

Not My Fault: Radio's unique role in disaster

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
Posted June 27, 2018

What do you do in the immediate aftermath of a disaster? I turn on the radio, my go-to place for information, especially when the power is out. Unfortunately, earthquakes can be hard on radio stations. Strong shaking damages sensitive broadcasting equipment and it is frightening to only hear static. That's exactly what happened in Chile in the early morning hours of February 10, 2010 when a magnitude 8.8 earthquake struck just offshore the central coast. There was one notable exception. Radio Bio Bio, a commercial radio station in Concepción.

The station director was Mauro Mosciatti, a civil engineer and a man who had always been interested in earthquakes. In the mid 2000s, he became convinced that a major earthquake might be coming soon. He began a five-year process of hardening the station. He had structural engineers look at the strength of their building. Station staff analyzed equipment vulnerabilities. They secured computers, desks, recording and transmission equipment to resist moving during the quake. They made sure to have generators, flashlights, and emergency supplies on hand.

It wasn't just the physical aspects of the studio that Mosciatti addressed. He developed relationships with scientists and government agencies long before the disaster struck so that he would know where to turn for the best information. The station recognized that what people need most during the stress of a great quake is the sound of a human voice, even when information is still sketchy. They developed a response framework – no ads, no music, no commercial programming in the initial phases and focusing on giving out what information was available and keeping people calm. The staff were involved with plan development and trained both in how to protect themselves and what to do afterwards.

Their actions paid off. The studio suffered minimal damage in the earthquake and was only off the air for the 20 minutes it took to put the generator into action. For four days, Radio Bio Bio was the only station operating in the hardest hit area of Chile and became the information lifeline for the region – relaying what information they could gather. Their planning had given them the

framework, but it was their ability to improvise and adapt made their story international news.

I was part of a post disaster survey team in 2010 and we arrived in Chile about two weeks after the earthquake. The purpose of our fieldwork was to identify factors that affected the response - what helped and what exacerbated impacts. Francisco Luna, a freelance Chilean journalist, was a member of our group and a genius at getting us access to people. Francisco arranged for us to meet Mr. Mosciatti in the Radio Bio Bio office and we learned that the station did much more than just relay information. People tacked notes on the station door about everything from finding missing friends and relatives to getting medications. The station became the community center – conveying questions and connecting people with needs with those who could help. It turned out to be a good business plan too – Radio Bio Bio became national heroes and their listening audience more than doubled in the wake of the disaster.

Here are a few of the lessons I took away from the Radio Bio Bio story. They apply not only to radio stations but to other organizations as well.

- For an organization to effectively prepare, someone high up in the management structure needs to understand the importance of becoming resilient and be committed to taking action. At Bio Bio, it came from the Director. The expenditure of time, resources and energy over the five years preceding the earthquake never have happened without Mr. Mosciatti's passionate belief that it could make a difference.
- Take the time before disaster strikes to develop good relations with your county emergency response people and agencies who provide alerts and guidance in different types of hazardous situations. Understand how the flow of information works, what their responsibilities are and cooperate with them during emergencies. For us, those agencies are the Office of Emergency Services and the National Weather Service.
- Planning is essential and plans need to be exercised and reviewed frequently. The most carefully crafted plan lying on a shelf is of no use. Part of the plan involves personal planning so that all staff take actions to prepare and protect their families. They will be much more likely to focus energy on work knowing that their families are safe.
- Identify structural and non-structural hazards in your work place and take actions to reduce them. The most likely cause of injuries in the office place are breaking glass, falling ceiling tiles, and toppling of office furniture and equipment.
- Your staff is your most important asset in an emergency and the more they are involved with planning and

training, the more important a role they will be able to play. Radio Bio Bio depended on a large number of on-air hosts, technicians and other staff to remain on the air. They were all frightened by the earthquake and continuing aftershocks, but they had trained, understood their plan and were able to perform their duties in a very stressful situation.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. Questions or comments about this column, or want a free copy of the preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground"? Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email Kamome@humboldt.edu
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