Communicating with the media

WAS*IS
7 November 2005

Matt Kelsch
UCAR/COMET
kelsch@comet.ucar.edu

Bob Henson
UCAR Communications
bhenson@ucar.edu
Who are the media?

**Television**—
The primary news source for largest chunk of U.S. population (but Internet catching up fast)

**Primary Media Sources for News**

- **Broadcast TV**: 43.6%
- **Cable News Networks**: 28.0%
- **Radio**: 12.1%
- **Newspapers**: 12.1%
- **Internet**: 3.2%
- **Public TV**: 3.8%

Source: TVB, Nielsen Media Research Customer Survey 2003
Who are the media?

Newspapers—Dominated by a shrinking group of corporate owners. Daily readership down, but still high among influential groups.

1970: 77.6%
2000: 55.1%
Who are the media?

Radio—
Fewer stations are carrying news, but NPR and other longer-form programs doing well. Less time pressure than for TV news.
Who are the media?

Internet—
News releases from labs & univs. easy to access.
Bloggers dig up topics that may get into mainstream media.
Who are the media?
Local high-interest topics in 2005

❄ Snowstorms generate tremendous local media inquiry.

🌎 Climate change, esp during drought and after Katrina.

National media really focused by Katrina; Local media wonders about hurricane impacts.

💧 Rain and floods are popular local topics. Oddly attention was enhanced after New Orleans incident.

🔥 Temperature was a “hot” national topic in summer 2005, but there were major misconceptions.

☀ Lightning, hail and tornadoes usually get some local coverage in the Spring, or after a national event.
Communicating your point(s)

How would you like to be quoted?
• Your complete quote (El Nino may cause flooding rains, but there are many influences on weather other than El Nino)

What do they want from you?
• Concise (The flood is because of El Nino)

How would you like to be quoted?
• Enough time to convey complexity and uncertainty (1-3 inches is most likely by tomorrow’s rush hour, but if the storm re-develops faster and further south than expected, be prepared for 6-10 inches by rush hour)

What do they want from you?
• Answer a simple question (There will be 2 inches of snow by tomorrow’s rush hour)
Blast a hurricane away? Forget about it!

'Like trying to move a car with a pea shooter'
Know the visual reference
The National Weather Service and U.S. Geologic Survey use opposite color schemes for the same information

Current River Conditions

November 03 2005 15:13

- Major Flooding
- Moderate Flooding
- Minor Flooding
- High Flow, Below Flood Stage
- Normal or low flow
- Low Flow
- Ice

Choose a data retrieval option and select a location on the map
- List of all stations in state,  State map, or  Nearest stations

Explanation - Percentile classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Percentile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>&lt; 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 - 24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 - 75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76 - 90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tips on working with journalists

Compiled by Anatta, UCAR Communications, anatta@ucar.edu

1. Use analogies, visual imagery, comparisons.

On a new satellite monitoring system:

“The resolution is so fine it’s like standing in Montreal and trying to see a dime over New Delhi.”
Tips on working with journalists

2. Speak in short clear sentences; think in terms of sound bites (10-15 seconds, single sentence)
   — Don’t start an answer with “yes” or “no” or “it.”
   — Name what you’re talking about.

GOOD: “Arctic sea ice is melting, especially in the summertime.”

LESS GOOD: “Yes, as I said, it’s melting around then.”
3. **Avoid jargon.** Ideas can be complicated, but language should be transparent.

**Avoid:**
Mean temperature  
Numerical modeling  
Positive/negative trend  
Amplitude  
Order of magnitude

**Try:**
The average temperature has gone up.  
We use computers to forecast the weather.  
It’s getting wetter.
What did you say?

http://meeyotch.weblogs.us/video/ChadMyersFlipsOut.mov
Tips on working with journalists

4. Nothing is guaranteed “off the record”. Most journalists will honor your wish, but if you don’t want it to haunt you later, don’t say it.
Tips on working with journalists

GOOD: “Two out of our three forecast models agree that we’re going to get at least a foot of snow tomorrow.”

LESS GOOD: “You know, there’s always at least one model that’s completely out to lunch.”
Tips on working with journalists

5. If a journalist (TV or radio) asks to schedule an interview . . .

—Contact your media relations expert and let them know you’re going to be interviewed, especially if there’s a film crew involved.

—Be flexible. TV and radio teams work on extremely tight and ever-shifting schedules.
Tips on working with journalists

6. Dress for TV.

— Keep a solid-color short or sweater on hand.

— Avoid busy, high-contrast prints (and solid white)
Example questions & exercise

Here are four questions I was asked:

1. Did Katrina cause a larger storm surge than Camille because it was stronger?
2. Did global warming contribute to Hurricane Katrina?
3. What would a storm like Katrina do if it hit New York as a category 4 or 5?
4. Can we destroy or deflect hurricanes like Katrina with nuclear weapons?

Try to answer these in one-sentence, 5-10 second sound bites.
Possible sound bites

* Yellow may be cut from the answer by the interviewer.

1. At landfall Katrina was less intense but covered a much larger area than Camille which allowed it to “pile up” the Gulf waters. It is important to remember that storm surge is not only related to the storm’s landfall intensity, but also the storm size and history.

2. One storm does not prove or disprove global warming, but other global occurrences such as melting glaciers and unusually warm ocean temperatures may be indicators. There are natural climate cycles that influence hurricanes in addition to global warming, and it’s a bit difficult separating global warming from natural cycles since both can occur at the same time.
Possible sound bites

3. A category 3 hurricane in New York would cause major inundation of areas within a mile of the coast, but a category 4 or 5 storm is extremely unlikely. **Ocean temperatures off New York are typically too cool to support a category 4 or 5 hurricane, but with large population along the immediate coast, a category 3 at high tide would be devastating.**

4. The amount of energy involved in a hurricane is far greater than anything we are going to impart to it. **Hurricanes have been around as long as the oceans and provide an important transport of heat and moisture that probably should not be messed with.**

**The energy release of a hurricane is equivalent to exploding a 10-megaton bomb every 20 minutes.**
Communicating with the media

With the media comes advertisers
15-second exercise

The class is in pairs.

In 15 second or less, tell your partner how you got interested in societal impacts of natural disasters.

Then switch roles.

Next, explain to each other the information you just received. Discuss how accurate your recollection is and how the communication could have been better.