

MONITORING AND WARNING SYSTEM AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA

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If there is such a thing as donor fatigue . . . let me just say that for journalists like me . . . there is also what we call disaster fatigue.

We have covered enough disasters, more than enough to last us a lifetime – from yearly typhoons, occasional floods to earthquakes to volcanic eruptions.

The period 1988 up to the present was the most trying time for a journalist like me.

Moreover, there was a series of coup attempts . . . natural disasters were hitting us one after the other, so much so that people were beginning to suspect that someone up there was punishing us or trying to deliver a message.

But the real disaster, it seems to me, is that we fail to draw lessons from every disaster that comes our way. Or maybe sometimes we forget the lessons that we learned from our misfortunes.

In November of 1988 my cameramen and I boarded a rescue helicopter whose mission was to help victims in the swollen Marikina river. This was at the height of typhoon “Unsang”.

Although the situation did provide us with heart-warming and heart-tugging scenes of human drama, later in the day, I thought while it was still happening – that the whole thing could have been avoided if only the victims had the foresight to leave their homes before disaster struck. But I guess, as one department secretary once told me, only hindsight has a 20-20 vision. Besides, one can never really foresee danger. Take the case of the killer earthquake of July 1990. Many people lost their homes, their dreams and their loved ones in that tragedy not only in the summer capital but also in Nueva Ecija, Pangasinan and La Union. For a long time, people were numbed by so much suffering and so much loss – they did not know what to do. On the part of the authorities who responded to the call for help – Baguio, in my opinion, was a classic example of how we should improve on our disaster preparedness program. I recall that days after the earthquake, rescue and relief operations were still chaotic and un-coordinated.

All the good Samaritans wanted to go to Baguio and take part in the action. Unfortunately, the roads were closed and the only way to get to Baguio was by military helicopter. I recall one instance when rescue teams and paramedics, who should have been the first ones to get to Baguio were stranded in La Union. Priority had been given instead to the wives of cabinet secretaries and politicians who wanted to distribute relief goods.

I remember too that formalin solution and cadaver bags were in short supply which made matters worse. Also there was the usual bickering as to where relief goods must be sent. Obviously, for political considerations.

This was the same case in Ormoc. Some politicians wanted relief goods all to themselves and their supporters. Those who belonged to other parties were snubbed.

This, in the midst of so much suffering and pain – when everyone should instead be helping one another.

In the eruption of Mount Pinatubo it was this same problem. There was that infamous tug-of-war between two politicians for victims about to be evacuated, while the volcano was raining ash and pebbles. One wanted the victims moved to his place while the other one said they should remain in his area of responsibility. It is squabbings like these, in my opinion, that make the situation worse than it already is. And the destruction wrought by Pinatubo has indeed, been devastating. Up to now, the suffering continues.

And now, for what I have been originally asked to discuss in this meeting: monitoring and warning system and the role of media. Let me just cite one mechanism that is in place right now and that is with regard to the Pinatubo problem.

It is the only media warning system I am aware of at present except of course, the usual, early morning no classes announcement over radio and TV during typhoons. It goes something like this: once Camp Olivas in San Fernando, Pampanga receives lahar alert signals from its watchpoints in the mountains surrounding Pinatubo, the signal is relayed by a telephone hotline to three radio stations based in Manila. The three radio stations, would then broadcast the signal in the hope that residents in the endangered areas would heed them and take the necessary precautions. Residents in the danger zones around Pinatubo have been, of course, advised before hand to tune in as much as possible to these stations.

This system is in addition to other means of transmitting lahar alert signals put in place by Camp Olivas which is, by the way, the headquarters of the Regional Disaster Coordinating Council. According to then RDCC chairman Gen. Pantaleon Dumlao, the system has been proven effective, although of late he's been complaining that often when they call via the hotlines, the radio stations involved do not respond immediately. Again, the ningas cogon attitude of us Filipinos. Unfortunately, our radio station DZBB has not been included in the three radio stations tapped for this purpose. We have been trying to, in an effort to tie-up the system for television to expand its reach, but we have been told, time and again, that there are no more hotlines available. Still, we have been trying very hard to get into the system and help save lives.

As I have said earlier on, this is the only alert system in place I am aware of, right now. Perhaps similar alert or warning systems can be thought of between concerned disaster related agencies, both in government and the private sector with media. Media, especially broadcast, has the advantage of technology and reach to expedite the transmission of alert signals or warnings especially in a disaster-prone country like ours.

Lately, if you have also been monitoring the weather forecast in our newscast, you have noticed that occasionally our weather forecasters, especially Amado Pineda of PAGASA has been including lahar and flood forecasts.

The experts see no end to the disasters that have been hitting us one after the other. The Philippines, they say, lies in that so-called ring-of-fire part of the Pacific, visited by an average of 20 typhoons yearly and occasionally rocked by earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and other natural disasters.

And so we might as well brace ourselves to this reality. And prepare for it.

With our wealth of new and media outfits of more than 20 national newspapers not to mention the provincial and local papers, more than two hundred radio stations nationwide and at least six major TV stations not to mention cable TV, it should not be a problem relaying information during disasters.

And when times are good, let's conduct a massive information campaign on disaster preparedness.

We in the broadcast media are often reminded of the fact that in practice of our calling, we owe the people the use of the airplanes – airplanes being the property of the people. And other than the stinging criticisms, tirades and commentaries that admittedly do more harm than good – sometimes.

The public deserves more during times of need. We owe them and therefore, we should pay them back – when they need us most.

