

Media Reports a Library Disaster: A Case Study at Colorado State University

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Abstract

The first section of this article surveys the literature regarding the news media's reporting of disasters. The second section describes the media reports of the July 1997 natural disaster's impact upon Morgan Library at Colorado State University. The third section analyzes the reports from Colorado State University's disaster as compared to the research literature, media by media: broadcast, national newspapers and wire services, Colorado (local) newspapers, library press, and specialized publications. The conclusion presents concerns about media reporting and the apparent lack of concern for accuracy; this case study serves as a warning to all librarians and researchers.

Media Reports a Library Disaster: A Case Study at Colorado State University

On the evening of July 28, 1997, Morgan Library, the main library building at Colorado State University, was struck by flowing surface water generated by an unprecedented cloudburst of several hours' duration. The basement of the library, which housed approximately 462,500 books and bound periodical volumes, was completely inundated. Many other buildings on the university campus also suffered damage, while elsewhere in the city of Fort Collins five people perished in flood waters, and many homes and businesses were destroyed or damaged. For a number of days afterward, media attention focused on the city, the university, and the library.¹ For those involved in the disaster, it soon became apparent that some of the news stories generated were lacking in factual accuracy or displayed unforeseen perceptions. The question arose as to how the news media treats disasters, and in particular, how the catastrophe that befell the Colorado State University Libraries (CSUL) was handled. This paper seeks to answer that question, serve as a warning to researchers, and to provide guidance as to what to expect from the media to other libraries struck by a disaster, large or small.

The Research Background

Most research on media coverage of disasters is initiated by either sociologists or journalists. In general, research efforts have concentrated on one of two themes. The first theme examines the factual accuracy and perceptions of journalists reporting on disasters. The second theme, one less germane to this paper, focuses upon the role the media plays in delivering information to disaster victims as the event takes place. The two themes are exemplified in two 1979 papers. In one, Parker rails at the tendency of the news media to sensationalize disasters, excoriating reporters for their alleged insensitivity toward victims and their failure to follow up on the long-term effects of disasters and the lessons to be learned from them. He calls for a journalism curriculum that educates editors and reporters as to their responsibilities during disaster coverage.² Taking a more empirical approach, Wenger surveys residents of three communities recently struck by disasters in an effort to determine the sources of information for disaster victims, as well as perceived accuracy of those sources. Although Wenger briefly examines myths perpetuated by the media, his focus lies more with the general public as recipient of disaster information rather than

with journalists as disseminators of information, accurate or inaccurate.³ This emphasis upon recipients of information, and the concomitant role of the media as a provider of information at the time of a disaster, preoccupies many researchers, but the examination of the perceptions of journalists also plays an important role, one examined in this paper.

A substantial contribution to the field comes from Quarantelli in 1989. Surveying the literature of disaster and the media since the 1960s, Quarantelli identifies several research themes relating to media perceptions of disaster. One theme indicates that different television networks display varying styles when reporting on disasters, and that local coverage can differ from national coverage. Another theme stresses that mass media coverage can help define what events are to be considered “disasters.” Other researchers believe disaster coverage to be distorted by emphasis on extreme cases among events and victims; this theme is widespread. Finally, much of the research indicates that reporting of natural disasters was superior to reporting of technological disasters.⁴ Several problems confronting the news media in its coverage of disasters are identified by Elliott. Elliott notes that the media tends to perpetuate the myth that disaster victims are helpless in the face of catastrophe; this supposed helplessness is reflected in media analysis that fails to examine disaster preparedness or its absence. According to Elliott, the ability to provide live transmissions often leads the media to focus upon drama rather than accuracy during the course of disasters. She also faults the media for its failure to place disasters in historical context, and suggests that a contextual approach would better enable victims and policy-makers alike to cope with present and future disasters.⁵ Wilkins underscores concern regarding the need for contexts: “The construct of ‘news’ itself may lead to inaccurate portraits of risk, reports that attribute too much responsibility to the individual and not enough to underlying social and political causes.”⁶

Quarantelli and Wenger compare disaster coverage in the United States to that in Japan, finding many more similarities than differences. They find:

1. In both countries the various television networks develop individual story lines for the same disaster.
2. In the immediate wake of a disaster, the media often reports information that is incomplete or potentially inaccurate.

3. By relying upon official government sources for information, the media assumes a “command post” viewpoint, as opposed to a viewpoint garnered from ordinary citizens or operational personnel.⁷

Likewise, Singer et al. examine the relationship of geographical location to the reporting of disasters. Perhaps not surprisingly, they find that the American news media has a bias toward reporting hazards in the U.S. rather than in other parts of the world, and there is a bias toward reporting catastrophes that include a large number of deaths. Such bias reflects the notion that such events are considered newsworthy and are therefore reported with an eye toward assumed audience interest.⁸

Examining yet another facet of media coverage of disasters, Hornig et al. survey newspaper reports on two natural events that struck the U.S. in 1989: Hurricane Hugo, and the Loma Prieta, California earthquake. The authors found that the demand for news during a disaster often exceeds the supply of information. In turn, the “gate keeping” that normally occurs during news events theoretically should be less stringent; that is, more sources and viewpoints ought to gain a voice in the news. However, Hornig, et al. find that journalists continue to turn to their usual sources, particularly government officials. Scientific experts with the ability to comment on the disasters in a learned fashion are not accustomed to approaching journalists; by default, the gap is filled by members of government agencies. When journalists do seek out experts, too often the latter are asked only for general observations rather than for statements that use their expertise. Among all these quoted in newspaper stories relating to the two disasters, 56 percent fixed blame on nature for the events in question. When solutions to the situation are sought, 56 percent also identified government as a source for relief. Spokespersons for government agencies are often less interested in fixing blame than in claiming a role for themselves in the resolution of the disaster.⁹

By far the most comprehensive examination of journalistic behavior during disasters comes from Smith who theorizes that journalists deal with the press of events by following certain routines and consulting standard sources. Disasters, however, are non-routine, and the usual journalistic procedures tend to be less effective. Reporters continue to approach their usual sources, even when not appropriate, and often present disasters as discrete events rather than placing them in the context of political institutions or systematic eventualities. Although natural disasters are viewed as “acts of God,” for which it is difficult to assign blame, frustration is often expressed over the

seeming lack of control by society over the effects of such disasters, given the supposed sophistication of modern society and its technology. Blame for technological disasters is often assigned to the agency, public or private, that appears to be most responsible for the successful functioning of the system that has failed. A sense of the complexity of technological systems, and the almost inevitability of failure at some point is seldom presented; instead, blame is fixed on human error within the organization in charge of the failed system. To make sense of disasters, journalists unconsciously turn to symbolic values; the public understands the “symbolism” of human error as opposed to the failure of complex systems.¹⁰ In order to test a number of hypotheses, Smith examines three disasters that occurred in either 1988 or 1989: the forest fires in Yellowstone National Park, the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, and the Loma Prieta earthquake. In all three cases he surveys both print and broadcast reporters who covered the stories, as well as the sources they used. His findings are worth discussion.

Smith postulates that journalists feel an ethical responsibility to present their readers with balanced reporting that represents all sides in a controversy. Balanced reporting is not easy to achieve, however. Journalists must choose how to tell a story, almost always working under tight deadlines. A tendency to present disasters as social dramas, with public or private agencies as possible villains, can manifest itself. Further, when large numbers of journalists gather to report on a disaster, eventually almost all those covering an event present it in similar terms, with little reference to possible alternatives. Although journalists strive for accuracy, they define accuracy in terms of facts, such as number of deaths attributed to a disaster. Some research also indicates that a tendency toward incomplete coverage should be of greater concern to the journalism profession than a focus upon accuracy. Although this paper documents that journalists do make factual errors, more frequently they fail to report on all aspects of a subject, thereby creating errors of omission. Additionally, journalists may select sources that are eager to share information, regardless of their expertise, or may consciously or unconsciously select sources who reflect the ongoing conventional wisdom. For example, one source for the Yellowstone fires complains that reporters seem eager to create “playlets” in which sources play a predetermined role in the story to be presented. Finally, television portrayals of disasters may have an all-pervasive effect on the story as a whole. Such is the emotional impact of television footage that it creates a storyline for the general public. Print journalists also see the pictures on television, and having arrived on the scene after the television crews, succumb to the temptation to follow the same

“plot” that the footage has already established.¹¹

In defense of journalists, Smith recognizes that reporters often labor under severe handicaps when reporting disasters. Most are rushed to the scene and have no acquaintance with the background of the story and are unfamiliar with local circumstances. They lack the knowledge to identify and contact scientific experts, so fall back upon the routine of interviewing official government or corporate sources. Finally, reporters and their audience alike often fail to realize that change in natural processes is inevitable, while failure of complex technological systems is to be expected eventually.¹²

Smith sums up the existing situation as follows:

There appear to be two different worlds of journalism that coexist uneasily among today's media. One entails the idealized kind of reporting that keeps the public informed about important issues and wins prestigious awards. The other, more common, form of reporting pursues drama and conflict and titillates us with the ironic and the bizarre . . . the majority of what is published in newspapers and seen in television news has little to do with an informed public.¹³

Following up on the article by Hornig, et al. (1991) that examines sources used by print journalists during the 1989 disasters, Walters and Hornig studied sources used by the broadcast media. Hurricane Hugo and the Loma Prieta earthquake are again examined. The results are similar to those of the previous study. Broadcast journalists often turn to their usual sources, official government spokespersons, during disasters. Science experts are consulted much less frequently and are often asked for general comments only. As other researchers have noted, use of government spokespersons gives the news a command post perspective, with official agencies either claiming responsibility for mitigating a disaster, or blaming others for shortcomings. However, gate keeping is relaxed to some extent as television reporters approach victims to learn their experiences and opinions, lending drama to the ongoing story. Walters and Hornig conclude:

This is a mediated reality in which the interpretations of experts are overshadowed by the faces and voices of victims and officials waging a battle with nature framed in terms of the allocation of government resources.¹⁴

Another examination of a specific disaster comes from Garner in 1996. Garner focuses on the Midwestern flood of 1993, a widespread and lengthy event. Garner studies national and local print media alike in an attempt to discover differences in coverage. The media tended to portray the flood as a war between human beings and nature, with humans often on the losing end. Technological fixes, such as levees and dams, are discussed, often in a skeptical light, since it appeared that efforts to control rivers such as the Mississippi had failed despite such devices. Both local and national media dealt with the cost of the flood, but here the framework differed. While the local newspapers portrayed the personal losses to individuals affected by floods, the national newspapers and news magazines expressed concern over the potential economic loss, and the funds needed to compensate victims of the disaster. Garner found the national media to be much more impersonal than the local media.¹⁵

Finally, in 1996, Dymon and Boscoe report on newspaper of flooding in northern California in 1995, emphasizing potential bias relating to locales selected for coverage. Dymon and Boscoe find:

It appears that in a widespread disaster event, newspaper editors select a small number of locations out of those where significant damages exist to give special emphasis, often developing the personal stories of a small number of individuals victimized by the disaster.

Locales are sometimes chosen for convenience; in northern California, flooding affected large cities and rural areas alike, but reporters found it easier to cover the cities. A center of government, such as the state capital at Sacramento, attracts reporters thanks to its access to officials. In other instances, reporters go first to a particular locale, then continue reporting from that point rather than moving on to other places hit by the disaster. Reporters also gravitate toward story “hooks.” One such hook is the presence of fatalities. In all, these factors contributed to a geographic bias that lead newspapers to give greater emphasis to some areas struck by flooding while ignoring

others, inadvertently misrepresenting the actual extent of the disaster.¹⁶

Several themes emerge from the research literature pertaining to disasters and the media:

1) That the news media have a tendency to sensationalize disaster stories.

- Reporters emphasize extreme cases among events and victims, often focusing on sites where deaths have occurred.
- The presence of “story hooks,” such as deaths, lends drama to the coverage.
- Once established at a site with dramatic implications, journalists often fail to move on to other sites.

2) Coverage of disasters varies from one media format to another:

- The differences between television and print media are obvious.
- There is variance between local and national coverage, with local coverage focusing on individual human dramas to a greater extent than national outlets.
- Some researchers even find differences among television networks, as each develops its own slant on the story.

3) The use of sources during disasters:

- The habit of journalists in seeking out their usual sources, often government entities, leads to a command post mentality that can exclude other, perhaps better, sources, such as scientists.
- While gate keeping controls are sometimes relaxed during a disaster, allowing government officials, victims, and scientists alike to have their say, the responses elicited from all groups may be too general to allow for greater understanding by the public.

4) Concerned with accuracy of specific facts (and then not necessarily getting the facts correct), the media too frequently ignores contexts that would give disaster stories greater meaning.

- Disasters are seen as acts of God with an occasional “assist” from human mismanagement.
- Examinations of human systems that may have contributed to the disaster are frequently not undertaken.

5) Finally, research indicates that disaster coverage tends to assume the aspect of story-telling or adherence to accepted myths or stereotypes:

- Under this scenario, the media fails to inform the public of the larger implications of the disaster and the potential need to examine those human systems that may have failed.

How the Colorado State University Library Disaster Was Reported

The coverage of the Colorado State University Morgan Library natural disaster shows some of the ways information is transferred from source to source—and how even when information is updated or improved, the old “facts” can still be published. Accuracy of information is critical during a crisis and afterwards for trustworthy reports and analysis to take place. Frequently, the casual researcher will locate only one or two sources and accept the facts presented therein as accurate. In the case of the Morgan Library disaster, a researcher might easily believe that the July 28, 1997 event took place in August, some 1,000,000 books and journals were destroyed (or if using different sources 500,000 books were damaged); however, the number actually harmed was approximately 462,500 books and bound journal volumes. The estimated number used for a number of months was 425,750 volumes, but later, more accurate compilations increased the losses sustained by the library. Approximately half of the materials in the basement of Morgan Library were books (51%), the other half journals (49%). In addition to the volumes harmed in Morgan Library there were materials damaged or destroyed in offices and homes. The researcher might also believe that half of the Colorado State University Libraries’ collection was destroyed when, while still devastating, less than 1/3 of the books and journal volumes owned by the Libraries were damaged or destroyed; none of the government documents, microforms, maps, or computer files were harmed. None of the books or bound journals in the off-library site storage facility were damaged. If the Libraries’ totals include these collections the Libraries has over 4 million items, which means that less than 1/8 of the collection was impacted. Another misleading statement that cropped up was that the disaster occurred during a summer renovation project; instead the disaster occurred near the end of a 2½-3 year construction project that involved building an addition and renovating parts of the original building. Finally, reports varied as to whether the flood waters (sheet flow) damaged 6, 18 of 75, 20, 20-25, 25 of 92, more than 30, 35, or more than 35 buildings on campus. Flood waters did do minor damage to 19 buildings and major damage to 15 buildings for a total of 34 damaged buildings on campus; it took some time to determine these figures.¹⁷

Locally, up-to-the-minute news was distributed throughout the night of July 28th/early morning July 29th on Denver television news stations. There were ongoing updates concerning the number of missing people (over 40 people were missing for some time), damage to a trailer park, and the derailed train cars.

JULY 29

On the first day after the disaster, July 29, 1997, on page one of the Fort Collins *Coloradoan*, the local newspaper, the headline reads “Torrential Rain Floods City.” One brief article forecasts additional rain and two slightly longer articles describe the emergency and the stories of residents and drivers stranded by high water. A side bar has “How to Cope.” An additional two articles describe residents seeking sandbags and water flowing through LaPorte (a town 7 miles Northwest of Fort Collins). Colorado State University is only mentioned as the location where official rain records are kept. There is no mention of the library or any other campus buildings, probably because this information wasn’t known until after the newspaper deadlines were past.¹⁸

That evening, *NBC Nightly News* reported the storm, recalling the Big Thompson Canyon Flood of 1976. “The library and student union at Colorado State University was heavily damaged.” *CNN The World Today* had a live report focusing on the drama . . . “hard to picture a million of anything. How about a million books? “Well, that’s how many were soaked in the Colorado State University library when an enormous wall of water swept through downtown Ft. Collins, Colorado last night.” Later that evening *CNN Prime News* reported “About \$50 million worth of books are covered with water at Colorado State University.”¹⁹

JULY 30

The second day after the disaster brought reports from around the country; reports varied. *USA Today* and the *Coloradoan* have the most accurate coverage in terms of the number of items damaged in the basement of Morgan Library--they reported 500,000 books (*USA Today*) or volumes (*Coloradoan*).²⁰

CNN revises its earlier report of 1 million items soaked on *CNN Today*: “a wall of water that damaged 25 of 92 buildings on campus . . . Seven feet of water soaked more than half the books and documents in the Morgan Library. The price tag on the damage, one million dollars,” millions less than the disaster ended up costing, but stated with confidence here. The number of items matches the more accurate reports, “Half a million volumes in this library have been damaged, but they believe they can be salvaged using a freeze drying method that removes the moisture from the books,” giving the perception that all of the volumes could be salvaged, when in actuality 10% were written off immediately²¹

On *CNN Early Prime* Don Knapp reports from the CSU campus. “This is a newly renovated library and we saw for the first time the damage the water did to the books inside. A half million books, just about 50% of the library’s collection lay sopping wet on the floor.”²²

However, although a more accurate figure had been determined, other newspapers and news sources dated July 30th reported the larger number of materials damaged: The *Associated Press* reports “Over at the library, a million books were soaked in water and raw sewage. Historic newspapers and journals were destroyed.” *State News Briefs* reports, “At the library, it’s estimated that one-million items including periodicals dating back 100 years were damaged.” The *Rocky Mountain News* reports “Hit hardest are Lory Student Center and Morgan Library where 1 million books are submerged.” The *RMN*, clings to this figure months later (Oct 20) after a closer total was widely known and reported by the same newspaper (Aug 1, 10, and 20). The *New York Times* article, reprinted in other newspapers, reports, “At the library, where books were stored in the basement for a summer renovation project, about one million books were damaged.” This gives a widespread publicity to the perception of the number of items damaged, and that the event occurred during a “summer” renovation project.²³

A *Denver Post* headline reports “CSU library, buildings hit hard in deluge.” The article goes on to say, “Monday night’s flood roared through the campus of Colorado State University, seriously damaging between 20 and 25 buildings, destroying computer equipment, and inundating at least 1 million books and journals in the campus

library.”²⁴

NBC News Today Show and *ABC World News This Morning* report six people killed [five were killed--a number known by the morning of July 29th].²⁵

The financial impact is of interest to the *Rocky Mountain News* less than 48 hours after the deluge has a story titled “CSU Loses \$50 Million in One Wave”; the front page lead to the story is “CSU Damage Pegged at \$50 Million.” The *Los Angeles Times* is also interested: “Damage at Colorado State University alone could reach \$50 million, state officials said.”²⁶

JULY 31

The *New York Times* reports “hardest hit was Colorado State University where water overflowed the banks of Spring Creek and damaged about one-fourth of the 92 buildings on the century-old downtown campus. Repairs and replacements could cost \$30 million.” “Earlier this year, as the library began a \$20 million renovation, old newspapers and half of its book collection--about 600,000 volumes--were temporarily stored in the basement.”²⁷

Dayton Daily News and the *Chattanooga Free Press* have “18 buildings” damaged at a cost “estimated at \$40 million.” and “Floodwaters soaked 1 million library books.” This million books appears here even after the number has been lowered elsewhere. *USA Today* reports: “Floodwaters damaged 18 of CSU’s 75 buildings, wiped out the bookstore and swamped 500,000 library books.” In addition, *USA Today* reports an “estimated \$40 million in damage across campus” “A 19.3 million renovation to the library was scheduled for completion this December.”²⁸

The *State News Service* provides a hopeful outlook: “On a positive note, library officials think they may be able to save 400-thousand of the half-million items in the C-S-U library damaged or destroyed by the flood.”²⁹

The *Denver Post* mentions costs in a headline: “Taxpayers May Foot the Bill for CSU: Damages May Exceed

Coverage.” The article discusses the state’s flood insurance. “Estimates of damage on the CSU campus from Monday night’s storm reach as high as \$50 million.” Separate from the costs, the library is mentioned:

At the university library, one of CSU's worst-hit buildings, a pump continued to draw water from the basement Wednesday and a dehumidifier buzzed alongside.

Camila Alire, CSU's dean of libraries, said there is a 72-hour "window" in which to bring the humidity down inside the library before books begin to rot. She estimated that 500,000 books were inundated by the flood. . . . Besides the books, which the school hopes to save through a freeze-drying process, the library has lost its collection of newspapers, mostly from Colorado.³⁰

ABC World News This Morning mentions “rushing waters killed five people” [correct here]. “Colorado State University campus, the damage estimates are approaching \$50 million,” \$49 million more than CNN’s (day after) July 29 amount. But, the volume count is still “as many as a million books at the library suffered water damage.”³¹

AUGUST 1

By the next day, August 1st, the number of damaged or destroyed items grows more accurate. *The Rocky Mountain News* notes that “500,000 flood-damaged books . . . Losses are less than feared. The original guess was that 1 million books--half the Morgan Library’s collection--was destroyed or damaged.” Costs are noted: “At a conservative \$40 a book, \$20 million could be at stake.”³²

PR Newswire “In addition to providing relevant merchandise, Sears and its associates are focusing on collecting donations for Colorado State University, which suffered \$50 million in damage to its library--losing all of the textbooks set aside for fall semester.” This newswire implies that the textbooks were stored in the Library; however, although all of the textbooks were destroyed, but they were in the bookstore located in the Lory Student Center, a separate building to the north of Morgan Library.³³

AUGUST 2

The *Coloradoan* reports “Damage at Colorado State University will be more than \$50 million, acting president

Judson Harper said Friday, four days after raging floodwaters ripped through campus.” The *Rocky Mountain News* writes, “About 225,000 flood-soaked library books worth \$22.5 million may be beyond repair, Colorado State University officials said Friday . . . Total losses to CSU could exceed \$50 million.” [Jud Harper] In the *Denver Post*, “Jud Harper, CSU’s acting president, said damage the floodwaters caused to the Fort Collins campus will ‘substantially exceed’ previous estimates of \$50 million, though the university did not yet have a firm dollar figure.” Looking over the situation, “10 of the 25 buildings on campus that had been damaged were still closed to normal operations. And workers found that water damage to the Morgan Library, where an estimated 450,000 books, journals, and other papers were inundated, was far worse than initially thought.”³⁴

AUGUST 3

The dollar amount grows as officials begin to assess the damage more closely: The *Denver Post* has a headline with “Flood Toll near \$200 million”: the article reports “Albert Yates, president of Colorado State University in Fort Collins, bumped the estimate of damage at the university from \$50 million to \$120 million.” A second article, “Feds Tour Ravaged Areas: CSU Bill Could Top \$120 Million,” reports “The damage estimate for the campus library is \$40 million alone.”³⁵

AUGUST 4

A week after the disaster finds specialized reporting for audiences concerned or interested in specific issues. For example, *Chemical & Engineering News* reports the disaster from the Chemistry Department’s perspective. “The department will be affected by the ‘tremendous loss in the library,’ she says [Chemistry professor Nancy E. Levinger] . . . All book and bound journals had been moved this summer to the basement of a new addition to the library and the entire collection is waterlogged.” All Chemistry books and bound journals in the building were in the basement, but this article might lead the casual reader to believe that all the books and journals owned by the university were in the basement. Earlier years of certain journals were safe in the storage facility and microform copies of journals were not harmed.³⁶

Another specialized source, *Business Insurance*, reports “conservative estimates put the losses at \$40 million to \$50 million for Colorado State University. . . . Approximately 20 buildings at the university suffered damage. Flooding in the basement of the Morgan Library damaged about half of the facility’s collection, which was being stored there during a renovation project. . . University personnel acted quickly in an attempt to save around 500,000 books and periodicals, some a century old.”³⁷

A *Coloradoan* article headline reports, “CSU damage tops \$100M.” “Estimated flood damage to Colorado State University has doubled from \$50 million to more than \$100 million and possibly as high as \$135 million. . . . An estimated 450,000 to 550,000 volumes in the library were damaged in the flood.”³⁸

AUGUST 8

The natural disaster was noted by the nationally read *Chronicle of Higher Education* “Damage on the campus was heaviest in the bookstore, . . . , and in the student center and the basement of the library.”³⁹

AUGUST 10

The *Rocky Mountain News* reports “A half-million volumes represents one-quarter of the library’s 2 million volumes. Overall flood damage on the CSU campus topped \$83 million, and the library rescue may account for \$40 million of the total.”⁴⁰

AUGUST 11, 12, 18 20, 24

Library Hotline (August 11, 1997) had a headlined report: “CSU Library Closed by Floods, 50% of Collection is Damaged” that said “more than half of the book collection and all of the bound journals, which were housed in the basement of the building, were floating in waist high flood waters and sewerage.”⁴¹

The August 11 *Engineering News Record* reports “Flash floods . . . caused more than \$83 million in damage to 15

buildings at Colorado State University. . . . The library, with an estimated \$40 million in damage to structure and contents, was in the midst of a \$19.3 million expansion-renovation when the July 28th flood hit. The 131,000-sq-ft three story addition to the 149,000-sq-ft two-story library had been set to open in November.”⁴²

The August 12 *Los Angeles Times* describes California State Northridge’s sharing “its hard-earned knowledge” with FEMA and the Colorado State University Library. “25 campus buildings were damaged . . . 450,000 books, periodicals and monographs were soaked or lost when muddy waters flooded the university’s main library.”⁴³

The August 18 *Business Insurance* reports that “repairs may cost as much as \$135 million.” As the campus has a chance to assess the damage, costs rise (compared to Aug. 4th estimate), and the publication aimed at those interested in insurance takes note. The *Rocky Mountain News* reports on August 20: “Nearly 500,000 books and journals were damaged in the library.”⁴⁴

Almost a month after the disaster, on August 24, *NPR Weekend Sunday* talks about the “Colorado Flood”: “a flash flood . . . also damaged half a dozen buildings on campus, causing \$100 million in damage. Hardest hit were the student center and the university library.” The Library Dean Camila Alire (“O’Leary (ph)” [phonetic] on the transcript) says in the interview, “We anticipate about 425--a little bit over 425,000 volumes--items--both bound journals and books--were damaged.”⁴⁵

SEPTEMBER

An article in *Online Libraries and Microcomputers* (September 1997) reported that among the destroyed was “the entire bound periodical collection of the university.”⁴⁶

Library Journal (September 1, 1997) gave an incorrect date: “Flood waters . . . swept through Fort Collins in early August.”⁴⁷

Typographical errors continue to be a problem over two years later. A colleague carefully proofed her *Library Journal* article, only to discover once it was published that the headline reports “426,500” volumes, when the official count is 462,500 volumes either damaged or destroyed. A couple of numbers got reversed.⁴⁸

ANALYSIS

To recapitulate our earlier research findings, we find that critiques of media representations of disasters tend to highlight five points:

1. Disasters are sensationalized, with a focus on drama, death, and specific sites.
2. Emphasis often varies among the various media.
3. Journalists continue to approach their usual sources: politicians and public officials. So-called “gate keeping” may relax to include other sources, such as scientists or members of the general public, but without appropriate attention to expertise.
4. Larger contexts are ignored; rather, disasters are categorized as acts of God or mother nature on the rampage. Potential system breakdowns are not examined, although blame may be assigned to individuals or organizations if seemingly appropriate.
5. Journalists present disasters as stories involving widely accepted stereotypes and myths.

We will now examine these five points in relation to the disaster that affected the Colorado State University Libraries. This analysis lends itself best to a breakdown among the various types of media. These include the broadcast media, national newspapers and wire services, Colorado newspapers, the literature of the library profession, and specialized periodicals.

The Broadcast Media:

Not surprisingly, initial reports on the disaster came from television stations. There were two points of drama to

be found in Fort Collins. One was the trailer parks, in the vicinity of which all five deaths occurred, while the other was the university campus, including the library. Some time elapsed before the full damage on campus was realized, so most reporters gravitated to the trailer parks. The situation was reported with many graphic details, almost always gathered from victims, rescuers, or bystanders. Gate keeping was at its most relaxed, as reporters interviewed a number of private citizens. Stories were told of victims clinging to light poles or being swept away in the swirling waters. The news was announced in gripping terms. For example, Tom Brokaw at NBC said of the flood “ It was sudden, it was shocking, and it was deadly.” Early news reports left the extent of damage unclear; viewers might well have believed that the entire city had been overwhelmed with water.⁴⁹

As more information was received, reporters began to divide their time between the trailer parks and the university campus. As stated earlier, a July 29 CNN report asked a rhetorical question: “Other than, perhaps, dreaming about a million dollars, it’s hard to picture a million of anything. How about a million books?” This may have been the first instance in which the library loss was estimated at a million volumes, well over the 462,500 in the basement. This report of one million books seems to have been one a lot of media sources remembered--perhaps because of the dramatic set up. On July 30, CNN has reporter Saint Bryan interviewing an “unidentified female” who is obviously a member of the library staff; in response to a comment made by Bryan in regard to the extent of the damage, she replies “It’s just unbelievable,” and goes on to mention the need to deal with humidity that might affect the rest of the collection. As the hours progressed, gate keeping became more evident, as additional interviews in regard to the library witnessed reporters talking with Associate Library Dean Irene Godden, and, later, University President Al Yates. The reporters obviously began to seek out those official sources that could be expected to have access to accurate information, and, in addition, library staff was asked to refer reporters to designated spokespersons.⁵⁰

Very early, reporters began to categorize the disaster as one of Mother Nature out of control. For example, on July 29, Don Knapp of CNN states: “Apparently, this is one of those 100 year or 500 year floods. We were talking earlier today about a person who moved in, said, gee, they have to take out flood insurance, and a neighbor said, no floods around here.” One of the first political figures to arrive at the scene was Colorado governor Roy Romer. As

a graduate of Colorado State University he was familiar with the area and was struck by the devastation. He refers to the episode as a “very concentrated rainstorm.” A little later Romer, discussing the fact that the location of the trailer park near a stream might not have been for the best, remarked “But, look, when you’re dealing with nature, it’s going to get you. And this one got us.”⁵¹

In the ensuing days some additional rain fell, but only minor flooding occurred and there were no further deaths. The dramatic story of a violent storm appeared to be at an end, and coverage of the flood by national broadcasters virtually ceased after July 31. National Public Radio did air a follow-up story just before classes began at the university in late August. As part of this story NPR interviewed Alire in regard to the number of volumes damaged and efforts to salvage them and to otherwise provide resources to students. Information provided in this interview was accurate and business-like, but quite brief. Curiously, NPR sought to provide its listeners with human interest details that substituted for television visuals; for example, Mark Roberts of NPR told listeners how Alire hugged a colleague after hearing word of assistance being offered by another institution.⁵²

National Newspapers and Wire Services

July 30 was a day of intense coverage of the disaster, with stories appearing in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Newsday*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and by the Associated Press. Like their broadcast counterparts, print reporters converged at the trailer parks first. They filed stories of harrowing experiences by survivors. Differences in coverage between newspapers and broadcasters soon became apparent. Limited air time forced television reporters to restrict their interviews to perhaps a single witness or survivor and a single political figure, usually the governor. Print journalists, on the other hand, were able to quote a number of individuals in their relatively lengthy dispatches. Gate keeping was fairly relaxed; reporters approached victims, witnesses, firefighters, and police officers. Also in evidence, however, was an effort to turn to a variety of public officials for information. In addition to comments from Governor Romer, print journalists obtained interviews with the lieutenant governor, the mayor, the city manager, and a police lieutenant. As had been the case with television broadcasts, print reports stressed that the storm was an example of nature striking back at human society. For example, Mayor Ann Azari described the city’s efforts at flood control, but went on to say: “It’s the irony of life in the West: Water can be

managed for a while, not forever.” The story in the *New York Times* characterizes the flood as a “freak.” This same story also mentions that state and local officials will be seeking federal aid in the recovery effort. Not only was this one of the initial instances discussing government action in regard to disaster recovery, it also exemplified one of the standard stereotypes of natural calamities: after rampaging nature upsets human lives, government steps in to set the situation aright.⁵³

Damage to the university and the library received comparatively little attention in most of these early print reports. The Associated Press story, which gives the most notice to the campus, estimated library losses at one million books. This same figure appeared in the *New York Times*. The *USA Today* story, presumably written a bit later in the day, reduced the figure to 500,000, a much more accurate estimate. *USA Today* makes no distinction between books and journals--either the newspaper wasn't aware at the time that there were journals in the basement or the author/editor decided that the national audience might not be expected to know or care about the difference. The only library figure interviewed in these three stories was Alire.⁵⁴

The library received greater attention in stories published on July 31. For example, a brief report in the States News Service mentioned that library officials were hoping to salvage 400,000 of the supposed 500,000 damaged volumes. A story in the *New York Times* emphasized the situation at the university rather than that at the trailer parks. The *Times* now estimated the damaged books at 600,000. The story went on to quote students, professors, and officials alike in regard to destruction on campus. Of note was the fact that both university president Yates and Governor Romer discussed the need to obtain federal assistance to put the institution back on its feet.⁵⁵

National newspapers lost interest in the Fort Collins disaster almost as quickly as did national television broadcasters; very few stories appeared after August 1. The Associated Press did produce a follow-up in late August that examined the resumption of classes and the extent to which the campus had recovered. Also of interest was a feature in the *Los Angeles Times* on August 12 that discussed how California State University-Northridge, which had been devastated by an earthquake in 1994, was planning to share information on disaster recovery with Colorado State University. This article mentioned the library losses in passing. In another article of library interest,

in December the *Raleigh News and Observer* told how librarians at Duke University were helping by shipping 125 boxes of material to Colorado State, and even publicized the latter's Web site for flood donor information. Otherwise attention given to the aftermath of the disaster, either on campus or in the library was minimal.⁵⁶

Finally, it is worth noting differences in coverage among the national newspapers. *USA Today*, in a story on July 30 used this headline: "In flooded creek, a grim search [;] Colo. town hit again by new storm." While there were additional rains, very little new flooding occurred; the situation was not quite as alarming as *USA Today* seemed to imply. In contrast, stories appearing in the *New York Times* were more staid and factual. Human interest tales did take up much space in the *New York Times*, but there was greater recognition that the flooding was limited in scope. Thus a map that appeared on July 30 indicated that parts of Fort Collins had been flooded rather than the entire town, and a story that appeared the following day was careful to note the damage that had taken place elsewhere than the trailer parks or on campus. Although the *New York Times* ceased to cover the story in detail after July 31, its readers probably had a better idea of the *scope* of the catastrophe, even though some details are inaccurate, than did those who followed the story in other media outlets.⁵⁷ However, July 31st was the last date that anything appeared in the *New York Times*. National interest went on to other matters.

Colorado Newspapers

As one would expect, the local newspaper, the *Fort Collins Coloradoan*, covered the story in great detail and over a long period of time, with emphasis on both factual information and human drama. Of greater interest is the reaction of two newspapers of regional importance, the *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News*. Denver is only 60 miles away from Fort Collins so it was easy for both newspapers to assign reporters to the story on an ongoing basis. Like other media venues these two newspapers gave their readers much of death and destruction, but differences in coverage compared to national newspapers soon made themselves felt; both papers provided greater detail. For example, the *News* explained just how the accumulated waters had broken into the library basement, while the *Post* soberly reminded its readers about safety precautions to take when faced with a flash flood. From the beginning both were able to report in depth on both the trailer park disaster and the situation on campus and with the library.⁵⁸

A “Flood of ‘97” banner graphic and a second rectangular graphic with the same words plus a “street sign” for College Ave. (the street near where the heaviest damage to the community took place) first appeared on July 30th in the *Coloradoan*. These are displayed with articles about the disaster in subsequent issues, demonstrating the newspaper’s use of a tag for the event. A tag depicting hands clasped appeared a year later with “Flood of Memories 1998.”

After the national media abandoned the story, the two Denver newspapers continued to report on it. One area of interest proved to be federal aid. State financial reserves were not sufficient to cover the escalating damage and it became crucial for Fort Collins to be named a federal disaster area. When the federal announcement came in early August, campus officials made no secret of its importance to the recovery of the library. Related to this topic was an intense interest among reporters for statistical information. How many books were damaged? How many buildings on campus were flooded? What was the total cost, in millions of dollars? How many homes were affected? How many homeowners had flood insurance? Over a period of several days attentive readers could see how the various estimates fluctuated, and watch as journalist honed in on reasonably accurate figures. Presumably this mania for data is something the reading public desires, for reporters seem to make a point of obtaining it whenever possible.⁵⁹

By August 2nd the stories about the disaster are beginning to merge. Details are starting to be thrashed out-- damage at the university is estimated as costing more than \$50 million. The *Denver Post’s* number of volumes in the basement has dropped slightly, and types of materials damaged are described more precisely.

Simultaneously readers could follow the ongoing drama of efforts to save books inundated by the waters. Hope and despair alternated, as estimates of volumes damaged and the likelihood of salvaging them varied from day-to-day and as new and more accurate information was obtained. The “freeze-dry” method of repairing wet books received extensive publicity; readers of the *News* were treated to a detailed explanation of its arcane intricacies. At one point the *News* dramatically described a “SWAT team of preservationists” battling to save books from both

weather and bugs.⁶⁰

As the weeks progressed, the two Denver newspapers continued to report on the disaster recovery progress. On October 20, for example, the *News* described efforts being made to supply students with substitutes, electronic or otherwise, for the absent materials; this was the article which unaccountably referred to the inaccurate figure of 1 million volumes damaged. Several days later the *Post* told how fourth grader Amanda Wallace voluntarily raised several hundred dollars in relief for the library. And in January the *News* informed readers that a new “flood” had hit Morgan library; this time the library was being inundated by offers of donations from numerous sources. Finally, one should note that after the first few days Denver reporters generally sought information from standard news sources such as public and university officials. Gate keeping became much more stringent after the initial excitement.⁶¹

The Library Press

The initial reports of the events at Morgan Library, described in the previous section, were brief and factual in nature. However, they did make inaccurate statements (including a report claiming the event took place in early August). As one would expect, the library press informed their readership in regard to details of interest to librarians, with particular emphasis on the extent of damage to the collections. Initial efforts at salvage also received attention. In most cases the major informant was identified as library dean Alire. Reference to an important official such as Alire is no surprise; most members of the library press no doubt have to rely upon remote interviewing techniques rather than in person interviews and therefore would almost certainly approach someone with a position of authority in the organization, assuming that such an individual would have access to accurate information.⁶²

Following the initial reports, stories on the disaster were remarkable only for their paucity in the library press. One effort was of interest for the fact that it compared the calamity at Colorado State to the fire that destroyed the famed library in ancient Alexandria. Two reports appeared in December; both described a successful effort at Morgan to utilize special fax equipment and a cooperative arrangement with other libraries in order to rapidly obtain periodical articles for each user. Otherwise follow-up by the library press was minimal.⁶³

Specialized Publications

These were concerned with issues in their specific areas. *Business Insurance* is interested in insurance costs. In its favor, it gives a conservatively estimated amount; it does not state the amount as an exact figure. *Chemical & Engineering News Record* is interested in the library collections in Chemistry. *Engineering News Record* gives the most accurate description of the library construction project of any publication.

Summary

Once again referring to the five points of disaster coverage identified by researchers, and applying them to media coverage of events in Fort Collins, we find the following:

1. Reporters did indeed converge upon the site that demonstrated the greatest drama in terms of death and destruction; i.e., the trailer park. As the realization dawned that there had been significant damage on the campus, coverage shifted to that site as well. Initial reporting on the library emphasized the massive destruction wrought by the storm. Later stories described the salvage and recovery efforts as well, though by then most of the national media had left Fort Collins.

2. Coverage did indeed vary among the various media formats. Television broadcasters had concentrated on sites that provided dramatic visuals and brief interviews with victims, witnesses, and political figures. National newspapers were more discriminating and were able to gather information from a larger number of individuals, but dropped the story after three or four days. The storm that hit Fort Collins was intense but brief, and casualties were few in number. If the disaster had been of longer duration, or had there been many deaths and injuries, one assumes that the national media would have remained on the scene longer. In contrast to their national counterparts, Denver newspapers covered the disaster over a much longer period of time and in far greater detail. Colorado State University is a major institution in the state and the recovery of it and its library, and the eventual cost, is of interest to the citizens and taxpayers reading the *Denver Post* and *Rocky Mountain News*. Lacking the news gathering apparatus of large media outlets, library periodicals probably have to rely upon wire service stories and remote

interviews with librarians at the scene-- dispatching a reporter to the disaster area would be beyond their means; therefore their information is brief.

3. Initially gate keeping was relaxed and reporters interviewed numerous individuals from all walks of life, ranging from the governor to university undergraduates. After the initial shock dissipated, reporters turned to their usual sources, public and university officials in this case, and coverage assumed the “command post” stance. Despite the fact that the storm had been a major anomaly few scientific experts were consulted for their opinions. The *Denver Post* did interview Michael Charney, a forensic anthropologist at the university, for his expertise on flood deaths; Charney identified many victims of the 1976 Big Thompson flood, which had occurred in the nearby mountains. Months later, the *Rocky Mountain News* spoke with climatologist Nolan Doesken, who identified the Fort Collins cloud burst as the “heaviest rain ever recorded on an urban area in Colorado.” Nevertheless, these two scientific interviews were exceptions to the general rule.⁶⁴

4. Because the nature of the storm was so extraordinary, little blame was placed on the failure of human organizations or on individuals. One story in the *Rocky Mountain News* stated that “Rain in the amount that clobbered Fort Collins on Monday--eight inches in a day--falls every summer somewhere in Colorado.” Usually such storms hit sparsely populated areas but in this instance nature had chosen to strike a major city. The interview with Doesken some months later reinforced this view; after all, a century of climate records failed to reveal so vicious a storm in an urban setting. Those involved in the recovery effort also recognized that human planning could only go so far; for example in January, 1998 one university spokesperson commented that “we’ve done about everything that can be done with the library.”⁶⁵ University, city, state, and federal authorities had fully cooperated in restoring the campus, the library, and the town to working order. The disaster had been dramatic in many respects, but journalists found no political or technological controversy on which to dwell--the context was one of nature vs. humanity, rather than one involving malfeasance or system failure.

5. The story of this disaster, then, was the familiar one of Mother Nature rampaging beyond the control of human systems. It easily fit into a “myth structure” with players in well recognized roles: as nature savagely overwhelms

individuals and systems alike, victims and rescuers do their best to fight back and to stave off hopelessness and despair. Government agencies step in to organize the struggle. After much travail, order is restored and life continues. Recovery may take years, but those involved recognize the need to carry on. At the back of their minds is the knowledge that they are ultimately helpless against weather events on so large a scale.

Conclusion

In this article we explored media perceptions, patterns, and the accuracy--and lack thereof--of media reports for a substantial natural disaster. By documenting reports of a disaster close to home, a specific event is found to be reported in a typical fashion. Friends and colleagues who were out of town the night of the event told us that news reports made it sound as if the entire city was under water. In town colleagues drove to work the next morning and wondered why roads were blocked and the campus inaccessible. While the vast majority of the city was not deluged, national news reports dramatized what did occur. By the time--only days later--damaged parts of the city were beginning to clean up, national news sources had lost interest and moved on. Local news sources continued to report on the event, focusing on the concerns of victims and taxpayers. Information about what happened to the library focused on the drama of damaged materials and the types and costs of recovery. The library press, which focused on issues of interest to librarians, had scanty and sometime inaccurate information; their reliability was similar to the regular press.

What to expect if a disaster occurs:

- If there is a way to dramatize the event, it will be dramatized.
- If the event takes place in or near a major media outlet it will receive more attention.
- Unless a large number of deaths are involved, the event will drop out of the popular news media a long time before accurate details are determined (the Fort Collins disaster was never mentioned in weekly news magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News & World Report*).

Concerns

Accuracy. The media appears as concerned with a good story as much as the “truth.” Truth can be found in factual details and in viewing the big picture of people’s ongoing struggle to compete with nature and poor planning by themselves or others.

Our experience serves as a warning to all researchers:

- One can’t just search an index or look at a news report and trust its accuracy.
- Reports frequently present guesses as facts--a very misleading practice.
- Often there is no long term follow up in popular news media.

In the large scale of things, the compilation of contradicting “information” is disturbing. Are researchers doomed to draw conclusions based on inaccurate information? Will diligent researchers be forced to relentlessly track down every possible source in order to gain the most accurate picture possible? Our findings have implications for:

- Answering reference questions. Most librarians are only going to have access to national media sources. This may be less of a problem in the future, but unless there is retrospective indexing of every city/town newspaper--and the newspapers themselves made widely available, librarians are going to have to rely on national media sources (i.e. newspapers and television) that traditionally do not remain on location.
- Teaching users to *really* critically evaluate their sources.
- Recognizing that humans are fallible and mistakes are going to be made.

Endnotes

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