The Westray Mine Explosion: An Examination of the Interaction Between the Mine Owner and the Media

Trudie Richards
Mount Saint Vincent University

Abstract: Technological crises are predictable and inevitable, particularly in a high-risk industry such as mining. Corporations are advised to have a crisis communication plan to facilitate proactive behaviour. Such a plan presumes a commitment to honesty, openness, and ethical behaviour. Journalists are also encouraged to have a crisis communication plan so that they are prepared for inevitable events, informed about the industries in their area, and able to tell the story substantively, accurately, and in context. The Westray coal mine, owned by Curragh Incorporated of Toronto and located in Pictou County, Nova Scotia, exploded on May 9, 1992, killing the 26 miners who were underground. This paper analyzes the relationship between Curragh and the media, particularly during the week following the explosion. It observes that the relationship was severely tested, as is often the case in time of crisis and human tragedy. The paper also observes that neither Curragh nor the participating media had crisis communication plans, which negatively affected their performance. It concludes that Curragh did not satisfy legitimate media needs and that the company's lack of open, prompt, and accessible communication fed a media suspicion that officials had something to hide. On the other hand, journalists relied on human interest, made mistakes, and decontextualized their coverage of the story.
Résumé: Les crises technologiques sont prévisibles et inévitables, surtout dans une industrie à haut risque comme celle des mines. Les entreprises sont encouragées à avoir un plan de communication de crises afin de pouvoir agir de manière plus préventive. Un tel plan suppose un engagement à l'honnêteté, l'ouverture d'esprit, et la morale. Les journalistes sont aussi encouragés à avoir un plan de communication de crises pour être prêts à adresser les problèmes inévitables, pour être informés sur les industries dans leurs régions, et pour être capables de rapporter les faits de manière substantive, précise et contextuelle. La mine de charbon Westray, appartenant à la société Curragh de Toronto et située dans le comté Pictou en Nouvelle-Écosse, explosa le 9 mai 1992, tuant les vingt-six mineurs qui étaient sous terre. Cette étude analyse la relation entre Curragh et les médias, particulièrement dans la semaine suivant l'explosion. Elle observe que cette relation fut sévèrement mise à l'épreuve, comme c'est si souvent le cas dans des périodes de crise et de tragédie humaine. Cette étude observe aussi que ni Curragh ni les médias impliqués n'avaient des plans de communication de crises, ce qui a eu un effet négatif sur leurs actions. Elle conclut que Curragh n'a pas satisfait aux besoins légitimes des médias et que le manque d'une communication ouverte, rapide et accessible de la part de la compagnie encouragéa les médias à soupçonner que celle-ci avait quelque chose à cacher. Pour leur part, les journalistes mirent trop d'accent sur les personnalités impliquées dans l'accident, commirent des erreurs, et manquèrent de contexte dans leur comptes rendus.

Introduction

The Westray mine in Pictou County, Nova Scotia, exploded on May 9, 1992, killing the 26 miners who were trapped underground. The interaction between the mine owner and the media, and how the behaviour of each affected the families of the trapped miners in the days after the explosion, form the basis of this study of relationships between corporate communicators and journalists in time of crisis. This analysis shows that Curragh Incorporated, the company that owned the mine, demonstrated an unwillingness to co-operate with the media and an insensitivity toward the families of the trapped miners, which negatively affected the company's public performance. It also shows that journalists attempted to rely on human interest to tell their stories and, with rare exceptions, decontextualized their coverage, as is often the case (Cullen, 1993; Wilkins, 1989). And finally, the study suggests that although corporations are advised to have a crisis communications plan in advance of a predictable event (Blythe, 1992; White, 1991; Wilkins, 1989), if they have something to hide, as is alleged in this case, the presence or absence of a plan per se is unlikely to affect the eventual outcome.

Research for this article was conducted in the year following the explosion. Journalists, communications specialists, and members of the community of Pictou County were interviewed, including families of the deceased miners. A literature review was also conducted. CBC Television news coverage was surveyed from May 9 through May 19, 1992. Print coverage from The Globe and Mail, The Chronicle-Herald (Halifax), and The Daily News (Halifax) was examined from September 1988 through to the end of 1994. Coverage of the explosion in the New Glasgow Evening News was also examined. Senior officials of Curragh were advised by their lawyers not to participate, in view of a pending
criminal trial and public inquiry, although one senior executive read the document and,
on condition of anonymity, endorsed the accuracy of its content. Public relations advisors
to Curragh were available, however, and were very helpful.¹

The Westray mine was owned by Curragh Incorporated, a Toronto-
based company with
mining operations in British Columbia and the Yukon. Although technological crises are
both predictable and inevitable (Wilkins, 1989) and mining is considered a high-risk
industry (Pinsdorf, 1987, p. 40), most mining companies have no communications plan in
the event of a crisis (Giacomo Capobianco, Former President, Coal Association of
Canada, Calgary, AB, personal communication, March 11, 1994; Jacques Hudon,
Director of Communications, Mining Association of Canada, Ottawa, ON, personal
communication, June 16, 1993). Curragh was no exception (Tom Reid, President, Reid
Management, Toronto, ON, personal communication, November 12, 1993). The literature
recommends that corporations be open with and accessible to the media before crisis
strikes (Charron, 1989; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and during the event itself, to the extent
that is reasonable (Regester, 1989; White, 1991). They are also encouraged to have a
crisis communications plan (Murray & Shohen, 1992; White, 1991) so that their strategy
in times of upheaval can be more proactive than reactive. This is particularly so in an era
when the incidence of corporate crises is increasing (Blythe, 1992; Drabek & Hoetmer,
1991). In the case of Curragh, the absence of a “what-to-do-when-the-unthinkable-
happens” guide meant, as public relations specialist Jon White suggests (1991), that the
company was dealing with two crises: the event and how to handle the event.

As this study reveals, Curragh ultimately alienated two of its key publics -- the media and
the families -- partly because it was not prepared, and also because officials were unable
to refute allegations of unsafe working conditions at the mine. White (1991) suggests that
if an organization does not perform well during a crisis, it may have difficulty recovering.
Bruce Blythe (1992) has written that 43% of organizations hit by “severe” crises never
recover. Curragh is now bankrupt, and the Westray tragedy played a significant role in
the company's demise.

The Westray mine had been politically controversial in Nova Scotia, and to a lesser
degree in Ottawa, since 1988. Journalists tended to cover the story from a political
perspective. They acknowledged former Premier Donald Cameron’s commitment to
Westray and the location of the mine in former Conservative MP Elmer MacKay’s riding
(a seat held briefly by former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney). They also covered the
bickering over competition for limited markets between coal from Cape Breton, which
was heavily government-subsidized, and coal from Pictou County, which would receive
government loan guarantees of over $100 million.²

Media coverage of the Westray story in Nova Scotia prior to the explosion reflected what
is perceived by some observers as a curious attitude among journalists based there. Most
journalists in Nova Scotia share with Nova Scotians in general a desire for positive
development in their province. Linden MacIntyre, a host of CBC Television's The Fifth
Estate, describes it as “a symbiotic relationship between the Nova Scotia population and
the news media” (Starr, 1992, p. 11). MacIntyre, who is from Cape Breton, argues that
many Nova Scotians believed then Premier Donald Cameron's claim that Westray was a good idea because they wanted to believe it. He adds that the local media followed suit because "they seem to be in sync with the mental state of the province" (Starr, 1992, p. 12). That general desire may have diminished journalistic zeal to be critical of the Westray project prior to the explosion. Furthermore, it is argued (Betsy Chambers, former legislative reporter, New Glasgow Evening News, Cape Breton Post, and Truro Daily News, NS, personal communication, December 3, 1993; Bruce Wark, journalism professor, University of King's College, and former reporter, Halifax, NS, personal communication, October 26, 1993) that there is a bias against Cape Breton among much of the Nova Scotia population in general, which is reflected by many of the province's mainland journalists. Chambers and Wark, both former journalists, believe the two biggest mainland newspapers, The Chronicle-Herald (Halifax) and The Daily News (Halifax), reflect that bias.

On the morning of May 9, as journalists learned of the explosion of the Westray mine, an awareness dawned that there had been another Westray story they had not much told. The mine was located in a volatile and dangerous coal seam. For example, from 1809, when coal mining began, to the 1950s, the number of mining-related deaths in Pictou County alone is estimated to be more than 600 men. Of those, 246 are known to have died from mine explosions (Cameron, 1974). There had been warnings about the dangers of extracting the coal. Furthermore, there had been complaints from miners at Westray about safety. With very rare exceptions, reporters ignored those issues.

Reporters cannot be chastised for dwelling on the political dimensions of the Westray mine. What is regrettable is the virtual exclusivity of that focus, and that is a regret with which, a year later, journalists still struggled (Kevin Cox, reporter, Halifax bureau, The Globe and Mail, personal communications, February 25, 1993, and November 24, 1993; Dean Jobb, reporter, The Chronicle-Herald, Halifax, NS, personal communications, February 26, 1993, and December 6, 1993).

The explosion of May 9, 1992

At 5:18 Saturday morning, May 9, 1992, an explosion erupted at the Westray coal mine in the village of Plymouth, Nova Scotia. The explosion was so strong it blew the top off the mine entrance, more than a mile above, and shattered steel roof supports throughout the mine, trapping 26 men below. In the nearby towns, windows shattered and houses shook.

In the early hours after the explosion, three distinct groups positioned themselves for their roles in this tragic incident. The families of the trapped miners, supported by a community of friends and neighbours, gathered to seek and provide comfort and to await news. The media converged on Plymouth to collect news. And Curragh's senior managers were installed at the mine site to manage the incident and to disseminate news.

The draegermen, miners trained in rescue work, spent the next week slowly working their way through the wreckage, looking for survivors, knowing the chances of finding anyone
alive were slim. On the second day, they discovered 11 bodies. Three days later, four more. As each day passed, hope faded that anyone would be found alive.

On Thursday, May 14, Colin Benner, president of operations for Curragh, told the reporters there were no survivors and that the risks to the draegermen were too great to continue the search for bodies. That was a difficult decision to make because in mining communities there is a strong commitment to retrieving the dead.

By the next day, Friday, the event was over, at least for the rest of the world. Most of the media had left. And the community of Pictou County began the process of adjusting to terrible loss.

Twenty-six miners died. The remains of 11 bodies are buried in the sealed mine.

It is believed the tragedy was caused by an explosion of methane gas, which is a natural by-product of coal. When methane gas is mixed with oxygen, it is combustible, which is why proper ventilation underground is so critical. The presence of coal dust makes mining even more dangerous because a single spark can ignite the dust, and travel through it, as if it were gunpowder. As the flames lick up the dust, they strike pockets of methane and air, and the explosion intensifies. It is therefore crucial to treat the coal dust with rock dust or ground limestone. Rock dust is heavier than coal dust, so it pushes the coal dust down to the mine floor, and covers it, so it will not explode.

Curragh installed the trapped miners' families in the firehall not far from the mine and placed the journalists in the community centre, directly across the street. The RCMP patrolled the road separating the two buildings and prevented the media from speaking to family members. The journalists had no direct access to the company offices or the mine site, except at the company's initiative. Restrictions were similar for the families.

**The relationship between Curragh and the media**

The positioning of the media and the families in such close proximity guaranteed animosity. The fact that the police blocked media access to the families heightened the tension. *The Globe and Mail* journalist André Picard, who was at the site to provide support to Halifax-based bureau chief Kevin Cox, wrote that there was a ``strange tension between local people and journalists.'' The journalists felt they had been wrapped in ``a virtual cocoon,'' he wrote, and the families and the press were kept apart by the RCMP, ``with strict orders to keep the media in their place'' (Picard, 1992, p. A4).

Curragh had no crisis communications plan. If it had, the company might have been able to reduce media antagonism, at least to a degree. The plan would have forced Curragh to think in advance about media needs, to try to schedule news conferences at convenient times, to use understandable language, to ensure that a mining expert with knowledge of Westray was available to answer questions about the technology, to provide first-hand updates of the search for survivors, and to encourage the families to speak to the media on their own terms. Curragh did none of that.
It has been observed that official sources often control the agenda of newsmaking, the 
dance between PR people and journalists in which, Gans (1980) says, "more often than 
not, sources do the leading" (p. 116). Crisis management specialists recommend 
information be made available to the media as soon as possible (Pinsdorf, 1987; White 

Tom Reid of Reid Management in Toronto, who had worked with Curragh's Chief 
Executive Officer Clifford Frame for many years, handled communications initially from 
his office. He provided journalists with "whatever facts they needed, diagrams, maps. I 
had the background. The employees at Westray didn't" (Tom Reid, President, Reid 
Management, Toronto, ON, personal communication, November 12, 1993). Although 
Kevin Cox was sceptical about having to rely on a Toronto-based source for information 
about a Nova Scotia story, he was amazed at Reid's grasp of what was happening. "He 
knew everything" (Kevin Cox, reporter, Halifax bureau, The Globe and Mail, personal 
communications, February 25, 1993, and November 24, 1993). Reid also advised on the 
tone of voice Curragh spokesmen should use and suggested the following priorities of 
what should be said to the media: that the explosion was a terrible tragedy which could 
not have been foreseen; that the mine owners ran a safe mine; that the families and the 
rescue workers were showing great courage; and that the company would participate fully 
in any investigation (Tom Reid, President, Reid Management, Toronto, ON, personal 
communication, November 12, 1993; fax from Reid to Westray, May 9, 1992). But that 
arrangement was only satisfactory in the immediate aftermath, on May 9, 10, and perhaps 
11.3

Rather than responding to journalists' needs by providing background briefings or 
scheduling news conferences at convenient times, as Fishman (1980) recommends, 
perhaps unavoidably but regrettably nevertheless, Curragh did the opposite and often held 
news conferences at inconvenient times -- 2:00 a.m., 6:00 a.m., and midnight. Dean Jobb, 
who was the on-location editor in charge of coverage for The Chronicle-Herald 
(Halifax), recalled that the news conferences would invariably occur right on his 
deadline, so he barely had time to file a story and hardly ever had time to get reactions. 
The hosts of the CBC supper-hour television news program for Nova Scotia, First 
Edition, referred to "information by news conference, when mine officials are ready to 
share it with us" and later to "broken deadlines, 'about to have' news" (First Edition, 
CBC-TV, May 12, 1992). On one edition of the program, the news conference had barely 
ended as the program began; on another, the news conference began while the program 
was on air.

Company officials made only a limited effort to help the media understand what was 
happening, and although advisors explained Curragh wanted to be accurate above all else 
(Paul Curley, President, Advance Planning and Communications, Toronto, personal 
communication, March 19, 1993; Elizabeth Hoyle, Vice-President, Advance Planning 
and Communications, Toronto, ON, personal communication, March 19, 1993; Tom 
Reid, President, Reid Management, Toronto, ON, personal communication, November 
12, 1993), even that was not always the case. The following observation was made on air 
by the host of First Edition:
At one point we reported rescuers were 100 metres from the trapped men. Then they [Curragh] said they were 300-500 metres from the trapped men. Then there was an indication today that they had moved back, uh, to a less deep position in the mine, to a new fresh air base. It is very difficult for us to tell you what is going on in the mine. It is very difficult for us to know what is going on in the mine. (CBC-TV, May 12, 1992)

Curragh officials used unfamiliar language and made insufficient effort to explain the technology of the Westray mine to reporters. Bob Allison, a senior producer with First Edition, recalls the journalists were trying to learn "what were so many 'parts per' of methane. We were trying to find out whether those numbers were high or low. They were not forthcoming in describing how high or how low" (Bob Allison, CBC-TV, Halifax, personal communication, February 15, 1993). Kevin Cox was also having problems following the jargon. When officials first started talking about "crosscuts," he says, "we didn't even know what a crosscut was. We gradually understood, but they would make no effort to tell us" (Kevin Cox, reporter, Halifax bureau, The Globe and Mail, personal communications, February 25, 1993, and November 24, 1993). That behaviour was not necessary, but it is not unusual.4

Curragh did not provide scientific expertise about the mine. Access to such an expert would not excuse the media from seeking out another, more detached perspective, but if Curragh wanted to encourage a relationship of trust and openness, providing such a person would have helped. A plan might have reminded Curragh to do so because it could have anticipated the need.

Curragh told the media they could not speak to the draegermen (Bob Allison, Senior Producer, First Edition, CBC-TV, Halifax, personal communication, February 15, 1993; Kevin Cox, reporter, Halifax bureau, The Globe and Mail, personal communications, February 25, 1993, and November 24, 1993). It is true the rescue operation was their first priority, and debriefing and rest shifts were also important, but an opportunity could have been found on a regular basis to give the media access to first-hand accounts of the rescue effort. Draegermen are miners, who work for mine owners. They are not likely to disparage their employers, although they might inadvertently have said something damaging to Curragh. The media wanted that first-hand accounting; it should have been made available to them.

Curragh could also have suggested the families choose representatives to talk to the media rather than insist that journalists leave the families alone. In his internal post-event assessment, emergency measures co-ordinator Daryn Smith recommends just that (Smith, n.d., p. 2). Even family member Isabel Gillis, whose husband died in the explosion, says that if the restrictions on the media had not been so severe, "they wouldn't have had to hound the families to death" (Isabel Gillis, widow of deceased miner, Myles Gillis, personal communication, June 30, 1993).

Joseph Scanlon (1993), a Carleton University disaster specialist, maintains there usually are victims who want to talk. He cites the following example: when an American military aircraft crashed near Gander airport in Newfoundland in December 1985, relatives gathered in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, to await word. Reporters gathered there too. The
U.S. Army's chief information officer told the media he was not prepared to allow reporters to talk to the families of the soldiers unless the families asked. They asked. According to Scanlon, a lot of families want to speak to reporters: ``If you've just had a horrific experience, letting yourself go to somebody who's sympathetic is a very positive relationship. So the journalist does not need to cause emotional damage. He may well be cathartic if he's empathetic'' (Scanlon, 1993).

Public relations specialist Michael Regester (1989) recommends that the media have some sort of access to decision-makers. He suggests three connected rooms so that decision-makers, advisors, and the media can work separately or together as appropriate. At Westray, the mine office was too small to accommodate that suggestion. But Curragh denied access of any kind to journalists. They could not even approach Curragh with a question, for example, on their own initiative.

Chief Executive Officer Clifford Frame appeared only twice before the media, on Tuesday (when he was able to return from a working holiday in Japan) and Friday, the last day of the major news coverage of the explosion. Crisis specialists recommend the CEO be the designated spokesperson, particularly in severe crises, because he can show both authority and concern (Murray & Shohen, 1992). Public relations advisor Tom Reid recommended that Clifford Frame play a greater public role:

I advised them to actually put Cliff in that community and that he should be there until he was satisfied that he'd done everything he could do for the families, emotionally or financially, or whatever it took to help them. And they just saw that as too much of an investment. (Tom Reid, President, Reid Management, Toronto, ON, personal communication, November 12, 1993)

Usually the President of Operations, Colin Benner, spoke. Benner is photogenic, telegenic, and he comes from a family of miners. Benner knows mining, but he was new to the Westray operation, his first priority being Curragh's Yukon operation. In short, Curragh did not treat reporters well and that treatment contributed to a growing sense of frustration and suspicion among the journalists, which gelled around one key theme: the issue of safety.

The issue of safety

The safety of the Westray mine became an immediate concern for journalists. They recognized it was a key element to the Westray story that they had not adequately covered prior to the explosion, and that haunted them (Kevin Cox, reporter, Halifax bureau, The Globe and Mail, personal communications, February 25, 1993, and November 24, 1993; Dean Jobb, reporter, The Chronicle-Herald, Halifax, NS, personal communications, February 26, 1993, and December 6, 1993). But Curragh deflected the safety issue from the outset. Often questions from the media during news conferences were not allowed, especially questions about safety. Reporters would rotate responsibility for asking "the safety question" to make sure someone always asked (Kevin Cox, reporter, Halifax bureau, The Globe and Mail, personal communications, February 25,

Public relations advisor Tom Reid raised the safety issue with Curragh very early. He recalls that the media started asking him questions about it almost immediately. "I would say that every third question was a safety issue" (Tom Reid, President, Reid Management, Toronto, ON, personal communication, November 12, 1993). Reid was not pleased with the way the issue was being addressed, and made sure Curragh officials were aware of his concerns: "They know I have certain standards, shall we say. And I would just fight them, [when] they had something that was of concern that they'd made up their minds [that] they didn't want anybody else to know about. I kept harping on it, because that is my style" (Tom Reid, President, Reid Management, Toronto, ON, personal communication, November 12, 1993).

The following canvass of media coverage suggests the safety issue became an increasingly significant component of journalists' coverage, even though Curragh continued to avoid addressing it. The Daily News (Halifax) is the only Nova Scotia paper which publishes on Sunday, although the local Thomson-owned New Glasgow Evening News put out a special edition on May 10. The Daily News carried five stories the day after the explosion, one of which raised safety concern. The Evening News published a four-page special edition, with 14 stories and a full page of photographs. There was no mention at all of safety concerns. Television coverage was much more critical, however. The National, on CBC-TV, devoted 31 minutes to the Westray explosion. There were four reporter-stories, two feature interviews, and a re-broadcast of a portion of a documentary broadcast on The Fifth Estate on December 11, 1990, which focused on the politics of Westray and mentioned safety only in passing. Safety was addressed in the first news report, in which a former Westray miner said he was fired because he complained about safety. And it reappeared later in a background report by Keith Boag, who referred to documents from the department of labour that showed there had been seven different roof falls between 1989 and the fall of 1991.

By Monday, the safety angle was evident throughout media coverage. A headline in the Toronto Star ran "Why Did Safety System Fail? Sad Questions Grow Louder" (Boyle, 1992). CBC Television's The National ran a separate story on safety concerns at Westray, as did CBC Newsworld. Kevin Cox painted a sensitive portrait of a community in mourning in The Globe and Mail, describing Colin Benner as "shaken," "his voice choking with emotion" as he gave the news that the bodies of 11 men had been discovered. Cox also mentioned safety, but only once, in paragraph 13 of a 27-paragraph story (Cox, 1992, p. A1).

The Chronicle-Herald (Halifax) devoted all of its front and second pages, plus a special four-page report, to the explosion. Although the safety angle was not explored on page 1,
it was peppered throughout the rest of Monday's coverage, which included two stories suggesting the mine was not safe.

CBC-TV's *First Edition* devoted the first 22 minutes of its Monday program to the explosion. There were five reporter-stories, and the third dealt with safety concerns.

Public relations professionals frequently suggest that communicators ``tell it all and tell it fast'' (Pinsdorf, 1987; Regester, 1989). The advice warrants examination here. Curragh and two of its mine managers were charged with criminal negligence and manslaughter and although those charges were stayed in June 1995, that decision is being appealed (as at May 1996). Furthermore, a public inquiry is underway (as at May 1996). Comment must therefore be subject to legal restraint. But it can be said that if any of the allegations against Curragh are proven true, the mine owner most definitely did not ``tell it all and tell it fast." There are allegations of such things as poor ventilation in the mine, dangerous accumulations of coal dust, and the discovery of oil-soaked rags underground, all of which could have contributed to the intensity of the explosion (Comish, 1993; Rob Gordon, reporter, *First Edition*, CBC-TV, Halifax, NS, personal communication, February 25, 1993). Pinsdorf (1987) and Cohn (1991), both public relations specialists, argue that concealment never works. ``Never hide the facts. If the media don't get information from the company, they'll get it from other sources, usually unfriendly'' (Cohn, 1991, p. 19).

According to Tom Reid, the media were not a top priority for Curragh. The company had other key publics very much in mind -- shareholders, lenders and, ultimately, a judge and jury:

A lawyer always gets precedence. We know that from our experience with other clients. They [Curragh] didn't want the media in there. [They were preoccupied:] If they'd made some horrible screw-up, then who was liable and how much liability was there, was it the end of Curragh -- they didn't know. ``We're all going to jail." These are serious questions that came long before the media. (Tom Reid, President, Reid Management, Toronto, ON, personal communication, November 12, 1993)

The literature reflects Reid's observations. Fitzpatrick & Rubin (1995) analyzed the communication behaviours of 39 organizations charged with sexual harassment and observed that ``legal strategy dominate[d] organizational decision-making process" in almost two thirds of the situations (p. 30).

It is perhaps not surprising then that Curragh did not address safety as an issue and deflected and sometimes ignored it when reporters asked, although efforts at concealment were to no avail. Ironically, Curragh's decision to prevent media access to predictable sources for human interest and the company's unwillingness to confront the safety issue may have resulted in more journalistic investigation, more quickly than might otherwise have been the case (Kevin Cox, reporter, Halifax bureau, *The Globe and Mail*, personal communications, February 25, 1993, and November 24, 1993).
The local media perspective

As is often the case with disaster coverage, the local media provided basic information (Scanlon, Alldred, Farrell, & Prawzick, 1985). The local cable company broadcast information about which facilities were open and when, about church services and the candlelight vigils, and about where people could pick up the black ribbons everyone had decided to wear (Lorne Seifred, Manager, Shaw Cable, New Glasgow, NS, personal communication, February 18, 1993).

The New Glasgow Evening News had a firm editorial policy that had to be followed at risk of dismissal: Reporters would cover the news conferences and write on the tradition of mining in the area, but they were to stay away from the families.

According to editor Doug MacNeil, the national media have a lot to answer for: “The entire community was invaded. Reporters parked on people's doorsteps. Every time a family member turned around there was a camera or a microphone stuck in his face” (Doug MacNeil, Editor, Evening News, New Glasgow, NS, personal communication, February 8, 1994).

The relationship between Westray officials and local reporters changed dramatically on May 9. Previously, mine managers had been very accessible and news releases were issued frequently. But after the explosion, there was no communication except in controlled news conferences and releases virtually stopped. Local reporters observed the change was particularly noticeable because the community is so small and many of these people were personal acquaintances (David Glenen, reporter, Evening News, New Glasgow, NS, personal communication, March 31, 1993; Doug MacNeil, Editor, Evening News, New Glasgow, NS, personal communication, February 8, 1994; Wilkie Taylor, reporter, New Glasgow bureau, The Chronicle-Herald, personal communication, June 28, 1993).

The "come-from-away" press

"Come-from-away" is a term Maritime Canadians often use to describe people who are from somewhere else, and to the people of Pictou County most of the journalists who covered this story were not from the area and were considered "come-from-away" people (John Hault, Former Director, Nova Scotia Museum of Industry, Stellarton, NS, personal communication, May 5, 1994). It is estimated that 100 journalists and support staff converged on the scene (Bob Allison, Senior Producer, First Edition, CBC-TV, Halifax, personal communication, February 15, 1993; Michael Lightstone, reporter, The Daily News, Halifax, NS, personal communication, February 24, 1993). The media often contribute in a negative way to convergence. They arrive in great numbers and make tremendous demands on limited facilities (Scanlon et al., 1985). Westray was no exception. There were very few available phone lines, for example, and residents in nearby homes agreed to temporarily give up their lines to accommodate the media's needs.
Sometimes the media can help to mitigate convergence (Scanlon et al., 1985). If they are regularly informed, for example, they can help control the volume of inquiries by passing on information to worried friends and relatives, and they can even make requests for certain types of aid (Scanlon et al., 1985).

But at Westray there was very little information forthcoming from the company, so the media remained part of the convergence problem and did not contribute at all to its resolution. Curragh released only two written statements to reporters. The first was issued at 12:01 a.m. on Sunday, May 10 (the night after the explosion) and the other at the end of the day on Friday, May 15 (the last day of the major news event). There were only about four journalists still in the media centre at midnight that first night (Kevin Cox, reporter, Halifax bureau, The Globe and Mail, personal communications, February 25, 1993, and November 24, 1993). The release was very confusing and contained no less than 21 references to statistical data, in both percentages and parts per million. It disclosed that carbon dioxide levels taken in the mine earlier that evening, more than 12 hours after the explosion, registered 100 and 200 parts per million. The release said that methane levels were also still high, at 1.25%. Government standards dictate that a mine must stop production if carbon monoxide levels reach 50 parts per million, and if methane levels reach 1.25% (Curragh Incorporated, 1992a). The reporters learned from local miners that even if anyone survived the intensity of the explosion, they would be unable to survive the lack of oxygen. But Curragh was searching for survivors, and the media were unwilling to say the search was futile.

Kevin Cox's first story was headlined "Holding On to Hope." He wrote that "there seemed little hope that anyone would emerge alive" (Cox, 1992, p. A1). And for those discouraging words, the families were angry at Cox (Kevin Cox, reporter, Halifax bureau, The Globe and Mail, personal communications, February 25, 1993, and November 24, 1993).

Michael Lightstone of The Daily News (Halifax) described the relationship between Curragh and the media as follows: "We were feeding off each other.... We were holed up there, waiting for these briefings, even though they were sometimes completely useless. There was no real news, they just felt that they had to come, and we felt that we had to write or broadcast something" (Michael Lightstone, reporter, The Daily News, Halifax, NS, personal communication, February 24, 1993).

On Thursday, May 14, Curragh spokesman Colin Benner announced that the search was being suspended, that there was no hope of finding survivors. That evening, CBC Television's First Edition ran a story that was more thorough and more critical than any other that appeared that week in the television or print coverage surveyed. Reporter Rob Gordon prepared a four-minute piece which charged that 10 hours before the mine blew up, methane levels exceeded 3.5%. Gordon reported he had spoken to draegermen who were too upset to go on camera, but they told him that high methane levels were so common it was not unusual for miners to pass out at their work station, that miners saw one or two cave-ins "almost on a daily basis," and that "it was push, push, push. They
were behind in their production. Management was pushing everybody to the limits" (CBC-TV, May 14, 1992).

The relationship between Curragh and the families

Initially, the relationship between Curragh and the families was one of trust, and that is understandable. Both were victims and both had much to lose. In some crises, a bond not unlike the Stockholm Syndrome emerges wherein ``the hostage is usually dependent on the hostage-taker for life and death, food and sustenance, over an extended period of time'' (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1984, p. 59). They also shared an antagonism toward the media, reinforced by occasional media transgressions, discussed below.

But as the days wore on, the trusting relationship between Curragh and the families was severely tested. People in the firehall were receiving even less information than the media. They were initially informed by an accountant, who was unable to answer the most basic questions. According to two family members, Curragh officials would not only tell the media first, they would not tell the families and the media the same thing:

I'd leave the firehall and go to a hotel for the night, and watch television. [Colin] Benner and [Gerald] Phillips [the mine manager] would appear before the media. It'd be a totally different story from what they told us. It was a more complete story. I'd rather myself know than the country. (Genesta Halloran, widow of deceased miner, John Halloran, personal communication, June 29, 1993)

The emergency measures co-ordinator wrote in his report after the event that by Monday evening the situation in the firehall was becoming critical, in part because Curragh was not giving enough information to the families:

Constant delays in information and the fact that accountants were often giving the briefings were leading to this tense atmosphere. At the 1 a.m. briefing, which reported nothing of substance to the families, people's emotions were running very high and the mood worsened. By 4 a.m., the situation continued to deteriorate, so I called Westray officials and informed them of the gravity of the situation and the need for substantive briefings. I was informed by mine officials that someone would be down at 5 a.m. to present a technical report. When [information about that planned briefing was] relayed to the families, the tension became almost unbearable. (Smith, n.d., p. 3)

Many of these people had not slept since Saturday morning. Because they were exhausted and frustrated at the lack of information from mine managers, they had begun arguing with each other. "It was at this point I spoke to the families to try and bring them together and not confront each other," Emergency Measures Organization (EMO) co-ordinator Daryn Smith wrote. At his encouragement, the families agreed to present ``a unified front" and decided on a list of questions which they phoned into Westray officials -- questions about conditions underground and about why they had not been getting "information of substance" at previous briefings. Finally, at 5:15 that Tuesday morning, Colin Benner arrived at the firehall with two other Curragh officials and "The concerns
[about the way they had been treated] were relayed to these men and when these were addressed, families began to feel better, as they felt they were finally being treated appropriately by the Mine officials" (Smith, n.d., p. 3).

But Curragh then made another mistake that made officials appear insensitive. On Thursday, the families decided they wanted to issue a news release to thank everyone who had been so supportive. According to Smith's report, they were about to release it when Colin Benner arrived to say the rescue operation was being discontinued. "Unfortunately, we had received no advance warning of this announcement, and we were caught off guard and had to try and comfort all the families with our existing staff" (Smith, n.d., p. 4).

Daryn Smith and grief counsellor Dr. John Service presented the families' announcement to the media after Benner's statement.

The relationship between the media and the families

Relations between the media and the families were tense from the outset. Curragh told the families not to trust anything the media said (Isabel Gillis, widow of deceased miner, Myles Gillis, personal communication, June 30, 1993; Genesta Halloran, widow of deceased miner, John Halloran, personal communication, June 29, 1993). Reporters, photographers, and television cameras had virtually surrounded the firehall. There were no televisions or radios in the firehall and no newspapers until Wednesday. In those early days, many families remained in the firehall (Mayor Mary Daley, Westville, NS, personal communication, February 26, 1993; Kathy Dobbs, mental health worker, Aberdeen General Hospital, New Glasgow, NS, personal communication, February 19, 1993; Genesta Halloran, widow of deceased miner, John Halloran, personal communication, June 29, 1993), so they were not aware of media reports of the rescue effort or the speculation about safety concerns. They heard only what Curragh officials wanted them to hear.

Curragh also told the media the families did not want to speak to them and although that was generally true, it was never suggested that providing a family member to speak on everyone's behalf might have made the journalists less intrusive (Isabel Gillis, widow of deceased miner, Myles Gillis, personal communication, June 30, 1993).

Kevin Cox recalls one of several low points during that long week. On the Sunday afternoon, Colin Benner came into the community centre and began his remarks by saying:

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the report that we all hoped we would not have to give. Rescue teams have reported that they have located the bodies of 11 men in the southwest area of the Westray coal mine. These bodies will be brought to the surface for identification by the RCMP as soon as possible. It would appear that these men died instantly. (Colin Brenner, President of Operations, Curragh Incorporated, Plymouth, NS, news conference broadcast live on CBC NewsWorld, May 10, 1992)
As Cox says, ``We'd been up all night. People were in pretty rough shape.... And then we think, well, obviously, you have to go out and get reaction. Well, your heart just falls to your feet. I mean, you don't like doing this job. This is the worst part of journalism'' (Kevin Cox, reporter, Halifax bureau, *The Globe and Mail*, personal communications, February 25, 1993, and November 24, 1993).

Michael Lightstone of *The Daily News* (Halifax) recalled covering one of the funerals: ``I have three small kids and all I could think of was, 'Oh God, these guys were all my age, and they all had small kids,' and how sad that was. Plus they all didn't want you there and hated your guts'' (Michael Lightstone, reporter, *The Daily News*, Halifax, NS, personal communication, February 24, 1993).

Lightstone was standing beside his photographer as the hearse pulled up and the pallbearers came out to take the coffin. ``As one of the pallbearers came out of his own car to go towards the hearse, he was smoking a cigarette, and he came and flicked it at us, or toward us, and said something like 'fucking bastards.' I probably would have done the same thing'' (Michael Lightstone, reporter, *The Daily News*, Halifax, NS, personal communication, February 24, 1993).

On the other hand, Rob Gordon of CBC-TV News was angry about the way the media treated this story right from the beginning. He says journalists were not looking for information. They were looking for feelings. ``The coverage centred around this press conference-driven thing. You know, the draegermen have moved four feet. We have established a fresh air base. We have discovered 11 bodies. And then there was a mad scramble to find the relatives of the 11 bodies. How do you feel about this?'' (Rob Gordon, reporter, *First Edition*, CBC-TV, Halifax, NS, personal communication, February 25, 1993).

Gordon was frustrated that so little of the coverage concentrated on what caused the explosion. He says he had that story by Monday. Rather than staying at the community centre and waiting for news briefings, Gordon went looking for original sources. He found draegermen who were staying at one of the motels and convinced them to talk to him. They spoke of alleged high methane levels before the explosion, about alleged oil-soaked rags in the tunnels, and about rock falls and roof cave-ins that should have been warning signs. Gordon's story was not broadcast until Thursday, because he had been trying to convince the draegermen to go on camera. But no one else had even come close to getting the information he had been sitting on for four days. Gordon believes print reporters, who were not slaves to pictures, should have had it. Dean Jobb, a print reporter, tends to agree: ``Rob was one of the few people who got out there and did some digging. But, there's a real shift in the media these days. It's the trivial now, it's the fluff, it's the feelies, it's the people angles, human interest. I mean, there's nothing wrong with any of this, but is that all there is to this mine disaster?'' (Dean Jobb, reporter, *The Chronicle-Herald*, Halifax, NS, personal communication, February 26, 1993).

Family members were experiencing severe stress by the very nature of the event. The placement of the media directly across the road aggravated their condition. And it was
further exacerbated as families learned that the media knew more than they did about what was going on.

**The search for human interest**

It has been shown that journalists tend to rely on human interest to tell their stories (Gans, 1980; Smith, 1992). In the case of Westray, the search for emotional detail was difficult because the families and the draegermen were off limits. Newsgathering behaviour was therefore occasionally inclined to excess. Very early in the event, a television crew from Radio France but based in St. Pierre and Miquelon, tried to cross the so-called White Line separating the media from the families. They were forced back by the police and by the rocks angry family members pelted at them (Bob Allison, Senior Producer, *First Edition*, CBC-TV, Halifax, personal communication, February 15, 1993; Kevin Cox, reporter, Halifax bureau, *The Globe and Mail*, personal communications, February 25, 1993, and November 24, 1993; Michael Lightstone, reporter, *The Daily News*, Halifax, NS, personal communication, February 24, 1993).

Rob Gordon knows of one national television reporter who went to a draegerman's home. There was no one there but -- this being New Glasgow -- the door was unlocked. The reporter went into the house and walked through the kitchen and hall to the living room, where she left a note on a coffee table, requesting an interview. When Gordon spoke to the draegerman that night, he was hostile. "He felt invaded," Gordon said (Rob Gordon, reporter, *First Edition*, CBC-TV, Halifax, NS, personal communication, February 25, 1993).

Family member Genesta Halloran recalls being approached by one woman who was crying. She asked, "What family are you related to?" And she said, 'I'm not a family member, I'm just concerned.' And I said, 'Well who are you?' And she said, 'I'm so-and-so from the Montreal Gazette.' And I literally chased her down the field. To put on false tears!" (Genesta Halloran, widow of deceased miner, John Halloran, personal communication, June 29, 1993).

These incidents suggest that the more detached reporters are from the event, the more aggressive they are prepared to be to get their story. But their willingness to go to such extremes only made their relationship with the families that much more strained. In fact, in one particular case, the families chose to believe an example of media excess which the media say is untrue. A local minister, who was in the firehall to console the families for a good part of the week and whose wife is an RCMP constable, said the media had installed sophisticated scanners to eavesdrop on private conversations. He said an RCMP officer saw the equipment in the media centre (Reverend Glen Matheson, First Presbyterian Church, New Glasgow, NS, personal communication, February 18, 1993). The mayor of a nearby community said the RCMP asked her to tell the families the media had this gear (Mayor Mary Daley, Westville, NS, personal communication, February 26, 1993). The reporters deny this categorically. They say no one had scanners and no one eavesdropped on private conversations. Staff Sgt. Ron Peers, the RCMP's incident commander, denies any knowledge of scanners and was not aware his officers had given
the families this information (Ron Peers, Staff Sergeant, RCMP, New Glasgow, NS, personal communication, June 30, 1993).

Bob Allison recalls that the CBC finally found out the name of one of the men trapped below. They knew he was from Antigonish, a town about half an hour's drive from the mine. They called every person in the phone book with that surname who lived in Antigonish. According to Allison, one of the people the CBC called was so angry, he drove to the community centre, stormed over to the CBC contingent, and said if anyone called the family in Antigonish again, he would be back with a gun (Bob Allison, Senior Producer, First Edition, CBC-TV, Halifax, personal communication, February 15, 1993).

Rob Gordon believes the families had reason to direct their anger at the media. They were constantly under a camera's gaze. Camera lenses were set on the family centre. Gordon says, "What you'd see on TV is people with tears streaming down their faces, hugging each other. What you didn't see is 2 seconds later, they were giving the camera the finger" (Rob Gordon, reporter, First Edition, CBC-TV, Halifax, NS, personal communication, February 25, 1993).

But Gordon also says people unfairly blamed the media for telling the truth. Because Curragh held out hope, the families held on. They did not want to hear the media say no one survived. As Gordon says, they were mad at the media, but "the media didn't blow the mine up. The media didn't allow a build-up of coal dust. The media didn't practise unsafe practices. Curragh did. But we were the bad guys. And the company was the good guy" (Rob Gordon, reporter, First Edition, CBC-TV, Halifax, NS, personal communication, February 25, 1993).

The families had a point. As one member said, hope was all they had.

How do you think the families were able to last 6 days in the firehall? That's what they were going on. You heard about Springhill [two mine explosions in 1956 and 1958, where some of the trapped miners were brought out alive]. You knew they could be trapped down there. And the company was saying the air they were breathing down there was cleaner than what it was up here. (Genesta Halloran, widow of deceased miner, John Halloran, personal communication, June 29, 1993)

The New Glasgow Evening News ran an editorial on the Thursday, titled "Sensitivity Required," which referred to the indescribable sadness of events so far, but also expressed some of the community's concerns. It concludes:

Sadder still is the lack of consideration for the families' privacy shown by some visiting journalists....Maybe the bottom line is some of the visitors won't be here after this terrible tragedy is all over. They will move on to another story. But in the meantime they should be professional enough to respect the deep sensitivity of the people of this community, or leave us alone. (p. 4)
As often happens in crisis coverage (Kreps, 1980; Scanlon et al., 1985; Smith, 1992), there were examples of reporters making mistakes. The chances of getting it wrong are enhanced, however, when the source provides so little solid information. For example, Curragh was slow to reveal the names of the trapped miners and even of the dead miners. That is why Allison's team did what they did. But company officials were not altogether sure who was down there (Wells, 1992). Eugene Johnson's wife, Donna, says she got a call from Curragh minutes after the explosion asking if her husband was on shift. Joyce Fraser says the first two times Curragh tried to provide the families with a list of the trapped men, they left off her husband's name. She had to keep telling them, "My Robbie's there too" (Mayor Mary Daley, Westville, NS, personal communication, February 26, 1993).

For Dean Jobb of The Chronicle-Herald (Halifax), it was a journalist's worst nightmare. One of his reporters filed a story on the Monday which incorrectly identified Mike MacKay as being one of the first 11 miners whose body was found the previous day. But MacKay's body had not been recovered. A correction appeared on page 1 of Tuesday's edition, with the following addendum: "The Chronicle-Herald regrets the anguish this mistake has caused Mr. MacKay's family." Jobb also personally apologized to the miner's brother. Jobb said that man could not look him in the eye, he was so enraged. The man said his mother had been getting condolence calls all day. Jobb felt like saying to him, "Go ahead, hit me. I wouldn't blame you" (Dean Jobb, reporter, The Chronicle-Herald, Halifax, NS, personal communications, February 26, 1993, and December 6, 1993).

One of the most common mistakes journalists made, almost without exception, was reporting that the Westray mine was located in then Premier Donald Cameron's riding. It was not at the time, although the redefinition of constituency boundaries for the 1993 election put Westray where most journalists thought it had been all along.

The decontextualization of the Westray tragedy

Disaster scholars have lamented the way the media turn their microscopes on disaster events for as long as the ghoulish details sustain interest, only to turn their attention to the next assignment once those details are exposed. They tend to interpret each disaster as a unique, rather than as a "normal," predictable occurrence (Wilkins, 1989). To a degree, this was true at Westray. Because the mine had been treated as a political story before the explosion occurred, journalists were caught in the position of trying to explain an event they did not understand. The effort required to do that meant the crisis was compartmentalized, as if separate from the wider context of technology and Canada's reliance on coal as a resource, which make such events both predictable and inevitable. Wilkins (1989) suggests that decontextualized reporting is not at all unusual and worries that decontextualization makes "debate over genuine solutions difficult at best" (p. 173).

An illustration of the type of context to which Wilkins refers appears in a document titled The Westray Story: Death by Consensus, in which authors Glasbeek & Tucker point out:
From 1985 to 1990, a total of fourteen companies was charged with offenses under the [Nova Scotia] Occupational Health and Safety Act, and the maximum fine imposed appears to have been $2,500. No mining companies were prosecuted, however, despite the fact that, according to another tabulation, between fiscal years 1987-88 and 1991-92, 1,037 directives were issued to mining companies. The fact that directives never result in change [means there is not] much compliance. (Glasbeek & Tucker, 1992, p. 43)

A survey of the content of each First Edition program from May 11 to May 15 reveals not a single mention of that kind of context, in spite of the fact that the program often devoted almost half of its 60-minute time slot to the tragedy.

There were exceptions in the print media, but they were rare. On May 11, two days after the explosion, a background report appeared in The Globe and Mail, headlined "Perilous Industry Vital to Province" (Vieira, 1992). The story concentrated on the history of mining accidents in Nova Scotia and throughout Canada, but it also quoted the president of Nova Scotia's mining association, John Amirault, as saying that for each of the 5,500 people employed in the mining industry, four ancillary jobs are created. That report was almost 500 words long, and the description of economic interdependence ran about 125 words.

The Globe and Mail writer David Olive wrote "a discourse on events" one week after the explosion. It provided the context other reportage missed. It began, "Lest we forget:" and proceeded to remind readers of how "the promise of economic prosperity can overpower even the strongest doubts."

That even before disaster strikes, even the most obviously risky of propositions can be sugar-coated as an alarmist hypothesis when placed against the sirenic lure of ready wages and profits. This is the principle underlying Exxon's decision not to use tankers with costly double-lined hulls in Alaska's Prince William Sound; Union Carbide's willingness to operate a pesticide plant at Bhopal, India, whose casual management standards would never make the grade at Carbide's U.S. facilities....That for all our heartfelt concern about workplace safety, somehow little progress has been made. (Olive, 1992, p. D4)

The only other striking exception to decontextualization came from New Brunswick historian David Frank, whose analysis appeared in the May 19 edition of The Globe and Mail. Frank documents in about 1,100 words the tradition of lives lost in mining accidents in Nova Scotia, the miners' "remarkable historical achievements... to enforce rules and regulations to improve the safety of the workplace," their respect for coal as a people's resource which made them "strong supporters of public ownership," and their stubborn refusal to enter the mine when conditions were unacceptable. He argued that most believed the mines are much safer now, "or so it seemed" (Frank, 1992, p. A15).

Then there is an explosion in a modern coal mine in a province with more than two centuries of mining experience and a large volume of legislation and regulation. Twenty-six men, most in their 20s and 30s, are lost. Tragedy. In the months ahead the question
will be asked, what went wrong? In looking for answers, we can also look to the past. We need to know whether, somehow here in the work world of the 1990s, we have been cut off from the history of achievement and improvement in coal mining. For all the accumulation of experience and knowledge in the industry, the price of coal is still paid in blood. (Frank, 1992, p. A15)

The week's end

Bob Allison was at the site from Saturday afternoon until Friday. He makes no apology for the media's behaviour under the circumstances. He says the last time he experienced restrictions to parallel those at Westray was during a prison riot, when the RCMP and prison administrators initially refused to let reporters on the property and finally permitted them inside only the administration building, which was outside the prison wall (Bob Allison, Senior Producer, First Edition, CBC-TV, Halifax, personal communication, February 15, 1993).

The Globe and Mail's Kevin Cox says he has ``never'' seen anything like it. He covered the CN train accident near Hinton, Alberta, in 1986, where 23 people died and another 71 were injured. Reporters were allowed to walk to the site of the collision, with CN police escorts, view the mangled trains, even look at the bodies inside. He also covered the 1987 Edmonton tornado, where reporters were not only allowed to explore the devastated suburban trailer park, but the police also provided them with bus transportation to and from the site (Kevin Cox, reporter, Halifax bureau, The Globe and Mail, personal communications, February 25, 1993, and November 24, 1993).

On Friday, May 15, one week after the explosion, and one day after Curragh announced rescue operations were being discontinued, the company held one more news conference. The news was that Curragh would not ``reactivate the search.'' Clifford Frame appeared before the media for the second time that week, to read a statement. It was 5:30 p.m. (just 30 minutes before First Edition goes on the air), and almost all the media had already left. Frame said, ``I would like to state that any coal produced for sale from the open pit mine at Stellarton... up to a certain sum, will be contributed to a fund... for the benefit of the families and children left behind'' (Curragh Incorporated, 1992b, p. 4).

Frame had been trying to get permission to take coal from an open-pit mine in nearby Stellarton, without a lengthy environmental assessment. Bob Allison was busy rewinding a tape when he heard Frame make that comment. He said to himself, ``That's a bribe'' (Bob Allison, Senior Producer, First Edition, CBC-TV, Halifax, personal communication, February 15, 1993). Cox and Jobb had the same reaction (Kevin Cox, reporter, Halifax bureau, The Globe and Mail, personal communications, February 25, 1993, and November 24, 1993; Dean Jobb, reporter, The Chronicle-Herald, Halifax, NS, personal communications, February 26, 1993, and December 6, 1993). Frame must have anticipated that. He said, ``I acknowledge that I may be criticized in the media for making these announcements today'' (Curragh Incorporated, 1992b, p. 4). But it was too late to do much about the so-called bribe. There was barely time to get an item ready for the 6:00 o'clock news or a story written for the next day's early edition. Because news
programming is reduced on the weekend, it is standard practice in most newsrooms to reduce staff. News that breaks late in the day on Friday often dies during that two-day lull. In the public relations industry, it is known that late Friday is a good time to release controversial information to the media, because it is more difficult for journalists to get reaction and points of view so late in the day and news editors like to start the next week with a fresh slate. Saturday coverage concentrated on the other elements of Frame's statement, the provincial government's announcement of a public inquiry, and reaction from family members.

**Conclusion**

When a tragedy such as the Westray mine explosion occurs, the flow and focus of information is highly charged for those involved, and highly sought after by many, including the general public. Large corporations are encouraged to have crisis communications plans in place partly because of these characteristics, and also because information surrounding disasters is both scarce and important. Curragh officials were not sensitive to the understandable need for thorough and accurate information by the media, the community, and media consumers. A crisis communications plan presumes corporate integrity. If allegations of unsafe conditions at the mine are true, a communications plan and its basic tenet of honest, accurate, prompt information delivery would have been very difficult for Curragh to follow. At the very least, such a plan would have warned Curragh about the implications of its alleged operational practices.

While corporations are encouraged to have crisis communications plans, less attention has been paid to the media's need for parallel plans. Journalists should be prepared for inevitable events, such as disasters. A competent media plan ensures news outlets know what to do when disaster strikes. The plan would prepare journalists for the need to be sensitive about such issues as invasion of privacy and the impact of seemingly small mistakes. Journalists who covered the Westray explosion pursued human interest angles at the expense of the context of the technology. A plan would encourage news gatherers to familiarize themselves with the context in which disasters occur, in advance of an event, so that they do not find themselves in the position of trying to explain an event they do not understand and so that they are able to broaden their coverage beyond the immediate drama to include an examination of the system that produced the event in the first place.

**Postscript**

Efforts to determine cause and accountability for the explosion of the Westray mine have been slow. In the aftermath of the tragedy, there were four inquiries established. Curragh's inquiry was internal. The provincial Department of Labour laid 52 charges under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* and all were dropped. The RCMP laid charges of manslaughter and criminal negligence causing death against Curragh and two former mine managers, Gerald Phillips and Roger Parry. A Nova Scotia judge stayed the charges in June 1995, arguing that the prosecution's failure to provide full disclosure
made it impossible to ensure a fair trial. The Nova Scotia Court of Appeal overturned that ruling in December 1995. That decision is now before the Supreme Court of Canada. A provincial public inquiry had been delayed and is now, as at May 1996, underway.

The Westray tragedy exacted a heavy price from Curragh. After the explosion, the Bank of Nova Scotia demanded payment of its $100-million loan and Curragh paid the 15% that was not guaranteed. The federal government paid the remaining $85 million. The government of Nova Scotia wrote off its $12-million loan. Curragh went out of business.

On a political level, the day after the RCMP let it be known criminal charges would be laid in the Westray case, on April 17, 1993, Premier Don Cameron called a provincial election in Nova Scotia. The opposition parties did not make Westray a major election issue because of pending court cases. Nevertheless, on May 25, the provincial Conservatives were soundly defeated and the Liberals swept to power. Don Cameron resigned and retired from active politics to accept a position as Canada's Consul General in Boston.

Notes

2 The paper is drawn from The Cost of Coal, a Master of Journalism thesis successfully defended at Carleton University in June 1994 (Richards, 1994).

2 The Nova Scotia government provided a $12-million loan. The federal government guaranteed 85% of a $100-million loan from the Bank of Nova Scotia and also agreed to an additional interest buydown of $8.75 million.

3 Neale Bennet of Bennet Communications in Halifax was hired to advise Curragh officials on the scene. He declined to participate in this study, citing client confidentiality.

4 In March 1979, for example, when the Three Mile Island nuclear energy plant leaked radiation into the atmosphere, journalists who were in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to cover the story also had trouble getting information they could understand. The Columbia Journalism Review paraphrased Jim Panyard of the Philadelphia Bulletin this way: "Sources seemed to speak a foreign language.... You asked them a straight question about how much radiation is escaping and they answered with mumbo-jumbo about millirems, manrems, rads and picocuries" (Sandman, Paden, Griffith, & Miles, 1979, p. 44).

References


Scanlon, Joseph. (1993, May 7-9). *Covering disasters* [Audio tape]. A panel discussion at the Canadian Association of Journalists annual meeting, Toronto, ON.


Back to the [Table of Contents]

© Canadian Journal of Communication