

## **Not My Fault: The problems and politics of death tolls**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard  
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My first experience with national media was in April 1992. Three big earthquakes over a 18 hour period and no sleep and I get a call from a staffer at CBS This Morning asking if I was willing to be interviewed. Sure, I thought, go ahead and fire away. That wasn't what they had in mind. Was I willing to be live on the show when it aired tomorrow. And it had to be on location.

Live meant Eastern Time, (4 AM for me) and the location was Ferndale. That meant leaving my house a little before 3. I was in no shape to drive and quickly demurred, explaining the logistics were too complicated. They weren't easily put off. They offered to provide a ride and I reluctantly agreed.

No Ubers in 1992. No 24-hour taxi service either. The only vehicle they could find was the local prom limousine. It shows up at 2:45 AM and I flop into the back and try to doze. The driver is chatty and wants to tell me his earthquake experiences. We arrive in Ferndale at 3:30 and the city is cordoned off with police checkpoints. All I have is my HSU ID and I explain I'm there to do an interview. I guess it appeared too improbable to be a lie and they let me through.

It felt like a stage set in the wee hours of the morning. The power was out and the only lights were from the mobile TV crews dotted about the city. They wire me up so I can hear the New York crew, the New York host and the local crew. Finally we are on and I am too tired to be nervous. The first question is "How many people died?" They didn't seem very happy when I said no one. "Why didn't anyone die?" So I talk about wood frame houses and how they perform relatively well in earthquakes.

The number of deaths is an easy way to categorize the scale of a disaster. But it is not always an easy number to determine. I was reminded of the subject again this week in an article about last year's Paradise fire. The official death toll stands at 86 but the article contended the true number may be at least 50 people higher. The unreported deaths in the Paradise case were primarily people with significant health issues for whom the stress of evacuation and the interruption in medical care

exacerbated pre-existing conditions. It got me to thinking of the difficulties of counting deaths and where to draw the line.

How do you determine whether a death was caused by a disaster or was independent? The simplest answer is – if the disaster hadn't happened, would the person still be alive? There are always gray areas, and in the case of Paradise, final decisions will likely be made in the courts. No one is arguing that the toll has been intentionally under-reported in Paradise. But there are cases where death tolls have been hidden, under-reported or inflated for political purposes.

The most blatant examples of under reporting come from China. In January 1970, a magnitude 7.1 earthquake occurred in China's Yunnan Province. The Tonghai earthquake received little mention at the time. China's Xinhua News Agency reported a smaller magnitude earthquake on the date and made no comments about damage or casualties. Nineteen years later, at a meeting, a Chinese seismologist mentioned as many as 10,000 people may have died in the earthquake. A more detailed study was released by the Chinese government in 2000 putting the Tonghai death toll at over 15,000 people, making it the third deadliest earthquake in China in the 20th century.

Why was there no mention of damage or deaths back in 1970? Probably because of the political context. It was the height of the Cultural Revolution and information both within the country and to the outside world was tightly controlled, particularly any story that might be perceived as tarnishing the Communist government. A key tenet of the Maoist government at the time was that earthquakes could be predicted and damage averted.

Six years after the Tonghai earthquake, a much more catastrophic Chinese earthquake occurred. There was no hiding the deadly impacts of the 1976 M7.6 earthquake. Space images revealed that 85% of the buildings in the city of Tangshan, a city of about 700,000 people at the time, had been destroyed. The official report of casualties listed 242,000 deaths, making it the second deadliest earthquake of all time. As large as this number is, a number of experts analyzing the scope of damage contended the true death toll was over 655,000.

The January 2010 M7.1 Haiti earthquake shows a different slant of the politics of earthquake casualties. The official government casualty number is 316,000 deaths, surpassing the Tangshan earthquake. But the government never explained how the number was

reached and the consensus of a number of aid organizations and other scientific studies suggest far lower numbers, ranging between 46,000 to 160,000. Why would the government inflate the numbers? The Haiti economy depends upon international aid and the larger the number, perhaps the easier it is to attract the attention of the donor community.

Both Haiti and China underscore the difficulties of determining accurate impact figures in countries where demographic data is either poorly kept or difficult to access even in normal times and where political considerations may further skew information.

The United States has not been immune from the murky business of estimating disaster death counts. The Puerto Rican government reported that only 64 people died in 2017's Hurricanes Maria. Aid organizations, journalists and scientists challenged the number and filed suits to gain access to government documents. Nearly a year after Maria and an extensive study, the official toll was revised to 2,975. One of the reasons for the change was how the numbers were determined. The initial 64 estimate only included deaths due to drowning or blunt force trauma and didn't casualties from exposure and lack of medical care in the days and weeks afterwards. Seesawing numbers confuse everyone. The public is still skeptical with fewer than half the American public believing the revised numbers.

The easiest way to avoid controversy over death tolls is to keep our number zero. That means continuing to reinforce weak buildings, reduce non-structural hazards and make sure everyone does the right thing when the ground starts shaking (don't move, Drop, Cover and Hold On if you are able). And the next earthquake might be large enough to bring a tsunami with it. We can survive that too – but it means knowing the shaking is your warning and getting to high ground. If I am still around after that earthquake and the media sticks a microphone in my face, I sincerely hope I can once again say "Nobody died because we all knew what to do."

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Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. All Not My Fault columns are archived at <https://www2.humboldt.edu/kamome/resources> and may be reused for educational purposes. Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email [Kamome@humboldt.edu](mailto:Kamome@humboldt.edu) for questions/comments about this column, or to request a free copy of the North Coast preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground."

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