The Media and Public Trust in Natural Disaster: The Canadian Experience

A Roundtable

IDNDR Day, October 1998

A Report by
Black & White Communications

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The Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction (ICLR) was established in 1998 with the mission to reduce the loss of life and property caused by severe weather and earthquakes through the identification and support of sustained actions to improve society's capacity to adapt to, anticipate, mitigate, withstand and recover from natural disasters.

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INTRODUCTION

At a gathering in Ottawa on October 14, 1998, marking the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, Black & White Communications Inc. convened a number of leading Canadian new executives and journalists as well as a number of key stake-holders from NGOs, community organizations, the utilities and the Weather Network to participate in a Roundtable on the Media and Public Trust to discuss their experiences in covering a natural disaster. These participants had reflected on the special demands and challenges of covering an emergency, and shared the lessons they learned and best practices from what they saw, what they did well, and what they would do better in the future.

Canadian Disasters

The participants came from Winnipeg, Ontario and Quebec, and had covered the 1997 flood of the Red River in southern Manitoba, and the 1998 ice storm in eastern Ontario and western Quebec. The participants were joined by representatives from a humanitarian response agency, in this case the Red Cross, which played an important role in assisting those affected by a disaster; and by a representative from a power utility, who described the challenges facing the provider of major segment of the social infrastructure when that system is damaged by a disaster.

Posing the Questions

Kathryn White, who facilitated the Roundtable, opened the session by touching on the themes of the discussion and posing the questions for consideration. A central theme was “authoritative voices”: when danger threatens a community and trusted places are no longer safe, how do we get people to adapt their ideas of safety, acknowledge danger and move to safety? A second key theme was how the media can enhance their own credibility, and work with and become trusted voices in the community to encourage people to protect themselves, their property and the environment.

Locating Safety in Disaster

Referring to the report on earlier research undertaken by Black & White, with support from Emergency Preparedness Canada and Environment Canada, called “*Locating Safety in Disaster”,* Ms White noted that for research participants the media were always within people’s awareness in the background with important emergency information, but they were not always entirely credible. People invariably turned to secondary sources of information to confirm media reports, and to interpret the information and decide what to do in the emergency. In particular, they looked to their own “authoritative voices” within their own communities. There was not a coherent single voice in Canada, illustrating the imperative for both media organizations and disaster managers, to know who was the credible or authoritative voice, to tap into this critical partner. Often they turned to someone older, a parental, guiding figure - someone who already had credibility. A crisis is not a time to try to establish credibility, but it is a time when it can be confirmed, built, and maintained.

It is important for the media to be able to work with existing authoritative voices in the

community, and some thought should be given to how that can be done. And does building on existing authoritative voices in the community operate the other way: do the media have a role in presenting emergency officials as credible and authoritative, to encourage people to comply with recommendations and take protective measures? The media clearly have a pivotal role in helping people get from danger to safety, and enhancing the media's credibility is in everyone's interest.

A disaster is a time of extraordinary demand for, and urgency of, information, and close integration of the media and the emergency response authorities is essential. But a disaster may also disrupt the normal working relationships between the various organizations that are involved in responding to the emergency, as they become preoccupied with (or confused about) their own responsibilities. In the absence of a coordinated emergency response framework that clearly orients all participants towards common goals according to understood guidelines, the regular interactions between these groups can fall apart and expose the divisions between them just as the need for their cooperation is most critical.

Discussions of the two disasters focussed on at the Roundtable, indicated that the ice storm event seemed to put a number of response agencies off their stride and cause them to retreat from the media. In the Red River flood, perhaps because it was a slow-onset disaster, government authorities and media seemed, in general, to cooperate well in informing the public of the threat. The ice storm took communities and response agencies alike by surprise, and in many cases they were unprepared. These patterns are suggestive of a phenomenon that researchers in public behaviour in emergencies have called "emergent norms." Emergent norms have been defined as "acceptable, albeit fairly temporary, guides for human interaction during a disaster situation"[1] They are a new set of norms, or values, guiding behaviour, that may arise in a crisis that has rendered normal patterns of behaviour inappropriate or inadequate. Emergent norms help those struck by disaster make sense of what has happened, and determine how they should behave and what they should do. Emergent norms are usually discussed as a phenomenon affecting members of the public affected by a disaster, and in that regard it is important that all those involved in emergency response be aware of them in order to understand the public response to a disaster.

It may be, however, that organizations involved in disaster response are themselves inclined to adopt emergent norms when their own procedures and relationships are inadequate for dealing with a crisis. This may apply to the ice storm, which was unexpected, which caused severe damage to infrastructure and created a disaster that was both intense and geographically widespread, and which also hit hard many of the very organizations that were under pressure to respond to the public emergency. The experience of many of those who were called upon to respond to the demands of the ice storm shows that it is important that realistic and comprehensive emergency plans be drawn up by all those groups that have a role to play in responding to an emergency, both individually to address their own responsibilities, and collaboratively to address the essential interactions and interdependencies among them.
This report is a compilation and analysis of the points made in the Roundtable discussion. It also reflects the written comments of three of those who participated in the Roundtable and one journalist who was unable to attend; and it includes references to the study *"Locating Safety in*

[1] Saundra K. Schneider, 1995. *Flirting with Disaster: Public Management in Crisis Situations*. New York and London: M.E. Sharpe. Page 53

Disaster", in part to incorporate more experience of the flood of the Red River in Manitoba. It is organized in sections focussing on public information during the emergency; what the media need to do, and need from others, during a disaster; and the roles of other organizations during a disaster. To some extent these are artificial distinctions, made for ease of discussion. But the divisions serve to highlight the fact that the media cannot function without external information sources, and that government and emergency response organizations depend on the media to disseminate their information to the public. A final section lists the major lessons learned, outlines emergent issues that require further consideration, and sets out policy recommendations to be passed on to emergency planning authorities. Summaries of the comments of each of the Roundtable participants are attached to the report as an appendix.

REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

1. Public information during disaster

Media audiences increase during a disaster, and not only in areas that are directly affected. The pressure to cover emergency events is a response not only to the obvious priority needs of information for victims, but also to a broader audience for reports on the situation. Nevertheless, most participants in the Roundtable were clear that their first priority in covering the emergency was disseminating accurate information from government and emergency officials to the public about the emergency situation and the efforts to address the needs of victims. Journalists knew that the public affected by the ice storm needed to know what the damage was, which roads were closed, what offices and institutions were closed, as well as weather predictions and assessments for the restoration of services and resumption of the normal routine. In the case of the Red River flood, which developed slowly, people needed to know where the flooding was, when it was estimated to reach their community, what was the likelihood of damage there, and what measures they should take to protect themselves.

The participants, and particularly journalists, acknowledged that the public information needs in an emergency demand that disseminating official information from authorities must take precedence over the media's accepted "watchdog" role, and that they should, as a public service, focus on reporting emergency messages. They were equally clear, however, that the media are not the mouthpiece of governments or agencies involved in emergency response and would resume their critical approach when the emergency situation was under control.

The second priority mentioned for public information was increased demand for advice on coping with the disaster. The desire for this kind of information became apparent during the emergency. Several participants said that, in this matter, they learned during the course of the emergency. This desire for practical advice was noted also in *Locating Safety*, in which focus group subjects recalled that they had heard advisories on protective measures, but did not know how to carry them out and had wanted more complete information.

The group noted that news outlets quickly responded to audience requests for information on such practical matters as how to hook up and run a generator safely; deal with frozen foods that had thawed when the freezers lost power, and place sandbags to make a dyke, by passing on information from experts on a range of practical subjects. People also expressed a desire for

advice on coping with the disaster, such as how to address their children's fears of the approaching flood. Media interviews were held with psychologists and other specialists on how people could cope with the extraordinary stresses the emergency placed on them and their families. The fact that these media outlets were able to respond to audience needs indicates that they had a means in place for listening to their audience, and that they were attending to what listeners and viewers were saying. It is very important that media be aware of this need to listen to the public in situations when public information is paramount.

A number of participants noted that their television or radio station became a kind of forum for the exchange of information, such as offers of assistance and requests for assistance. One noted that his radio station acted as a community bulletin board during the ice storm, broadcasting requests for supplies or services and for offers of help. Others recalled, however, the number of offers for help that were not taken up, and the pile of firewood that was collected but not used. To a degree this reveals just how reluctant people were to evacuate their homes; but it also points to the need for, as one participant put it, "help in coordinating help." An excess of the wrong kind of help not only fails to address real needs, but can take up valuable storage space and agency time and effort. Social service agencies gather and relay information on what items are needed and where they should be brought, and will also have information on what items or services are no longer needed in certain areas. It was stressed that emergency authorities and social service agencies, such as the Red Cross which have specific mandates for coordinating aid and donations, should lead the placing and coordinating of requests and offers of help in a disaster.

Story Telling

Another aspect of the emergency coverage which emerged was that of "story-telling," - providing a forum for the whole community to share stories of coping with common adversity and, in one case, inviting them to nominate their "heroes of the storm." This was a role that the print media performed well, and it was a welcome supplement to the urgent updates of the emergency situation. CBC Television in Montreal also responded to the public need to remember the event by assembling and selling a video tape of highlights of the coverage of the ice storm, and donating the proceeds to the ice storm relief effort.

Reflection

The need to reflect on the emergency in the weeks and months afterwards - how people handled their own situations and coped with inconvenience, uncertainty, danger, and loss - was a strong theme in *Locating Safety*. That report noted that many people had not had sufficient opportunity to talk over their experiences with others, and that stress and trauma lingered long after the media attention had died away. *Locating Safety* argued that debriefing sessions held in affected communities after disasters would be a valuable service to victims.

Many participants in the Roundtable recalled that their colleagues and staff worked long hours to maintain the coverage of the emergency, even though many of them were affected themselves and often had to travel to work against official advisories. As one journalist noted, this was in a sense a "good news story," in which there were no bad guys but thousands of citizens struggling with the same difficulties, and the media wanted to be part of the community response.

The different media provided different types of information and served different, and complementary, roles for the public during the emergency. One participant noted that the ice storm was really "a radio event," since victims without power and television relied on battery-powered radios for information, and since radio's strength is its ability to disseminate information immediately. Television offered plenty of pictures, for which people have a great appetite - scenes of the coming Red River flood helped residents of Manitoba understand the magnitude of the disaster that threatened them, and viewers all across the country wanted to see what the flood and the ice storm really looked like. In addition, though victims of the ice storm could not watch television, many participants noted that people who were not affected still phoned friends and relatives who were affected, and passed on the information in the broadcast. Newspapers, on the other hand, were valued for the greater wealth and detail of information they provided, which were particularly welcome for those victims of the ice storm whose only news of the situation came from the regular briefings on a battery-powered radio.

2. Lessons learned for the media in covering disaster

Responding promptly to an emergency was suggested as an important element in media coverage and public information during a disaster. Several Roundtable participants felt that they had been slow to recognize the ice storm as a true emergency which would require exceptional attention from the media - that the public would depend so heavily on the media for basic and crucial information. The first notice that the ice storm had resulted in a general state of emergency did not come in an official announcement: the emergency consisted in large measure of the widespread power failures which began to accumulate during the day after the first freezing rain storm. For some media offices, recognizing that the situation was nearing emergency proportions was a matter of monitoring and assessing the situation themselves, in some cases actually counter to official assurances. This experience confirmed, for some, the need for the media to retain their independent and critical perspective.

Self-Sufficiency

While some media outlets were uncertain whether, and when, to move to special emergency coverage of the ice storm, others were themselves hit by power failures threatening their ability to operate. The newspaper of one participant was forced by power failures to set up an ad-hoc news room in another building, where they struggled with sporadic power losses and telephone line failures.

Meanwhile, the Weather Network, whose English programming was sent by fibre which maintained the communications system from the studios in Montreal to broadcast facilities in Toronto, faced going off the air and depriving the public and other networks of critical weather forecasts during the ice storm, when the generators were stolen. Others had no trouble with their own facilities, but staff could not travel to work on dangerous roads, or could not reach important sources to get information on the emergency. These participants stressed the importance of having their own emergency plans in place, including arrangements for back-up power supply and procedures for operating when regular channels and routines are interrupted in the future.

A number of participants commented on the importance of providing the right kind of information, and in the right manner. Journalists felt that people were making decisions on the basis of the information they got from the media, and were aware that every word counted. Others noted that the public looked to them for critical information on the emergency and on what they should do, and considered the media to be an essential service in the emergency response. The first priority was accurate information; journalists must verify all information and check their sources. During the ice storm a few rumours were broadcast, which caused inconvenience and could have caused much more serious consequences. Participants recognized the grave risks of reporting a rumour and a delay for verification was justified. Rumour monitoring is an important component of emergency information, for all media and for emergency response agencies whose actions and advice are reported to the public. In addition, not all information needs to be reported, and journalists should exercise judgement in deciding what to report. Journalists should consider what people need to know under the circumstances.

Another important aspect of information in a disaster is framing the information in terms that are understandable and relevant to the audience. One news manager explained that early in their station coverage of the Red River flood, they interviewed experts who had discussed the approaching flood in terms of statistical probabilities. This news manager suggested this was not the kind of information people could readily understand or relate to their own situation, and it was not suitable to the 6 p.m. television news broadcast. Likewise, as noted above, in Winnipeg and other locations the media responded to requests from their audiences by supplying information they had not anticipated that people would want, such as very practical advice on protective measures and coping with family stress in a disaster.

Tone of Voice

A few participants noted that the tone they adopted in their broadcasts was important in keeping people informed and reassured, and not arousing further anxiety. A participant from Manitoba recalled that her television stations's coverage had been praised as being non-alarmist, even though they had devoted all possible efforts to warning the public that the flood threatened to cause very serious damage. Another participant got the opposite impression of coverage of the ice storm, which he observed began to follow a “party line” that was a little excessive in its portrayal of the storm as an event of almost war-like magnitude.

Culture and Interpretation

A reporter with the Eastern Door community newspaper at Kahnawake wrote that the paper suspended operations during the ice storm so that staff could be with their families while the power was out. He explained that traditional Mohawk principles of collective thinking, voluntarism and resiliency contributed to the community's coping well with the emergency. In addition, the Oka crisis of the summer of 1991 had helped the community learn a framework for emergency planning. This suggests a theme noted in the literature on emergency planning and response, that cultural minorities may have different perceptions of the threat itself and of the best way to respond to it. Awareness of the different cultural minorities that live in a region can help emergency planners and media both collaborate with those communities in emergency planning, and provide appropriate information and support during an emergency.

3. Meeting media needs in disaster coverage

There was agreement that in disaster, media priorities shifted to relaying to the public the most recent information from the most credible sources. Participants also agreed that the media's primary requirement is access to key decision makers. This access has two aspects: the regular provision of the latest information on the situation and response plans by government and emergency response officials, and the availability of authorized spokespersons for interviews and additional background information.

The provision of immediate and complete information on the emergency by emergency response officials allowed the media to act as an essential service in the disaster - getting verified, accurate information to the public and thus facilitating the response and minimizing confusion. Most of the participants in the Roundtable reported that the government officials leading the disaster response in their region recognized that the media play a crucial role in a disaster, and held regular news briefings. These briefings were attended by representatives of all the agencies involved in the emergency response, including local elected representatives, utilities, police, and the military, who answered all questions. The exception to this pattern was the active unwillingness of officials in the City of Kingston to involve the media in the response to the ice storm.

The second aspect of media access to decision makers is the availability of spokespersons for interviews and further information. Government officials managing the response to the Red River flood in Manitoba made every effort to provide the media with spokespersons for interviews, and the local media made extensive use of these opportunities. Many journalists who covered the ice storm, on the other hand, had difficulty finding suitable spokespersons from the various governments and utilities involved in the emergency response. It was agreed that the most helpful spokespersons are very knowledgeable about their agencies' role in the response effort and understand how the media operate and what they need, and are comfortable being interviewed and appearing on television. Emergency response organizations will need to give careful thought to designating media spokespersons to be available in disaster or other crisis situations.

The source of the problems with the availability of information and official spokespersons appeared to be inadequate preparation and organization within the agencies themselves. The situation improved as the emergency wore on, but participants noted that it is in the first few hours and days of an emergency that an effective and authoritative emergency information system is most needed.

Several participants argued that, flowing from the important recognition of the media as an essential service in disaster response, governments should support the media in a disaster to ensure that they can continue to operate. There were several instances of such a formal recognition during the ice storm: the federal government provided CKAC Radio in Montreal with diesel fuel to keep its emergency generators running; and The Weather Network was ranked fairly high (number three) on the priority list for diesel deliveries for its generators.

Finally, the availability of equipped facilities and communications capabilities in a particular location influences how well the media can cover a disaster there. Many people had noticed that

there was much more media coverage of the ice storm in Montreal than in the equally hard-hit eastern region of Ontario; the reason for that was that many media outlets are established in Montreal and were functioning within a few days of the storm, whereas getting to and reporting from rural areas was difficult for a number of weeks. In Kingston the media working during the storm were reduced to just one newspaper, and it was unable to inform other media about the situation there because the phone lines were undependable. And early in the ice storm, some networks had trouble finding accommodation and working space for journalists visiting Montreal to cover the ice storm in that city.

4. The roles of other agencies

The Roundtable included representatives of the media, both management, journalists and anchors, and of a power utility and non-governmental social service agencies, and this section reflects both their observations on their experiences during the Red River Flood and Ice Storm, and the experiences of the media representatives with those other emergency response agencies. Since local governments were central in coordinating the emergency response and facilitating the media's reporting of it, comments on their roles are also included.

Local Governments

Local, municipal governments take control of most emergency response actions in their communities, with assistance as required and requested from provincial and federal governments. Most participants at the Roundtable reported that the local governments responsible for emergency response management had quickly mobilized the emergency response organization, and had set up a communications centre for holding regular media briefings. Round table participants described the successful communication arrangements and facilities that were established by the City of Winnipeg and provincial ministries in Manitoba during the Red River flood, and by the Ottawa-Carleton Regional Government during the ice storm. These operations coalesced into collaborative systems that were very effective. Another participant described a very ineffective situation created by the City of Kingston, which refused to allow media representatives any access to decision makers and did not provide media spokespersons or hold regular briefings. This was frustrating for the media trying to inform local residents of the situation in their community, and was noted by the residents themselves: participants in the *Locating Safety* focus group held in Kingston expressed their dissatisfaction with the way the local government had managed the emergency response.

The Utilities

Clearly the power utilities will have a major role in many types of emergencies and need to be prepared to handle their parts of the response and to provide information to the media, as will operators of many other essential services and social infrastructure. The ice storm, however, was in very large part a power-loss emergency that placed the utilities at the centre of attention, and forced both Hydro-Quebec and Ontario Hydro to recognize that their internal emergency organization and procedures for media relations and public information were inadequate. Most participants in the Roundtable had problems obtaining basic information about the power failures and the predictions for the restoration of power from Hydro-Quebec and Ontario Hydro,

especially in the first few days of the storm when the utilities did not appear to grasp the extent of the damage to their systems or know how to deal with the enormous demand for information.

Some participants from Quebec noted that Hydro-Quebec seemed to have trouble designating spokespersons who could speak the language of broadcast and who were confident speaking on camera, and that assigned spokespersons changed daily. In Ontario, it was difficult at first to get information from Ontario Hydro, and the utility had not been organized about its own responsibilities, responses, and designated spokespersons.

Nevertheless, once Ontario Hydro set up its call centre, it found itself providing a broader range of services than it had anticipated. Agents received calls from across North America offering services and equipment, and directed those callers to the appropriate authority. They also formed relationships with isolated victims of the storm who had called just to talk, and began to call them regularly to check on them. Ontario Hydro learned, as it operated the call centre, that it was well placed to carry out a broader range of emergency functions, as well as social ones. This instance

suggests the multiple opportunities that can develop during an emergency to provide assistance to victims. Further, collaborative planning by, and open communication among, emergency response planners and agencies would allow those leading the various aspects of emergency response to guide and support these parallel assistance efforts.

Ontario Hydro believes that the media are allies of the utility during an emergency, and endeavoured to be very open with information on their operations in the repair efforts, recognizing, like the media themselves, they took some time to register the extent of the disaster. However, officials still have reservations about creating an appetite for information that they won't always be able to meet, and thus creating internal pressure to produce information for the media. Information will still need to be controlled to ensure that no unconfirmed information is released.

The Red Cross and Non-Government Service Organizations

In a disaster the Canadian Red Cross Society (the Red Cross) keeps a data base on evacuated people and can provide useful information to the media on the numbers of people affected by a disaster. The Red Cross and other service organizations also identify and request emergency items the affected public needs, coordinate offers of help with requests, and determine where items for donation can be taken. Red Cross officials know that a good relationship with the media is necessary, both in order to give the media information on people affected by a disaster, and to get information to the public, through the media, on what kinds of donations are needed and what items are not necessary. There can be problems, however; the media in Manitoba were unable to get any information from the Red Cross on what had become of all the money donated for Red River flood victims by relief efforts carried out across Canada. Organizations of a humanitarian nature often are viewed as particularly credible sources and resources by the media.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Lessons learned

Lessons for the media:

- all media outlets should have their own emergency plans that cover physical needs such as back-up power sources and procedures for operating with reduced resources, as well as guidelines on public information priorities and interactions with emergency response organizations

- it is not always apparent when an emergency escalates to a crisis or disaster; however, the sooner a disaster is recognized, the more appropriate is the response that can be mobilized and the community informed

- establish feedback mechanisms to listen to your audience and adjust the information provided to address the needs of the public in an emergency

- verify information and check sources, and be alert to the development of rumours and the powerful role the media has in increasing the perception of risk

- be aware of cultural minorities in the community and of the different perspective on emergencies and protective measures - their need for specialized information

- a disaster plan can identify the lead of social service agencies in the request and coordination of donations where the media can play an important, catalytic role

Lessons for other organizations involved in emergency response:

- have internal emergency responsibilities pre-established

- have guidelines and procedures for releasing public information and for interacting with the media. Appoint spokespersons who are knowledgeable about the organization's emergency response activities and are familiar and comfortable with the media

- ensure that information is verified before it is released, and monitor the media for rumours and public misunderstandings, and correct them promptly

2. Roundtable themes and emergent issues

i Finding authoritative voices to help people move from danger to safety

In order to provide an authoritative voice during an emergency, it is necessary to understand what kind of information people find most useful, compelling and credible. It can then be asked whether the media have been operating on reasonably accurate assumptions of people's responses to emergency information, and how they can tailor emergency messages to public attitudes in order to enhance the credibility of media information, and encourage people to heed warnings and protect themselves in disaster situations. This is a continuous feedback loop: an essential one. Citizen-viewer, listener and readers' calls and questions to media outlets must be taken as indicators of the type of information needed during different phases of a disaster. The principle is enhancing credibility as a means of protecting citizens, their property and the environment.

Research on public behaviour in disasters has identified some useful information about public behaviour in disasters:

- people rarely panic in emergency situations, rather they go through a series of steps - usually quite reasonable (in unreasonable situations)

- people often deny that they are at risk in an emergency or from an approaching threat. *Locating Safety* observed this tendency in people who had experienced the Red River floods, who had not believed, against mounting evidence, that their houses would flood, even though they believed that others in their neighbourhoods probably would.

- people are subject to anxiety during an emergency and, in the absence of clear direction, uncertainty about what to do, and may suffer from trauma and stress after an emergency.

Emergency researchers have also found that the kind of information people receive in an emergency can influence how they behave:

- with complete, clear, and consistent information confirmed by several different sources, and not refuted by other credible sources, people know what to do in an emergency and are less likely to deny that they are at risk

- when information is confusing, ambiguous, incomplete or inconsistent, people are more likely to ignore warnings or become more anxious and uncertain, and are less likely to comply with recommendations for protective action

- denial of risk is a pervasive reaction, and people will often not evacuate until they are directly informed of their risk by a person in authority.

These research findings provide several approaches for the media in reporting emergency information. First, since denial of risk and reluctance to take protective action is very common and panic is rare, the provision of complete information to encourage people to protect themselves is probably a more appropriate principle to guide emergency information than the concern that some information may cause panic. Clear and complete information can reduce

people's anxiety, help them make decisions about what to do in an emergency and increase their confidence that they can cope with the situation.

Second, the tendency to deny a risk can be very strong, and encouraging people to protect themselves may require both messages from the media and the involvement of local authorities and trusted members of the community. This is an important argument for the participation of the media in the design of emergency plans and procedures, the strongest recommendation to emerge from the Roundtable discussion. It is also a reminder that people decide how to respond to an emergency on the basis of a range of considerations, including family, property, or cultural concerns and more practical aspects of evacuating, and that encouraging people to heed warnings is a matter that needs a great deal more understanding.

ii Improving communication between the media and governments and other agencies responsible for emergency planning and response

A significant observation made by many participants in the Roundtable was that media, government, utilities and other organizations do not know very much about each other's fields of expertise and procedures for operation. This lack of understanding can lead to distrust between organizations and unrealistic expectations of performance and provision of information, which can in turn lead to an undervaluing of the imperative tasks and the expertise required to do them. Even more seriously, it also hinders their cooperation in emergency response.

Greater cooperation in the planning of emergency procedures would be an important step in addressing this lack of understanding and mutual respect, but organizations can take advantage of other opportunities to explain their operational guidelines and procedures. Responders to small events might explain to the media what is involved in a particular operation, what assessments and considerations underlie a decision to proceed in a certain manner, and what skills and expertise are required to carry out a procedure: the same principles of building credibility or an authoritative voice with the public is also true among response agencies, government, civic authorities, NGOs and the media. We must also recognize that this takes a continuing investment of resources over time to achieve the pay off of a more informed citizenry in a crisis, and reduced impacts. This investment and its supporting commitment may be most difficult for NGOs on tight budgets and the media who institutionally changes their focus on the news of each new day. Nevertheless, these bodies are essential to this process and incentives for cooperation might be considered (for the media, for example, being able to report on the process). When the media understand the factors involved in assessing an emergency situation and taking action to repair damage, for example, their expectations will be more realistic and their public reports more complete and informative. Similarly, when emergency response agencies understand the needs of the media, they will be better able to provide appropriate information and spokespersons, in a manner that supports the media's process for public reporting.

Improved communications and trust among emergency response organizations would facilitate the support and guidance of unexpected sources and mechanisms of help in an emergency - such as the relationships that developed between Ontario Hydro's call centre agents and isolated victims of the ice storm - and thus preserve flexibility in the response. Efforts such as those would be more effective, and less likely to go wrong, if they were linked with those of other agencies and guided by common principles and procedures.

3. Policy Recommendations

A key recommendation emerging from the Roundtable is the need for authoritative voices and to re-enforce their credibility in a disaster.

> **Public information is a critical aspect of the response to a disaster. The news media are professionally experienced and equipped to disseminate official information quickly and should be seen as an essential component in the emergency response system, and as an essential service in an disaster. As such, the media must participate in emergency planning and disaster exercises at the local, provincial, and national levels. The official disaster response system should provide the necessary support to the media to allow them to operate during an emergency.**

Many of the issues emerging from the Roundtable discussion would be appropriate topics for discussion during cooperative emergency planning, and would benefit from a collaborative planning framework.

- a formal recognition of the essential role of the media in emergency response would serve notice to governments and emergency response organizations that media participation is an essential component of their own emergency plans and procedures.

- cooperative planning orients all participants towards the common goal of responding to the needs of the affected public during an emergency, making them partners in a shared enterprise rather than misunderstood and beleaguered separate agencies focussing on their own performance.

- joint planning sessions provide a needed opportunity for representatives of the media and other emergency response organizations to learn more about each other's operational procedures and requirements and emergency responsibilities.

- a joint planning process offers an important forum for the exchange of information on public behaviour during an emergency, and the establishment of guidelines and procedures for providing credible and authoritative information to the affected public.

Mutual understanding and trust among media and other emergency responders is a necessary basis for their collaboration in a unified emergency response framework in which all participants know how their roles fit into the larger effort. Public confidence in the capabilities of emergency responders would be increased by their knowledge of the complexities of emergency response and their trust in the skills possessed by those who carry it out. That public confidence confers credibility on the authorities responsible for all aspects of disaster response.

APPENDIX

Roundtable Participants

Facilitator: Kathryn White, Black & White Communications Inc.

1. Don Butler, Executive Editor, The Ottawa Citizen
2. Robin Walsh, Media Relations Office, Canadian International Development Agency
3. Lynn Haddrall, Editor, The Kingston Whig-Standard
4. Tom Moorehead, Senior Vice-President Operations, Pelmorex - The Weather Network
5. Mark Bulgutch, Executive Producer, CBC-TV Newsworld, Live Programming
6. Jules Bordeleau, News Coordinator, CKAC Radio, Montreal
7. Michel Vincent, CKAC Radio, Montreal
8. Paul Kovacs, Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction
9. Don Shropshire, Canadian Red Cross
10. Janet Lalonde, Canadian Red Cross
11. Jim West, Ontario Hydro
12 Diana Swain, Anchor, CBC TV Winnipeg
13. Scott Hannant, Executive Producer, News, CJOH TV, Ottawa
14 Emmanuelle La Traverse, Anchor, CHOT-TV, Hull
15 Dennis Trudeau, Anchor, Newswatch, CBC-TV, Montreal
16 Charles Caccia, MP and former Federal Minister of Environment
17 Chris Dornan, Director, School of Journalism, Carleton University, Ottawa
18 Tom Dearhouse, Reporter, Eastern Door community newspaper, Kahnawake (written submission)

SUMMARIES OF PARTICIPANTS' COMMENTS

1. Don Butler, Executive Editor, The Ottawa Citizen

The offices of the Ottawa Citizen didn't lose power during the ice storm. The paper was published and consistently delivered, even to outlying areas where everything else broke down and people were isolated by the storm. The Citizen was rather slow to catch on to the story of ice storm, but by the second or third day the storm "took over the paper." Journalists wanted to be part of the event and rose to the occasion, working long hours to produce the paper.

People wanted three things from media coverage of the storm:

1. information: what is the situation, what should people do, how could they help. The media have an ambiguous role in a crisis: though information is the highest priority, the media are not strictly a conveyer of information. They will put their own spin on information they get from spokespersons.

2. advice: practical information on how to cope with the emergency. Staff at The Citizen were slow to realize that people wanted practical information, and felt that they could have done more in that regard.

3. storytelling: community sharing, telling how others were getting through and helping each other. The paper also had a feature called "heroes of the storm," in which readers wrote to the paper about someone who had gone out of their way to help someone. At first, the ice storm was a "good news story": there were no bad guys, no one to blame, and the focus was on coping with common adversity and helping each other. This kind of coverage helps keep morale up in a community affected by disaster.

Media information for the public in an emergency must be a central part of the broader disaster response system. Openness and availability of disaster warnings, and information on supplies and services that are available are especially important.

2. Robin Walsh, Media Relations Office, Canadian International Development Agency

As a new employee of the Canadian International Development Agency, most of his experience with disasters has been overseas with Oxfam Canada. The Canadian media pay no attention to natural disasters overseas - their impact on people, or their causes - until there is devastation. But the "decaying infrastructure" that we hear about with respect to disasters in the developing world may apply here as well. The "silver lining" of recent natural disasters is that people are beginning to realize "it can happen here." More attention should be given to mitigation of the impacts of disasters, and more analysis of the causes of natural disasters.

He lives in Quebec, and during the ice storm saw the Chair of Hydro-Quebec on TV, looking credible in casual clothes instead of a business suit, reassuring people that power would soon be restored. This credibility was undermined when Hydro-Quebec released the results of a poll showing very high approval levels for Hydro-Quebec: it looked self-serving, and very doubtful in the middle of the power failure.

He thought Susan Riley's article in the Ottawa Citizen (criticizing what she saw as exaggerated coverage of the storm) was inappropriate.

Wind-up radios (which don't need electric power or batteries) were promoted for emergency survival kits; hundreds were bought by a cable company and distributed in rural communities to allow people to listen to emergency broadcasts.

3. Lynn Haddrall, Editor, The Kingston Whig-Standard

Her personal story was that power was out and trees down in her small town outside of Kingston. Schools were closed and her young children were at home. They decided that her husband would work at home and she would go into work. To get there, she drove the wrong way on the 401 highway, which she later learned was closed by police; but the on-ramp had not been blocked, so she had gotten on the road not knowing it was closed.

The paper's offices had lost all power, and only a small staff was able to get to work. They decided they would try to publish, and moved the newsroom staff and operations to their press, which had power, though it was intermittent. Early in the emergency the power went off when there were only three pages to go on the paper, and many times they were close to being unable to publish. There was only one phone line and it failed frequently, making connection with other media contacts difficult, both to get information and to relay information about the situation in Kingston. The paper was small during the storm, since there was little advertising because most businesses were not open. The Whig-Standard was the only media outlet operating in Kingston during the ice storm, as the only radio station was not functioning.

The main need of the media during the emergency was access to people making decisions, and the Whig-Standard had varying degrees of success. In rural and outlying communities, the municipal governments were wonderful: they invited journalists into the meetings at which decisions were made, and gave them the information they needed.

The new City of Kingston government, on the other hand, gave the media no access. The City had a very secretive "command station" that was closed to the media; they never appointed a media spokesperson, and treated the media like a nuisance rather than a partner in the disaster response. Officials did not understand the media, how they would get information out to the public, and what they could contribute. City officials seemed to be disorganized and confused: at one point, the Mayor promised to send a media release by fax, when the power was out. The City of Kingston has since developed a new emergency plan, which still has no provision for media participation, and does not call for the appointment of an official spokesman. Discussions after a disaster should include the media, and should cover such points as back-up power supplies for the city command centre.

4. Tom Moorehead, Senior Vice-President Operations, Pelmorex - The Weather Network

The Weather Network does mostly live programming, and runs 24 hours a day. There were several challenges to staying on the air during the ice storm. The English programming section was being moved from Montreal to Mississauga when the storm occurred; during the storm the

programming travelled from Montreal to Toronto via fibre, and this failed when the power went out. Their generator should have kicked in, but it had been stolen, putting them off the air briefly. In all, three generators were stolen before a guard was put on duty.

In Montreal, the station was running on generators, for which they had ordered a delivery of diesel fuel. An authority in Quebec (perhaps the military) had decided some days into the emergency to prioritize deliveries of diesel fuel, regardless of previous orders or payments. Hospitals were first priority; the media were recognized as an essential service and moved up to third priority, and the station got its fuel in time.

Audiences always go up for the Weather Network during a "weather event" as people tune in to see what has happened. The Weather Network had several roles in covering the ice storm:

- broadcasting regular weather forecasts and passing on severe weather warnings issued by Environment Canada to affected communities. Forecasts and warnings are important for people to preparation for coming severe weather. A new technology allows them to broadcast Environment Canada weather warnings on any channel on the cable company, by scrolling information across bottom of screen, in the affected areas only.
- after-the-fact coverage of storm conditions.

People wanted practical information during the emergency, and they looked to the media for information on what to do. Describing something that has never happened before "has credibility problems," however; people are sceptical that it will happen, or that it will be serious. Though people whose power was out could not see their programming, people who had power who watched TV phoned those whose power was out and relayed the information.

5. Mark Bulgutch, Executive Producer, CBC-TV Newsworld, Live Programming

Newsworld is a national network, and doesn't usually do local coverage. The flood and the ice storm were clearly important stories, however, and Canadians care that others are affected by an emergency and want to help, so Newsworld gave them national coverage. In any case audiences, go up in disaster, so devoting the time and resources to covering them is easy to justify.

Staff and resources are stretched during a disaster, as the same people must cover everything within their region. The Red River flood happened during a federal election campaign, and the same people had to cover both stories. As a national network, they rely on local associates to contribute to the coverage of these stories.

Generally, how well disasters are covered depends on where they happen: it is easier in cities, which have all the necessary broadcast facilities, good transportation in, and plenty of accommodation. It was hard to get work facilities and accommodation for staff in Montreal during the ice storm, as power was out and hotels were full of local people who had evacuated their homes.

In the ice storm people in unaffected areas had TV, and phoned those who didn't and told them what they had seen on the program. With respect to the credibility of information and information sources, people who were experiencing the emergency situation know when official

assurances of the restoration of power weren't true. Media spokespersons for the agencies managing the emergency response and repairing the damage need to be thoroughly informed of the situation, so they can be credible to the public.

6. Jules Bordeleau, News Coordinator, CKAC Radio Montreal

During the ice storm, the station received information that people in Montreal were being told to restrict their water use because municipal supplies were low; later they heard that people in some areas were also being advised to boil their drinking water. Since they were unable to confirm this information, they considered whether or not to report it in the light of the situation: there was a widespread power failure, bridges into and out of the area were closed, power lines down throughout the city, and there was general confusion downtown. They decided that reporting a possible water shortage would aggravate an already serious problem, and did not broadcast the information. Journalists should consider the pertinence of the information in deciding what to broadcast to the public.

7. Michel Vincent, CKAC Radio Montreal

The station had a slow start in responding to the ice storm, but soon realized the situation could become catastrophic and completely changed the format of their programming to meet the needs of those affected by the storm and the power failure. Much of their programming was live, and new information came in so fast that news readers simply read items as they were handed to them. This immediacy of information dissemination was one of the reasons that the ice storm was really a 'radio event' - radio is direct and can bring information to listeners very quickly. In addition, since those affected had no other source of information, radio was their main link to the authorities, and became an essential public service. The station became a sort of "community bulletin," a place for exchanging information between the affected public and authorities.

Municipal and provincial authorities did not immediately acknowledge the emergency and did not begin the emergency response until after the first day of the power failure. The Premier stated that it was not as serious as the Saguenay flood, and the Minister responsible for energy and all his office staff had left the office by 6 pm the first day of the power failure, and could not be reached by phone.

Many important agencies in the disaster response did not seem to know what to say when asked by the media for information. Staff at the radio station had trouble getting information from Hydro-Quebec on the numbers of people without power and when power might be restored, and they had difficulty throughout the emergency to get spokespersons from Hydro-Quebec. They were given different spokespersons every day, despite being the main source of information for victims of the power failure - the utility seemed to favour the television media. It appeared that Hydro-Quebec was more concerned with protecting its corporate image in the emergency than in working with media to inform the public of the situation.

In a disaster, journalists should always exercise good judgement and consider the situation and circumstances of the public in deciding what to report - not all information is pertinent to the situation, and not everything needs to be reported. It is also extremely important to confirm information and check sources to avoid reporting a rumour and causing greater anxiety. A calm

tone is important to reassure people. Journalists should always retain their critical perspective, even in a disaster; Hydro-Quebec, for example, is a public utility and should be subject to criticism from the media.

The station ran on generators, and at one point during the storm someone from the federal government called the station and offered diesel fuel so they could continue to broadcast. This is the kind of support that the media need from governments and other emergency management authorities, in recognition of the media's role as an essential service in an emergency.

8. Paul Kovacs, Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction

It is inevitable that some day there will be a major earthquake in an urban centre in British Columbia. Public officials and private sector organizations are working hard to be prepared for this hazard. The media are also well aware of the risk and they are also making advance preparations. It would be valuable if the media were working in partnership with others during the period of preparation.

9. Don Shropshire, Canadian Red Cross

There are some key themes for service agencies in disaster information:

1. let people know where they can a) help b) get help
2. get good information to pass on to media

Despite high public expectations, disaster assessment in Canada "stinks." It is hard to get good information in the first 48 hours after a disaster. There are still serious limitations in the system. Nevertheless, he has seen a change in people's interest in disaster preparedness with the recent disasters and the media coverage of them. More work is needed on disaster mitigation and preparedness, and that will require media attention between disasters to encourage people to make plans.

The Red Cross has a good data base on evacuated people, and can help the media and others in a disaster. Governments and agencies know the importance of the media in disasters, but the media are not invited to participate in any of the actual emergency planning.

10. Janet Lalonde, Canadian Red Cross

It was during the ice storm that she started with Canadian Red Cross. They know that a good relationship with the media is important, in order to give the public information on what to donate and where to drop it off. But in the ice storm they had difficulty getting the numbers of people affected and who needed help to the media, because of power losses in some of the regions they were responsible for. For the future, they are looking at how to facilitate the flow of information - would posting information on their Internet site, for example, work better than sending it by fax?

11. Jim West, Ontario Hydro

He lives in Kingston now, but works in Toronto and has been through other natural disasters that damaged Ontario Hydro's equipment, like tornadoes and other ice storms, but the 1998 ice storm was unique because of its two separate waves. After the first storm Ontario Hydro did assessments of the damage and prepared to make repairs, and they were not prepared for the second storm. It took them a while to realize the magnitude of the damage

Ontario Hydro is fairly decentralized, with local offices equipped with only three or four lines, and these were not able to handle calls from the thousands of customers who had lost power. They routed calls to their central "call centre," which usually deals with billing questions, not emergency matters; in addition, many of the agents were new, but they learned as they went. They received 36,000 calls the first day, but they had nothing to tell people, and simply tried to be reassuring They found that people who were isolated by the storm would phone the call centre just for a chat; relationships developed between these people and the call agents, and agents began to call them every few days to check on them. The call centre also became a "message pipeline" as calls about safety emergencies came in, and agents referred callers to the right place. Offers of supplies and equipment came from all over North America, and agents tried to refer people to the proper authorities to deal with their offer or need.

He went to Kingston to deal with problems there: officials in the new amalgamated City of Kingston government (which had just taken over on January 1, a week before the storm), expected the local Ontario Hydro manager to be in their meetings, while Ontario Hydro thought he ought to be organizing extra work crews and trying to restore power. He was surprised that politics and positioning "still raised its head" in the midst of a disaster. This impeded the response to the disaster, when people should be focussing on getting the right information to the right people.

Ontario Hydro considers the media an ally, but needs to get better at making "partnerships in disaster." By the second week they had established a good relationship with the media. He is concerned, however, that giving the media unprecedented access to information can create a "thirst for information" that can be difficult to meet - there isn't always anything to say when the media want information. Care must be taken that this push to produce information and predictions does not result in an "over-promise and under-deliver" situation. There is a need to create trust between the media and industry, including organizations like utilities; industry needs to be assured that making information available and being open about their operations will not make them vulnerable to undue media criticism.

Furthermore, some corporate control must be retained over information that is released to the media. During the ice storm some incorrect information given by someone within Ontario Hydro personnel caused great inconvenience - there were reports that power was restored in a small town: residents left their relatives' houses and hotels and returned, only to find that the power was not back on. Wrong information is worse than a delay for confirming the information.

12 Diana Swain, Anchor, CBC-TV Winnipeg

The Red River flood was a very slow onset disaster - in fact, it took so long people thought it would never really happen. It had been 30 years since the last major flood, too long for people to have any memory of a serious flood; and in the meantime the floodway was built. People thought it would not happen and they were not at risk. Every spring, the forecasters had information on the possibility of flooding, but no one, including the media, paid much attention.

The 1997 flood predictions from officials interviewed on the evening news were full of statistics and probabilities, which people found incomprehensible. This kind of information was not suitable to the 6 pm news broadcast, and probably helped people deny that it was important. Perceptions began to change after a late spring blizzard that dumped a lot of snow, which would melt and add to the runoff and to the high water levels. Then the flood hit Grand Forks, North Dakota, two hours away; and then much of the centre of Grand Forks burned down. Still people believed that Winnipeg would not flood. Winnipeg sees itself as somehow different from the rest of the province; people argued that Grand Forks flooded because it is smaller, and that it caught fire because the buildings are older, and that what happened there didn't indicate risk for Winnipeg.

She realized the desperation of the situation when she saw loads of derelict buses brought in to be used for dykes. To protect people's houses from the flood, sandbags were flown in from all over North America. They had machines to fill them, but still couldn't keep up with the need.

The television station started remote broadcasting from the site of the advancing edge of the flood when it reached the Canadian border, and devoted the entire 6 pm news hour to the flood. Neither of these things had been done before.

City Hall handled the emergency response and communications for Winnipeg, and did a good job. City officials held daily news conferences at 1 p.m., which was a good time: it was late enough that things had happened that day, yet left time to prepare for the evening news broadcast. Officials answered all the media's questions, and supplied people for interviews wherever and whenever they were requested.

The provincial Natural Resources and Environment departments handled the rural areas, and also did a good job. They gave lots of interviews, and held news conferences at 3 p.m. daily.
The Red Cross was the biggest problem for information: many relief efforts had been held across the country and money was being donated, but the Red Cross could not tell them where all the money went.

The story of the flood is still happening, 18 months later: they recently did stories on the 20 families who are still out of their houses. Flood compensation for rebuilding depended on the owners building a dyke as high as the house, or building a new house on a hill that high. Ste. Agate is still devastated: there is nothing green in the town, as all the soil had been used to build dykes, and there has been no time since for landscaping. Stress levels are high: people are still traumatized, and are nervous about spring runoff.

Organizations involved in disaster response should prepare themselves and contact the media

when an event requiring an emergency response occurs: they should appoint a spokesman who is comfortable on TV, and knows what the media need, and who is very knowledgeable and informed. They should not allow themselves to be surprised and unprepared when the media call. The media are important to the general emergency response, as they are the most efficient way to disseminate information to the public.

They were complimented on their "non-alarmist" coverage of the flood. The media know that people are making decisions on the information they get, and know that every word counts. People wanted a lot of general coping information as the flood approached; people called the station asking for advice on what to say to their children about coming flood, and the station had a psychologist on the show to talk about such matters.

13. Scott Hannant, Executive Producer, News, CJOH-TV, Ottawa

At the beginning of the ice storm staff at the station could not get in touch with Ontario Hydro to get the information they needed. Ontario Hydro did not have its own responsibilities organized or its spokespersons designated, and there was additional confusion in Ottawa area because of the involvement of both Ottawa Hydro and Ontario Hydro. In the first week, therefore, it took many phone calls to find information they needed, and they were still editing one minute before broadcast. By the second week Ontario Hydro had set up an information system and faxed the station a single list with all the required information on it - but by then many people did not need it.

In Ottawa, the media were seen by all agencies but Ontario Hydro as a part of the solution. The communications component of the Ottawa-Carleton Regional Government's emergency response was good; regular news conferences were set up early in the emergency, in consultation with media representatives: the media were able to set up their equipment inside, and install their trucks outside. Daily news briefings were attended by the Regional Chair, Police, Ontario Hydro and other local utilities, the mayors of several area municipalities, and representatives of the military and service organizations.

Victims of the storm considered the media to be an emergency service, not a news service. "We became an authoritative voice" delivering other authoritative voices around the community. It is the media's job to relay emergency information, and media outlets need to get the permission of their "corporate overlords" to commit the necessary resources to cover a news emergency properly. The media also helped coordinate the public effort to help, with information from the Red Cross on what items were needed and where they should be dropped off. In addition to these roles, the media must also continue to ask questions and act as a critic on behalf of the public.

Their station lost power briefly, and had to get their own plans organized for working with disruptions. All agencies involved in emergency response need to have plans for dealing with each other, and for getting information out to the public. He is now helping the network develop an emergency plan that can take effect immediately, without the delays that occurred in the ice storm.

14. Emmanuelle La Traverse, Anchor, CHOT-TV, Hull

She is a student in the Master's of Journalism Program at Carleton University, doing her degree on the media coverage of the ice storm. During the emergency she wondered why the networks were going live in areas where people had no power; she realized that the networks were providing information to those who had power, who then phoned those whose power was out. She also heard some reports that she thought were alarmist.

15. Dennis Trudeau Anchor, Newswatch, CBC-TV Montreal

He lives in Montreal and was without power for five days, though he has a number of gas appliances and was not greatly inconvenienced.

At the television station, he noted on the Tuesday night - after the first storm, and the first day of the power failures - that the media were underplaying the story: hundreds of thousands of Montrealers were without power overnight, in January. This had never happened before, but there didn't seem to be anyone in authority acknowledging that this was serious.

It was difficult at first to get interviews with key agencies - the Hydro-Quebec spokesman who was referred to them could not speak English, and was scared of appearing on television. They did live shows directly from shelters, where people were wonderful, and patient. Only the marginalized who have no other support went to shelters; everyone else had somewhere to go. They had some trouble deciding at what point to return to normal programming. After two weeks most people had power, but some areas were without power for several weeks after that, and felt forgotten when the media's interest in the emergency dropped.

The public offered lots of help, and the media passed on the offers to storm victims, but the coordination was not ideal: "Help is needed to coordinate offers of help." Though accommodation and supplies, like firewood, were offered, what was notable was how much of this help was not accepted by those who could have used it. The firewood is now rotting, and authorities are considering selling it.

One problem that arose in the coverage of the ice storm was that of the reporting of unverified information. RDI got into trouble when it reported a rumour that Hydro-Quebec was going to "pull the plug" on the Island, and had to retract the story. It is likely that Hydro-Quebec knew about this rumour, but did not step in and stop it soon enough.

The media are an essential service during a disaster, but they will not act as a mouthpiece for governments and agencies. They will report the information as they see fit. And, though they did play an important role in the emergency, the media played their image in disaster coverage just as the utilities and other agencies might have done.

16 Charles Caccia, former federal Minister of the Environment

His media credentials are based on his writing an Italian-language newspaper column: his sustainable development credentials are that he wrote two reports on sustainable development,

with help from the Environment and Sustainable Development Standing Committee of the House of Commons.

With respect to the media coverage of emergencies, a better flow of information is clearly needed. Better policies for mitigation of disasters are also needed, though it may be more effective to emphasize prevention rather than reduction, since reduction suggests accepting some degree of impact that could be prevented.

The role of the media in providing information on disasters requires that the media do the following:

- have a balanced understanding of the situation
- balance local, national, and international news
- regain their credibility
- participate in emergency planning

On the issue of climate change and the reduction of natural disasters, government departments of finance are currently working contrary to reducing emissions, by funding industrial expansion. These departments must be involved in discussions to reduce emissions. In addition, meteorological services should not be cut back, and all levels of government need to know the impacts of what they are doing, or global change problems will not be addressed.

17. Chris Dornan, Director, School of Journalism, Carleton University

He lives in Ottawa. During the ice storm, his wife's mother died, in Tunisia. They had to retrieve the body from the airport at Dorval, and host the family at the funeral in the midst of the aftereffect of the ice storm. They paid close attention to local coverage of the emergency, which he found to be very good.

The Ottawa Citizen and the local CBC radio station were slow off the mark to devote appropriate attention to the emergency, but then the coverage was good. He did notice that coverage in all media began to reflect a "party line": they all seemed to report "in lockstep," and it was "not done" to

depart from the party line. He understands the impulse behind Susan Riley's and Jan Wong's columns that criticized the exaggerated coverage, with its war time cliches. The storm was not as serious as a war, and the coverage did get a little excessive.

If the media are important for information and for a "psychological salve" during emergencies, then government and agency infrastructures should recognize this, and facilitate media access to information and essential supplies, like generators to keep media outlets operating.