

Article

## Planning for Spontaneity: The Challenges of Disaster Communication Fieldwork

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### Abstract

This methodological article explores the intersection of qualitative fieldwork methods in crisis communication and disaster management. While crisis communication is a popular topic of research in the public relations genre, there is relatively no methodological work to serve as a precedent for a participant-observation study of communication during an unfolding disaster event. Likewise, disaster management literature that is based in qualitative fieldwork methods has not examined the communication practices of a disaster response organization. This article explores the various challenges in conducting fieldwork in real-time disaster communication and describes how the researcher overcame those challenges to conduct a participant-observation study of the American Red Cross' communication efforts during the 2009 Red River Valley floods in Fargo, North Dakota, United States.

**Keywords:** disaster management, public relations, crisis communication, communication, participant-observation, fieldwork

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## **Introduction**

Standing in a frozen backyard in Fargo, North Dakota, I peered over the pile of sandbags to see icy floodwaters creeping toward the home's basement. Only a meter separated this artificial shoreline from the house, which normally sat about 140 meters from the Red River. About 20 centimeters of fresh snow covered the back porch. A Fox News reporter interviewed the homeowners live on camera from the porch while the camera operator panned the rising floodwaters under a clear-blue sky. The resident described the losses he had already sustained in his own backyard, but he was more intent on depicting the way all the neighbors came together to build sandbag dikes by hand throughout the neighborhood. After a commercial break, the Fox reporter turned to a spokesperson from the American Red Cross for updates on the ongoing disaster relief efforts, which had no swift conclusion in sight.

The blinding, sun-struck snow, the submerged cars and trees, and a useless basketball goal sticking out of the water created a surreal scene for me at this point in my field study. I had been in Fargo for about a week in March 2009 playing dual roles as a public affairs volunteer with the Red Cross and a disaster communication researcher. My participant-observation work would last nearly two weeks until the flood ceased to threaten the region and the Red Cross shut down the disaster operation. Although I had been planning to conduct disaster fieldwork with the Red Cross, the exact moment and location were completely unplanned. During a dinner party with friends on a Friday night, I received a call from my local Red Cross chapter asking me to deploy to Fargo the next morning. However, the call was not entirely unexpected because I had been preparing to engage in this sort of fieldwork for more than a year. The disaster response in Fargo would bring all my training and background research together as I studied the organization's communication efforts in a natural disaster setting.

I had never been to North Dakota before and I had never been involved in a flood, so this site was a completely new experience for me. I had met only three of the hundreds of Red Cross workers who had deployed to Fargo from around the country. Fortunately, I was familiar with previous research about crisis communication during the 1997 Red River Valley floods in this same region (Sellnow & Seeger, 2001). The Red River forms the border between North Dakota and Minnesota and flows due north into Canada. Although this part of the country is relatively flat, the narrow river often floods during the spring thaw when the snow melts faster in the southern region than in the northern reaches toward Winnipeg, Canada. In March 2009, a heavy winter snowfall was resulting in record flooding all along the river's banks and its tributaries, even while the area continued to be blanketed by additional spring snow. The disaster response headquarters was based in Fargo, and public affairs personnel were based to the west in Jamestown, to the north in Grand Forks, and to the east in Moorhead, Minnesota, to provide coverage for media and public information purposes. I would be based in Fargo at the Red Cross disaster operations headquarters, located in a high school hockey rink.

This article describes the challenges of doing qualitative disaster communication fieldwork, with little advance notice, in the midst of chaos. The goal of my fieldwork was to experience firsthand how the Red Cross and its partner agencies prepare for and engage in communication with affected publics before, during, and after a natural disaster. Missing from the body of disaster communication literature is the in-the-moment, sensory-laden experience of being in the midst of a disaster as it unfolds while participating as an integral part of the communication response. This experience would be disaster communication participant-observation at its pinnacle.

This article reviews the disaster fieldwork literature, describes the key challenges that I found during my own research, explains the research agenda I established while working with the

American Red Cross and other disaster management organizations, and presents the solutions that allowed me to conduct fieldwork under uncertain conditions. This methodological article presents a unique crossover between the crisis communication and the disaster management fields that will begin to fill a gap in communication research. Although every disaster fieldwork experience is unique, this methodological exploration may serve as an impetus to establish more interest in this exciting and important area of research and empower more communication researchers to take on the challenge of disaster fieldwork.

## **Challenges and Opportunities in Disaster Fieldwork**

### **A Research Field Open for Exploration**

The essential research question for my fieldwork focused on how the American Red Cross organizes during disaster to communicate with primary publics, including the media, donors, partner agencies, and those affected by disaster. This study would blend an investigation of public relations practices with a disaster setting. My chosen methods were participant-observation of a disaster response with informal on-site interviews. Although I was going to employ well established qualitative methods, I realized that the research setting would present unique challenges. Because my research is rooted in public relations, I first consulted relevant literature in this field for studies that employed fieldwork. I found that crisis communication is a popular topic in public relations and communication journals, but there is essentially no research based in fieldwork methods. For example, a sample of 66 crisis communication articles published in 16 business, communication, and public relations journals between 1991 and 2009 contained no fieldwork studies (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2009). Likewise, a content analysis of 74 crisis communication articles published over 30 years in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* and *Public Relations Review* found that, while most research (51.4%) was deemed to be qualitative, no study implemented fieldwork or participant-observation methods (An & Cheng, 2010). In-depth interviews were used in only two (2.7%) of the sampled articles. A rare study of fieldwork in public relations was Horsley's (2010) participant-observation of a state emergency management agency's public affairs unit. A radiological exercise during her time in the field provided an opportunity to observe the public affairs team role-playing a disaster scenario. Aside from this study, however, I have yet to identify another exploration of external communication activities in a disaster or crisis setting that implements fieldwork methods.

I then turned to disaster management literature, which is based in sociological research, to find methodological articles or empirical research in disaster fieldwork. While my search found no fieldwork studies specific to crisis or disaster communication, I found rich book chapters and articles detailing the challenges of disaster fieldwork and methodological considerations for research in this field. Because of the evolving nature of disasters and the inability to use other methods in a timely and sensitive manner, qualitative research methods are well established in disaster management research. However, the most common methods are still interviews and case studies as opposed to naturalistic methods of participant-observation (Phillips, 2002; Quarantelli, 2002; Tierney, 2002). The literature described below presents the benefits of and challenges to conducting fieldwork in disaster settings.

### **Benefits of Disaster Fieldwork**

Among the many benefits of fieldwork is the opportunity to contextualize the data gathered during a disaster. A detailed description of the context in which an event occurs is critical for data analysis, theory development, and practical application. The naturalistic approach allows researchers to keep their research agenda flexible in a rapidly-changing environment, enables

observation of people as they are reacting and responding to the disaster event, and accounts for the researcher's presence on the scene (Phillips, 2002). On-site fieldwork gives a researcher access to documents and information that may be difficult to access or lost after the initial emergency has been resolved. Individuals who are involved in the disaster response may be able to provide information on the scene that is officially suppressed or simply forgotten once the individuals leave the scene and return to their routine roles (Quarantelli, 2002).

### **Challenges of a Disaster Setting**

The scarcity of real-time disaster fieldwork may be explained by the multiple challenges that create barriers to this research approach. Stallings (2002) noted several challenges that differentiate disaster research from other topics that employ field methods. Researchers need disaster-specific training to help them be prepared to enter the field to collect data. Not only may researchers be untrained in how to conduct research in a disaster setting, their homes or institutions may have been affected by a disaster, making it a greater personal challenge to go into the field (Richardson, Plummer, Barthelemy, & Cain, 2009). Once the researcher enters the field, the time between the disaster event and the researcher's arrival may limit the researcher's ability to make necessary connections with key informants, make observations of significant developments, and gather background information or documents. Time continues to be the greatest barrier to developing theory, creating research instruments, or reflecting on what is important to the research and what is not. The immediacy of most disaster research means that the researcher's approach to the study is almost entirely reactive, with little opportunity to plan when, where, or how the research will take place (Killian, 2002).

Another challenge of disaster fieldwork is access to informants, interview participants, and disaster-related documents. Informants, those who are insiders on the disaster response, can provide context, clarifications, and information to help the researcher develop a clear understanding of the response effort. Interview participants may be disaster victims, members of the disaster response organizations, government officials, or anyone whose experience would be relevant to the research goals. Documents are produced during the disaster operation that may or may not be available to the public once the disaster relief efforts have ended. These documents could be lost, packaged for archives, or simply made confidential after the fact. Researchers in the field must be able to approach key informants, candidates for interviews, and keepers of documents early in the disaster to invite them to participate. While most people are generally willing to participate in research interviews, the researcher needs to present herself as credible and trustworthy when asking others to participate and be aware that disaster victims may be considered vulnerable subjects under Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines (Stallings, 2007). For my study, informants and participants were disaster personnel (staff and volunteers) from the American Red Cross.

The limited ability to generalize to other cases is a common problem in qualitative research, but there are strategies that make disaster research relevant to a variety of events and circumstances. Purposive sampling (as well as snowball sampling) will allow a researcher to include people whose participation in the disaster event is relevant to the research project. A researcher can create a representative sample of everyone in the disaster event who can contribute to the study. For example, if one were studying the local community's first responder efforts in an earthquake, the researcher would seek out informants and interviewees from all levels of local emergency management agencies, the mayor's office, and local elected officials. If, during a different disaster event with the same research focus, the researcher only interviewed disaster victims, the results would be the product of two very different sample populations that would not support triangulation. Therefore, consistency in research design and sampling can lead to a generalization

of what happens when a certain type of organization responds to a certain type of disaster. Another method of establishing generalizability is the use of a control group to confirm causal relationships. Although this would be impossible in most disaster settings, a description of the community, organization, or other subject of investigation prior to the disaster event can serve as a control group for comparisons. Triangulation, the use of other methods and studies to discover patterns in the results, also may support generalizations from disaster research (Stallings, 2007).

Ironically, the public information function of a disaster response organization, which happens to be the focus of my investigation, has been cited as one obstacle to doing disaster fieldwork. The need for an organization to protect its image during a volatile time can cause an organization to exert more control over the dissemination of information. Thus, for some researchers, the public information officer (PIO) becomes a barrier for the researcher's collection of data, often treating research inquiries in the same manner as a media inquiry. To help manage consistency of released information, upper management may instruct disaster workers to avoid unapproved media interviews, which may be interpreted as refusing interviews with both reporters and researchers. Researchers who ask for an interview with a disaster worker may be sent to the PIO who provides them with a news release or other pre-approved, carefully edited information. Some researchers admit to a general distrust of the public affairs function of a disaster organization and consider the PIO's potential contribution to their research as irrelevant (Stallings, 2007; Tierney, 2002). For my study, the public affairs unit would be my greatest asset because of the relationship I had been developing with them for more than a year.

Ultimately, the greatest difference between conducting qualitative fieldwork in disasters and in more stable, certain environments is the simple fact that it is a *disaster*. There may be power outages, a shortage of clean water and food, a lack of climate-controlled facilities, and other personal hardships that make remaining in the field difficult for an extended period of time. Researchers who are not from the affected community would still have to manage living under the same conditions as people who reside there, while researchers from the affected community have the additional hardship of taking care of their own personal and professional responsibilities (Richardson et al., 2009). There is some research on dangerous research settings for fieldworkers; however, these cases pertain to organized crime, political unrest, or sexual harassment, not dangers inherent to natural disaster settings (Belousov et al., 2007; Nilan, 2002; Sampson & Thomas, 2003).

Inductive fieldwork, while perhaps the best method for collecting data about a disaster response in an uncertain and constantly evolving environment, still presents limitations that the researcher must resolve. Although the prevailing methodological literature referred to above is grounded in the sociology field, there are ample opportunities to apply these approaches to disaster communication studies.

### **Participant-Observation Strategies for Disaster Research**

Researchers can approach observational research along a continuum from complete observer to complete participant (Angrosino, 2007; Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2003). The researcher must decide the most appropriate level of involvement for the particular field study. In a disaster setting, having a participant-as-observer role would allow the researcher to maintain some distance while being able to reciprocate by contributing to the disaster relief efforts as a volunteer. Benefits of observational research include the researcher not asking participants to perform in any unnatural way (i.e., filling out a survey or taking part in an experiment), but instead allowing her presence to be accepted as they go about their business. The emergent nature of observation allows the researcher to shift her focus as more information becomes known. For example, a

researcher may enter the field with one research topic only to discover there is a much more relevant and important topic revealed by the setting. This flexibility is vitally important at a disaster site in which the setting and circumstances are constantly evolving. Finally, as mentioned previously, observation is a complementary research method for triangulation in larger studies, both qualitative and quantitative in nature (Angrosino, 2007). For example, observational studies with informal on-site interviews would inform in-depth interviews that would take place after participants have had the opportunity to reflect and return to their routines.

### **Considerations for a Disaster Research Plan**

Key issues with participant-observation are very similar to those in general disaster research: selection of a site, which is rarely predetermined by a researcher in disaster; access to the setting and people; appropriate training and orientation to the site; evolution of the research topic during the observational period; and a conclusion upon reaching data saturation (Angrosino, 2007). For many observational studies, the site, access, training, and research topics can be planned in advance. Spontaneous disaster research requires a researcher to be flexible, nimble, and ready to act when a disaster strikes, literally.

### **Participant-Observation in a Disaster Setting**

The methods of naturalistic inquiry may be the same for all field studies, but the application of those methods may differ depending on the research setting. Phillips (2002) argued that observational studies have not been used to their fullest potential in disaster research. She found the most common use of the method is for investigations into individuals and organizational groups that are affected by or participate in disaster response and recovery. While observation is also a valuable complementary method for triangulation, Phillips encouraged the use of long-term and longitudinal observational studies to develop richer explanations of disaster recovery. The Disaster Research Center (DRC) trained its field researchers in conducting observational research with the aim that field researchers would record critical information that may not come up in subsequent interviews (Stallings, 2007). Even if the observer did not understand everything that was taking place, observed details could be used later as interview probes or direct questions to develop fuller explanations of what occurred. Detailed observational guides were generated during the course of a disaster response to help field observers answer questions that were relevant to the study's focus. The DRC, which operated with field teams, also instructed observers to draw sketches of the scene, produce diagrams of response organizations' operating centers, tape record their observations, or take photographs of disaster response efforts (Quarantelli, 2002). Circumstances such as time compression, an unstable environment, and constantly evolving circumstances differentiate disaster fieldwork from other participant-observation studies.

### **Overcoming My Challenges to Disaster Fieldwork**

My primary challenge for this study was to combine crisis communication and disaster management into one comprehensive field study in the absence of having a completely relevant precedent to follow. In addition to public relations and disaster management, I borrowed my theory and more methodological approaches from high reliability organizations (HRO) literature in organizational behavioral sciences (Weick, 1987; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). High reliability organizations are those that regularly operate successfully and safely in a dangerous and chaotic environment. Weick and his colleagues used observation to study HROs, such as naval aircraft carriers, to learn what characteristics allow these organizations to accomplish their goals. The HRO concepts are the foundation of the crisis-adaptive public affairs (CAPI) model, which takes

into account the organizational change that must occur when a disaster response organization shifts from routine to disaster mode (Horsley, 2010). My Red Cross fieldwork would be the first test of this developing model. I planned to study how the American Red Cross reorganizes to communicate with the media and affected publics as a disaster unfolds. The Red Cross deploys trained public affairs personnel from around the country to set up an ad-hoc public affairs unit on the site of a disaster once it has surpassed the response capabilities of a local Red Cross chapter. Working with the Red Cross would create a unique opportunity to study disaster communication in close proximity to the event as the disaster evolves. The informants and participants would include Red Cross disaster relief workers. I had received expedited approval from my university's Institutional Review Board several months earlier, so I was ready to begin data collection. Drawing upon the challenges to disaster fieldwork discussed in the literature, I now explain how I responded to these challenges to accomplish my fieldwork during the Red River Valley floods in Fargo, North Dakota, in March and April of 2009.

### **Role Determination**

Deciding who I would be as a researcher was a critical part of my fieldwork preparation. As a pragmatist, I knew I wanted to be involved as much as possible in the public affairs efforts so that I could grasp an understanding of all the nuances of the practice and implementation. Following Patton's (2002) dimensions of fieldwork, I established this approach to my position as a researcher:

*Role: Part participant, part observer*

I was positioned as a certified Red Cross disaster public affairs volunteer who also was conducting research on the disaster operation. I engaged in all disaster public affairs activities during the flood response while observing the Red Cross disaster operation as a whole. During my time in the field, I lived the Red Cross experience: I slept in a staff shelter (high school gym) until hotel rooms became available; I ate with disaster personnel in the operation's kitchen, in restaurants, or at our work station; I worked the same hours as other public affairs staff; I followed all established policies and procedures for Red Cross workers on the site of a disaster; and I experienced the same sleep-deprived, disaster-fatigued, cold working conditions as my colleagues on the disaster response.

*Perspective: Tendency toward the outsider perspective*

As a relatively new volunteer who had never deployed to a large-scale disaster, I was able to take on a slightly more naïve role than if I had had previous disaster experience. However, my Red Cross training and volunteer work with the local chapter had given me a glimpse into the organization that prevented me from being a total outsider. For example, I knew that one of the basic responsibilities of the public affairs function was to monitor all media reports about the Red Cross' response efforts. That sounds easy to do until you are set up in a location, in our case a high school hockey rink, with no cable or television antenna that would allow you to watch the local, national, and network news or to monitor the daily town hall meetings on local access television. We had to find creative ways to track media reports, none of which are included in the public affairs training program.

*Conductor of the research: Sole investigator*

I was a solo researcher who relied on informants from the organization for clarification and member checks of my data. I would be responsible for all data collection, field notes, transcription, analysis, and presentation of findings.

*Level of disclosure: Full*

I made everyone with whom I interacted aware of my role as a researcher and notified them of their rights in regard to their participation in my observations and informal interviews. Because of the fast-paced, uncertain, and evolving nature of the setting, I obtained a waiver for signed consent forms in my IRB approval. When I met individuals or small groups, I introduced myself as a researcher and explained the purpose of my study. When we were in large groups, such as a daily briefing of all staff in the disaster headquarters, I would ask the disaster operations manager to allow me to make an announcement to the group. I explained that anyone could opt out of my research or ask me to leave during sensitive conversations, but I never had anyone make this request.

*Duration: Long-term, multiple observations*

My larger research plan included observations and interviews with Red Cross staff and volunteers in non-disaster settings as well as multiple potential disaster settings. The non-disaster settings included the Red Cross headquarters in Washington, D.C., the presidential inauguration, and a disaster public affairs conference. For the immediate portion of my plan, I could stay in the disaster setting for a maximum of three weeks, which is the limit for a deployed Red Cross volunteer or staff member. My deployment to Fargo lasted for 12 days until the national disaster operation ended and the local Red Cross chapter resumed relief efforts.

*Focus of observations: Emergent*

Originally, I thought I would have a tight focus on the public affairs function in the Red Cross disaster operations center. However, once on the scene, I realized I would have more of an evolving and emergent focus. It was important for me to understand the larger picture of Red Cross disaster services and the needs of the community in order to observe the public affairs function and to develop a comprehensive understanding of the role of communication in a disaster response. It also became apparent that I needed to talk with Red Cross personnel who were not in public affairs to learn their impressions of this communication function. For example, I spent time throughout my stay talking with the staff involved in delivering food and water to the emergency first responders and volunteers who were building or protecting sandbag dikes throughout the region. Their delivery locations changed several times each day, so it was important for public affairs to understand the nature of their work to communicate the locations to emergency workers and residents who were looking for a hot cup of coffee or a sandwich.

Another shift in the focus of my observations was to the working conditions for public affairs staff. In earlier interviews with disaster response veterans, the participants rarely mentioned how the weather, lack of sleep, or inadequate resources affected their ability to communicate with the media and public. However, it became apparent to me from the moment I arrived in Fargo that public affairs work in a disaster setting would have innate hardships that are not an issue during routine Red Cross public affairs activities. I was intrigued to observe how the staff's training would prepare them to complete essential public information duties in a difficult working



environment. Observations in an ongoing disaster would add rich detail to answer my question of how the Red Cross public affairs unit operates under chaotic and uncertain conditions.

### **Training and Background Research**

My fieldwork training actually began about 18 months prior to the Fargo floods of March 2009 when I signed on as a public affairs volunteer with the Greater Salt Lake Area chapter of the American Red Cross. When I decided to pursue this kind of research, I realized that the fieldwork would not be limited to my participation at a single disaster event. This type of research was going to be a lengthy process. I couldn't just show up at a convenient hurricane response center and ask if I could hang out and watch the communicators do their work. To undertake disaster fieldwork research, I needed extensive Red Cross disaster response experience to give me credentials to enter the scene and allow me to reciprocate as a volunteer.

I joined the local Red Cross chapter in Salt Lake City as a public affairs volunteer, and training opportunities at the local, state, and national levels quickly followed. Over the next several months, I completed short training sessions on a number of Red Cross topics and attended a weeklong disaster public affairs session that qualified me to work national-level disasters and to train other public affairs volunteers. My work with the local chapter helped me network with the county emergency management agency, and soon I was taking online courses through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), attending training through the Utah Department of Homeland Security, and joining a team from Salt Lake City to participate in a week-long earthquake simulation exercise at FEMA's Emergency Management Institute in Emmitsburg, Maryland. The combination of training from the varying perspectives of a voluntary agency and local, state, and federal government agencies not only improved my ability to serve as a Red Cross volunteer, but also gave me tremendous background knowledge that helped me establish an ambitious research agenda.

To prepare for a national deployment and to develop a multi-stage research agenda, I worked with the senior public affairs director for the American Red Cross in Washington, D.C. to arrange a three-week visit to the organization's headquarters. The timing of my visit in January 2009 allowed me to observe disaster readiness for President Barack Obama's inauguration. While my level of participation was low, I was able to observe public affairs' role in pre-inauguration preparation, implementation of the disaster response plan on the day of the event, and post-inauguration evaluation. Because the inauguration transpired with no major issues, the event became an exercise that gave all Red Cross participants the opportunity to rehearse their roles under realistic conditions. I continued my training by attending an intensive weeklong advanced public affairs team (APAT) conference in Atlanta, Georgia in February, which included sessions on Red Cross policies and procedures, media training, and an evolving scenario. Finally, by March 2009, I was on call for deployment to a national-level disaster.

My professional background in public relations and my status as a university professor gave me credibility to get in the door, but I wanted to demonstrate a commitment to serve to get full access for my research. The time I invested in training others to do public affairs and in establishing the chapter's first disaster public affairs volunteer team demonstrated my commitment to the organization. In addition, the training I received helped me gain credibility with public affairs personnel from disaster management organizations, which allowed me to meet prospective informants and participants. I do not believe the level of access and cooperation that I received during this study would have been possible without my volunteer work and training.

## **Time**

There were several issues related to time, including availability of my time to conduct fieldwork, timely entry into the field, and time pressures related to the chaotic, fast-paced nature of disaster work. From the start, I knew this kind of experience would be difficult to manage simply because one cannot schedule a disaster. My plan was to use a six-month window, combining a semester-long research leave and summer away from the classroom, to work as a volunteer with the national Red Cross public affairs unit and travel to disasters. Once I was contacted to go to Fargo, my entry into the field was timed perfectly. I arrived with the majority of the disaster workers to find the disaster operation in full force. To address the third issue of time—collecting data under fast-paced, rapidly changing conditions—I worked to keep up with the demands of the public affairs function and took advantage of lulls in the action to take reflective notes and conduct some informal interviews. These breaks allowed me to refocus my attention and determine what questions I needed to ask before the response operations shifted again. The conclusion of my fieldwork was not determined by data saturation, but rather by termination of the national disaster response operation. As the operation geared down, I collected documents, researched media coverage, took more notes, did more informal interviews, and went home knowing the next step would be to conduct follow-up interviews with the public affairs staff and volunteers.

## **Site Location**

As in most disaster research, my site selected me. Red Cross personnel, including me, were called in to assist the North Dakota Red Cross chapters once the Red River Valley flooding reached the level of a national disaster response. Schools and colleges were shut down during the flood, which allowed the Red Cross to set up operations in a Fargo high school. My physical environment included an ice-free high school hockey rink that was transformed into a Red Cross disaster operations center, which would be populated with more than 700 Red Cross workers from 45 states before the end of the response efforts. A gym and an adjacent hallway were filled with camping cots to accommodate about 100-150 workers who were not lucky enough to get hotel rooms. The school's second ice rink became a warehouse complete with pallets of packaged food, bottled drinks, supplies, and forklifts. I toured flooded areas, attended meetings at the local Red Cross chapter, and worked with reporters interviewing local residents and emergency responders throughout the area. I followed the Red Cross mobile feeding trucks as they delivered food and drinks to sandbaggers and to members of the National Guard who were protecting the dikes. I also visited shelters that were set up for residents who were waiting out the floodwaters or were stranded while traveling. In Fargo, temperatures hovered around freezing most days, with a blizzard dumping nearly 30 centimeters of fresh snow in the middle of the operation. For most, it seemed a paradox to have a blizzard during a spring flood, and many began to refer to this operation as the “Flizzard” of 2009.

## **Access**

Fortunately, because of my previous training and preparation for my fieldwork study, I was granted full access to the Red Cross disaster operations center in Fargo. I had a name badge and Red Cross attire that allowed me to walk around the disaster operations headquarters. My credentials also made introductions to informants and interviewees much easier. As I mentioned previously, I had not anticipated the need to broaden my field of observation beyond the public affairs unit, so having access to other areas of the Red Cross organization (e.g., shelters, feeding and warming stations, the local Red Cross chapter, and Red Cross emergency response vehicles on delivery routes, among others) allowed me to observe the larger picture to better understand how public affairs fit into the overall mission of disaster response.

## **Generalizability**

The nature of this fieldwork study makes the results inappropriate for generalization to all disaster organizations' communication units. However, the observations I conducted prior to Fargo during the presidential inauguration disaster planning and the public affairs training conference, combined with in-depth interviews I conducted at the Red Cross national headquarters, produced data that I can triangulate to present a generalization of how the American Red Cross conducts its communication efforts during national-level disasters. This generalization can be tested through future replication studies of other Red Cross disaster communication efforts. In addition, the results and emerging disaster communication theory will inform comparative research with other nonprofit and government disaster response organizations.

## **New Challenges**

Challenges emerged during my fieldwork experience that I did not find in the prevailing disaster research methods literature but would certainly apply to a variety of disaster settings. One issue that became apparent almost immediately was a potential risk to personal safety. When disaster strikes, most people run from danger, not toward it. The Red Cross works diligently to provide for the safety and well-being of its employees and volunteers, so I did not feel personally threatened during my fieldwork. I did learn, however, from my experience and from my informants that disaster researchers need to be aware of dangerous weather conditions, personal security when living among a transient population in makeshift shelters, and the potential for illness and fatigue. When entering a new site, researchers need to be prepared logistically with maps of the area and the tools they need to function in their new environment (for example, de-icer was a critical tool in Fargo's environment). I encountered only what I considered to be minor hardships, such as sleeping in a gym packed with strangers and working long days, sometimes 12-14 hours at a stretch. We were fortunate in Fargo to have all power and utilities at the Red Cross headquarters and in most places around the area, but I heard stories of other disasters in which Red Cross personnel had to work for weeks with no power, running water, or hot meals. These conditions would limit a researcher's access to technology and create a personal hardship compounded by other chaotic elements of the event. Finally, the waves of Red Cross personnel entering and leaving the operation made me realize the importance of making connections early with individuals and getting their contact information for potential follow-up interviews after they have left the scene. The majority of people I interacted with were not from Fargo and, therefore, the transient nature of informants created a challenge for data collection and verification.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

As the flood response efforts evolved, I worked to determine key informants and interview participants in a timely manner before they left the site. In the initial days, I took notes on my observations and reflections, sketched the disaster operations headquarters' layout, took photos of Red Cross personnel working in all areas of the disaster relief operation, and collected documents produced daily by the public affairs team. All the while I was actively participating in the public affairs efforts. When I was able to leave the headquarters, I took photos of the disaster relief shelter and of flooded neighborhoods and businesses in the Fargo area. Once I got to know the members of the public affairs team, I invited them to do individual interviews when they had free time. I captured the interviews on my handheld digital audio recorder, but I also took extensive notes. I asked public affairs team members to describe their Red Cross experiences, their roles in this particular disaster operation, and how this operation compared to other disasters. I also asked questions about the current public affairs objectives and asked them to help verify or clarify my own observations. Gradually, these interviews expanded beyond public affairs to other areas of

the operation, such as sheltering, feeding, logistics, client assistance, and leadership. I emailed notes and the recorded interviews to myself each day to back up my data in a secure manner, and I uploaded all photos to an online photo gallery. When time allowed, I read through notes and documents and began developing themes based on Miles and Huberman's (1994) method of qualitative data analysis. These initial attempts at exploring the data not only eased the transition to analysis once I left the site, but also helped fuel more questions while I was still in the field and helped me process an immense amount of data collected over a short period of time.

### **Final Thoughts**

On one particularly blustery day in Fargo, I was standing in a parking lot staring at row after row of palletted sandbags. I braced myself against the icy wind that ripped through my heavy winter coat. As I struggled to catch my breath, I attempted to comprehend the magnitude of the flood and reconcile with the fact that this sea of sandbags would be added to the countless number of sandbags already in place protecting homes, schools, and businesses. I reflected on what I had seen that day: a house on a virtual island protected only by a ring of sandbags; a canoe made out of fresh snow decorated with a red cross and the word "Thanks!" on a neighborhood lawn; lines of college students passing sandbags because they chose to help rather than go home when classes were dismissed; and frustrated city officials who were weary of the annual floods and prayed this one wouldn't be the record-breaker. The people behind each of these scenes needed information so that they could make informed decisions about staying in their homes, helping in the flood fight, or heading for safe shelter. Emergency management agencies and voluntary disaster organizations become the information providers in these disasters, and I felt fortunate that I could study this phenomenon in person.

I drove back to the Red Cross operations center to get the afternoon update on the response efforts. I entered the noisy hockey rink full of chatter and ringing cell phones and headed toward the public affairs table. I didn't bother to take off my coat and boots, because even without ice, it was still an ice-cold hockey rink. The afternoon briefing revealed that home damage assessment had begun. Free Red Cross clean-up kits were now available to help residents remove water and mud from their homes. The public affairs team immediately started working on key messages and news briefs to tell the community where to pick up the kits and how to use them. The next phase of the disaster response had begun, and so had the next phase of critical public information.

My fieldwork experience in Fargo, North Dakota, allowed me to experience the job of disaster public affairs personnel in a highly personal way. My journey from research design to fieldwork was filled with countless hours of background research, disaster training, volunteer work, and personal preparation to enter a disaster setting. Given the numerous challenges to conducting this sort of field investigation, I found my preparation was worthwhile. The Fargo site turned out to be an ideal setting for my first venture in disaster fieldwork because the damage was limited to a finite area, resulting in few interruptions to electricity and transportation. The opportunity to work in a disaster setting that was mostly intact allowed me to concentrate on my observations and interviews while keeping up with the public affairs operation. I believe I am now more prepared to conduct research in harder-hit communities after this experience and after having learned from others who have worked in major disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

I was aware of some limitations to disaster research before I began this study, including a condensed time frame for field work, obstacles inherent to the particular disaster setting, and the fact that I was new to an active disaster response of this scale. Upon reflection, however, I have

realized there are many other limitations to disaster fieldwork. Fatigue and inadequate personal conveniences caused me to have less time and energy to do daily reflections and analysis as the response evolved. My fatigue may have caused me to overlook some data that may be relevant to my findings. The fact that I had not included in the research study design those affected by the flood prevented me from being able to evaluate Red Cross public affairs efforts that were directed toward this target audience. In addition, my solo efforts to observe a large disaster relief operation spread over a significant geographic region, without the assistance of additional researchers, limited how much I could see, hear, question, and understand. Some barriers that I had anticipated in a disaster (i.e., power outages or lack of computer and internet access) were not an issue in this operation because most of the areas away from the immediate flood zones had full power and communications. This “slow-moving” disaster posed few risks to my safety, and personal hardships such as minimal sleeping quarters in a gym, lack of showers, and exposure to cold, wet conditions were minimal or even alleviated over the course of my fieldwork. I could imagine, however, how much more challenging a total disaster setting, such as Hurricane Katrina, would be for field researchers as well as for the public affairs personnel responding to the disaster.

As an active Red Cross volunteer, I have continued training and following the efforts of other public affairs volunteers who deploy to disasters. Although most disaster relief efforts may only last a few weeks, my ability to add multiple or longitudinal studies will further inform emerging theory and improve the generalizability of the results. Studies of Red Cross communications in various types of disaster settings over time will allow me to describe typical public affairs activities involved in disaster relief efforts. This research, while not immediately generalizable to other disaster relief organizations, can be tested in cases from the perspective of governmental and other nonprofit organizations. While no two disasters are exactly the same, the organizational structure and public affairs responses by the Red Cross may remain similar in each operation, leading to a generalization of how this particular disaster relief organization communicates during disasters. Future research will include case studies and interviews related to past disasters to help triangulate findings and further develop the crisis-adaptive public information (CAPI) model. The more research I do, the more I hope to inform other disaster response organizations with theory development and best practices that will help improve communication efforts to save lives and property.

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