

Toward a Framework for Caribbean Media Coverage of Disasters

Outcomes of the Regional Symposium on Caribbean Media Coverage of
Disasters - Barbados, March 2-3, 2018

With Support from

The logo for ifex, featuring the lowercase letters 'ifex' in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The letter 'e' is stylized with a speech bubble shape around it. The logo is set against a solid black rectangular background.

Background

The Association of Caribbean MediaWorkers (ACM) has long advocated for inclusion of natural disasters as one of the more serious challenges to media development in the developing world. Since its establishment in 2001, the organisation has been involved in activities supporting colleagues in the face of several regional disasters; notably in Grenada following Hurricane Ivan of 2004 and in Haiti, after the 2010 earthquake. In 2017, the region was confronted by the serious impacts of Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

The impacts of these events on native populations have been considerable. They also served to highlight the need for greater levels of preparedness by the media themselves. This is so since physical assets, personnel and all forms of media output suffered considerable damage and harm.

In all instances, considerable damage to media plant and equipment and injury/displacement of journalists and other media workers critically undermined the ability of conventional media to play a role in response and recovery efforts, whatever the part media played in mitigation and preparedness activity. On March 2 and 3, 2018, the ACM, in collaboration with IFEX and in partnership with the Public Media Alliance (UK), the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), UNESCO, UNICEF, Caribbean Broadcasting Union (CBU) and CARICOM Secretariat convened a symposium to consider the structure of a framework to guide better media performance at times of disaster.



The objective was to prescribe protocols for the support, engagement and recognition of the role of Caribbean media in the coverage of disasters while acknowledging and facilitating the important part they play in all phases of disaster preparedness and recovery, with journalists and media workers recognised as indispensable respondents in the face of a catastrophe.

The Hurricane Season of 2017, brought these imperatives to the fore in an unprecedented manner because of the multiplicity of affected territories and as a result of the key role played by media houses and practitioners in providing important channels of public communication that proved crucial in the saving of lives, accessing of assistance to affected communities and the restoration of social order.

The ACM had engaged in several important activities during the crisis periods by networking regional journalists for the extending of professional solidarity and support:

1. Collaborated with CDEMA and CBU/CMC to disseminate first-person accounts of the work of journalists at the height of the crises;
2. Promoted and supported the entry of regional journalists in affected territories in order to get news and information out on the situation in some countries;
3. Implemented a programme of support to replenish professional tools damaged or destroyed by the hurricanes.

The Process

On March 2 and 3, 2018, the ACM and partner organisations deliberated on the following:

1. Development of a protocol, in collaboration with national and regional disaster relief agencies, for the recognition of journalists and media workers as having the status of key stakeholders engaged in the specific task of information gathering and dissemination;
2. Development of approaches for the building of professional resilience among Caribbean media practitioners in the face of disasters;
3. Development of a network of stakeholders activated to support the work of journalists at times of emergency/disaster.

The symposium included the participation of journalists representing Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Martinique, St Kitts & Nevis, Saint Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and Trinidad & Tobago.



Personnel from the following organisations were in attendance: CARICOM Secretariat, CBU/CMC (Caribbean Media Corporation), CDEMA, FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation), IFEX-LAC, UNESCO, UNIC (United Nations Information Centre for the Caribbean), UNICEF and PMA.

Case Studies

The impact of two hurricanes that affected several islands of the Caribbean was examined with particular reference to media performance. There was also consideration of the Verificados media campaign launched in response to the 7.1-magnitude earthquake that affected Mexico City on September 19, 2017 killing over 300, injuring 6,000 and causing massive infrastructural damage.

The Caribbean hurricane events began on Tuesday September 5, 2017, when Irma, the 9th named storm of the 2017 Atlantic Hurricane Season, became a category 5 hurricane in the Eastern Atlantic Ocean. With maximum sustained winds near 185 mph, Irma a powerful Category 5 Hurricane impacted the CDEMA Participating States of Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, St. Kitts and Nevis and Montserrat over Tuesday night into Wednesday evening, September 6, 2017.



Irma continued its destructive path and impacted the Turks and Caicos Islands and the northern border of Haiti. On Friday September 7, 2017, the southeastern Islands of the Bahamas were impacted. A combination of strong winds, storm surge and intense rainfall from Hurricane Irma, resulted in the loss of lives, significant damage to homes and critical infrastructure throughout the impacted islands.

The National Emergency Operations Centres (NEOCs) in the CDEMA Participating States, although severely impacted, provided an overview of the situation. The information shared is based on data gathered to date. Maria, the 13th named storm of the 2017 Atlantic Hurricane Season, became a category 5 hurricane near the Leeward Islands on Monday September 18th, 2017. Hurricane Maria impacted Dominica at approximately 9:35pm on September 18th as an extremely strong hurricane with wind speeds of 155 mph. Maria then impacted Antigua and Barbuda, Montserrat and St. Kitts and Nevis on September 19th, 2017 and the Virgin Islands September 19 - 20, 2017.

Impact of Hurricanes on Media

Caribbean media workers, domestically and regionally, confronted grave difficulties as they pursued journalistic coverage of the recent destructive hurricanes. Regional media audiences complained of being starved of critical and vital information at the domestic and regional levels in the aftermath of these natural disasters.

This followed generally strong performances in the pre-event coverage which enjoyed substantial support from national disaster management agencies and other official institutions.

The post-event situations proved that media in the Caribbean are as vulnerable as they are vitally important as important stakeholders before, during and after disasters.

The destructive hurricanes downed antenna towers for radio and television stations, telecommunications systems collapsed and, in the cases of Barbuda and Dominica, affected populations were cut off from the rest of the world for long hours and days.

Internally, affected populations were not in a position to receive vitally important information to assist them in coping with the disasters and externally, even Caribbean neighbours could not have known immediately the extent of the destruction and injuries.

Guidelines for media practice

Media professionals and citizens are protected under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. At times of disaster, this is balanced against Article 3, which is concerned with the rights associated with life, liberty and the security of people.

Under such circumstances, information is a basic need for sustaining life and is not only viewed as expression, but as a survival tool.

Providing accurate and credible information to citizens during times of crises, emergency and disaster is thus a central role of all media

It is also acknowledged that while the overarching principle of media freedom ought to prevail at times of disaster, commitments to established procedure by all concerned are required to ensure the orderly and effective role of media in addressing the information needs of affected communities. This does not include any commitment to self-censor reports or suppress important information.

It was also deemed important to ensure that official protocols, while useful, should not restrain or restrict mass media coverage except in cases where the well-being of affected citizens is clearly threatened.

The aim is to facilitate access to and coverage of the work of aid experts and intended beneficiaries, especially since many of the first responders are members of the police and defence forces who have their own enshrined media protocols for war and riot that may not be applicable to disaster situations.

There was agreement that CDEMA, in concert with national disaster officials, also devise clear and established procedures to resolve disputes should they arise between disaster personnel and media workers.

The role of non-mainstream media should also be recognised as critical and the Verificados model in Mexico in 2017, which made use of networks of citizen informants, provided evidence of the value of interfaces involving both traditional and new media.

It is also important for media operatives to pay attention to a variety of requirements to deliver high-quality reportage.

Some shortcomings relative to pre-event coverage include: outdated emergency protocols; little or no direct communication with the emergency sector and a failure to rehearse various scenarios and to familiarise media professionals with the different scenarios that may arise, including expected professional behaviours.

During the course of an event, it was also important to ensure the integrity of sources of news and information and that the content provided is verifiable. Care must also be taken to employ only the judicious use of strong/graphic images and not to breach any agreed confidentiality protocols with the authorities.

Newsrooms also need to be organised to ensure the best use of human and infrastructural resources. This may include psycho-social preparation for journalists and other media workers and advanced arrangements to take care of family needs.

Following a disaster, it was also recognised that the scale of damage should be accurately depicted to ensure there is neither an inflated nor underestimated picture painted. Victims also need to be sensitively and fairly portrayed and the consent of parents and guardians of children should be secured except in instances where it might be useful for the identification of missing/injured or deceased persons. It is also important that distress reports are accurately portrayed and that follow-up occurs.



General Guidance

Preparatory

Media houses need to be prepared. This includes clear and updated strategies to ensure the safety and secure conduct of all staff members in the course of their duties. If there are special passes or permissions to be obtained, these should be addressed prior to the onset of the threat.

Journalists should understand that they are being relied on to deliver trusted, accurate and appropriate information on the platforms where people are seeking guidance. The outputs of media houses are expected to be a part of the recovery effort and to provide a trusted space for citizens to tell and share their stories



Media enterprises are also expected to participate in national mechanisms and processes that aim to strengthen national preparedness for disasters and ensure all staff have a proper understanding of the requirements of disaster relief management activities.

There should ideally be in-house resource material to assist in translating technical disaster management jargon into understandable language and images for citizens.

Investigative journalistic work can be done to help highlight vulnerabilities and promote thoughtful discussion on solutions to such challenges. Vulnerable groups should be identified and provided with platforms for expression of their concerns and needs.

Archival material on past events should be readily available to aid in development of background information for dissemination to media audiences and to indicate areas in which lessons have been learnt.

Broadcasts/Advance Information

Early warning information and scientific forecasts should be prepared and expressed in layman's terms and repeated as often as possible. Media houses can also serve as clearing houses for the dissemination of information on and tools for preparedness.

Media reportage should include messages that encourage citizens and institutions at all levels to participate in disaster risk reduction. Editorial policy should be supportive of national and regional policy and development agendas that promote greater emphasis on disaster preparedness.

Media Houses

All media houses should have business continuity and disaster recovery plans with emphasis on the integrity of physical assets, archives and basic infrastructure to continue/resume operations as quickly as possible after an event.

These systems should be tested and updated regularly. This includes staff briefings to ensure they are aware of such plans and understand their respective roles and responsibilities.

There should be scheduled engagements with national disaster management offices and emergency broadcast and coverage teams should be identified in advance to adopt a leadership role throughout a crisis/emergency.

Broadcasters would also need to identify an emergency broadcast location and develop alliances with other broadcasters who may have the capacity to partner with other media houses in the event of a crisis.

Outside broadcast equipment should be identified, acquired, maintained and tested regularly and an outside broadcast plan should be developed.

Emergency Supplies

Media houses should maintain a set of emergency supplies. These supplies should be for a minimum of three days and include:

Water- for drinking, cooking, hygiene; Non-perishable food; First Aid Kit and Training; Resources for cooking- stoves, gas, utensils; Disposable eating utensils; Bathroom supplies; Cleaning supplies including disinfectant; Flash lights and bicycles for mobility.

Media managers need to also be aware of the domestic and personal needs of media workers and be clear on their familial commitments, medical needs and other requirements in the event of long hours on duty.

Institutional Relationships

While there are clear obligations, as corporate citizens, for media in the face of a national crisis or emergency, its editorial independence and freedom to report on the realities confronting citizens should not be compromised. Media operatives should operate in accordance with reasonable guidelines regarding their own safety and the safety of others, but the content of their reportage should remain a matter of editorial prerogative. The basic principles of good journalism remain with an obligation to be truthful, accurate, fair and balanced.

As important stakeholders, media operatives should be accorded access to remote areas and to photograph, record and report on relief and recovery efforts freely. This includes access by non-resident media.

Media industry leaders and representative national media worker organisations are encouraged to establish institutional arrangements to facilitate such a scenario well in advance of an event. This may or may not include memoranda of agreement which spell out specific measures to facilitate the free work of the media, subject to agreed guidelines to assure the safety and well-being of all concerned.