A professional's viewpoint: What the media says, and why.

"Professional newspapermen love disaster - it is their business - but don't rely on them to be very different from the rest of the community. The independent commercial media survives and thrives by reflecting the community it serves. If a community is complacent, then there is a fair chance that its journalists too will take the placid line… If people don't die in thousands, it is not a disaster, and therefore not news. The preparedness message gets only a limited airing."
T. Radford, The Guardian, 1999

The media tends to reflect the mood of the community it serves. If there is already debate about the exposure to natural hazards or concern about disaster awareness, then journalists are likely to amplify and focus this concern. If there is no local interest in the subject, then a local newspaper, television or radio program is unlikely to launch and sustain the discussion. There is, however, a moment to trigger such attention and to inspire media professionals to take an intelligent interest in wider disaster subjects. This moment is in the immediate aftermath of an earthquake, flood, forest fire, landslide, hurricane or tsunami.

Paradoxically, such moments also underscore huge cultural gaps that exist between journalists and the engineers, scientists, health teams and administrators who want to promote wider public understanding about risk. The issue is a simple one. News people want the story. In the first bewildering hours after a catastrophe, there is often no direct news at all. There is instead silence. Roads are cut, communications are severed, water and power supplies are interrupted and the civic authorities and hospitals that should be the source of information are themselves part of the disaster. At such moments, reporters phone frantically to find university or government-based specialists who might be prepared to speculate on what might have happened, or the possible reasons for the disaster. When approached urgently, by often previously unknown questioners, these experts tend to worry about reputations for scholarly accuracy, mature judgement and political soundness. They often shrink from comment, apologetically promising to offer thoughtful analysis when firm information becomes available.

This is a mistake. News people have no choice. They must report on a disaster that has just happened even if they have only the sketchiest details. If an informed and thoughtful expert is hesitant to comment based on limited information, media reporters will go in search of a less-informed and less-thoughtful commentator who will.

It is at such moments that disaster risk management professionals have a golden chance to describe the pattern of loss and destruction. They can drive home the lessons of risk awareness and known procedures that can reduce those risks. They should seize on the chance to do this, in vivid, clear and even chilling language, at every moment for the next 24 hours. They should do this because - since the media reflects the community it serves - if the media is listening, then the people are listening.

Once television cameras get to the disaster zone, as images of crushed children and weeping relatives and toiling rescuers begin to flood the public, the imagery and the grim statistics of suffering will dominate the news. And then who will want to hear somebody talking in academic terms, about monitoring hazards or mitigating future risks ?