

DISASTERS HAVE NO TIMETABLE

When a disaster strikes, will your station be ready to report?

In a major disaster, you will need reporters both at the scene and in the newsroom. Reporters at the scene can get many facts immediately, describe the scene, and interview the rescuers and eyewitnesses. Do not send all your send everyone to the scene. Keep some folks in the newsroom to follow other leads and put the stories together. If necessary, call off-duty staff in to work. A good reporter will always be happy to be involved. It is good to decide who will be in the field, and who will person the news-desk at the station to assemble and then disseminate important information to your listeners.

GETTING TO THE SECENE

Reporters may have problems getting to the scene of the emergency. If it is local, they might be able to get there by car, but may find that roads are closed by police because of the emergency. This is where preparation can help. You will probably find that an official pass or mentioning the name of a senior officer at the scene will help you get past any roadblocks. If the roads are blocked with traffic, you may have to walk or hitch a ride from a passing emergency vehicle (again, it helps if you are known by the emergency service staff).

Always think about how far forward you should go, especially when traveling into a disaster area. Although you need to get as near as possible to the action, you may have to stay in a stay in a protected area in order to get your story out within minutes. In these cases, you need to assess your means of communication, such as cell-phones, recorders or radios.

Although many reporters are good at getting to the scene quickly, many do not think about getting to the newsroom to write the story or you will need to set up a quick remote. Creating and having on-hand an "Emergency Reporting" kit that is stocked with batteries, note-pads and pens and a list of contact phone numbers will help make reporting in the field more efficient.

AT THE SCENE

On arriving at the scene, the first thing you must do is quickly assess what is happening so you can inform your station and send back a first story.

- Take a quick look around and try to find people in authority: perhaps the chief fire officer or the leader of the rescue team.
- Introduce yourself quickly and correctly and promise you will not take up their time. Ask simple questions to find out what has happened and what is happening now. Ask about the dead and injured, what rescue attempts are being made and, if relevant, what was the possible cause. Do not enter into a debate with busy people, or you may be removed from the scene. Reporters should record these quick interviews.
- Spend five minutes quickly writing a short story in your notebook. Contact your newsroom and let them know the main facts, so they can assess what they need to do, such as sending more reporters or pre-empting programming. Agree on a time when you will be in touch with them again, perhaps in half-an-hour.
- Now you can get more details and start to build up your major story. Talk to as many people as possible without getting in the way of rescuers.
- If it is a major disaster, ask the emergency services for a special telephone number for people to call to find out about friends and relatives who might be victims. Once you broadcast this telephone number, be sure your “base team” has it ready to relay to folks calling the station.

Look busy and show that you are doing *your* job professionally. Wear some official identification tag, even if it is only your newsroom security pass, and stay clear of any crowds of sightseers. If you are mistaken for a spectator, you may be removed if police clear sightseers from the scene. Once you have been seen talking to senior officers, other rescue staff will probably leave you alone to do your job.

REPORTER'S MAIN TASKS

The scene may be chaotic, but you have some essential tasks to do. These will include the following:

NOTES & PRIMARY CONTACTS

Make lots of notes about what you see and what people say. Reporters should do a lot of recording, so make sure you have enough batteries for your gear. A “disaster reporting kit” should be set up with recording gear, mics and plenty of batteries. Save some space on your recorders in case something unexpected happens, such as a second explosion, another tremor or the discovery of someone trapped alive in the wreckage.

EYEWITNESSES

Look for eyewitnesses, people who were there at the time of the event and who can describe what happened. Your “disaster reporting kit” should have a notebook and a few pens/pencils. Get their personal details such as names, ages and what they were doing at the scene. They may be in a state of shock, so be gentle when you ask questions. Try to get them to explain what happened in their own words.

KEEP CONTACTS

Keep contact with the people in charge or who seem to know what is going on. You can leave them while you do other interviews, but always know where they are in case something happens and you need more information from them.

KEEP STATION INFORMED

Keep your station informed of latest developments and contact them on a regular basis. There is nothing more frustrating for a news editor than to lose contact with journalists in the field and not know what is happening. For example, once you know where the injured are being taken, tell your newsroom so they can send another reporter to the hospital.

The scenes of disasters and other emergencies can be chaotic, with events changing minute-by-minute. Many reporters are afraid that they will miss something while they are contacting their newsroom. If the activity seems to slow down, take the chance to contact your newsroom. If you have to leave the scene, arrange with journalists from other news organizations to “keep an eye on things”. They too will probably need to contact their newsrooms, so you can return the favour for them. Try where possible to

share information, but you may also be in competition with some of the reporters there, for example reporters from a competing newspaper.

FIND COLOR

Look for things that add color to your report. By color, I mean observations which may not be essential to the story, but will help your listeners imagine what is happening. Radio reporters should listen for sounds, like the sound of an electric saw being used to cut through wreckage or the shouts of rescuers.

REPORT THE FACTS

Try to answer all the obvious questions your listeners will ask. Remember **WWWWH - Who? What? Where? When? Why?** and **How?** You may not be able to answer the Why? question right away, because details may not be clear.

You need to give the following kinds of details:

Casualties - numbers of dead and injured, types of injury, where casualties were taken, any well-known names, people who escaped.

Damage - the extent, and estimate of the cost, what kind of damage, any well-known buildings.

Description - of the event itself, eyewitness stories, the scene afterwards.

Rescue and relief - the people involved, the action being taken, the facilities, any problems (such as weather), evacuations, any acts of heroism.

Cause - what the experts say, eyewitness accounts, who sounded the alarm and was there any warning?

Follow-up action - will there be post mortems or inquiries, legal action, rebuilding?

DO NOT EXAGGERATE!

Let the facts speak for themselves. If you exaggerate you could cause unnecessary alarm and panic to your listeners. If fires have destroyed acres of forest in a small corner of your broadcast area, it would be wrong to write your opening tag: " _____ is ablaze."

Try to keep your emotions under control. Although you may become emotionally involved in the event, you must try to report the story without putting in your own feelings. For example, you might find the scene of an earthquake extremely distressing. You might see the bodies of men, women and children lying in the broken remains of their homes. Do not talk about how bad it makes you feel. Describe the scene carefully in simple language. If you report well, you will take your listeners to the scene, allowing them to feel the tragedy with their own emotions.

TASKS IN THE NEWSROOM

Although your station should always try to send a reporter to the scene of a disaster or other major crisis, there is plenty of work for reporters and staff left in the newsroom. There are more details to gather, stories to write and pages or bulletins to put together. In some cases, the newsroom becomes the public's information center. You will have callers asking for various things, such as: Which hospital are the injured being taken to. Where is the nearest shelter. What about animal shelters. The "base" team at the station can assemble that information to share with the listeners and callers.

ASSIGN TASKS

The news editor or chief of staff should organize teams to do different tasks. Someone - or a team of writers - must be responsible for the final story or stories, either writing them or checking how separate stories fit together in the overall coverage. If the news editor and chief of staff are busy with other jobs, one person must take responsibility for overall coverage.

Someone must keep the rest of your news organization informed. The General Manager, or Program Director will need to know if there will be extended news coverage and drop-in bulletins. The more people know, the better they can help.

Gather more details

Although the reporter at the scene can do a lot, they cannot usually do everything needed during a time of emergency. At least one team member behind the scenes should be getting additional information, background details and comments. They can keep in touch with the emergency control rooms for details. They can find out from experts or from your broadcasts, contact people such as ministers or aid agencies for comments and details on what help can be given to the victims.

Reporters may need to be sent to airports or hospitals to report on how casualties are being received and treated.