative, prompt to announce and above all swift to help. Thomson–Reuters launched the quick-off-the-mark disaster website AlertNet. A number of organisations collaborate in producing an excellent multi-purpose portal managed by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Reliefweb. The UN Space Agency builds up satellite data from disaster-hit areas and makes it available on the web. The UN funds an International Secretariat for Disaster Reduction which tends to respond to big events, inevitably a little more slowly. The UN, through the World Health Organization, also backs CRED, at the Catholic University of Louvain. This database provides a lot of useful statistical information. Insurance giants such as Munich Re and Swiss Re have a clear stake in DRR, and have produced annual tallies of the cost, in lives, human suffering and economic toll, along with some thoughtful analysis.

Journals such as *Nature* and *Science*, *Scientific American* and *New Scientist* have over the decades built up a huge corpus of quickly accessible material about disasters. Francophone readers enjoy *Pour la Science*, *Science et Vie*, *Sciences Humaines* and *La Recherche*. Contributors have then gone on to write valuable popular books that should be available in media libraries. There is no shortage of general material for those who start looking. The problem is that although all disasters are likely to follow one of a set of broad general possible patterns, no existing website or

Box 63.2 Examples of research resources for journalists

Ben Wisner

- BGS: www.bgs.ac.uk/research/earth_hazards.html
- USGS: www.usgs.gov/hazards and www.usgs.gov/emergency
- AlertNet: www.alertnet.org
- Reliefweb: www.reliefweb.int/rw/dbc.nsf/doc100?OpenForm
- UN Space Agency: www.un-spider.org
- Munich Re: www.munichre-foundation.org/StiftungsWebsite/Projects/DisasterPrevention
- Swiss Re: www.swissre.com/rethinking
- CRED: www.cred.be

Tim Radford and Ben Wisner

encyclopaedic library can help with all the immediate questions about a precise catastrophic event, which has only just happened, in a particular place on the map.

Some media institutions have themselves attempted to provide support for improved disaster journalism. AlertNet, a major resource funded in-house as a non-profit subsidiary by Thomson-Reuters, was mentioned above. AlertNet has a tool called MediaBridge which specifically targets working journalists (www.alertnet.org/mediabridge/index.htm). In the USA, the CBS television network offers a portal to many sources of data and analysis; so many, however, that one needs some prior experience to use it well (www.cbsnews.com/digitaldan/disaster/disasters.shtml).

Also, networks of civil society organisations and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), as well as bloggers, now provide journalists with accessible ways in which to learn of success stories in avoiding disaster and fast-breaking impressions of sites of disaster impact (see Box 63.3). Blogs are a fascinating and little-studied phenomenon. They range from those produced by highly qualified scientists (e.g. daveslandslideblog.blogspot.com/2009/04/british-geological-survey-landslide-web.html), to lay people whose grasp of the issues, perhaps even reality, is suspect. So a good deal of care and discrimination is required in utilising this burgeoning resource. All of these developments are manifestations of the revolution in communication made possible by information and computer technology (Bulkley 2010).

Experts can help with answers to those questions that occur, spontaneously, as one follows the latest headlines. For example, is it true that someone could have foreseen this earthquake, that volcanic eruption, or the once-in-100-year flood? Is it true that authorities were repeatedly warned about the vulnerability of this district, on that hillside; or the weakness of that levee, under these cyclone conditions? Is it true that the government formally committed to a disaster emergency plan, but failed ever to implement it? From the journalist's point of view, an expert in DRR is a rich resource: someone who is familiar with the mechanics of death and destruction, and someone who also knows what should have been done, could have been done, and was not done: as we journalists say rather callously, someone who knows where the bodies are buried.

Studying the media

The area of media studies is vast and asks many questions that are germane to disaster and public perception of them; however, these are beyond the scope of this chapter. One might ask about the role of media in shaping public attitudes toward risks and toward natural hazards in particular. Another set of questions concerns how individual and group behaviour itself is influenced by media. Whole academic industries have grown up around the analysis of biases and ideological assumptions in the media (Bassett *et al.*, 2000). All the questions can be asked of the treatment of hazard, risk and disaster.

There are also some more descriptive studies of importance. Some centres monitor the coverage of various events including disasters and their reception by various publics. The Pew Center Project for Excellence in Journalism is one such (Pew 2008). Similar research work is sponsored by the Annenberg. For example, a major study during 1993–94 looked at 'Media, Disaster Relief and Images of the Developing World' (Cate 2010) (see Chapter 11). In 2005 the International Federation for Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' *World Disaster Report* found that media coverage of disasters was not proportional to human suffering and need, but biased in various ways (Wynter 2005). A number of scholars have found evidence of bias and of 'neglected disasters' (Shah 2005; Wisner and Lavell 2006). Critical scholars have deconstructed the stereotypes and images of disaster 'victims' (Fordham and Ketteridge 1998) (see Chapter 35).

Box 63.3 ICT, social media and bloggers

Terry Gipson

Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction, London, UK

Information communication technologies (ICTs) are changing the media landscape in ways that may help to shift popular and political attitudes to disaster risk reduction. The coverage of the 2004 Asian tsunami sits on the dividing line between old and new media perspectives. It predated now familiar channels such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, and yet it revealed a cultural contrast between the distant 'helicopter' perspective of the mass media and the grounded social media perspective of SMS (text messages) and blogs. The BBC news website opened its pages to blogs which made both stark and fascinating reading, including text-to-blog messages from people at the sharp end, in devastated communities in Sri Lanka, for example. The then head of BBC news, Richard Sambrook, described this as part of a 'sea change' in the locus of power of news delivery—particularly of fast-moving topical events. The Sichuan earthquake in 2008 was first broken on Twitter, and Ushahidi's SMS-monitoring and campaigning platform was born that same year out of the social turmoil of the Kenyan elections as the first large-scale example of SMS-based social campaigning. Just after the earthquake in 2010 in Haiti, Ushahidi linked survivors, responders and response co-ordinators via mobile phone texting and text-to-map analysis. YouTube broadcast eyewitness material from Haiti hours after the earthquake struck.

In the Philippines, since the early 2000s people have been using these sites for social networking, especially Friendster before Facebook emerged. It has been particularly used among overseas workers to maintain social relationships beyond borders among relatives, friends, alumni, etc., as a new medium of strengthening transnational communities. Now it is being used as a way of mobilising people in time of crisis. During a series of typhoons that battered the country during September 2009, there were stories of people mobilising resources among relatives and friends locally and across borders through such networks. In a country where remittances are crucial to both the daily economy and to coping with crises, Friendster and Facebook turn out to be powerful new additional media.

Two transitions are seen here: one from top-down mass media to narrowcast social media, and another from messaging to social mobilisation. Both offer possibilities for raising awareness and securing action for better disaster risk reduction. The shift from top-down to social media signifies a transformation of news representation through social media channels. Campaigning INGOs such as Greenpeace have been swift to grasp this opportunity—for example, with their 'Save the Turtle' campaign leading to 100,000 cyberactivists pressurising Indian corporation TATA to back down on wrecking a habitat with a port-building project. NGOs will increasingly recognise the opportunity to connect their collaborators—the excluded and the vulnerable—to wide audiences using these technologies.

The shift from messaging to social mobilisation emphasises the direct voice of groups—whether local or global—rather than the managing of messages by media organisations. For example, HablaHonduras.com was born out of the 2009 political turmoil in Honduras, and overnight it mobilised news and citizen action through Twitter, Facebook, Skype, Flickr and SMS. This was a response to a political rather than a natural crisis, but illustrates the way in which grassroots social movements are able to

Tim Radford and Ben Wisner

seize the initiative. The global social movement Global Network for Disaster Reduction focuses specifically on disaster risk reduction and has used a digitally orchestrated international monitoring project, combining blogs, Google Earth and social mapping, to create bottom-up pressure for change within the UN system.

This is a very different world from that of the traditional mass media. As with any innovations, many will fail to stand the test of time. However, the opportunity for social groupings and movements to secure a more powerful voice cannot be ignored. In a world where the excluded and vulnerable suffer disproportionately from the impact of disasters, the shift in the media landscape may create new opportunities for changed attitudes and action at a popular and political level.

Conclusion

What could be more shameful than a set of civil and national authorities that were made aware of the risks, but did nothing; or a guardian of liberty, an Argus, a Sentinel or an Observer that pounced upon the folly of a drug-addicted actress or a philandering footballer, that denounced venality in a minor politician or applauded bigotry in a conceited bishop, but failed to see, and warn of, the headlong approach of death, destruction and appalling suffering on an epic scale? M. Marius Hurard, editor of *Les Colonies*, should not be held up as a figure of fun, or journalistic ignominy. He cannot be accused of failing to address the question of danger to the town of Saint-Pierre. He did address it. He made precisely the wrong judgement at a critical moment in history, and when editors do such things, they tend to lose their jobs. It seems heartless under the circumstances to say so, but M. Hurard paid for his misjudgement, and was fired on the spot.

Some recommendations follow. Media workers should make more of an effort to inform themselves about the resources available to make disaster risk reduction an exciting and engaging topic for their audiences. Many resources do, in fact, exist. Scientists and humanitarian workers, for their part, need to make an effort to communicate with journalists in a way that makes it easier for the latter to put together good stories. Finally, energy and resources need to go into the perennial struggle against state censorship and exposure of special economic interests that manipulate 'the news'. One should never forget that powerful interests may not want disaster risk discussed, and that the media workers who do so need to be protected by international networks of people who care.