

The Media is My Friend
Eric Holdeman
George Haddow

Here in the 21st Century we are living in the information age. Media in all its forms dominates our lives. Old media in the form of newspapers, magazines, television and radio is being challenged by “new media” in the form of the internet, podcasts, wikis and blogs. Trust in the traditional media is at a historical low as people are using new media to get their news and evaluate the “truthiness” of what traditional media is telling them. In this internet age there are intense pressures to be first with the story and to verify all the facts later. It is interesting to note that the very first media call we received at the King County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) following the Nisqually Earthquake in 2001 came from Australia.

Into this mix comes emergency management professionals who are seeking to provide disaster public education before an event, and then warnings and disaster public information to tell the story of disaster response and recovery once a disaster has come and passed.

Generally, emergency managers recognize that they cannot have an effective program without interacting with the media, but because of mistrust of the media in all its forms they avoid contact and treat the media as the enemy.

I believe that the media is a critical partner in your efforts to educate, inform and warn the public. Like all relationships, they are best built before an event occurs. Initiating contact with all types of media representatives will enable them and you to begin building a relationship that acknowledges the role of the media while still being a person who they know they can trust. Since you can either provide them with information, or failing that, refer them to other reliable and knowledgeable sources that can provide information and commentary on what is happening.

News rooms like emergency operations centers are 24/7 enterprises that may never sleep. After all, it is drive time sometime everywhere. In order to be of use to the media you must first be accessible. Providing reporters, assignment editors and news rooms all of your contact information, including your home phone number, is perhaps the one single thing that you can do to be responsive to their needs. You must realize that if they don't talk to you, they will talk to someone since they need to fill their news with content. It only makes sense that you should be that resource to them.

Disasters don't respect our artificial and man made jurisdictional boundaries. Therefore, when a large scale disaster strikes, it is typically a regional event. Media cannot have staff at the multitude of EOCs that activate to respond to an event. They will gravitate to scenes that have graphic images and to EOCs that are prepared to share information in a consolidated manner that paints the big picture for their audiences. To accommodate media getting the story it is important that technology systems and operating methodologies are put in place before an event that enables them to get the story. When building the Regional Communications and Emergency

Coordination Center (RCECC) we invited television and radio engineering representatives to participate in the design process to ensure that we could provide them with space, connections, power and other tools that would enable them to efficiently get the story from our center.

Katrina showed that even the media can be impacted by a disaster. Television and radio stations had damaged facilities, lost power and went off the air. Recognizing that an earthquake in the Pacific Northwest will have the same effect on our local media they were invited to become signatories to the Regional Disaster Response Plan. This will enable them to share resources between media companies if they choose to do so, and it also provides a legal instrument for the sharing of government resources to the media that might enable them to continue broadcasting during a disaster.

There are other things that can be done to improve the media's ability to get the story. For instance, the primary warning radio station in the Central Puget Sound Emergency Alert System (EAS) Network has pre-positioned a portable "radio station in a box" which would enable a remote broadcast from the King County EOC should the situation warrant its use.

In the end, the media has been shown to be a critical partner in the preparation for a future disaster. Instead of looking at the media as the enemy, it is time we start thinking of the media as a friend. If you are having trouble with this concept, just repeat, "The media is my friend" over and over to yourself. Then, get out there and start building working relationships.