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SEARCHING FOR SYMBOLIC MITIGATION

Media coverage of two floods

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THE RELENTLESS SPRING

Life magazine published it as a “picture of the year”. The scene was almost surreal: a fire-gutted downtown skyline awash in water up to the second-story windows. No one seeing this photograph, perhaps the most memorable visual image of the 1997 floods in the upper Mississippi River basin in the Midwestern United States, could question the magnitude of the calamity that had overtaken the Red River valley.

In the seven preceding months the area had been subject to a confluence of natural events that taken singly would have caused only inconvenience. However, in the spring of 1997 the rare combination of natural hazards only foreshadowed the political problems the disaster itself precipitated.

Things began to go awry in November 1996 when an unusual amount of rain saturated the ground in the Red River basin, a geographic feature known for its extreme shallowness and its flat floodplain, which through most of the valley is 48–80 km wide.

In December temperatures plunged, locking the water in the saturated, frozen ground. That same month, and for the next three months, snowfall in the region reached a historic depth. One city, Fargo, North Dakota, recorded 269 cm on the ground. Furthermore, it was dense snow with the highest water content per cubic meter ever recorded there. News accounts of the weather focused on the record snowfall and the sometimes miraculous efforts of rescue workers to locate and free motorists who became trapped in a series of blizzards on the high plains. The snow fell over 40,233 km² a geographic area that included every major tributary to the Red River. News accounts seldom mentioned that the spring runoff was just as likely to be of historic proportions.

Spring came late, and in early April a record cold kept things frozen. But on 8 April, when the thaw began, the ground in the river basin and the river itself were already filled with water. Flooding was inevitable, and in fact about 150 years of records indicated that flooding in this river basin was to be expected. But the magnitude was unprecedented.

Unlike in the case of flash floods, which occur and recede quickly, residents of North Dakota and Minnesota had time to watch the waters rise. Hardest hit were towns of Grand Forks and East Grand Forks, where as the river crested at about 7.92 m above flood stage, more than 75 percent of both communities were under water. More than 500 bridges were closed in the region, and literally thousands of residents (about 40,000 in Grand Forks alone) were forced to evacuate – sometimes for weeks. Since the Red River flows north into Canada, the disaster spread across the border, where about 28,000 Canadians had to leave their homes to avoid the rising waters.

By this time the flood had become an important news story. The three American television networks, both morning and evening, aired stories detailing the rising waters, the inevitable property destruction, and memorable visual images, often shot from the air, that provided a panoramic view of the inundated river valley. The roofs of house tops were visible above the water, the major bridge across the river that linked the two communities was under water and impassable,
MEDIA COVERAGE OF TWO FLOODS

and a downtown was accessible only by boat. Other communities, which did not receive this level of media attention, were similarly devastated.

And then human handiwork added insult to injury. With an electrical system under water and under stress, the predictable happened. An electrical short caused a fire in the downtown area of Grand Forks. The flood made fighting the fire impossible, and most of a block, including the major retail area, burned. Those images also made the nightly television news, perhaps the most vivid symbol of a weather-related catastrophe for the entire year. (See Plate 8.1, in color section, Volume 1.)

Vice President Al Gore toured the area, as did President Bill Clinton. Federal disaster aid was promised. Private agencies didn't wait. The Red Cross and the Mennonite Church reached the scene early and provided enormous amount of relief to those who were forced to evacuate and who would be involved for months in rebuilding their lives. An anonymous donor (later revealed as the wife of the founder of the McDonald's fast food chain) gave every evacuated resident US$2,000 to help, no questions asked. Farmers recorded crop losses; some residents said they could not rebuild and decided to leave the area. But most decided to stay. As more than one news story noted, people of the region are resilient; they tend to bounce back.

The United States Congress was not on such a trajectory. The bill for Red River disaster relief reached Capitol Hill at a time when bills for other disasters were mounting. Furthermore, congressional Republicans - who had control of both houses of the Congress for only the second time in fifty years - had other legislation they thought more important. So, federal disaster relief for the Red River Valley was held hostage to a political agenda that put the Republicans at loggerheads with the Democratic President, who wanted to provide flood disaster relief and who had already said that he would veto the Republican-sponsored measures. Much wrangling ensued, and as the waters in the upper Mississippi started to settle, Republicans representing that geographic area in Congress found themselves at odds with their own leadership. Disaster relief was the most important issue in their own communities, and if it took siding with a Democratic President to get it, that was what was going to happen. The US$8 billion measure eventually passed both houses of Congress and was signed into law. President Clinton had, once again, won a bruising political fight with the Republican majority that consistently underestimated the impact of symbols on political debates, particularly when floods, people, and clear human need were the focus.

All of this, of course, was chronicled in the news media, which by this time had framed the Red River floods as an economic disaster that federal help and local fortitude could remedy - after the fact. News coverage centered around the events of the flood itself, beginning with the waters near flood stage. The events that foreshadowed the flood, the November rains and the record snowfall, were mentioned only as background and in relatively few stories. Instead, news coverage concentrated on the disaster onset, the mediated watch of the floodwaters as they crept upward, and on events during the immediate recovery period, particularly relief to those left homeless by the flood. From that point, national media coverage of the rising and ebbing waters subsided until the political events in Washington, DC, emerged as a new focus.

The national news media, almost without exception, reported only issues directly related to the politics of the relief effort. For example, even though the warning capacity of the National Weather Service was severely criticized at the local level as grossly inaccurate, that story didn't make the national media agenda. Neither did an examination of the impact of new federal regulations governing disaster relief, particularly the changes in the federal Flood Insurance Program as the result of the Great Flood of 1993 in the lower Mississippi River basin.

There was one additional story that didn't make the national agenda. It was the story of Winnipeg, Canada, also in the river's path. Winnipeg had invested in disaster mitigation - a floodwall in the downtown area - which in 1997 saved it from the swollen Red River. No disaster, especially no disaster in Canada, equated to no American (i.e. United States) news coverage.

THE GREAT FLOOD OF 1993

In fact, one of the most striking characteristics of media coverage of the 1997 Red River flood was how
closely it resembled media coverage of the Great Flood of 1993. While mass communication scholars have documented that news coverage tends to follow predictable patterns, ones which fit sometimes stereotypical popular notions about disasters and which help journalists to do their job under often difficult physical circumstances and constant deadline pressures, what is striking about news coverage of these two events is how closely they resemble each other despite the policy changes that resulted from the early flood. The implications of these similarities will be explored in the conclusions of this chapter, for they have a bearing not only for journalists attempting to improve professional performance but also for policymakers attempting to make mitigation the focus of public and political response to natural hazards. But first, a review of the flood of 1993.

The 1993 flood, depending on geographic location, was considered anywhere from a 50- to 500-year event. Significant damage occurred in nine states; the two most heavily affected were Iowa and Missouri. In more than 9,656 km of riverway, more than 1,000 levees were overtopped. More than fifty-two deaths were directly attributed to the flood itself, and others died as a result of flash flooding that was ancillary to the major flood event. Total damages were estimated at about US$12 billion, and after the event the US Congress allocated about US$6.2 billion for various sorts of relief, with private agencies such as the Red Cross spending even more (National Weather Service, 1994; Changnon, 1996; and see Changnon, Chapter 18).

However, damage could have been far worse. While one American city, Des Moines, Iowa, wound up partially under water, two other cities in the path of the ever-rising Mississippi and Missouri rivers escaped massive losses owing to mitigation efforts. St. Louis, which sits astride the Mississippi, benefited from a floodwall which — while it came within a couple of meters of being breached — nonetheless kept the water out of the downtown area. Upstream and downstream communities, which were protected primarily by a system of levees, were much harder hit. Downtown Kansas City, which also had invested in mitigation, likewise sustained less damage. Estimates indicated that US$19 billion in potential damages were averted by these and other mitigation activities.

Like the 1997 Red River flood, the 1993 event had its roots in geographical history and the human attempts to alter the river in ways that supported shipping and farming. The Mississippi River is perhaps the most heavily engineered river in the United States; and the Corps of Engineers had completed similar projects to dredge and channel the Missouri River. Both rivers had a more than 100-year history of serious flooding. In fact, farmers routinely planted crops in what are referred to as the “river bottom lands” with the expectation that every few years a flood would destroy most or all of their efforts. However, bottom lands are fertile and have supported a way of life that was first chronicled by the nineteenth-century American author Mark Twain and persisted more than one hundred years later. And, like the Red River flood, the event itself did not begin with the first newspaper headline; in fact, the Mississippi River basin had been the subject of unusual and prolonged rainfall which saturated the ground in the upper parts of the basin for about four months before the flooding became the focus of media attention.

**Media coverage of the flood: an event with few systemic implications**

The usual conception of floods is of raging waters, like a dam bursting. But really big floods, like on the Mississippi, are far more insidious. The damage doesn’t come from roaring walls of water, it comes from quiet backwaters that spread amoebae-like, creeping higher and higher ever so gently, gently and inexorably. Sometimes nature is terrifying in its fury, sometimes in its relentlessness.

*Des Moines Register*, 3 July 1993, p. 6A)

News coverage of most disasters follows predictable patterns. Multiple studies have found the following overarching trends. First, journalists covering disasters transform them into discrete events, making what was unexpected into a part of the journalistic routine (Tuchman, 1973). This routinization of the unexpected has several important results. These discrete events themselves, for example the height of the rivers on any particular day, then become the foci of individual news accounts. Discrete events tend to remain disconnected.

Second, journalists tend to strip natural disasters,
which have both a geographic and human history, of that context (Altheide, 1976). Thus a flood becomes news only when the water laps above the river bank, not in the months before when natural events appear to be somewhat – or perhaps significantly – beyond the norm.

Third, news accounts tend to cluster at the immediate impact stage of the event and early in the post-disaster recovery period. Much less media attention is paid to warning and mitigation.

Lastly, the visual images of television, and to a lesser extent still photography, tend to provide a dominant visual frame for most disaster stories. In fact, some scholars have asserted that television’s visual impact is not merely on the public but on print journalists, who find themselves having to file stories that meet the expectations of editors who have already seen early television coverage of the disaster (Smith, 1992). Thus, journalistic coverage of earthquakes or forest fires tends to focus on the areas of heavy devastation, leaving the image that an entire city is devastated when a more systematic analysis would note that damage is often quite localized.

This tendency was particularly true of media coverage of Des Moines, most of which was not under water. Indeed, the most memorable visual images of the impact of the flood on St Louis were of houses being washed away and of what came to be known as the floating McDonald’s: televised images of a restaurant built on the bank of the Mississippi actually being swept into the river. While it is undeniable that the 1993 flood caused an enormous amount of damage, urban St Louis was spared much of it, a story and an image that was seldom told and was much less likely to be printed or broadcast compared to the dramatic images of extensive property damage also available to journalists.

It is important to note that the visual images of Fargo were far more accurate in this regard. Most of the land area of the community was under water; the fire that swept through part of the downtown simply could not be easily extinguished because of the flood. The stereotypical images of devastation that emerged from Fargo were much truer to the event itself than is normally the case, at least if scholarly analysis is accepted.

Coming from the tradition of hermeneutics, Garner (1994) analyzed coverage of the 1993 flood in two newspapers, the Des Moines Register and the New York Times, to “outline the set of interpretative packages that give meanings to an issue.” Each package (news account) had an internal structure, or what media scholars call an organizing frame, for making sense of events and suggesting what is important about particular issues (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Garner’s study found that these two newspapers covered the flood with a framework of “domestic Afghanistanism” (Hungerford and Lemert, 1973), or as an event that had little relation to faraway audience members. As has previously been indicated, news coverage of the 1993 flood focused on the facts in terms of billions of dollars in losses, thousands of hectares under water, and the overall impact on the economy. While these bits of information are certainly considered facts and are generally accepted as accurate, none of them allows the individual citizen to understand the flood event on a more personal level (Garner, 1994). In addition, Garner also found an underlying theme in the coverage provided by these two media outlets – human helplessness against nature. Time called the flood a “Season in hell” (19 July 1993, p. 23), while Newsweek noted “The Great Flood of ’93 rolled inexorably down the Mississippi, teaching everyone – even television anchormen – never to underestimate nature” (26 July 1993, p. 21). The New York Times noted that “there is nothing anyone can do . . . people sandbagged like crazy and they still lost the war” (11 July 1993, p. 18A). Garner noted the totality of the coverage provided a somewhat predictable distortion of the reality of the event:

Readers of only the national media could end up believing that only those communities along the Mississippi were affected, that most flood victims were unable to deal with the disaster (emotionally or physically) and that the disaster didn’t ultimately affect anyone beyond the Mississippi River.

Garner, 1994

It is crucial to note that those who witnessed the 1997 Red River flood, particularly from the vantage of their television screens (the dominant mode for most Americans to receive news), would have observed an identical frame. Nature simply overpowered human beings, and there was little anyone
could have done to prepare for or to help with the immediate onset of the event.

Garner also found that the news media framed the impact of the 1993 flood primarily as an economic event. Furthermore, this framework allowed journalists to develop what is called an "unfolding" story, or one where initial cost estimates of damage are revised upward – or, in the case of the 1993 flood, often downward – thus making for individual “events” that can be readily reported. Framing the event as a disaster with economic consequences could have opened the journalistic door to analysis and policy questions, particularly of the impact of mitigation strategies. And, to be fair to the news media, some journalists understood the story in this fashion:

In the current catastrophe, two Iowa cities demonstrate the two approaches – we pay or they pay – with the pungency of a parable. After the terrible flood of 1965, Dubuque decided to contribute its share (US$1 million) of the US$12 million necessary to build a flood wall. In 1984, nearby Davenport rejected a proposed US$65 million flood wall because it neither wanted to pay its third of the cost nor mar the look of its historic river front. Today, Dubuque is sitting pretty – and downtown Davenport is underwater.

(Newsweek, 19 July 1993, p. 23)

In the same magazine, journalists also noted that flood insurance was easy to obtain – literally until almost the last minute – and quoted a government official in suburban St Louis as saying, “Taxpayers have bought some of these people refrigerators and chain saws 10 times over” (Newsweek, 2 August 1993, p. 24).

However, media coverage was not monolithic. Local news media, particularly, provided their readers and viewers with specific instructions on how to help both themselves and their neighbors (Thorson and Meeds, 1994). This frame – one of community solidarity – dominated coverage of the 1993 flood by the St Louis Post Dispatch. Furthermore, this news frame supports a finding from the wider field of disaster research, namely that in times of disaster, people do help each other (Drabek, 1986).

While the two sets of findings appear to be at odds, reality may have had something to do with how journalists covered the story. As previously noted, St Louis escaped the devastating consequences of the flood through mitigation efforts. For many residents of St Louis, the reality of the flood was working as sandbaggers or as volunteers in other ways to help communities both up- and downstream that had been much less fortunate. It makes sense that a reality-based news media would cover the story from essentially this perspective – at least when the news media are located in St Louis. Similarly, the Des Moines media outlets examined could also be expected to adopt a frame of human helplessness against nature. Most of Iowa was under water. Humanity seemingly had lost the battle.

What is at least as important to note is that the national news media, as represented by the New York Times, chose the dominant frame of helplessness. More importantly, news outlets, whether national or more local, gave scant attention to the policy issues raised by the flood. Similar findings have been noted in other studies of media coverage of hazards and disasters (Wilkins, 1987). Coverage of those issues – for example, the regulations governing the communities – was treated in an episodic and event-centered manner. Policy choices on the individual or community level were not linked with national policy choices – at least in the news media:

Compassion plays a major role in the way people respond to disasters and rush to provide disaster relief.... As for the 1993 floods, the nation can remember pictures carried by CNN of the house being swept away when a levee was breached. Viewers were left wondering how this could happen rather than why the house was there in the first place.... Human compassion and the way news is reported influence how Congress and the nation respond to disaster. A great push arose to replace levees along the Missouri River, many of which should not be replaced without careful design and engineering consideration.

(Interagency Floodplain Management Review Committee (IFMRC), 1994)

If federal response to disaster relief is driven by the immediacy of an event, rather than by rational decision-making, the effort to put everything back to the way it was may increase future risk rather than relieving it and finding a long-term solution to risk reduction. In the wake of some disaster relief, and under the pressure of the media effect, the nation may have subsidized some poor decisions and penalized some sound proposals, forgoing opportunities for change (Interagency Floodplain Management Review Committee, 1994). At a time when people were
prepared to pay attention to the flood mitigation question, the media failed to cover this important aspect of the event.

The policy impact of the 1993 flood

Although the news media may not have focused on mitigation during the flood itself, the US federal government did so almost immediately after the waters subsided. A federal task force headed by General Gerald Galloway produced an analysis of the flood which encouraged the nation to place an emphasis on mitigation strategies rather than focusing almost exclusively on post-impact disaster relief. Some of the proposals were far-reaching. For example, the Galloway commission suggested that some of the land along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers be returned to wetlands which would act as a natural sponge to soak up floodwaters. Other recommendations included one-time federal buyouts of residents along the rivers. As this recommendation was eventually implemented, entire communities were moved to higher ground. Those who chose to remain were denied flood insurance. And the waiting period to obtain flood insurance was increased to thirty days – a move designed to coerce property owners into thinking ahead instead of waiting for the floodwaters literally to hit their doors. In short, the Galloway proposals urged the nation to move away from a reliance on engineering to mitigate seasonal flooding and more toward solutions that emphasized planning, ecology and some policy shifts to encourage long-term mitigation.

The Galloway Report itself received little sustained media attention. Individual actions – for example, moving communities from the river bank – received localized media coverage, but that coverage seldom tied the local issues to a national flood mitigation strategy. Other changes – for example, increasing the waiting period for flood insurance – received episodic news coverage. This news coverage pattern should have been anticipated. It followed the dominant trends already present in news accounts: a focus on the event and a lack of historical and contextual information in news stories. And while it is easy to note that journalists may have done their jobs imperfectly, it is as important to note that other groups more focused on mitigation, including local and state emergency managers and other elected and appointed political officials, did little to provide journalists with a different frame of reference and level of understanding.

The mediated record of the 1993 flood is a patchwork. The event itself was well, if predictably, covered. Policy changes resulting from the flood were given minimal coverage. Local communities that were affected in particular ways sometimes received substantial news coverage, but generally without linking the specific event to the larger policy issues centering on flood mitigation. Journalists themselves became caught up in other stories – some of them disasters. News coverage was episodic rather than sustained. Thus, even though the flood of 1993 (Myers and White, 1994) resulted in some important policy initiatives (see Myers and Passerini, Chapter 14, and Changnon, Chapter 18), political leaders, aided by the media, missed a national teachable moment about the necessity for mitigation. Instead, those lessons were offered sporadically. And, since hazards researchers have long known that it is difficult to get people to transfer mitigation information about one type of hazard or risk to another, it is hardly surprising that journalists and the public failed to make such a link. That failure, of course, had consequences four years later in the spring of 1997.

NEWS COVERAGE OF POLICY CHANGE: THE MISSING ELEMENT IN RISK COMMUNICATION

With this background from another river basin, it is now important to return to news coverage of the 1997 Red River flood and look specifically for mitigation and policy information. If television coverage is taken as the standard, then the result is problematic. Televised news coverage of the Red River flood fits neatly into the patterns established in coverage of the 1993 flood – and mitigation information is, in general, missing. For example, there are brief mentions of the changes in national flood insurance, but those references are not tied to the previous event or to consequences for the 1997 flood. In addition, almost all the news stories, except in terms of visuals, failed to provide information
about the geography of the area, and history of flooding in the area, and an analysis of patterns of human habitation along the Red River banks. In addition, national news coverage emphasized the desire of most local residents to rebuild on the current sites; indeed, private donations appeared to support those decisions. The compassionate impulse noted in news coverage of the 1993 flood was also dominant in the 1997 event.

Local coverage was both deeper and with a substantially broader scope. Here, mitigation issues were addressed, although that focus also seemed to cluster around specific events. For example, the Grand Forks paper was among the only media outlets to question the accuracy of the warnings provided by the National Weather Service and other government agencies. Yet this coverage focused exclusively on the Red River flood; there was no link to findings that documented the same problem during the Great Flood of 1993. There were some stories on the changes in the national flood insurance policies. But again these stories tended to have a human interest focus which muted the policy questions. And media attention to more drastic mitigation strategies — for example, building away from the floodplain — was muted by the political uproar in Congress, where disaster relief became a pawn in a kind of legislative brinkmanship.

Finally, in the early months after the event, there was little comparison reporting. What both national and local journalists did not do was to explore the impact of previous mitigation efforts on downstream communities or to link those efforts with the impact and the changes that resulted from the flood of 1993.

While scholars initially characterized the risk communication as a one-directional process from sender (usually a government agency) to receiver (usually the general public), contemporary understanding presents a much more complex schematic. Risk communication is now acknowledged as a two-way flow of information between various groups of senders and receivers. Although there are many channels for such messages to travel, one of the most potent appears to be the news media, which have the capacity for “symbolizing” the event and for equalizing the power equation between various stakeholder groups (Krimsky and Plough, 1987). Such an understanding of the role of the media in risk communication, however, assumes that a continuing thread of coverage remains dynamic, building on both events and understandings that have come before. This view of risk communication implies long-term conversation taking place on multiple levels.

There is little doubt that in the floods of both 1993 and 1997 the media symbolized the event. Vivid images of people helpless in the path of natural forces as well as able to help each other in times of need provide common thematic threads. What is missing from the symbol is much discussion of how “help” can be transformed from immediate disaster relief to long-term mitigation strategy. In this sense, media coverage was static rather than dynamic, reinforcing the stereotypical notions of disasters. To blame journalists exclusively for this shortcoming is to devalue the role and impact of other institutions and stakeholder groups in the hazards mitigation process.

But in order for complex risk communication to occur, journalists too need to be considered an important part of the power equation — one that can change, but only with help from other powerful societal institutions. What all need to search for more diligently is a visual symbol for the success of mitigation. Until such a symbol emerges, the symbolic discussion that will dominate news coverage of disasters will focus on the immediate event and the inevitable clean-up, symbols that reinforce a view of mitigation activity as “too little, too late.”

REFERENCES


