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Reconstructing Reality: Interpreting the Aeroplane Disaster News Story

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Abstract

At 9 a.m. on 31 August 1988, Delta Flight 1141 crashed on take-off, killing 13 people and leaving 94 survivors. Existing research has furthered our insight into media coverage of disasters but it has not broadened our understanding of disaster narrative interpretations and disaster behaviour education. In total, 24 in-depth interviews explore reader interpretations of print-mediated disaster reality and the Delta 1141 disaster. Disaster news stories provide the frames people use to interpret aeroplane disaster behaviour. Concludes the media need to recognize that their pedagogical role extends beyond disaster reporting and includes disaster behaviour information.

Keywords

Air transport, Aircraft industry, Airports, Contingency planning, Disaster management, Media

At 9 a.m. on 31 August 1988, Delta Flight 1141 crashed on take-off in Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas, killing 13 people and leaving 94 survivors. Destined for Salt Lake City, Utah, the flight originated in Jackson, Mississippi, and had a scheduled stopover at Dallas/Fort Worth. Like the Bhopal, Chernobyl, and the Challenger space shuttle disasters, Delta 1141 was a specific kind of tragedy: sudden, unexpected, and inexplicable.

Unlike the other disasters, however, the crash of Delta 1141 was one of many transportation disasters covered by the media and was one of many *survivable* crashes that have occurred throughout aviation history. Survivable crashes are those where passengers survive the impact of the crash. Lives lost in “survivable” crashes are attributed to inadequate evacuation plans, lack of communication, or lack of passenger awareness as to role expectations[1].

Despite their commonality, or maybe because of it, media coverage of transportation disasters has not drawn much scholarly attention[2, 3]. Most disaster and mass media research concentrates on natural disasters, the affected community or the role of the media in the disaster[4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9]. Disaster news content studies are less prevalent and typically focus on the inaccuracies and inadequacies of news coverage and the media’s tendency to perpetuate popular myths such as panic and helplessness[10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18].

Vincent *et al.*’s[3, p. 21] study on aeroplane disasters news coverage reveals that television journalists’ accounts of plane crashes contain three overall themes:

(a) the tragic intervention of fate into everyday life; (b) the mystery of what caused the crash; and (c) the work of legitimate authority to restore normalcy. While the themes help encourage “naive beliefs about the safety of air travel” they also protect millions who would be alarmed needlessly if journalists “exaggerated the importance of inconsistent details about an accident”[3, p. 24]..

While these studies further our insight into media coverage of disasters, they do not broaden our understanding of disaster narrative interpretations, especially as they relate to disaster behaviour education and transportation disasters. While researchers have acknowledged that the public relies on the media for disaster information, including disaster response education (e.g. evacuation), none has assessed what it is that the public is learning from the disaster discourse or how they are interpreting reported disaster behaviour[19, 20, 21]. In other words, we need to move beyond studies of disaster as epistemic structuration and explore disaster epistemic processing; how we process or appropriate print-mediated disaster reality.

We begin such an exploration by focusing on readers’ interpretations of the 1988 Delta Flight 1141 disaster. We ask three questions:

1. What interpretive meanings about flying and aeroplane disasters do readers bring to the Delta Flight 1141 print-mediated disaster message?
2. What meanings do they derive about flying and aeroplane disasters from the print news stories covering that disaster? and
3. What do these interpretations mean for disaster behaviour education?

We begin by briefly outlining how we determined the readers’ interpretations of the disaster.

Interpreting the not-so-everyday event

It depends on what kind of plane crash. If you’re, I don’t know how many 1,000 feet in the air and all the engines die at the same time then you can probably expect to spend the last and most frightening seconds of your life praying or whatever as you get closer to the earth. But since I think most plane crashes happen suddenly, probably you wouldn’t have much time to think about it until it was over.

Then either you'd be dead or you'd just take it from there I'm sure I'm being influenced by aeroplane disaster movies but probably there'd be somebody that would refuse to put his seatbelt on and would run up and down the aisle and try to get out the door (interview, September, 1987).

Interviews, like this one, indicate that as we struggle to understand events we cannot (and do not want to) experience we draw on a variety of resources, including the mass media. Disasters, such as aeroplane crashes, are abstractions for most people. Nonetheless, they become part of our common stock of knowledge through personal, shared and mediated experience. Because indirect experience is the most common way of knowing about, or having an acquaintance with, an aeroplane crash (or any other disaster) the media play an important role in shaping disaster interpretations.

As Gamson and Modigliani[22] state, "media discourse is part of the process by which individuals construct meaning". Through the sharing of experiences we develop our typifications and schemata or frames which enable us to carry on in everyday life.

The term "frame" is based on its sociological conception as outlined by Goffman[23], Tuchman[24], Gitlin[25], Gamson[26, pp. 161-74] and others. Goffman[23, p. 21] for example, calls frames the "schemata of interpretation". For Gamson[26, p. 165] "the frame suggests what the issue is about. It answers the question 'what is the basic source of controversy or concern on this issue?'" . Studies examining the social construction of news have revealed that frames, "enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and [to] routinely package the information for efficient relay to their audiences"[25]. Disaster news frames can both mediate and shape and, therefore, become part of our ongoing world views or schemas about disasters.

'...we followed Graber's[30] use of schema theory and applied her six dimensions of schemata to our study of readers' interpretations of aeroplane disaster news...'

Underlying the concept of frame are assumptions about individual cognitive processes; assumptions which cognitive and social psychologists share. In fact, the terms frame[27], scripts[28], and schema[29, 30], are often used interchangeably by social psychologists. Political communication scholar Graber, in her seminal book[30], effectively studied how audiences process political news and construct meanings by using schema theory. Because our interest is in the interpretive meanings, readers bring to print-mediated disaster narratives, and the meanings they derive about disasters and disaster behaviour, we followed Graber's[30] use of schema theory and applied her six dimensions of schemata to our study of readers' interpretations of aeroplane disaster news and aeroplane disaster behaviour.

Schemas

Briefly, schemas are the "world views" that we have constructed from our interactions with others and from pieces of information we have abstracted from interpersonal and mass communication connections; they represent social learning and bear the imprint of the culture in which learning takes place. Schemas are common-sense models of life situations that an individual has experienced directly or vicariously[30, 31]. They contain information about the substantive elements usually encountered in the situation, the likely interaction of these elements, and can be expanded or modified when direct or indirect experiences challenge their accuracy and completeness. For example, we have an image of what happens when an aeroplane crashes and this image includes information about the expected sequences of events, the scenarios, the props and the action. After experiencing an aeroplane crash we may mentally restructure our image by adding, subtracting or modifying that image so that it easily fits into the already established mental picture[32].

People have more than one schema, they have as many as they need and several schemas may be linked so that "thinking" progresses readily from one to the next. Schemas may overlap; containing the same bits of information stored in multiple contexts. Schemas perform four major functions according to Graber[30]. They:

1. determine what information will be noticed, processed and stored for future retrieval;
2. help individuals organize and evaluate new information so it fits into established perceptions;
3. make it possible to go beyond the information presented and fill in missing information; and
4. help in problem solving.

Schemas have six dimensions which can reveal how people interpret events.

They are:

1. simple situation sequences;
2. cause-and-effect sequences;
3. person judgements;
4. institution judgements;
5. cultural norm applications; and
6. human interest and empathy[30].

We used these dimensions of schemas to shape our study and analysis.

Simple situation sequences were addressed through questions that asked readers to describe the basic aeroplane safety briefing; the events leading up to a plane crash and what they would do if they had to escape an aeroplane. Cause-and-effect sequences and person judgement components were approached through questions such as “In your opinion, what causes most plane crashes?” and “In your opinion, who is responsible for most plane crashes?”

Institutional judgements were addressed through questions such as “Do you know of the FAA?” “In your opinion what is their job?” “How well do you think they do their job?” Other questions such as “What do you think should be done to prevent plane crashes from happening?” explored the cultural norm dimension and finally, human interest and empathy was explored through such questions as “What are the best two-three items you would pass on to your son/daughter for the next time he/she flew?” In many cases, the questions combined some of these dimensions.

We also addressed Graber’s six dimensions in another way. News stories are plays[33, 34] or narratives[3] wherein events are conveyed complete with plots, climaxes, resolutions, heroes and villains. Both in the telling (in the news story) and in the retelling (by the readers) the dimensions can and do appear. Thus, we asked the readers such questions as “A friend tells you that she does not know what happens when a plane crashes. She is especially interested in the passengers and what happens to them and what they do. What would you tell her?”

‘...people construct and modify their understanding in an active environment that is constantly offering them images and potential schemata, suggesting how an issue is to be understood and what should be done about it...’

By using the concepts of frame and schema, and by incorporating Graber’s six schema dimensions we hoped to reveal how readers interpret disaster news narratives. In addition, by providing the readers with Delta 1141 news stories we hoped to further explore Gamson’s[26] observation that “people construct and modify their understanding in an active environment that is constantly offering them images and potential schemata, suggesting how an issue is to be understood and what should be done about it”.

The study

Three factors determined the selection of the Delta 1141 disaster: type of news story, time and space. The news coverage had to involve a survivable commercial aeroplane crash because most aeroplane crashes are survivable^[1] and we wanted the disaster to be as “typical” as possible. The disaster also had to be at least two years old (time) and to have occurred in a location separate from the study locale (space). This was done for two reasons. First, the older the event the more likely it would be treated by the readers as a “fresh” or possibly new event. Second, if the disaster occurred outside the study area, event salience for the readers would be reduced.

We examined the first three days of Delta 1141 crash coverage (31 August-2 September 1988) by six newspapers: *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Dallas Times Herald*, *The Houston Post* (crash site papers), *The Clarion Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi), *The Jackson Daily News* (flight origin papers) and *The Salt Lake Tribune* (flight destination paper). Location of the disaster, flight origination and flight destination determined newspaper selection. The greatest amount of coverage occurred during this period, totaling in 351 news stories, photographs and diagram stories covering every topic from victim lists to stories about media coverage of the crash^[35].

Eight stories (including accompanying photographs and diagrams), representing the complete coverage of the disaster, were used in the study. (Only eight were used because of time constraints and readers’ comfort.) The stories selected focused on the following topics: the crash (summary of events), the investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Delta’s safety record, DFW Airport, airline industry, disaster photo essay, the pilot, and surviving passenger stories.

Following Gamson^[26], we argue that the Delta 1141 disaster discourse, like other discourse, has its own culture in which there are competing and constantly changing packages available for interpretation. The newspapers and stories used in this study serve as an indicator of the packages people can use to construct their interpretation of the Delta crash. Most of us would not read all of these publications, but they were available to those who wanted to make sense of the crash through local, national and personal discourse.

The twenty-four readers

We interviewed 24 readers for approximately 2.5 hours each. Sex, age, education and occupation diversity, as well as a willingness to be interviewed for more than two hours determined reader selection. Readers’ ages ranged from 30 to 72; six were in their 30s, nine in their 40s, five in their 50s and four over 60 years of age. There were 12 males and five of them were veterans. The educational level was high, ranging from four years of high school to nine years of graduate school. The readers had a wide array of occupations ranging from psychiatrist, sociologist, and civil engineer, to parking enforcement attendant, hair salon owner/stylist, homemaker and student.

Variations in reader flying experience also determined their selection. Filmore (readers’ names are pseudonyms) for example had never flown on a commercial aeroplane and another, Iris, had flown once and did not plan on doing so again. Others, like Morris and Tom, flew quite frequently, up to 35 times a year. None had experienced a plane crash nor did they know anyone who had.

The interview

Readers were asked a series of questions about flying frequency and experiences, knowledge of aviation safety practices (e.g. oxygen mask use), perceived safety of flying, existing aeroplane disaster interpretations (e.g. what happens when a plane crashes?) as well as personal data about age, education, media use, etc. They were then asked to read the eight Delta 1141 crash stories as they would normally.

The readers were unfamiliar with the crash or the news stories. After the readers finished reading, the interview proceeded with the focus on their interpretations of the Delta 1141 disaster. Interviews were tape-recorded and professionally transcribed. Each transcript was examined for individual and collective descriptions of the readers and their narratives.

Readers' interpretive meanings

What they brought with them

Readers brought to the interview their interpretations as to what happens when a plane crashes (situation sequences), what people/passengers do in such situations (person judgements and human empathy) as well as their judgements as to the causes of, and responsibility for, aeroplane crashes (cause-and-effect sequences and institution judgements).

Research by Johnson[36] indicates that those with little or no flying experience tend to view flying as a relatively unsafe practice and those with more experience regard flying as a safe method of transportation. This proved to be the case with this group. Without hesitation, 15 readers stated that they "believed it was safe to fly". Those with little or no flying experience "knew" it was safe to fly but they did not really "feel" it was so; expressing concerns about "lack of control", "deregulation", and the belief that "driving was a calmer" way to travel. Two believed their "chances of survival" were greater when travelling by car.

When flying on a commercial airline, FAA regulations require a safety briefing outlining seatbelt use, oxygen mask use, and so on. A total of 18 readers thought the safety instructions were adequate "if anybody listens to them", with additional qualifications such as "It's false security to think that to follow those you are going to be all right." The other six were more skeptical as the following statement illustrates: "You're going to be hamburger anyway. Those things are to give you something to do while, you know, before you hit the ground".

While all felt they knew the instructions (seatbelt use, exits, oxygen mask, etc.) and could even reproduce the voice and movements associated with the safety briefings, their actual knowledge was uneven.

'...Readers all believed, with varying degrees of certainty, that planes "fall out off the sky" and that passengers panic...'

Even Filmore, the reader without flying experience on commercial aeroplanes, was able to describe some of the procedures in spite of the fact he had never seen or heard them before. When asked how he knew the instructions, he said: "Well, that is just assuming that the ones you see in movies are somewhat close to the truth". Direct references to movies were not common but some readers did draw on them when searching for descriptions of disasters and disaster behaviour. While most claimed they did not watch disaster films and believed they were "unrealistic", the films were part of the disaster culture they used to construct their interpretations.

Readers were able to describe what happens in a plane crash and all believed, with varying degrees of certainty, that planes "fall out off the sky" and that passengers panic. In their crash descriptions, 13 focused on the ways a plane could crash (on take-off, landing, engine falling off) and the possible cause of the problem (pilot error, maintenance problems, wind shear, birds). A few, like Loren, were very brief: "The plane falls out of the sky and hits the ground and usually explodes and burns. Some percentage of the passengers are killed, either 100 per cent or some percentage, you know, die or are injured". (In 86 per cent of the accidents no one dies[36].)

The remaining 11 readers focused primarily on the passengers. One said, for example: "If they don't die of a heart attack, they probably are traumatized for life ... their [Sioux City's] saving grace was that the captain of the plane was such a hero. ... But most plane crashes don't have any heroes, you know". (This comment refers to the

United flight 232 crash on 19 July 1989, at Sioux Gateway Airport, Sioux City, Iowa.) Another said: “You’re dead, probably, because you are up 40,000 feet when an engine falls off and there’s no way ... in a lot of cases it’s over before you know it, so some of them pray, some of them panic”. Or: “If they have time to react I imagine it is real panic out there. And in some of these disasters, there is a real lot of time for them to react. They are going down and writing letters home”. As noted, panic is a popular disaster myth, one perpetuated by the mass media and popular culture. Despite images to the contrary, in aeroplane disasters passengers tend not to panic or respond at all - not out of shock, but because they do not have leadership or ample safety information[1].

According to the readers, aeroplane crashes are caused by human error, mechanical error, mother nature, or some combination thereof. Diane’s statement is illustrative: “I don’t think there is one - there’s human error from people flying the plane, human error in the maintenance of the aeroplane, there are mechanical things that are no one’s fault to a certain extent. I think there are natural causes like wind sheers and weather and things that people do, like the terrorists’ bombs”. In fact, 89 per cent of aeroplane crashes are attributed to pilot error[37].

Their views regarding responsibility for aeroplane crashes were more varied and included: the pilots, air traffic controllers, maintenance programmes, mechanics or mechanical inspectors. Ten mentioned the airlines noting:

If you really assume that this plane should have been flying, and it had too many take-offs and landing times, then you can really blame the airlines themselves. The last inspection routine-maintenance, changes of wheels, whatever, however many miles they go, they are probably trying to save a buck. I say the airlines.

Interpretive meanings of the Delta 1141 news stories

Having established the readers’ existing interpretations of aeroplane disasters and the safety of flying the eight news stories provided a base for further exploration. While only two of the eight stories were passenger stories, these drew the readers’ attention the most. A few said they disliked the human interest portion of the news but this proclaimed dislike did not deter any from discussing the passengers involved in the disaster.

When the readers finished reading they were asked to retell the Delta 1141 story in order to further understand their interpretations of aeroplane disasters in general, and disaster behaviour in particular. Despite Graber’s[30] warning to the contrary, we expected them to start at the beginning of the story and progress systematically through the series of events leading up to, and then following the crash.

The readers’ stories, however, were far from being systematic or detailed. In fact, the results are similar to Graber’s[30] in that the stories were full of inconsistencies and contained factual errors. Nonetheless, they related what they perceived to be the key facts of the story and those perceptions were tied to their established views about disasters. “Pretty much what you would expect”, and “Just like the Sioux City crash”, were common phrases indicating that some of the news story discourse was already part of their existing schemata.

The readers related, in an empathic way, to the passengers in the stories and they tied the 1,141 passenger’s experiences to other crashes with which they were familiar, and to the experiences of others in similar situations. “The one man who’s wife was lost - [there] has to be post-traumatic syndrome, there has to be survivor guilt. Similar to when a person very close to you tells you that they have a terminal illness. And almost simultaneously, your response is my God, and thank God it’s not me.” Both in the retelling of the events, and in the discussion of the crash scene, they spoke in terms of the people involved. They wanted to know “what it feels like to go down in a plane” and how they “handled the situation; how they handled it right then”. They talked about all of the passengers, the ones on the crash plane, on nearby planes, and those waiting in the airport.

Some related to specific passengers, such as the woman who burned her hand, the rodeo clown, or the parents with the children on the flight. One reader, for example, had two children and she clearly related to the passengers with children: "There was a lady with a child and she had one of them out and was afraid the other might have gotten caught in the fire. So there were two children. Of course, that gets to me".

'...The readers' existing schemas also included person judgements about flight crew behaviour before and after a plane crash...'

The readers' cultural norm for disasters included the idea of panic; having clearly stated prior to reading the stories that they thought people panicked and that flight personnel would be there to assist them in an emergency. This information was not in the news stories they read. Nonetheless, they assumed that panic did occur and worked through this "information gap" by either automatically filling in the missing information ("they panicked"), or by wondering aloud about the behaviour of the flight crews, speculating as to what happened and why. This also indicates that when expected information was not present they had information to fill in the perceived gaps or they re-examined their existing schemas for possible solutions.

The readers' existing schemas also included person judgements about flight crew (pilots and attendants) behaviour before and after a plane crash. As a result, it was not surprising that they noted the heroic efforts of the passengers and the pilot and raised questions about the flight crew's actions after the crash. "I don't remember that they [flight attendants] helped anybody get out. I was wondering about that. I don't think the attendants helped anybody get out - whereas the captain did; he was the last one out of the plane." While all raised this issue, it appeared to be more salient for those who flew less than once a year and who worried that this was "not what I was expecting".

The readers saw heroes and asked about the villains (who was responsible) and they expressed an interest in the mystery of the crash (what caused it and who was responsible). All expressed a belief and a confidence in the FAA and the NTSB's ability to determine the cause of the accident. Throughout all of this, however, there was a feeling of powerlessness (in the sense that they did not feel that there was anything they could do about the situation). As Violet noted:

I think [the airlines] pass the buck. As cheaply as they possibly can. They can probably put on a front as doing a good job of air safety. But how do we, the consumer [know]? Unless we know this business, we have to be trusting and just have to take it as best we can.

Overall, they did not think plane crashes would stop anyone from flying, but they did feel those who are concerned about flying safety from the beginning would be more concerned. These crashes, according to one reader, do not have much of an impact because "they [the public] believe the propaganda that they're fed, that the airline industry is safe". Readers also made more complex linkages, tying beliefs in human gullibility to those that the airlines are not "trustworthy" and are "only out to convince you that flying is safe and natural when it is not". This latter view was especially strong in those who flew less than once a year.

Reader interpretations of aeroplane disaster behaviour

Most did not feel that they, or anyone else, would learn anything from the news stories about disaster behaviour. In fact, 20 said that they did not learn anything new about what they should do when a plane crashes. They felt that the information was "common-sense information" and "pretty much what [they] expected to see". For others, the stories confirmed their belief that what happens is a matter of fate.

It's, you know, all you can do is prepare yourself, but then when it happens, some guy sitting there and the plane opens up right at his feet, you can hop out and go down. Another person is in the middle of

the plane and there's fire all over the place, you just don't know. You have to try to trust your instincts, I guess (Bert).

The four remaining readers did, however, feel that they learned something, whether it was to "just get to the exits as soon as possible", or to "not take a hold of a hot door". Interestingly, while most of the readers did not believe they learned anything from the news stories, their discussion of the event included repeated references to being unaware that "exits might be blocked", that doors "might be hot", or that they might survive the crash but be "injured in the escape".

Tom, for example, found the stories to be revealing about technology and its limitations. "The one thing I thought of when I read the article was the door handle. The handle on the door was so hot they couldn't open the door. Why could that be? Why couldn't the door handle be made out of some acrylic that doesn't transfer heat at all?" The stories made Kevin "conscious that my avenue of escape could be blocked by technology".

'...Having to plan for injuries or alternative exits was clearly not in some readers' game plan for aeroplane disaster response...'

All of the readers mentioned the passenger who burned her hand when she tried to open the exit door. This proved to be of concern for them, either in terms of confirming their own fears of opening a hot door ("I would try to make sure there wasn't a fire on the other side, first" - Ernie) or in terms of the fact that precautionary measures are needed ("So you would also think, jeeze, at least take along a pair of gloves" - Oscar). This also made them realize that alternative exits may be necessary. Kevin noted, "It is probably a good idea that before a crash to think of, well, if this one is blocked, where's the next one?" These statements are in direct contradiction to their view that there was "nothing new" in the news stories. Many were clearly incorporating new information into their disaster behaviour schemas. Kevin, for example, said: "It reinforced what I knew, but it struck me that when the one woman tried to open the exit and burned her hand, it made me think about that - that in case of a fire, my avenue of escape could be blocked ..." Having to plan for injuries or alternative exits was clearly not in some readers' game plan for aeroplane disaster response.

Implications

As a whole, the readers brought to the interview fairly complex interpretive meanings about flying, aeroplane disasters, airlines, and the FAA. Regardless of flying experience, they were able to discuss aeroplane disaster causes, reactions, and behaviours. Most of their disaster knowledge appears to stem from the mass media and popular culture rather than personal experience. Even the safety briefings appeared to play a minor role in their interpretations compared to the mass media. Which mass medium had the greatest influence on the readers' interpretations is unknown, though their heavy use of newspapers certainly must have played a key role.

Nonetheless, it must be noted that the readers did draw on the various competing packages of disaster discourse (print and broadcast news stories, films, personal discourse). Graber[30] argues that schema complexity is related to whether an individual has had direct experience with the event (none had) or has experienced it vicariously (e.g. through the mass media). Those who rely primarily on print media tend to bring more information to a new scenario than those who rely primarily on broadcast media[30]. The readers' schemas for aeroplane disasters are not as complex as someone who had experienced a crash. It is likely, however, that their schemas are more complex than those who rely primarily on broadcast media or popular culture films.

The readers' utilization of the six schema components, and multiple disaster discourse packages, reveal the complexity of studying epistemic processing. A wide range of attitudes, opinions, and beliefs about the social world were brought to bear on the subject at hand and included information about expected events, people,

actions and props. The schematic make-up for each reader is, of course, different. But the commonalities outlined here have been found outside this study and possibly reflect the most common source of information for this type of event - the disaster news story. Readers evaluated the Delta 1141 stories and found the crash to be “typical” and what they “expected”. This would support the idea that one disaster story frame is the same as the next, reflecting a common stock of knowledge which shapes and influences the news frame as well as our own schemas.

Disaster news stories suggest two values according to Gans[38]: “The desirability of social order ... and the need for national leadership in maintaining order”. When confronted with a disaster, the press tries to organize it, routinize it, make it appear within the realm of the normal. They take the unpredicted, unstructured event and try to give it structure; to re-establish order. Indeed, the press can be expected to behave in a predictable pattern during times of disasters[5] and this behaviour can be found within the organizational nature of news[2, 39].

When the media encounter an “unscheduled” news event, like a plane crash, it is moved from unscheduled status to developing news status via the use of typification[2, 39], the unexpected becomes the routine. This means that the press covers the disaster as a discrete event rather than a normal occurrence within the larger technological, social and/or political environment. The decontextualized disaster can, in turn, lead to misunderstandings on the part of the public as to the nature or the reason for the event.

Presented with a picture or world view that says each disaster is the same, its cause is the same, and the response is the same, the reader is prevented from developing a true understanding of the event, its cause and the corresponding appropriate response.

Aeroplane crashes challenge the system by reminding us that things go wrong and people die. Yet, aeroplane disaster news stories reassure readers because authority figures, such as the FAA, NTSB, and the airlines, are depicted as being in command. Vincent *et al.*[3, p. 24] argue that this news frame is “responsible” because it protects the public from being “needlessly” alarmed. On the other hand, the practice encourages the perpetuation of disaster myths; encourages the public’s belief that flying is safe and that there is little they can do about their own safety in a disaster situation; and encourages the belief that authorities are in control and are ensuring public safety when, in fact, this may not be happening at all.

The readers did see heroes and villains, and - though they clearly did not like the aviation industry - they expressed faith in the system and its ability to work; they believed the FAA and NTSB do their job, as do the airlines. Ironically, this “faith” in the FAA and the NTSB and the ritual discussion of investigation into the “mystery” of the crash may actually help to preserve aeroplane passengers’ apathy towards safety briefings. The news stories do not directly challenge the institutional process but merely give the reader a sense that aviation officials have command of the system even when it is demonstrating failure. The discourse, then, is ultimately hegemonic.

‘...NTSB studies have shown that flight crew survival is no more ensured than passengers’ *and* most passenger deaths are not attributable to the crash itself, but rather to passengers’ lack of familiarity with safety procedures leading to their inability to escape the plane...’

This is especially true when one considers the fact that, despite their protests to the contrary, the airline industry does not want the public to be aware of the fact that when a disaster does happen, passengers will most likely have to respond on their own. The airlines actively encourage the belief that airline personnel will be there to assist passengers in a disaster and subtly encourage the belief that the safety briefings, and the information contained therein, will not be needed[1]. This ultimately promotes the sense that authorities are always in control of the system and the public has no power over its own fate. Yet, NTSB studies have shown

that flight crew survival is no more ensured than passengers' *and* most passenger deaths are not attributable to the crash itself, but rather to passengers' lack of familiarity with safety procedures leading to their inability to escape the plane^[1]. In other words, passengers can achieve some control over their fate if they know what to do and are willing and able to take action.

The readers in this study clearly questioned the usefulness of the safety briefings presented on board aeroplanes. While most were able to mimic the voice and movements of flight attendants demonstrating the use of the oxygen mask, most admitted that they did not know how to use a non-seat cushion life vest or open a door; nor did they think the information would help them survive a crash. Readers also clearly expected the flight attendants to be there after a crash and to tell them what to do.

The Delta 1141 news stories did not challenge readers' conceptions of what happens in a disaster, but they provided disaster behaviour information some of the readers had not encountered before (e.g. flight attendants not present after the crash). The readers appeared to incorporate the new information, to some degree, into their schematic structures, as evidenced by their checking what they already knew (escape through the doors) with new information (hot or blocked doors) and then incorporating the new information (alternative exits needed).

Thus, the readers were consciously unaware that they were learning disaster behaviour information from the news stories but it appears to be the case that they were. If disaster researchers are going to continue to rely on the mass media to educate the public about disasters and appropriate disaster response, they will need to address issues of newswork and reader interpretations in order to better address issues of disaster education.

This case illustrates that what people learn from news stories such as these is far more complex and varied than what disaster researchers have revealed in the past. The actual shape of what they know is determined by a number of factors including primary source of information and experience. Nonetheless, this does not matter as much as the fact that people want to know both what happened in a disaster and how to respond.

Editors and reporters must be aware that their audience is looking for more than a good story; they are looking for information that will help them if ever they are in a disaster situation. This raises the question of whether the mass media have an obligation to educate the public about appropriate safety behaviour in transportation disasters, natural disasters, and other potentially dangerous situations? The answer is yes. First, because that is ultimately what they do - they educate us about political, social, and economic events, including disasters. Second, the media already serve as disaster warning agents in natural disaster situations, as indicated by their participation in the Emergency Broadcast System, and many already provide earthquake and tornado preparation guides.

They should also provide transportation disaster guides. As in the case of natural disasters, each time there is a transportation disaster, the media can provide something as simple as a sidebar that outlines what the reader should do if ever he or she finds her/himself in a similar position.

This call, however, raises another issue: the reluctance of the transportation industry to acknowledge disasters and the need for preparation^[1]. As Molotch and Lester^[40] observed, accidents foster "revelations which are otherwise deliberately obfuscated" and they provide us with "an important resource for learning about" events of which economic institutions would rather have us remain unaware.

'...Disaster researchers and the media need to recognize that their pedagogical role extends beyond natural disasters and that the public needs to be told clearly and repeatedly how to respond to *all* potential disasters...'

As the latest round of aeroplane crashes reminds us, flying can be unsafe and disaster behaviour knowledge can determine your fate. Disaster researchers and the media need to recognize that their pedagogical role extends beyond natural disasters and that the public needs to be told clearly and repeatedly how to respond to *all* potential disasters. Safety behaviour information is already a part of natural disaster news discourse and could easily be made a part of transportation disaster news discourse. This would probably not please the transportation industry, but it would please the rest of us who must ride on the wings of fate.

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