

Nuclear Crisis Communications: The Plan Worked. A Critique of NRC Communications in the Fukushima Daiichi Reactor Crisis - 12073

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ABSTRACT

“Call the AV-Photo folks and get someone in here to shoot b-roll. We’ll never be able to accommodate the network cameras and the only way I can get this to the media is to produce it ourselves.” Eliot Brenner, Director NRC Office of Public Affairs, March 12, 2011

For the past four years we have been speaking to audiences at Waste Management about communications issues. Last year, though we were kept from attending because of the federal budget crisis, our surrogates described to you the lessons the nuclear industry should draw from the BP Gulf oil spill crisis.

Those remarks were delivered 11 days before the Fukushima Daiichi tragedy became the nuclear landmark of a generation – an industry changing event with worldwide ramifications, both in science and regulation and in communications.

Eliot Brenner cut his teeth on crisis communication in the aviation industry where tragedy unfolds rapidly. He has been a speechwriter to three cabinet secretaries, spokesman for the Federal Aviation Administration and now spokesman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission since 2004. Holly Harrington manages the NRC crisis response program and has 26 years federal public affairs experience, including eight years at the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Her crisis experience includes the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, numerous hurricanes and floods, Sept 11th, and, now Fukushima Daiichi. Rebecca Schmidt is a veteran government relations professional whose decades in Washington include service with the House Armed Services Committee, the House Budget Committee and the Secretary of Defense.

INTRODUCTION

This is the story of a communication plan – well practiced – put into place to deal with an event that reached from the NRC to the White House and Tokyo, to Capitol Hill and the capitals of the world. It is an event that will have repercussions for decades.

Forget the footnotes and academic references. Go inside the NRC Operations Center with two senior NRC officials and hear how the event unfolded, how the U.S. communicated with Americans and the world, and what observations these senior government officials have after the experience.

March 11 was supposed to be a quiet Friday. The day before the NRC had concluded its annual Regulatory Information Conference, or RIC, and the 3,000-plus delegates were scattering around the world. Many in the Japanese delegation had remained an extra day. A senior official

from the International Office of Japan's Ministry of Industry and Trade stopped by Eliot Brenner's office to talk about communications.

Through a translator, the two exchanged pleasantries and talk turned to how Japan and communicated after the 2008 Kashiwazaki earthquake that damaged the seven-reactor complex almost due north of Tokyo on the northern Japanese coast. The official talked of how Japan now was using email alerts to advise the population in the event of an emergency.

For his part, Brenner discussed how the NRC practiced repeatedly for emergencies and had a set game plan to deal with a crisis. He noted that the NRC had just taken its first steps in the world of social media.

THE EARLY HOURS

Friday, March 11, was an otherwise undistinguished day – other than the alert that came shortly after 5:30 a.m. Eastern Time. There had been an earthquake in Japan, a big one, 8.9 (later revised upward to 9.0) on the Richter Scale. With it came a tsunami warning, and that is what set off the caution bells in the United States. From NRC Headquarters in Rockville a call went out. Two California nuclear plants, -- Diablo Canyon south of San Francisco, and San Onofre below Los Angeles – were in the path of the tsunami warning for the United States. Four nuclear reactors perched on bluffs above the Pacific, standing sentinel for the unknown.

At 5:45 a.m. Brenner was called at home by one of the two NRC public affairs officers based in the NRC region that is responsible for the West Coast. "There's been an earthquake in Japan and Diablo has declared an unusual event because of the Tsunami Watch posted by California authorities," said regional public affairs officer Lara Uselding.

Brenner was off that day, thanked the staffer for the call, dressed and went to an early medical appointment, checking in afterwards to check the status of the tsunami, and deciding it would be prudent to go into the office.

By 11 a.m. it was clear the tsunami was in large measure a reasonably ho-hum event in the United States. But there was an uneasy feeling as senior staffers drifted in and out of the NRC's fourth-floor operations center.

INSIDE THE OPERATIONS CENTER

At the core of the operation is a triangular room with a triangular table. At the base of the triangle is the seat reserved for the NRC Chairman or his designee. Arrayed around the table are a half-dozen seats for key managers. Along the wall facing the executives is an array of television screens. They were displaying the latest Japan news from the 24-hour American networks.

As morning turned into early afternoon, it was clear this would be more than a major humanitarian crisis. Word reached the executives that the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant was off-line, and worse, had been swamped by a tsunami. Are the diesels running? What about off-site power? How are they fixed for batteries? What about the staff? Have they been accounted

for? Is there any information about the condition of the cores? What is the condition of the safety systems? And what about the spent fuel pools?

The questions were almost never ending.

So were the media calls. What can you tell us about Japan? Are you getting any information? Do you have any staff in Japan? At this point, the NRC's contacts on Capitol Hill – the staffers who serve the members of the NRC's authorizing and appropriating committees – like the media were curious, and similarly relieved the tsunami threat had passed for the west coast.

In an adjacent room, a handful of Japanese nuclear executives took the NRC up on the offer of communications with their home office.

There were no immediate answers.

As the team of NRC experts assembled in the Operations Center began to grow, so did the apprehension about the situation in Japan.

THE FIRST COMMUNICATIONS, FIRST RESPONDERS

The NRC sent out its first press release on that Friday afternoon, noting that it was monitoring events in Japan and the U.S. plants on the West Coast. There were also two blog postings. The intent of these communications was to demonstrate that the NRC was on the job.

The U.S. Embassy in Japan – well staffed with a variety of experts in the subjects most commonly dealt with by the two governments such as trade and finance matters – was turning to nuclear experts at the NRC in the early hours.

NRC experts explained the basics of boiling water reactors to the ambassador's staff, talked about the portent of a bank of reactors without any way to cool the hot fuel, and asked how the United States could help.

As the U.S. Government was marshaling its resources, Chairman Jaczko, about 9 p.m., made a decision: the NRC had to get people into Japan to help the Embassy and the Japanese. He looked around the room and asked if anyone had a passport and could get to Dulles Airport to catch a flight leaving in a couple of hours.

Tony Ulses raised his hand, and with a nod from the chairman he was out the door. A quick call to his wife alerted her to grab the passport and pack a small bag he could take with him. Jim Trapp left to meet a family member driving his passport down from Pennsylvania so he could make a flight the next morning. The influx of U.S. help in an unprecedented situation was underway.

Throughout the day and into the night the Office of Public Affairs touched base with the executive branch communicators, chiefly those at the White House, to keep them apprised as to the NRC's activities.

By mid-afternoon on Saturday, it became all too clear this was a full-blown nuclear disaster on top of a humanitarian disaster of almost unimaginable scale. Hour after hour the same pictures of tsunami waters rolling over helpless civilian areas repeated on the television screens in a seemingly endless loop.

FIRST NOTICE OF U.S. PERSONNEL TO JAPAN

USAID – the federal agency responsible for responding to disasters outside the U.S. – was pulling together a team that included the NRC. The NRC, as the agency most familiar with the issue and with staffers in the air headed for Japan, pushed to get that word out. Finally, the logjam about U.S. participation in emergency assistance was broken with the issuance of a short release late Saturday afternoon detailing the fact that two NRC staffers were in the air.

The NRC regularly practices for disaster, and that training paid off across the board. In the communications shop, the work settled into a rhythm not much different than a domestic accident – 24-hour staffing with support from technical staff.

Sunday, in response to concerns we had seen in the media we communicated the fact that the NRC did not foresee any dangerous levels of radiation reaching the United States.

And a day later we reported on a massive increase in the size of the NRC contingent sent to Japan following a formal request for help from the government of Japan.

ON THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS ROOM PODIUM

On Monday the 14th, Chairman Jaczko made the first of two appearances at the podium of the White House press room. It was there, on national television, the chairman reiterated the NRC belief that no radiation in harmful levels would reach the United States and described the situation in Japan as serious. He noted the differences with U.S. plants and refused to speculate about the outcome.

“At this time, we don’t really have detailed information about the nature of the core in the reactor itself. But it is a situation in which there has been also of the normal type of cooling mechanisms to the reactor. So as the situation continues to develop we’ll get better information. But right now, the focus has been to do everything possible to ensure that the reactor continues to be cooled,” Jaczko told the 40 to 50 journalists crowded into the compact White House briefing room.

Three days later, from the same podium, The chairman discussed the 50-mile evacuation recommendation for U.S. Citizens issued through the Embassy in Tokyo, and he addressed what would become the long term focus of the NRC’s activities saying: “We want to get that (reactor) information and we want to do a systematic and methodical look at what changes we may need to make to those types of plants or possibly other types of plants in the country.”

COMMUNICATING DURING CHAOS, FOLLOWING THE PLAN, AND LESSONS LEARNED

Through the early course of the Japanese crisis, the Office of Public Affairs pushed to provide as much information as possible to the American public, cognizant of the fact that this was not our accident. Had it occurred on U.S. soil we would have been producing far more information, but this was not our accident. As it was, in the first 12 days we had a dozen press releases updating the public on NRC activities or providing related information. And our blog had 16 postings.

We operated off a Crisis Communication Plan that outlined important philosophies that we followed in the Japan crisis, including:

- 1: The concept of “people first” should motivate communication actions, including expressing concern for any victims or potential victims of the crisis.
- 2: Crisis messaging must be in simple language and repeated often as people under stress are not processing information normally. Repeating consistent messages and using multiple media i.e. print, television, radio and the Web, help ensure the messages are heard and understood.
- 3: Monitoring public perception from the beginning of the crisis allows for negative perceptions and problems to be addressed early in the incident. Message effectiveness can be measured in a variety of ways, including analyzing feedback in the media (interviews, letters to the editor, blogs) or by assessing e-mail messages, correspondence or phone calls from the public.

Our primary goals in responding to the crisis were to:

1. Underscore that the NRC is a regulator that ensures nuclear power in this country operates safely and securely, and a combination of factors makes it extremely unlikely, if not impossible, for a similar tragedy to occur here.
2. Underscore that the NRC will thoroughly scrutinize the incident for application to the U.S. nuclear industry and make adjustments/corrections as warranted;
3. Reassure the public that there was NO threat of unsafe levels of radiation exposure in this country due to fallout from Japan.
4. Help the public get to the relevant federal agency i.e. radiation health questions to CDC, radiation exposure questions to EPA, etc.

Frustrating to the media – and making it difficult for us – was the fact that the NRC could not speak for Japan. We were unable to provide insight into what caused the incident, critique the Japan response or guess at the possible outcome. To help the media with such information, we referred reporters to a variety of non-profit, trade and scientific organizations, including the Nuclear Energy Institute and the Health Physics Society, and academic institutions. Our focus remained on what the NRC was doing to support Japan, whether or not something similar could occur in the U.S. and what the public should do in response.

Some observations: blogs were the quickest way for the NRC to communicate with the public because they could be written and posted faster than press releases, largely because they required less internal coordination.

The NRC external blog, hosted on WordPress, was not even two months old when the incident occurred. Previously it had been experiencing what we thought was an astounding average of 400 visits a day. OPA converted every press release to a blog post bylined by the OPA director, and was able to use the blog to post information that was not appropriate for a press release, but important nonetheless – such as a list of which federal agencies were responsible for which piece of emergency response. We also were able to monitor the comments and use them to guide the creation of additional communication tools. The readership of the blog rose steeply to 5,000 a day in the first days of the incident, and even 10 months later has remained at a higher average than before the incident. The clear advantage of social media in meeting the public's need for information gave OPA greater impetus to develop additional social media outlets, including Twitter and YouTube, which were initiated six months later. All are now integral parts of the crisis communication planning for the office. And Flickr is the most recent addition.

In addition, our emergency facility was not conducive to bringing in large numbers of television cameras, so we shot our own B-roll for networks and handed that out. And, the NRC was not well equipped logistically to handle a large press conference, something remedied as we go forward with the installation of fiber optic lines in a new building under construction for the agency and the development of studio space to give us an area to conduct individual network interviews.

The hue and cry from the media to talk with the chairman was overwhelming – hundreds of calls a day. We had to create a triage system for looking at and prioritizing interview requests. Ultimately, it became easier for us to make use of the media “stakeout” locations or “scrums” outside committee rooms on Capitol Hill to talk with reporters. And, we sifted through the many television requests, choosing those that allowed us to use the long-form interview process to provide the most responsive answers such as CNN evening programs. And on a Sunday, for example, rather than doing a “Meet the Press” show, we did C-Span.

The office created a public response section to deal with public calls, staffed with personnel recruited from other programs in the NRC. FEMA also sent us help, our Congressional Affairs office provided organizational help for public meetings and we augmented our phone staff with contractors. Our six-person professional staff jumped to about 20 in very short order, and two retired staffers were brought back on board to help in our regional offices.

We also worked closely with network “pool” coordinators to get “pool” cameras into our public commission meetings so the room was not overrun with cameras from the huge media interest. C-Span three times provided us with two-camera, high definition pool coverage. High-definition

was important because Japanese networks needed that rather than the standard used in U.S. networks.

The constant drilling for emergencies and the use of the core communication concept of communicate early, often and clearly, underpinned the controlled chaos of dealing with the media and public inquiries.

Across the NRC operations center from the public affairs section is a room devoted entirely to communicating with government entities, from the defense department to the transportation department and Congress.

ON THE CONGRESSIONAL FRONT

The Office of Congressional Affairs manned the Operations Center 24 hours a day Friday, March 11th through the next few weeks. We participated in numerous briefings with other Federal Agencies, and we had daily briefings of our own for our Congressional constituents. We prepared our leaders to testify before numerous Congressional hearings. We communicated by email, phone and in person during the crisis and learned a few lessons along the way as we tried to keep our Congressional clients fully informed about the ongoing events in Japan.

OPERATIONS CENTER LOGISTICS

The Office of Congressional Affairs is a small office. We have eight staffers who have trained to respond to such an event. They have worked the drills over the years and have the routine down pat. Unfortunately one of the staffers had a medical emergency at the same time and was not available for several weeks. We found that working three eight hour shifts quickly depleted our ability to keep both the office in the Operations Center and our regular office appropriately staffed to handle the volume of phone calls and daily tasks that we needed to do. Not only were we handling phone calls but we were going to the Hill everyday on briefings and working with the NRC staff in the building to keep the volume of information straight. Eventually we got permission to bring back a retired Civil Servant who had years of experience in our office. It was necessary to bring in additional staff to keep up with the volume of requests.

We also learned early on we had some logistics problems. We really didn't have enough room in the Operations Center to do our job. We had a computer that was supposed to capture the log on our one desk but we needed another computer to access our emails and files. We ended up relying on our blackberries which was very cumbersome when you were trying to keep as many staffers informed as possible. We had no real space to work with since our one desk was covered with the computer and whatever information we had in hand. Finally, Congressional staffers were used to calling us at our office number not in the Operations Center. So, we were usually at the wrong place when the calls came in. If they did call the Operations Center and found out the phone line was a recorded line, they asked us to call them back on a non-recorded line. It seems that we never thought about the possibility that staffers would want to have private conversations with us.

SIZE MATTERS

We sent out a daily email blast to Congressional staff based on our previous relationships with Congressional energy staffers. We had a list of Congressional staffers in districts which either contained a nuclear power plant or was close to one. In this case, we needed a broader list. Every Congressional office wanted to be updated and in the loop so we needed to add staffers to our lists quickly. As the list grew to over 600 staffers, more problems emerged.

First of all, our email list was so long that we found out it ended up in junk mail when it was sent. So, we had to break the list down to smaller units to send the information. Also, trying to maintain the list was difficult. We had Congressional offices calling in wanting us to remove the energy staffer from the list and add the press person or the committee staffer instead of the personal office staffer. The last thing we wanted to happen was to drop the wrong name but when you are dealing with 600-700 staffers it was easy to forget someone. Eventually it was easier to just not delete names and figure that it was better to err on the side of more people being informed rather than less. Also, some staffers wanted special treatment. They didn't want to be on a list with hundreds of other people so we broke out a smaller list of about 15 staffers and sent them the updates separately.

IT'S THE LITTLE STUFF

We provided daily phone briefings to any staffer who wanted to call into the bridge line. We originally set it up so that 500 staffers could call in. We provided a briefing update and then left plenty of time for questions. The initial briefings were 1 – 2 hours every day. We answered every question we were asked. We had hundreds of people on the bridge line. After the first week of briefings, the number of people on the bridge line dropped tremendously. By week two, we had about 10 staffers on the daily call. By the end of that week, we were down to 3 or 4 staffers.

In addition to the phone briefings, we participated in several joint Hill briefings with our Federal partners—State, DOE, DHS, NOAA, EPA, DOD. Also, we did our own briefings for our oversight staffers. We learned from the daily email blast that staffers like to be part of a smaller, select group so we provided photographs of the event and briefing materials they could use for their Members. In addition to the travel time, these briefings basically took up a half day from the schedule of a busy executive. One of the things we did was to put together an executive briefing team that we took to the Hill and used for the daily phone briefings so one person was not overwhelmed with the briefings. The Executive Director of Operations put together a daily “Go Book” which had the most up-to-date information available and the book was provided to the small team so everyone was talking from the same material. This rotating group of executives worked well to meet our briefing requirements.

CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS AND FOIA REQUESTS

Since the Fukushima events unfolded, the NRC has testified at 18 hearings. We expect several more lessons-learned hearings. After the events at Three Mile Island, the NRC participated in 73 hearings during the next 18 months. Clearly the closer to home the problem is, the greater

the Congressional scrutiny. In addition to the hearings, we have received dozens of FOIA requests that require hundreds of man hours to complete. When every email over a 2 or 3 month period must be found, printed, reviewed and categorized for an office, lots of other work gets pushed to the side. I alone had thousands of emails to go through let alone everyone on my staff. Our small office has had a difficult time meeting the requirements associated with so many additional requirements.

LESSONS LEARNED

Crises strike without warning but if you learn from the past, you are better prepared to manage the future. A few simple lessons we learned include:

1. Bring in the right people to help you out in a crisis. There is no reason to work your staff to death if you can hire short-term experienced consultants.
2. Make sure you have the space and equipment you need to get the job done.
3. Prepare several email lists for your contingency plans and remember that it is always a good idea to test the system occasionally.
4. Prepare briefing teams with the same information and make sure you are prepared to take the time to thoroughly answer all questions in briefings and in hearings.

CONCLUSION

Collectively, the Offices of Public Affairs and Congressional Affairs conducted the largest outreach for the agency since Three Mile Island. We worked with the basic rule, described to Waste Management last year just 11 days before Fukushima – communicate early, often and clearly.

The response – while not without its problems and lessons – went as smoothly as a chaotic event like Fukushima could go. That was due in large measure to the fact that the NRC has a well-tested system of responding to nuclear emergencies, and we followed our plan.