Chapter 7
Communications Crises and Media Management
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INTRODUCTION

Ships in distress, especially if they become casualties, attract the same media challenges as other disasters, similarly to rail or air incidents if they are of a sufficient scale. Even if a ship in distress is not a casualty, the manner in which the media will report such stories can have a very significant influence on decisions that need to be taken in response to the ship.

Disasters contain the very essence of hard news. They involve ordinary people, with whom everyone can identify, who have become the victims of extraordinary and horrible events. The disaster may highlight a risk to the public. Few stories have such a powerful draw for the reader, listener and viewer – and therefore the media. The media’s response to a disaster is determined by a mix of factors, the two most prominent being newsworthiness (relevance to the audience) and competition. News is the world’s most perishable commodity. There are no prizes for coming in second, either with breaking news, or with the detail and background. There are great professional dividends for the winner.

Intense media interest in a shipping accident or disaster – or any major incident for that matter – is inevitable, and to many people can seem almost as bad as the disaster itself. Inadequate media and information handling worsens the
aftermath of a disaster. Truth suffers and those who rely on it, particularly victims. Misleading, often hurtful rumour can spread like wildfire. Energy and resources of emergency personnel are drained responding to falsehoods just when the load is heaviest.

Dealing effectively with the media is an essential element of managing the aftermath of a shipping incident. It is a major element of the public information process serving the interests of the local community, rescue workers and the wider public interest. Good media and public information handling can deliver these objectives:

• sympathetic coverage for the victims, generating support from opinion formers and the wider community
• positive coverage of the work of emergency and relief workers, reinforcing morale, and developing public understanding of their difficulties
• establishing public confidence in the handling of the aftermath of an incident
• providing a fund of goodwill among the media for help with publicity, or for restraint
• establishing the high moral ground from which to deal with misbehaviour

It is essential to involve those at the highest levels of command in the public information process. On the day of the incident, they will be involved – as decision-makers, leaders and participants. Therefore media and public information handling must be built into the emergency planning and training processes.

This chapter addresses some of the issues and consequences that flow from the extraordinary attention that a disaster at sea attracts. Successful handling of the aftermath of a major shipping incident disaster depends greatly on how well all the various communities and agencies of interest are kept informed and involved. This chapter will identify examples and proven good practices to stimulate awareness and appropriate preparation for some of the issues and practicalities of media handling and public information.

**Disasters and News**

Public attitudes to disaster coverage are ambivalent. Relatives of victims may well hear the initial report through the media without realising that it is relevant to them. While personal news should reach them first through official channels, there are many instances where a newsflash or a reporter’s call has been the first news of a relative or friend’s involvement in a disaster. Many people who condemn the ‘intrusion’ obviously continue to buy the intruder’s products.¹

¹ A notable exception is the London-based national newspaper, *The Sun*, still suffering a boycott by Merseyside’s outraged residents regarding unsubstantiated reports, which blamed Liverpool supporters for the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, when 96