

Obvious or Suspected, Here or Elsewhere, Now or Then: Paradigms of Emergency Events (p. 1)

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(Based on work done for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

Emergency communication isn't always about an obviously horrific event that is happening right here, right now. Consider the three sources of variation:

1. obviously horrific as opposed to a **suspected** emergency
2. right here as opposed to an emergency **elsewhere**
3. right now as opposed to a possible **future** emergency or one that is already **past**

Combining these three variables yields $2 \times 2 \times 3 = 12$ paradigms. Some of the more interesting ones besides **obvious/here/now**:

1. **Obvious/here/future.**

Bad things may happen here someday. What do we say now? Communication issues include how to talk about emergency planning, how to talk about worst case scenarios, and how to speculate.

2. **Obvious/here/past.**

When emergencies end, the communication about them doesn't end -- but it does change. How to handle recriminations is a key topic here.

3. **Obvious/elsewhere/now.**

Most emergencies happen elsewhere. What to say depends on where your public is psychologically: the "not our problem" zone, the "we could be next" zone, or the "right next door" zone.

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4. **Suspected/here/now.**

It might be smallpox, or just a weird case of chicken pox. Do you communicate at all before you know? If so, what questions do you need to answer? And how do you address uncertainty?

5. **Suspected/here/future.**

If you think you may someday face the fourth paradigm, you face this one now. A key communication strategy for this situation is dilemma-sharing.

6. **Suspected/here/past.**

You thought it might be a disaster, so you overreacted to a false alarm. You thought it was a false alarm, so you ignored a disaster-in-the-making. Now you have to explain.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Communication now about possible future terrorism (Mar 2002) -- www.psandman.com/gst2002.htm#maryjo
- Planning for Bioterrorism Communication (Sep 2002) -- www.health.state.mn.us/oep/docs/sandman091202.pdf
- Obvious or Suspected, Here or Elsewhere, Now or Then: Paradigms of Emergency Events (Feb 2003) -- www.psandman.com/articles/obvious.pdf

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