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Political Communication in Disasters: A Question of Relationships

By Hamish McLean & Jacqui Ewart

Abstract

Politicians are both a help and hindrance in the provision of information to the public before, during and after disasters. For example, in Australia, the Premier of the State of Queensland, Anna Bligh, was lauded for her leadership and public communication skills during major floods that occurred late in 2010 and in early 2011 (de Bussy, Martin and Paterson 2012). Similarly, New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani was praised for his leadership following 9/11. This is in contrast to the poor performance of political leaders during Hurricane Katrina (Cole and Fellows 2008, Olson and Gawronski 2010). Political actors' lack of credibility and their poor situational awareness contributed to the problems. The involvement of political leaders in disaster communications is also problematic from the perspective of emergency agencies. For example, politicians who move their communication position from supportive to tactical can take over the role of providing official disaster information, such as evacuation warnings, without sufficient expertise, credibility or situational knowledge. This paper builds on the expanding body of research into the politics of disasters by exploring relationships with political actors from the perspective of emergency managers. Drawing on interviews with emergency agencies in Australia, Germany, Norway and the UK, we firstly examine when and what a politician should communicate during disasters and secondly, offer six principles toward a roadmap of involving political actors in the disaster communication process when life and property is at stake.

Key words: politicians, communication, disasters, emergency management

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Introduction

Scholars agree that disasters are political events (Olson 2000, Olson and Gawronski 2010, Kelman 2012). Much of the increasing body of research into the politics of disasters has taken a broad-brushed approach. In this paper, we drill into the relationship between emergency managers and political actors in times of calamity. Two key themes arise from a series of interviews undertaken with senior emergency managers in Australia, Norway, the UK and Germany. The first is the need to clearly establish the role and expectations of the political actor during a disaster, particularly during tours of impacted locations and, secondly, the key messages to be communicated during such times. We have established that these issues are important operationally to response agencies, but until now these topics have not received any scholarly attention. In fact, political involvement in disasters, although accepted as an important role by emergency agencies, can be problematic. For example, political actors with poor situational knowledge of the disaster while, at the same time, wanting to show leadership, have become more of a hindrance than help when timely, accurate, credible and relevant information is crucial when lives and property are at stake. Further, politicians, now dubbed 'flood tourists and welly wallies' in the United Kingdom (Ingham 2014) can also be a hindrance during the resource-intensive response phase of the disaster. Emergency managers, faced with the demands of saving life and property, have developed strategic ways of delaying ill-timed political requests for visits to disaster locations while protecting their unwritten relationships with their political masters.

Methodology

This paper draws on in-depth interviews with disaster response agencies which were undertaken in the course of a larger project about disaster communication. The methodology consisted of open-ended, conversational style interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) to allow for in-depth discussion of the issues associated with the research topic. An interpretative approach to the interviews was taken to explore deeper insights into the complexities of the lived experiences of the interviewee from their own perspectives (Andrade 2009; Schwandt 1994). Both authors have professional backgrounds in disaster and crisis management. They were able to draw on their experiences in managing crises and disasters when developing the guiding themes for the interviews. Interviews, ranging between 30 minutes and two hours in length, were held with a number of senior emergency managers including:

- Anders Aspaas, Commmunication Advisor, Tromso Police District, Norway (12 November 2013)
- Kjell Brataas, Senior Advisor, DSB, Norway (4 November 2013)
- Ian Cameron, Media Advisor to the UK National Steering Committee for Warning and Informing the Public (NSCWIP)

- Phil Campbell, Manager Corporate Communications, NSW State Emergency Service, Australia (3 June 2013)
- Anthony Clark, Group Manager, Corporate Communications, New South Wales Rural Fire Service, Australia (3 June 2013)
- Nicholas Hefner, Head of Public Relations, Federal Agency for Technical Relief, Germany (20 November 2013)
- Anne Leadbeater, community development officer, the Murrindindi Shire, Victoria, Australia (3 June 2013)
- Commissioner Ole Bredrup Saeverud, Tromso Police District, Norway (12 November 2013)
- Bob Wade, Emergency Planning Society, UK

Participants were given the option of having their names attached to their comments or to have their comments de-identified. As part of the larger project from which this paper drew data we undertook eight interviews in Norway, the UK and Germany and seven interviews in Australia. The interview with community development officer Anne Leadbeater from the Murrindindi Shire, which was affected by bushfires, known as the Black Saturday bushfires, in Victoria, Australia in 2009, was included because she took on a significant leadership role in the disaster and recovery and in that position had substantial contact with politicians and media. The themes that emerged from the coded interview transcripts provided a pathway to develop six principles of how emergency managers and politicians can best manage their relationships, particularly when lives are at risk and the need for factual, timely and accurate information from a credible source is critical.

Literature Review

The ways in which political actors and emergency agencies interact during the various phases of a disaster has received sparse scholarly attention. For example, the authors were unable to source any research on how, when or why politicians should communicate before, during and after a disaster. An explanation for this may be found in Olson and Gawronski's (2010) observation that political science had been largely ignored until recently by disaster researchers. This is changing, however, with an increasing body of mainstream research into what Olson and Gawronski (2010: 219) describe as 'the politics of disaster'. There is little disagreement among scholars that disasters are political events (Kelman 2012, Olson and Gawronski 2010). Kelman goes as far to say that disasters are inherently political and it is 'naïve to think otherwise' (Kelman, 2012b: 14). Similarly, Wei et al. (2010: 1016) identified that the information provided during a disaster is 'always a political decision'. Cottle (2014: 3) argues that social and traditional media shape disasters 'from the inside out, and outside in, reconfiguring disaster social relations, channeling forms of political control and projects for change, and circulating deep-seated cultural views and sentiments'.

We found scholars take a broad approach to the topic of politicians and disasters. For example Kelman (2012, 2007) examines the question of whether disaster related activities spur diplomatic ties among opposing countries. Drilling down, Olson and Gawronski's (2010) research into the 'politics of disaster' found that disasters often, but not always, evolve into political crises (207). They argue that the way a disaster is managed has significant political repercussions, both positive and negative. Olsen and Gawronski (2010) elaborate:

> A well resourced and managed response reassures both victims and the larger public, but a poorly resourced and managed response has the opposite effect. Indeed, how well a government or regime handles any type of large-scale crisis event will instill greater or lesser public confidence in specific political leaders and government institutions, and it can even affect the legitimacy of the regime itself. (208)

Disasters challenge political leadership because nature and society are severely disrupted. In turn, this violates 'all the rules of plot' leading individuals and communities to question who they are, why the world is unpredictable and why order has temporarily ceased (Erikson, 1994: 147). 'Politicisation' of the disaster increases as the impacted community, or at times an entire society, moves from emergency response through to the recovery and reconstruction phases (Olson, 2000: 265). The recovery phase, in particular, has significant implications for politicians. Olson and Gawronski (2010) describe it as a 'special time', where both victims and the public expect a 'diligent' response from the government. They explain (2010):

> Public officials who fail to grasp the dynamic nature of public expectations during a disaster and attempt to respond in normal ways create a disjuncture with their publics. That is, publics expect government officials to do their jobs, and to do them well, in times of crisis. (208)

Additionally, failure to adequately respond to a disaster often becomes the focus of media attention. As Olson and Gawronski (2010) observe, social and traditional media cover disasters 'with extraordinary intensity and often in real time' (208). There is intense pressure to fill 24/7 coverage over extended periods as the media perform their sense-making role on behalf of their audience. As observed by Littlefield and Quenette (2007: 29) the media act in the role of a 'judge' as to how the disaster is managed, thus providing the authority for the media 'to assign blame when the situation requires it'. In turn, the public is 'willing to attribute blame and punish incumbents accordingly' (Arceneaux and Stein, 2006: 50). Hurricane Katrina, in 2005, is a useful example of political mismanagement of a disaster. Poor situational awareness by political leaders, combined with media broadcasting of unsubstantiated rumours, diverted the priorities of officials from rescue to law enforcement. As CNN (2005) reported during Hurricane Katrina, Governor Blanco declared that law and order would be restored with battle-hardened troops equipped with 'M16's and they're locked and loaded'. It is not surprising that Maestas, Atkeson, Croom and Bryant (2008: 615) identified that media coverage in the weeks

following Hurricane Katrina focused on blame and responsibility, with much of the criticism leveled at government.

Given the aforementioned issues, this paper turns to two pragmatic questions: when should political leaders engage in public comment during a disaster and what information should their messages contain? We argue this is important because, as discussed, political leaders face unprecedented leadership and communication challenges in a disaster. Furthermore, we have observed at least in the Australian context, political actors are taking an increasingly active role in disaster communication, from three positions - strategic, supportive and tactical. It is the tactical position, however, that is problematic for emergency managers, where boundaries of who should provide what information become blurred. At the supportive and strategic level, in the 2011 floods in Queensland the-then Premier Anna Bligh was lauded for her leadership and inspirational supportive public commentary (de Bussy, Martin and Paterson, 2012) as the scale of the disaster unfolded. Thirty-eight people died in the Queensland floods and three-quarters of the State was declared a disaster zone. In 2014, the current Queensland Premier Campbell Newman, in preparing communities for an approaching cyclone, took on a more tactical role by providing evacuation advice and information about the capacity of buildings to withstand the cyclonic winds (ABC, 2014). We found the role of politicians in providing this sort of information is subject to debate based on source credibility. For example, a New Zealand study on credibility in evacuation messaging using a simulated flood found that evacuation orders issued by disaster agencies, rather than the Prime Minister, were more trusted (Lamb et al. 2012: 278).

Findings

Our paper now turns to the two key questions that emerged from the literature review to explore the perspectives from the interview participants. They are (a) when a politicians should engage in a disaster and (b) how they should shape their messaging. There was consensus from interviewees in Australia, Norway, the UK and Germany, that politicians had a role in disaster communication. What was subject to debate, was how far that role extended in the context of what was communicated, by whom and when. In any event, the interviewees agreed that political actors needed to show leadership and concern for their communities during the various stages of a disaster. For Anne Leadbeater, who led devastated communities through the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Australia, political leadership in a disaster is crucial. She explains (interview 2013) ‘(it) doesn’t really matter whether it’s the Prime Minister or the local … councillor. There is a role to be fulfilled in terms of leading by example’. Anthony Clark, Group Manager, Corporate Communications, New South Wales Rural Fire Service argues that disaster and emergency agencies are ultimately ‘responsible to the Minister, the Premier and the people. It’s not

something I think anyone can just look at and go, 'We don't want a politician involved' (Interview 2013). Interviewees in Norway also argued that politicians have a role in a disaster to support their communities. For example, Anders Aspaas, Commmunication Advisor, Tromso Police District, Norway, argues that politicians should be involved to 'take care' of the communities impacted by the disaster. This approach resonates with Kjell Brataas, a Senior Advisor with the DSB, Norway's disaster agency, who notes that politicians need to show 'that they are in control of the situation or capable of managing it' (Interview 2013). Brataas points out that this is particularly evident during an election year, when it is 'even more important for them to show that they are in control and that they care' (interview 2013).

The theme of political leadership in a disaster also emerged in Germany. Nicholas Hefner, Head of Public Relations for Germany's Federal Agency for Technical Relief (THW) asserts politicians want to provide leadership by 'being on the spot' to show they are 'worthy' of being elected and for the public relations benefits. Although emergency agencies in Germany, Norway and Australia agreed that politicians had a role in a disaster, none had developed specific written policies defining how the relationship between them and the politician would be structured and the boundaries of responsibility in what would be communicated to an impacted community. It seems two important aspects of that relationship identified by emergency agencies - when a politician should communicate in a disaster and when they should visit a disaster location – are managed on a co-operative ad-hoc basis. From the perspective of emergency agencies, the timing of political VIP tours of disaster locations is a critical factor. This largely depends on resources being available and perceptions being managed. This second point is a particular challenge for political actors.

Ingham (2014) observes that floods in the UK have given rise to two terms 'welly wallies' and 'flood tourists', referring to politicians who have 'appeared sloshing through the waterlogged wastes of the UK'. Ingham points to the tightrope faced by political actors in disaster perceptions – if they do not go to the disaster scene they are 'lambasted' for failing to care, while those that do are criticized for exploiting a media opportunity rather than genuinely helping with the relief effort. Ian Cameron, of the UK national warning committee argues that politicians are tending to visit disaster locations without sufficient briefing and advice. He pointed to the example of a Government Minister arriving at a flood without appropriate wet weather gear. He continues:

> 'As a result the whole (media) story was about a Minister who was unprepared, who turned up with the wrong gear. And so that was the story. Whatever he was saying was overshadowed' (interview 2014)

There was consensus across the interviews for this paper that on-the-ground political visits were important, however they should be scheduled after the disaster has transitioned from the response to the recovery phase. This would avoid a scenario that Aspass, of the Norwegian police, describes as placing officers in the difficult

position of 'trying to save lives [while] at the same time as we are hosting politicians' (interview 2013). Police Commissioner Ole Bredrup Saeverud, Tromso District, Norway, put his position succinctly: politicians should 'stay away' during the response phase. He noted, however, that they would not have long to wait, observing that the recovery phase can happen quickly after the impact. It is then, Saeverud argues (Interview 2013), that politicians have a role in the recovery phase to 'see what happens and what needs to be done'.

A similar position is taken in Australia on the timing of political visits to disaster locations. Philip Campbell, Manager Corporate Communications, NSW SES, argues that the impact phase of a disaster is the least favourable time for such political activity. He finds that politicians generally agree with this, observing 'politicians very rarely become involved when the weather is absolutely awful and the rain is pelting down' (interview 2013). In Norway, politicians take a similar approach of stepping back to allow emergency agencies to deal with the disaster impact. Aspaas observes that politicians 'are really good at keeping their hands off and have an understanding of the work we do' (interview 2013).

For emergency managers, however, dealing diplomatically with an ill-timed political request to visit a disaster location can challenge their relationship with the political actor. For example, Brataas, of the Norwegian disaster agency DSB, observes:

> In the end of course it's the Minister who decides, and if someone is brave enough to tell him that maybe you should wait two days and then you visit, and he still wants to go, of course he goes, you can't deny him that, or then you are out of a job probably. (interview 2013)

A similar sentiment is held by an Australian emergency manager, who notes that refusing a political request can result in negative career consequences. He elaborates:

> If you just keep on saying no your career is probably going to be a very short one. And I know there's been plenty of situations where people have just consistently said no, no, no. And you never hear of them again. They become the disaster. Yeah, so providing that alternative is quite often the best tactic (interview 2013).

Rather than bluntly refusing a request, Australian emergency managers paint a picture of the perception which may be gained by the impacted community and the media of an ill-timed political visit and offer an alternative activity, such as a tour of the disaster operations centre. One emergency manager (interview 2013) noted this approach often worked with political actors, and their media minders, keen to avoid an ill-timed disaster tour:

> You might think that's a good idea now, but as soon as one community member finds out that there was a helicopter trip in there with the Minister and the Premier and six cameras in tow, yet you're not letting someone who has lost their home to a fire or it's been flooded, you're not letting that person in there I mean, that's when you start having issues and when you actually explain that to them, most of the time they get it. (interview 2013)

Another Australian emergency manager argued political tours are inevitable. He explains (interview 2013): 'you know that inevitably the politicians are going to turn up at some point during a major operational response and that you're going to need to find those particular resources. ' Clark, of the NSW Rural Fire Brigades, accepts this position and argues disaster agencies do 'everything possible' to facilitate political visits to disaster zones when timing is appropriate and resources are available. A request, however, may be declined if 'it is too early' for a political visit based on safety and the information and resource needs of the impacted communities. Clark (interview 2013) observes that,

> What the people on the ground are actually wanting is information, not just photos in the local papers, for instance. It's a very simplistic way of looking at it, but that's a reality of it. Sometimes (for a political visit) it's just too soon and working in communications you've got a pretty good idea of when something is a bad idea.

The impact on resources for a VIP disaster tour is another consideration. Brataas, of the Norwegian disaster agency DSB, recognizes that political leaders require extensive support from emergency agencies. He elaborates,

> They come by helicopter and they visit a few places in a day. And of course it's lots of work just to coordinate and deal with the media. And some of these local communities, or local government agencies, don't have more than maybe one or a half person to normally deal with communications questions. It's lots of work, and they are not able to work on the crisis. So that's another challenge that we have seen. (interview 2013)

Emergency managers in Australia share similar concerns about resourcing VIP visits. For example, one emergency manager describes the pressure in this way:

> There are times when (our) media team have felt a little bit like travel agents for the politicians rather than getting on with our role of getting the message out…we also find that operations staff can equally be frustrated that they have to take time out from their day to get senior personnel who are running the operation to spend three or four hours showing around a politician when they really would rather be getting back into what they're doing (interview 2013).

Cameron, of the UK warning committee, asserts that traditional and social media are a major factor driving politicians to the location of a disaster. He explains:

> 'I think they (politicians) always see a chance to be on camera as an opportunity. I think the way that the media is changing is that in the past blue light services and politicians during a disaster were your first port of call as a journalist. The difference now is that social media means that the journalist has access to those victims and their families and people who experienced it first hand and the tales and the stories that they get from them have more colour, are more interesting. And so the politician comes a bit further down the line. And I think the politicians are finding that sometimes they're not even approached for a comment and so therefore they're desperate to get on the TV. And therefore they're desperate to make any comment.' (Interview 2014)
> '

Hefner of Germany's THW, argues political visits to the location of the disaster will happen in the response phase at the height of media coverage. Hefner continues,

> So if the media are not there, the politicians won't be there. That's why you won't be able to tell them come in the recovery phase. [The] media will be there, and the politicians will be there. (interview 2013)

This reality for Hefner means he plans for resourcing political visits in the midst of a disaster response phase, noting that the political priority is to 'talk to the forces', thus politicians want to be seen with 'the people on the ground with a shovel and pick' (interview 2013). Hefner argues that perceptions about political visits during the response phase need to be carefully managed. It is accepted practice that VIP visits are associated with volunteer responders, and that the visiting politician has the ability and authority to provide resources, to avoid perceptions of creating the kind of self-serving public relations opportunities identified by Ingham (2014). Hefner elaborates,

> The tricky thing is on the one hand it's PR, and on the other hand it's important. They [politicians] can be on the spot and they show their empathy to the people and they bring, they always have to have something in their pocket like money, money and [resources]. (Interview 2013)

Hefner notes that political minders sometimes have unrealistic expectations on what can be delivered on the ground in the heat of the disaster. From an operational perspective, Hefner's approach is to examine the political wish list and go 'ok, what's realistic, what's unrealistic' (interview 2013). Australian Black Saturday bushfire community leader Anne Leadbeater argues that there are benefits in providing political actors with appropriate early access to disaster locations. This allows politicians and the media to quickly gain a clear picture of the disaster impact that could result in increasing support for survivors. She asks (interview 2013):

> If you don't have your Premier there going, 'oh my goodness, this is terrible', how does he, in good conscious, put the stamp on the form that says you've got an open cheque book? (Interview 2013)

Leadbeater asserts that political support needs to be meaningful and pragmatic. She explains, 'we don't want to hear that we're going to be given millions of dollars to build new community assets, because we don't know where we're going to eat tonight' (interview 2013). Although such statements may be welcome in the later stages of recovery, Leadbeater suggests that the initial post-impact phase the political messaging should be 'we're here for you and our job is to try and help you get what you need to just make it through the first week, the first month and so on' (interview 2013).

The senior emergency managers identified that politicians engaging with the media during a disaster could be problematic. The interviewees for this paper agreed that a fine line exists between tactical operational information, usually in the jurisdiction of practitioners, and supportive and strategic information at the political level. For Brataas of the Norwegian disaster agency DSB, the line can become blurred when political actors open the door to media engagement. Brataas explains it can quickly lead to follow-up questions about operational matters and politicians

delivering 'advice that maybe police or health officials should be doing' (interview 2013). Brataas argues that media commentary should be discussed and planned between agencies before a disaster happens. He offers his personal view,

> The politicians have a right to and should be talking sometimes, but not about the details, and that's a very dangerous and difficult situation, because it's very easy to start answering the detailed questions. They should probably more talk about funding and how the government is supporting the local communities and things like that. (Interview 2013)

For Hefner of Germany's THW, political communication in a disaster should focus on the supportive rather than operational aspects and they should 'talk about what they see at the moment, not about the general overview'. He offers this example of a statement that refers to volunteers, rather than operational details on the response to the disaster:

It is good to see … citizens help citizens in Germany. I am very proud that we have such a wonderful system in Germany. (Interview 2013)

Wade, of the Emergency Planning Society, offers a simple formula for political commentary in the early stages of an unfolding disaster – the three P's of pity, pledge and praise. Wade (interview 2014), explains the concept:

> They can go on camera showing empathy for the victims; they praise the emergency responders, what a great job they're doing, to reassure the public, get confidence back in the public; and then of course the pledge, "We don't know what's caused this but we will leave no stone unturned to find out what it is." Again, reassure the public that they're not trying to whitewash it. And I think that still holds.

There are a number of challenges that face those charged with managing disasters including, the involvement of politicians in disasters and the types of messages they provide to various publics and news media during these types of events. This paper has identified a number of key areas for improvement in the unwritten and rather ad-hoc relationships between emergency managers and political actors. We argue that the boundary of who communicates what in a disaster is fragile and alters depending on the situation. Political actors, without sufficient situational awareness or operational expertise, are problematic when engaging with media that are keen to obtain tactical information. As Brataas, of the Norwegian disaster agency, points out, the media will take advantage of the opportunity to delve into operational questions with a politician. Thus, we offer six principles for the effective collaboration between emergency agencies and political actors in the context of a disaster:

- Politicians have a role in disaster leadership and communication;
- Political disaster tours should be undertaken in the recovery phase when resources are more readily available and those tours are part of the operational planning;
- Disaster tours should not be only about public relations opportunities;
- Political actors should embark on disaster tours with the authority to provide additional resources to support response and recovery efforts;

- Communication by political actors should be supportive rather than tactical;
- Politicians should defer tactical questions to operational people in their area of expertise.

Conclusion

This paper examined two key questions: when a politicians should engage in a disaster and how they should shape their messaging? This paper has found that politicians should refrain from engaging in disaster tours during the response phase when resources are needed to save lives and property. Instead, political actors should be actively involved in the preparation and recovery phases. Secondly, that political messaging should be shaped using a supportive narrative rather than operational narratives. We argue that this paper contributes a hitherto unexplored area of disaster politics. Further research would be useful from the perspective of political actors to explore how they see their role in disaster communication. This would build a more comprehensive picture of how both emergency managers and political actors can collaborate in the effort to save life and property during a disaster. It would also help prevent many of the mistakes we have seen in the recent past.

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