Mark Peterson - Host:

I am Mark Peterson, and this is "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA."

Mark Peterson - Host:

When a crisis occurs, communities need actionable messaging, reflective of their unique circumstance in order to respond. Creating effective communications begins before a crisis by engaging communities to understand their needs and appropriately communicating their risks. Across the communications field, increasingly complex challenges are emerging. In emergency management, overcoming these challenges is necessary to sustain and save lives. To meet these needs, FEMA is leading efforts to strengthen organizations and agencies' commitment and ability to create and deliver tailored messaging. A few weeks ago, on June 10th, FEMA's Office of External Affairs, in collaboration with some esteemed roster of co-sponsors, hosted the first ever Risk Communications, Crisis Communications and Community Engagement Summit. On this episode, we'll take you back to a packed house at the prestigious auditorium at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC. While we can't air the entirety of the nine-hour summit- we wish we could, we are happy to share a couple of key panels and highlights from some of the dynamic conversations that took place throughout the day. First up, Director of External Affairs, Justin Knighten. And then he'll follow with our FEMA Administrator, Deanne Criswell, who is well known for her hands-on operational expertise. She is a commanding and empathetic spokesperson, so we hear her kicking off the day.

Justin Knighten:

Hello and welcome—Justin Knighten, the Associate Administrator of the Office of External Affairs. I'm so, so thrilled and honored to help kick off our summit today, FEMA's first ever summit on risk communications, crisis communications, and community engagement. Thank you for all being here at the sold-out event with so many more watching online and through live broadcast—thank you C-SPAN—which tells me that today's topics and themes really matter for the country. And more than that, all of you, the communicators across federal government, across the nation are doing lifesaving work every day that matters. In addition to thanking our co-sponsors who helped shape every aspect of this event, I must also thank my team, the FEMA Office of External Affairs, for their work every day to serve the nation and help people and for their work to help host and produce this incredible summit.

Justin Knighten:

I also have to thank our FEMA Office of Chief Counsel—if I've learned anything in my career, it's that you engage your lawyers early, often and thank them publicly all the time. So thank you to FEMA lawyers for keeping us on the straight and narrow. Also thank you to Marcus Coleman and his team. Thank you to my front office, my partner in service Lucas Hitt, as well as the incredible, incredible, incredible Jessica Wieder, Jessica Hubbard and Nicole Candace. I also need to acknowledge and thank our FEMA Regional Administrators who are with us today—Andrea Spillars and Tom Sivak, as well as leaders across the agency who have supported this event. I'm specifically calling out our U.S. Fire Administrator, Dr. Laurie Moore-Merrell, and of course, our FEMA Administrator, Deanne Criswell. And thank you to all of our presenters. We have assembled some of the nation's leading communication practitioners, luminaries and agents of change in our field.

Justin Knighten:

And thank all of you for coming. Thank you for being here. Thank you for showing up. You represent the best, the highest profile, some of the most influential communicators and community leaders, community organizers in the field today. You come from across the federal government, in fact, all levels of government. You come from academia, nonprofits, the private sector, emergency management and the international community. Some of you traveled just down the road to get here—today. Others of you flew in from places like California and Hawaii and beyond. We have convened communicators who all share a common devotion and duty to communicate effectively, to engage with our communities in ways that work for them and to help fulfill our role to build resilience nationwide like never before. This is urgent for all of us because climate is a risk multiplier from the day-to-day issues at the community level to transnational threats across geopolitical, economic, social and environmental fronts; our changing climate propels already challenging conditions into chaos.

Justin Knighten:

The extra complexity of all the hazards we face from cyber attacks and public health emergencies create enormous obstacles for communicators. Lemme set the, set the stage with some context; globally, 27% of people reported experiencing a disaster such as flood, hurricane, tornado, earthquake or fire. In just the past five years, here in the United States, one in 70 adults in 2022 alone, were estimated to have been displaced from their homes because of a disaster. And these statistics further threatened by the fact that as we look at the disaster landscape in years to come, the disaster tempo will continue to impact everyone, but especially those underserved communities—the left out, put out or forgotten communities among us that will continue to bear the brunt and burden moving forward. From a communicator standpoint, these trends are even more alarming when you also consider the hurdles we face in delivering the right message, to the right audience, at the right time. Across the country, information and the landscape that we work within continues to change rapidly. For example, research shows that our news media and media consumption habits are splintering like never before—forcing us to consider what's working in our engagements, where we miss the mark and where we must completely rethink what's possible to innovate and pivot. Now there are cross-sector, cross-disciplinary leaders working in every level of government before, during and after these incidents, yet there's not one national forum designed exclusively for communicators on the front lines of these issues to learn, to share and connect.

Justin Knighten:

And if you're a communicator in the room that hasn't yet grappled with these issues, it's only a matter of time before a situation rush you into the hot seat where you have to lead in extraordinary ways. That's really the motivation of this conference today—this summit—to bring us all together with these issues at the forefront. I know each of you, myself included, take ourselves—not ourselves, our roles, we don't take our ourselves—we take our roles very seriously. As communicators, we work to strengthen, adapt and perfect our skills because we know—that done well—in our profession, we have the power to transform the world around us and save lives. In fact, when we first started talking about this summit, we really analyzed and took a hard look at FEMA's role—and our role as a convener, our role to help fill the gap of people coming together to share, to listen.

Justin Knighten:

And we wanted an opportunity to look ahead with all of you and think boldly about the future of our field and reflect on how communications must continue to adapt. Risk communications, crisis communications and community engagement are not just inextricably intertwined—they're the pillars upon which we build our collective resilience. Going deep on any one area is incredibly valuable, but so is exposure to the wide variety of approaches, platforms, tools, issues and opportunities like art, film, audience mapping, IPAWS, behavior-change strategies from leaders and experts in public health, best practices from the domestic and international lens and beyond. These and so much more are the areas that we will be exploring today. We very intentionally curated this summit with our co-sponsors because regardless of where in the communication spectrum your position or practice exists, the social media strategist to the writer and everyone in between, we don't have the luxury to operate in a vacuum and to tightly think about the world through our tight specific lanes; we must grasp and consider it all, and how we are all woven together to make the power of communications work—that is also what today is about. Each of you sitting here today are an important part of this summit; how you spend your time throughout today and the actions you take after matter. Now, I know you are all incredibly busy people and have a lot going on, and right now I'm sure many of you are thinking about the program topics and speakers you want to hear from. Some of you are probably answering work emails—I see you. I think some of you are texting colleagues and friends, maybe some in the room right now or beyond—I also see you. And maybe some of you're also thinking about what you did this weekend, what the rest of your chaotic workweek looks like and perhaps the herculean sized effort it took just to get in the room here today.

Justin Knighten:

I acknowledge all this because I'm gonna ask that we all set an intention to be present. We are gathered here in this magnificent room with this magnificent ceiling, the National Academy of Sciences, for the purpose to grow, to connect, to learn and really take what we do through the lens of the hazards that impact our communities. Together let's use a judgment-free mind to honestly challenge or confirm what we know, how we think and what we do. Our hope—my hope—is that you are met with moments of inspiration, tactics to strengthen what you do, connections to help you reach your goals and insight into how your colleagues, those on the stage and throughout this room, approach the field of communications through different viewpoints. You may not always agree, but we do have to acknowledge that these viewpoints are part of our world. So this is your permission to get everything you need out of this summit today and more.

Justin Knighten:

So with that, let's get started. It is my honor to introduce my boss, the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Deanne Criswell. Any of you who have seen her do an interview in the White House press briefing room, conduct a conversation with a community stakeholder, or talk one-on-one with a survivor at a scene at a disaster site know that she is one of the nation's top communicators. As one of the top problem solvers in the nation for President Biden, CNN recently featured the Administrator in their Badass Women of Washington series—given her profound impact here in Washington, DC and around the country with her bottom up community-based and people-first style of leadership. She leads with empathy, compassion, and honesty; and that is why I'm proud to have her kickoff our summit today. Everyone, please help me welcome the FEMA Administrator, Deanne Criswell.

Deanne Criswell:

Well, good morning everybody. What a great turnout. This is really amazing. Justin, just wanted to say thank you very much for that introduction. Thank you for organizing such an incredible event. As I think you heard from Justin, and I just wanna reiterate, today's convening is truly a first of its kind for FEMA. It's the first time that we as an agency have pulled together communications professionals from across the federal family, from across a variety of different sectors, to discuss the importance of risk communication, crisis communication and community engagement. You are gonna hear from some amazing speakers throughout the day today—from professionals across a variety of fields and sectors with different backgrounds and different areas of expertise. And frankly, I think as you heard some of the stats that Justin talked about in his opening remarks, there's an urgency to have this convening today. As the nation's leading response, recovery and resiliency agency, FEMA has been working nonstop with many of you here in this room to keep up with the rapidly escalating tempo of natural disasters and hazards across the country.

Deanne Criswell:

I would say gone are the days of a typical disaster season. We are now dealing with persistent extreme heat, drought, extreme cold. We have seen weeks of devastating rain and tornadoes just in the last few weeks—just in the last month or so. And I have visited four different states on four different storms. And just last week we had a tornado that touched down right up the road in Maryland. Wildfires, they are also now happening year-round; Texas and Oklahoma caught fire all the way back in February and flames torched farmland well into March. And last year we had a hurricane in a desert of all places. All of this to say we are constantly communicating to a variety of stakeholders, of individuals and of partners to try and get our messages across—messages that save lives, change futures and help mitigate risk.

Deanne Criswell:

And as the Administrator, I frequently visit many of these disaster sites; I'm on the ground face to face with the aftermath, just days after they pass. And you might ask, why do I do that? Why do I spend so many hours on planes flying across the country, visiting communities on their worst days? Well, that's what I wanna talk about with all of you today. I wanna start with a story from one of my recent visits that I made to a small town just outside of Des Moines, Iowa. I was walking with Governor Kim Reynolds visiting a residential area and speaking with survivors from one of the most devastating tornadoes that they had experienced—in that area. We saw a woman in a pink tank top working to clear a debris pile that was taller than me—next to a massive hole in the ground that used to be her home. I listened as she told me her tale of survival. I listened as she told me she had been watching the news and heard that a storm was coming. I listened as she told me that her mother had just called minutes before the tornado went through to make sure that she went into the basement to stay safe—and how heeding her mother's warning had probably saved her life. I listened as she told me, that while she was sitting in that basement under nothing more than just a few blankets, something flew through a low window, hit her in the head and knocked her out. And I listened as she told me when she woke up—all she could see then was blue sky above no more house.

Deanne Criswell:

As the Administrator a lot of my day is spent listening to others because listening matters, because listening is the foundation of communication. I look out into this room, here this morning, and I see some significant power players in DC and in the communications realm. Too often I would say though, we find ourselves pressed for time—doing our best to make decisions, developing communication plans in a bubble in our nation's capital. It's not that different from the many other bubbles that exist in cities across the country—in conference rooms and other various places across America. In these bubbles, we look at data, we do the best we can to make decisions with that data, but if we are operating solely from a central command center, we miss the rest of the story. We need to look into the eyes of the survivors. We need to hear their stories, see the truth on the ground and then couple that anecdotal information with data to better inform our decision making.

Deanne Criswell:

We can only fully grasp the impacts of disasters by meeting with people who lived through them. These experiences, they help us make the best decisions possible to support the communities that we serve; because good strategic communications is not a one size fits all—it considers the audience, their stories, their backgrounds. It requires us to consider the listener and to do some serious listening ourselves because only by knowing our audience can we effectively get our message across. And the first step is opening the lines of communication so we can get our foot in the door. Then we need to take the time to learn about our audiences— understand their needs, their concerns—so we can strategically shape our communication to meet them where they are.

Deanne Criswell:

Let me give you just a couple of examples. When I brief President Biden, being able to share a survivor's story makes all of the difference. It helps me paint a picture and put a finer point on the human impact disasters have on communities across the nation. So I know that when I am communicating up, I need to come armed with stories, not just data to help drive my point home. We also communicate across our federal family to align our resources, our support. and our messaging; and we communicate down to our workforce to make sure that we are all marching forward together. To do this requires message discipline, shared data, a common understanding of our mission, our stories and our goals. These communications—they help us get on the same page; they require us to bring the right people into the room to amplify and coordinate our messaging. This is how we ensure that we are operating from the same playbooks when we need to communicate out to the communities that we're serving.

Deanne Criswell:

And that's where listening comes back in, because the best way to reach these different communities, to communicate directly to them, is to meet them where they are, listen to their unique needs and build our communications plan around them. Let me give you another example. When Hurricane Ida was bearing down on Louisiana, landfall was predicted to impact a community of Vietnamese descent. Previously, we had done all of our PSAs in English, Spanish and American sign language, but we knew that to reach this community, we had to take their needs, their culture into consideration. So for the first time ever, we developed a PSA in Vietnamese. We then distributed this video to the Vietnamese community through media outlets in the area and across our social media channels to ensure that we could reach our intended audience. The result—it was our most watched video in 2021.

Deanne Criswell:

People were anxious and hungry for the information that we were putting out there. This is what communities both need and deserve. They deserve to be listened to. They deserve to be met where they are, to have barriers removed, so we can help them more effectively. And as leaders, it is on us to do this work, to put people first and listen to what they need, especially as we look to a more challenging future. Let me give you another example from one of my more recent trips. I was joined by Senator Bozeman during my visit to Arkansas last month to assess tornado damage. And I was really surprised by what he told me—that the community that we were in had the largest population of Marshallese, or the people from the Marshall Islands, the largest population across the United States. Now, I don't know about any of you, but translation into Marshallese was not at top of mind when responding to a community in rural Arkansas.

Deanne Criswell:

This is why listening and understanding and taking the time to find out about the communities we serve is so important—the whole community; we have to be able to do this work. It's also why today's convening is so critical, because the people in this room will be tasked with figuring out how to solve whatever problems come their way and helping to keep these communities in mind. So I want everyone in the room today to be thinking about what those future challenges may be and how we can leverage the partners that surround you, the conversations you'll have, and the lessons that you'll learn to be better prepared. I want you to ask yourselves, how do we make sure we are leading through crisis instead of being driven by them? How do we ensure that we are meeting communities with intention, hearing their stories and using them to paint a clearer picture of the work that needs to be done? How do we use our resources to break down barriers of access, including language barriers so people can get the help that they need? How do we find out where people get their information—whether that's the news, a phone alert, social media, or like the woman I met in Iowa, from her family, from their caregivers, so we can help keep them safe? How do we improve our communication tools, our strategies and our platforms moving forward?

Deanne Criswell:

Now, I know it can feel overwhelming, especially as Justin clearly pointed out—you have very busy schedules, and I know that you are all listening with intent right now, but I want to assure you that none of us are in this alone. We all have each other that we can depend on and get support from. This is why we brought you all here today to build networks, to expand your networks, to share stories and to help you help others because we are so much stronger when we do it together. Thank you all for taking time out of your busy schedules and being here today. I wish you the best of luck. And on my notes, it says, I look forward to partnering with each of you in the future, but honestly, I hope I don't have to. So with that, have a great day.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Next up our Risk Communications panel moderated by FEMA's own, Jessica Wieder. Risk Communications is all about communicating in a way that empowers people to make informed decisions, which is more challenging in the noise of information we all live in today. Jess was joined by Dr. Vincent Covello, Founder and Director of the Center for Risk Communications; Dr. Micki Olson from the University of Albany; Vivi Siegel from the Center for Disease Control; and Dr. Ceeon Quiett Smith from Dillard University.

Speaker 1:

Setting the stage for our panel on risk communications, please welcome Gretchen Michael FEMA's, Deputy Director of Public Affairs and Planning.

Gretchen Michael:

Good afternoon, everybody. So I'm here to set the stage for what is gonna be a fantastic panel discussion on risk communication. I began learning about risk communications nearly 20 years ago, and most of my career has been spent communicating about public health events. I've seen firsthand how effective risk communication can make a profound difference in managing public health crises from disease outbreaks to environmental hazards. Clear, accurate and timely information can alleviate fear, guide actions and ultimately save lives. Risk communications uses a science-based approach to provide real-time information and advice to people who face a hazard or a threat to their survival, health or economic or social wellbeing. Effective risk communication aims to enable people to understand the nature and the magnitude of the risk they face, and to make informed decisions to mitigate the effects of the threat, such as a disease outbreak or a potential natural disaster like a hurricane or flood and take appropriate action.

Gretchen Michael:

Why is risk communications important? Risk communications is crucial for several reasons. It plays a vital role in public safety by providing timely and accurate information during emergencies such as natural disasters, health crises or technological accidents. Transparent and honest communication builds trust between authorities and the public; when people trust the messenger and the information they receive, they're more likely to follow the recommendations and the guidelines. It empowers individuals and communities to make informed decisions about their health, safety and their wellbeing. By understanding the risks and benefits of different actions, people can choose the best course of action for themselves and for their loved ones. Risk communications, as you've heard, all day, is a critical aspect of our society that affects all of us—both individually and collectively; as communicators, recognizing its importance and actively engaging with it, we can empower individuals to make better decisions, build stronger communities and enhance our overall resilience in the face of uncertainty.

Gretchen Michael:

Now to the panel to further discuss risk communications, please welcome the following panel: the moderator, Jessica Wieder, Director of Incident Communications Planning in FEMA's Office of External Affairs; Dr. Vincent Covello, Founder and Director of the Center for Risk Communications; Dr. Micki Olson, Senior Researcher in Emergency and Risk Communication at the University of Albany; Vivi Siegel, Crisis and Emergency Risk Communications Lead at the National Center for Environmental Health Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry at the CDC (she's got the longest title); and Ceeon Quiett Smith, Dr. Ceeon Quiett Smith, Executive Vice President for Student Success and Operations at Dillard University. Thank you all for your attention, and please join me in welcoming our distinguished panel.

Jessica Wieder:

Thank you, Gretchen. Well, thank you so much for all of you being here today. With my panel's blessing, I think we're gonna start with a little audience participation. Are you guys up for that? I know it's after lunch, but we're gonna try and get everybody engaged. So some of you may know this, but some of you probably do not. My son is graduating from elementary school today. I know we're very, very proud of him, but I need your help with some of my own risk communications. So I brought, I brought my phone up with me so I'm hoping that if I can count to three, you can all say congratulations, Dean—so I can send it to him. Would you guys do that for me? Yes. Okay. Amazing. Amazing. That is great. So let me get us on video. All right, ready? 1, 2, 3. Congratulations Dean! Amazing. Thank you so much. But there is more than just the fact that I wanted you to do that for my son, which is lovely and he is gonna be over the moon to know that I'm thinking about him. But I think risk communications— one of the biggest things that we do is, and fill in the blank, people need to know that you—care. People need to know that you care when it comes to risk communication. So that is lesson number one from our panel. People need to know that you care before they care what you know, right? It has to come from a place that comes from heart. And this is just an opportunity to help highlight that for you and get this great moment for my son. So thank you very, very much in doing that.

Jessica Wieder:

I have more audience participation; I need some raises of hands. So how many of you consider public information as the primary part of your job? Some of you—alright. Got a decent number. Now, this next question may hurt a little, but know that we're coming to a good place at the end of it. How many of you have worked in a space where somebody has thought you are 'just a communicator', right? As in, yeah, as even have seen more hands now than the first time around, right? That lack of understanding of the skill that it takes, the fact that communication—specifically risk communications, as part of this, is based in research. It is a social science. And then the application of that in communities, is an art; it is a skill. And that we are in this room today to learn more, to do our jobs even better. And I have got the most esteemed panel here with me today to go into depth into some of the risk communication things that we all all talk about. So I'm gonna give them an opportunity to introduce themselves a little bit by asking them some questions. So we're gonna get started up here now. Thank you for your help.

Jessica Wieder:

Vincent, I'm gonna start with you. So I have had the pleasure of working with Gretchen for almost two decades, and you are also somebody I have had the pleasure of working with. But I've had the pleasure of working with you and learning with you for almost two decades. In fact, this is definitely gonna age both of us, but you taught my very first, risk communications class when I joined the federal government. And I have had the privilege—you know, we talked, right? We heard, we heard from the White House Press Secretary, you know, to realize where you come from and, and people who have taught you. And you certainly have done that for me. So I appreciate that so much and I'm so thrilled that you're on the panel. You have been a doctor and a researcher and a practitioner. So tell us like, what, what has changed in the field of risk communication over all of these years?

Dr. Vincent Covello:

So lemme also ask a question. How many how do you think of yourself as communicators? And how many of you think of yourself as scientists? Hmm. In 1989, the National Academy of Sciences declared the field of risk communication to effectively be a science. The field has grown exponentially since then. And so what I did is for just two slides, since we said we'd speak in three minutes.

Jessica Wieder:

That's right. I'd like to get us started.

Dr. Vincent Covello:

I'd like to review what has happened in the last 30 years, in three minutes. And for that purpose, I selected seven—what I think are highlights from the risk communication development over these past three decades. I'm gonna use the number seven one of the most influential studies, influencing my work. That was a study done by George Miller, Professor George Miller of Princeton University, 1956; it was called the "Magic Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two Limits of the Brain in Low Stress Situations". That led to follow-up research that my colleagues and I I did, which was what do we know about high stress, high concern situations such as high perceived risk? And so I put together seven conclusions from that research.

Dr. Vincent Covello:

Number one. And it's not that we learn something where we learn. The first statement was, which Jessica just mentioned, was that when people are stressed and upset, such as when they're confronting a perceived threat, they want to know that you care before they care what you know. That's as old as intellectual history. It was Aristotle who first made that statement over 2000 years ago. The second, he also observed that when people are stressed and upset, they have difficulty digesting information; so therefore he said, keep it short and simple. And luckily, he gave us information about what short and simple means. He gave us the number three which led eventually to something called the magic number three plus and minus two limit to the brain. And high stress heightened situations also led to a conclusion that it's not just that the brain is, is stopping after three messages, it's also stopping after 27 words, nine seconds—whichever comes first. Number three, that people tend to focus more on the nonverbal information. Not what you say, but what you look like and what you sound like when you say it in a high stress, high concern situations.

Dr. Vincent Covello:

Number four is that, and this came from, not from Aristotle, but from Daniel Kahneman professor, again at Princeton University, introduced the concept called loss aversion theory—that the brain is asymmetrical in how it responds to risk information. In fact, we put more emphasis on the negative than the positive—leading to a very simplistic—but overwhelmingly profound formula one n equals three p. And we as humans tend to put much more focus on the negative than the positive, which means to offset a negative message, we need at least three positives just to get back to zero. Number five, that the human brain tends to focus on worst case assumptions relating to nonverbal cues. Example, if you're sitting forward back in your chair, it's not that you're relaxed and comfortable, it's you're indifferent to the information. Number six, we make worst case assumptions about simple commonly used words, such as the word, "but" we'll discuss that in a second. And finally, the knowledge base has increased exponentially over the last three decades. There's now approximately 9,000 articles on risk and crisis communication in academic journal.

Jessica Wieder:

Thank you so much, Vincent. We have three more panelists to make sure you guys get a chance to hear from. So Ceeon, I'm gonna turn over to you if that's all right. You're also a researcher and a practitioner in risk communications and you have dealt with a number of different types of audiences. So my question to you is, what are some of the common themes or best practices that you find when you deal with audiences? I know we heard a bunch this morning, but I wanna hear from you.

Dr. Ceeon Quiett Smith:

Thank you. Yes. We've talked a lot today about engagement and audiences. You know, in my experience, I would say, when you're talking about local audiences for—all of us who are communicators in the room a little bit deeper, and let's think hyper-local I'll—a few examples. During the BP oil spill, for example, you know, covering the coast, and we have an opportunity as communicators—if we are leading a JIC or if we are a PIO inside that JIC, or if we are an ESF 15, we have the opportunity to get to know the leaders in the community, churches barbershop and salon owners, schoolteachers. And our ESF 15 and those of us that are in our local communities have the opportunity to grasp local information and understand the flow of those communities so that when the time comes to stand up a command center, we then have some leverage that we understand those communities.

Dr. Ceeon Quiett Smith:

So, for example, just understanding that many of the people during the BP oil spill and during any of our incidents or threats want to be a part of the community. First of all, give our communities, give the people in our communities a voice. Our communities know—people know what they need and they know when they need it. And so we found, for example, one family—they didn't want to fill out the application to get the FEMA support; they just wanted to stand up their po'boy stand that was near the incident area and sell their po'boys and be a part of the recovery. So we were able to work with that family, build them in, integrate them into the recovery process, and that family actually began to sustain themselves and actually now have two or three restaurants in that area as a result. So listen, give our community a voice; our community knows what it needs.

Jessica Wieder:

Yeah, I mean, I think giving your community a voice, that idea of giving them some sense of control, something that they can own is, is so important. Are there any of your slides that you wanted to show or speak to? I've got the clicker here. I can pass it over to you.

Dr. Ceeon Quiett Smith:

I guess a few quick points—when we talk about, we talked about crisis communication, and we're here to talk about risk. Many of our scholars are suggesting, which I would suggest, how do we integrate and combine our risk and communications messages. So that we—we find that our risk themes and our risk messages, which are preventative, which a consequence from a risk actually has generational implications and complications—implications. We have discussed that a risk to a community can—it directly impacts our behavior, how we think about how we, how we move. But risk communication also follows the same line as crisis communication. So when we get hyperlocal, when we start consistently talking to our communities about risk—that also helps our crisis response. Okay. And just a quick example. Those of us who have worked in JICs working and pulling our information and feedback together can help us get hyperlocal and respond to our communities.

Jessica Wieder:

Fantastic. All right. Let's pass that over to Micki, 'cause Micki I believe this slide is yours. And you have done a lot of research when it comes to emergency alert and warning and making sure that we're using the right words, the right terminology, the right tools, the right mechanisms for making that happen. So I just wanna open the floor to you to tell us about your research and what your findings have been so far.

Micki Olson:

Yes. So, I'm a risk communication researcher. I specialize in message design and persuasion—meaning I look at how we can use language about risks to help promote public safety outcomes. So I primarily look at short messaging channels and messages centering imminent threat. So primarily looking at channels like social media, as well as more recently wireless emergency alerts with my colleague Dr. Jeannette Sutton. So as a researcher, I'd like to begin by apologizing. So no, hear me out. Okay, for a second. We researchers, we're often not very good about getting the knowledge our research generates into the hands of those who need it most, those who can use it the most. And this is extremely problematic because we publish journal articles that you had mentioned intended for other academics, and then that's hidden behind a paywall, right? So you are the ones that are writing the messages and you are the ones that are pushing send. So how do I get my knowledge to you? And this is a really important thing that me and my team at the University Albany focus on. And so with that in mind, I wanted to highlight a project that attempts to do just that, to give back, to give that knowledge into the hands of the risk communication practitioners.

Micki Olson:

So this is a project that is funded through FEMA IPAWS, and I've provided three different resources that I wanted to just touch on very briefly. So the first is a paper called A Decade of Wireless Emergency Alerts. And in this paper, we found that less than 10% of all wireless emergency alerts sent in the last decade were complete. So that means less than 10% gave people the information they needed to make decisions, right? So this shows that we have a problem; so then what do we do about it? Well, we developed a resource called the Warning Lexicon. It is a set of vetted and validated contents for 48 hazards, where we try to create clear, consistent and actionable language that you can take today and use in your risk messaging, right? So if you download, if you go to this QR code in the middle and go to the supplemental materials, all of those contents, so all the words are there for you to use right now. But then we also developed a software tool called the Message Design Dashboard that uses the Warning Lexicon, and it walks you through step by step how to build a complete alert, right? So this was our way to give back to those risk communication practitioners, and we hope that you use it because it took a lot of work. So, thank you.

Jessica Wieder:

Yeah, that's amazing. And we will be getting into what exactly the words are in that lexicon in just a minute. But I wanna give Vivi an opportunity. Vivi, it is a pleasure sharing a stage with you again. You and I have known each other for about 10 years. We met at a global initiative to combat nuclear terrorism event. We had to go all the way to Manila to meet. But since then, you know, we have, we have been through Ebola, we've been through COVID, we've been through multiple hurricane responses, and public health continues to be one of the most important things that we message about, right? People need to know what they need to do to keep themselves and their families safe. The whole idea of risk communications is to inform people so that they can make informed decisions for themselves. And yet it continues to be one of the most challenging things we have to communicate about. So I wanna open it up to you and your experience in CDC about why is it so challenging, and what do we need to do?

Vivi Siegel:

Well, first of all, I wanna say it is a pleasure and an honor to sit up here with all of you. And I too can say that I took a Vince Covello class on risk communication early in my career at the CDC. I appreciate everything that you've done and all the research that's currently happening as well. And I wanna say it's a challenge, and it's a challenge because people do care so much, and it is such an important topic. I started my career in newspapers as a newspaper reporter covering environmental health. And so, I remember, you know, writing about illegal dumping of carcinogenic chemicals in playgrounds in Chicago, and lead contamination in public housing in Birmingham, Alabama. And the questions that I had as a reporter were all about holding public officials accountable. Why did this happen? How did this happen? What are you going to do about it? And how fast? And I was really trying to get a sense of, of how much they cared and how big of a priority it was. And if I didn't get a straight answer, if I could tell that someone was being cagey, you know, it did cause me to lose some trust in them, and therefore my audiences. And so the ones who really—the officials who I really respected and who really got across their messages were the ones that took the time to really learn and understand the community concerns—and the ones who spoke frankly and forthrightly about what they knew and the things that we just didn't know. No one, no one expects us to know everything. So now as a communicator at CDC, I'm the one answering the questions, which as it turns out, is harder. Who knew? And I have to say that a lot of the questions are the same.

Vivi Siegel:

So, I have been involved with emergency and environmental communications at CDC since—the emergency aspect since 2009. So I've worked on a number of different emergencies. You know, the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Ebola, which we've talked about today, COVID, which we've talked a lot about today, and almost every natural disaster since 2010. And we're still answering the same questions that I had as a reporter. Why is this happening? How did this happen? What can people do to stay safe? And is this a priority for you to fix? And how are you gonna fix it? And how fast? So I will say that now we have a lot of resources to help us answer those questions. You know, a lot from the historical body of work, from risk communications researchers. So again, I thank you for, for all the work you've done. We've had practitioners pull everything together in, in curriculum like the crisis and emergency risk communication curriculum from CDC that Dr. Barbara Reynolds put together. And it's so great to have these resources at hand. So I will say that's the easy part—kind of knowing the best thing to do and the best-case scenario—we are transparent, we are empathetic, we are clear, we're using plain language, we are sharing what we know and what we don't know and what we're doing to find out. And then the hard part comes in implementing that. So when we're talking about public health, as a lot of people have talked about before on the stage today, we're not just talking about one public—we're talking about thousands of publics who all have different risk perception of the same health threats.

Vivi Siegel:

And a message that might resonate with one audience is going to alienate another audience. You know, and I think that speaks to the need for us to really have a wide network of partners and know who to reach to when we want to be able to reach these audiences. You know, I think we have come a long way in being able to do some of these things and reaching low literacy populations and reaching speakers of other languages and reaching people with different access and functional needs. And I see us growing as a community. You know, it is a challenge. It's going to continue to be a challenge, but I see some of my CDC colleagues out there, and I've been so excited to meet all of the rest of you here today. And I think we're up for the challenge.

Jessica Wieder:

So, I think I wanna delve into risk perception for a second. We're gonna get back to where—but since we're talking about risk perception, and we know that risk perception and risk communications are intrinsically linked and that risk communications becomes that much more important when your risk perception and the actual threat don't align, right? So sometimes you have risk perception where you have the a high perceived risk, but perhaps a low actual threat. We found that in radiation a whole lot. But I really want us to delve into this sort of very sticky, tricky spot of when the risk perception is low, but perhaps the threat is very real or, or very important. And how do we best communicate around things like, you know, build a kit; we know disasters happen, we want people to do that. Even, you know, things like you getting my grandmother to take her medication, right? It's important. We want you to do that. Like, what, what is working, what kind of advice do you have for people about communicating when that risk perception is, is not aligned? And the risk perception perhaps is, is low, but the threat is very real?

Micki Olson:

I can start in that—well, the first step is actually including the consequences or impacts in the messaging. I see that as the first step because in that study I referenced in my opening remarks—so only 22% of wireless emergency alerts actually included a description of the hazard or consequences. So people without that information, people can't personalize their risk. So making sure that's included in the messaging is the, the very first step. But before I also wanna just reiterate is that when it comes to risk perception, we know risk perception is just one side of the coin towards action.

Micki Olson:

People also need to feel a sense of efficacy before they act—so we know this from social science theory and communication and psychology—I need to feel like the behavior you're recommending is effective and that I can do it. And that last one is really hard because there's so many barriers that actually affect people's ability to act. So I'm supposed to—I'm told to evacuate, but I don't have a car; I don't have a safe place to go. We talked about this at lunch. I don't wanna leave my pet behind, right? So I can see this—the hurricane coming, or the wildfire is scary and severe, and I can want to act, but I can't. This is why I strongly, strongly recommend that our—what we gauge as successful communication isn't. Did people act, did people do what I asked them to? Successful communication is actually—did I give them the right information they need to make an informed decision. That is good communication, and that is successful communication if you can do that.

Dr. Ceeon Quiett Smith:

And the opportunity for risk communicators and what risk communication allows us is—and I'll go back to my opening point. If you're in an area—we talked a lot about southeast Louisiana, we talked about southwest Louisiana. I'm a native of New Orleans. The consistent communication on many different levels, the consistent communication about the risk and on different levels, how do you prepare, right? So again, back to our lunch conversation, contraflow, if I don't have a car, what does that mean to me? That's also a, a risk—message that also—an image helps to amplify as well. But how do you communicate the risk to a population that if you have reliable public transportation—I don't have a car, what does that mean for me? So we have to take advantage of the opportunities before it's time to stand up an EOC to make sure that at every level of the community—and I'm going back to our ESF 15s and our people who are working in our communities—don't miss a moment and don't, don't miss a day, right? The way that we talk about the threat of a risk to a church, a school, a small business owner—knowing the flow of the community, but it has to be consistent. And that's what risk allows us, because it helps us to get ahead of, and even before there is a crisis incident, to make sure that the community's informed. I think we've heard many different ways in which that can be done from animation— to other different ways of communicating.

Jessica Wieder:

And, oh, go ahead, Vince.

Dr. Vincent Covello:

I was thinking that the question you raise is when you have a high actual risk and low perceived risk it becomes more like a Sherlock Holmes story. What's driving the concern or what's driving the lack of concern? The seminal change, I believe that happened in risk—in literature was when Peter Sandman identified what he called the outrage factor—that in order to understand why a person is concerned, why a person perceives a risk, another person doesn't perceive a risk, why one person perceives high concern, another person doesn't. He identified what are called risk perception [...]. There's now approximately 20 of those, which means that as a Sherlock Holmes detective, you start checking off the list, why is this person not concerned about this issue? Why is this person about issue?

Dr. Vincent Covello:

It starts up with trust, number one. We've heard this several times throughout the day, that trust is the driving factor. In fact, it can change the perceived risk as much as 3000 [...]. We heard before about the Ebola case, for example, one of the central concerns on the part of communicators there with the lack of trust in government. One of the ways to break down that government was, among other things we'll talk about in a second words matter, is that the many of those coming from the western nations were referring to the local care healthcare workers as witch doctors that did not, for example, please the healthcare workers. And therefore, there was an agreement that we will no longer refer to them as witch doctors, even in private conversations as healthcare providers. And we can work together as partners in the process—that can change the level of concern as much as 3000-fold, which means a low perceived risk for an actual high risk can actually be increased by increasing levels of trust. Then you start checking through the list benefits, control, effects on children, other pointing factors. And this is a graduate student thesis every year.

Dr. Ceeon Quiett Smith:

One last point to that, the HBCU Emergency Management Consortium that's based here in Washington DC at Howard University, and I co-facilitate that. It's led by Dr. Goulda Downer. One of the things that we're trying to do is make sure that we have as many CERT teams on our college campuses as possible—starting your freshman year, especially in the southeast and southwest. So, for example, we have, Benedict College had their first CERT training; they're being mentored by Elizabeth City State. Grambling State University—starting their CERT program. Dillard University is about to start theirs. And different sectors—nursing programs are leading it in one campus; Residential housing assistances are leading it at another campus. On our campus—first day you have your class schedule, you have your ID card, and we're talking about your emergency and evacuation plan on day one. And that's another example of consistency in our risk communication.

Jessica Wieder:

Great. Oh, do you wanna [...]?

Vivi Siegel:

I'll just you know, I agree with all of you that in situations where the risk perception is low, but the actual threat is high, that's where we often need to bring in community solutions and lowering barriers for people to act because they're already not going to act. They have a really high threshold for action. So making it easier, having those pet shelters, having you know, if there's a respiratory outbreak, having things like masks and air purifiers available, ready and there—makes things easier for people to act. And then when you've got those situations where there is a very high-risk perception, but low threat, which happens a lot in environmental health with radiation, I think that's where our empathy skills really shine in trying to understand where someone is coming from because it is a real threat to them. And, you know, you can say over and over to somebody, you know—this contamination is not causing the cancer in your neighborhood, but they've still got cancer in their neighborhood even if it wasn't caused by that. And even if it's not causing the cancer, isn't it still a problem that there is contamination in the neighborhood? And so I think that's where really trying to get to the root of the issue with people and working with the community to find community-based solutions can be helpful.

Jessica Wieder:

Yeah, that idea of validating feelings is so important, right? The feelings are real to that person regardless of whether or not that the threat that they're facing is something that is [...]. So you can validate feelings. I think I found this with COVID. I mean, even with my friends, my friends who were teachers, you know, and their concerns going back to classroom, even if the data wasn't there to support that—their concern was very real. And just being able to tell them that, like, you know, statistically, because it's uncertain, because, you know, because it, you know, is affecting people that you care about—it makes sense that your fear is high, so you can validate the feeling, right? And that's a really important part of this. All right, I wanna get into words matter. That's something that we have talked extensively about, but amongst the four of us, and I think that they probably would like to hear from you all on that.

Jessica Wieder:

I know that when we were researching things like radiation and messaging for nuclear detonations in particular, one of the things that we were researching was some of the language around "instructions will change" versus "instructions will be updated". And in, in New York in particular, the word "change" was as if you were to say the instruction was wrong to begin with. The people that we were testing this with was back in 2011, and their findings were that the 9-11 experience for them that word "changed" meant it was wrong in the first place, but "instructions were updated", was a word that resonated more with them—that's something that they could, they could live with. And I know that there's been a lot of research on words, and so I wanna pass it over. Vincent, I'll start with you. And then Micki, I'd like to go to you to talk about the words that we use, the lexicon and how, how it's important. You mentioned the word, "but".

Dr. Vincent Covello:

Oh, well, I also like the word "change". When you think about it, typically, you wouldn't think that the word "change" would change its meaning in a high stress, high perceived risk situation; and it does, we've actually just put this into the hopper—seeing how a person reacts, for example, using MRI, CT scans, PET technology. Where does the information about when you present the word "change", where does it go in the brain? And to our surprise, it came exactly where Jess said. It goes into the amygdala, not into the frontal lobe of the brain.

Jessica Wieder:

And what does that mean?

Dr. Vincent Covello:

That means, for example, fight or flight as opposed, for example—processing information in order to make an informed decision. My research on this began with a colleague of the University of Glasgow. We were experimenting with the word "hello". What happens when you meet, for example, with a group for the first time, and you say the word hello in a high perceived risk situation. And it turns out that we had over 400 participants in the study. We had them listen to over 64 expressions of the word "hello". Virtually every person decided 10 personality characteristics based on one second of material—the word "hello". The second word we looked at with the word, "but", B-U-T. What prompted me on this was—I had been traveling and my, my wife and I have been married since college, and the most important date for our us is our anniversary. I was traveling. She called me up and said, "Vincent what's today's date?" And I said, "well, let me look at my calendar." And I realized it was our anniversary date. And I said, "I'm really sorry. I missed our anniversary. I know after 40 years of marriage. And but.." And she said, "Vincent, I read your article on the neuroscience of the word 'but'. I remember what you, yourself, said, that in a high perceived risk situation—which it is. That the word, 'but' negates what went before and prepares for something for negative to follow, and your recommendation was as a action step, use the word 'and', or at least start a whole new sentence." So I did.

Dr. Vincent Covello:

The second word we looked at was the word, "as you know", or starting a presentation with the word "clearly", or "obviously"—again, in a high perceived risk situation. Once again, it did not go to the frontal lobes of the brain where, where rational thinking takes place. It went to the amygdala, fight or flight. Third word absolutes—"never", "nothing", "every", "all"—once again, did not go to the frontal lobes of the brain where we'd like it to be processed. Or you might even find some wiggle room in high stress, high concern, or high perceived situation. It went into the fight or flight part of the brain—changes in the word.

Dr. Vincent Covello:

So we have three action steps. Number one, I'd like you to practice your "hellos".

Jessica Wieder:

What does A good "hello" sound like?

Dr. Vincent Covello:

Hello—actually, there's an NPR piece that will evaluate your "hellos". It'll give you—they put a software on the—I hope it's still up. Be careful about using the word, "but". Be careful about using the word, "as you know". Be careful about using absolutes in risk communication.

Jessica Wieder:

Thank you. Micki, in your research, you're talking about the lexicon that we use in emergency alerting and how important it is to use the right terminology. And you in particular are working with our Integrated Public Alert & Warning System—and so we have very limited number of characters to work with. So talk to me about what works in that situation.

Micki Olson:

Yeah, so, well—words are everything especially on channels like Wireless Emergency Alerts through IPAWS, where all you have is words, and you have a very small number of them. So each word carries an incredible amount of weight and can have incredible amount of impact. So you need to pick the words very carefully and very thoughtfully. Let me give you an example. We know that in a warning message, in an alert, you need to have five types of content. You need to have the source, the hazard, location, time and guidance, right? That's from Dr. Dennis Mileti—who we. So we know through decades of the empirical research record, those are the five contents. We know that any of those contents are missing—so it's incomplete. Rather than people immediately protecting themselves when they get a Wireless Emergency Alert, they're gonna go out and look for more information. They're gonna reach out to see to their friend and see what they should do, right? And in FEMA, you talk a lot about when minutes matter, right? You don't want people's minutes to be looking for more information. You want it to be—them, have to—them to act immediately, right? And so the words you pick and how you say them can be the difference between those two outcomes.

Jessica Wieder:

Vivi and Ceeon, I know we were talking about heat earlier today, and the language that we use around that; do either of you wanna add on that topic or any other topic?

Dr. Ceeon Quiett Smith:

The, I would say I agree the, the words yes, that you use, but we also have to be mindful of the timing in which we use them. So there's a time when you know, you're just giving information or updates. So there are key words you may want to stay away from at that particular time. That's not a time for a directional message—"go", "drive", "don't"—it isn't just informational. So we have to be also mindful of those times. Keeping also as you said, the, the five words. And studying thousands of Twitter messages during Hurricane Sandy, the data mining and machine learning at Arizona State, one of the things that we realized, which of course would not be a surprise to anyone else in here, people will tweet before they dial 9-1-1, therefore, cannot underscore enough that you have to really be careful before you call that action. And, and incorporating those five things, because people will tweet before they dial 9-1-1. They will search and look for others. And as we've—our experts have talked to us earlier today, we also have to be very mindful of rumors and rumor control. And that's how rumors can start.

Jessica Wieder:

Yeah. All right. I have another question for all of you: how many of you have had to communicate something, to Ceeon's point, where there was an amount of uncertainty. You didn't know something, but you still had to say something, right? Okay. How many of you had a hard time getting a decision maker to agree to send some message out with that level of uncertainty? Yes. I'm seeing lots and lots of hand. Okay. So I'm gonna turn to you guys again to talk about communicating in uncertainty. I'm gonna open it up to whoever wants to take it first.

Vivi Siegel:

I think, you know, first of all, it's important to communicate and to not be silent. You know, I live in Atlanta. I don't know if any of you saw on the news, there was recently an issue with our water system in the city of Atlanta. Thankfully, I live right outside of Atlanta, so I wasn't affected. But all of my friends in Atlanta were saying, what's going on? We're not getting, you know, where, where, where are our updates? And they appreciated every time the city said something, because even though often it was—"we're still working on this", it gave them something, and something is always better than nothing. That said, I think we've gotta be really careful to not overpromise when we're dealing with uncertainty—knowing that things are going to change, knowing that our guidance will be updated. You know, really getting that message out and to people that not only might it be updated—we expect it to be updated because we expect to learn more as the situation changes.

Jessica Wieder:

I thought that during H1N1, you know, that was something that was done very well, right? That constant drumbeat of—there's still so much we have to learn. This is still very new, but we're going to provide you updates as we have them, and we're going to provide on a very, very regular basis for you. And so when instructions were being updated about public health and safety, it was always with an explanation of what new piece of information we had, which I think was very important. But I think even in the uncertainty, people want to know, you know—"we're still gathering data" only buys you so much time, right? At some point, you need to be able to say, even if we're still gathering data, but based on what we have, here's the recommendation of what to do.

Dr. Vincent Covello:

I liked what you said also—CDC during the H1N1 and H5N1, Dr. Richard Besser, CDC the first words he spoke, were admitting to uncertainty, acknowledging uncertainty. "We will update as we have more information available", which led to this, to the mantra of CDC—be first, be right and be credible. And I would argue that still that position still holds.

Jessica Wieder:

Well, we've got five minutes left. I wanna make sure that we have an opportunity for each of you to make sure you're leaving this group with your call to action to them. What do you want them to leave with today? Vivi I'll start with you.

Vivi Siegel:

Sure. I'll just say that, I think you know, despite what some people say, communications is a science—risk communication is a science. And with that said sometimes it's hard internally in our organizations to get that message to leadership. Or if you're working with a huge number of partners, which I think we all are when we're working on emergency communications, to make sure that the incident manager or incident commander values risk communication as much as we know it matters. So I will say that you know, we can be the best risk communicators in the world, but if we don't have that internal buy-in from all the folks that we're working with, it's, it's, it can't be put to use. So when needed, we need to push ourselves into the room. We need to be included in the strategic discussions. Communicators should be in the room where it happens.

Jessica Wieder:

Excellent, Micki.

Micki Olson:

So, I'm changing the answer I thought of before I came here. Just based on what I've heard today—and I just wanna reiterate what we heard in the morning, and we've heard a little bit on, on this panel today, is to speak using plain language in a way that is familiar with your audience. That means avoiding jargon. So when I say jargon, what is that? That could be acronyms for your organization, that could be technicalities of the hazard in your emergency management—"shelter in place" can even be a little jargony, because I've seen interview data that people hone in on the word "shelter" and think they have to go somewhere, which is the exact opposite of what you want them to do, right? When you say "shelter in place", right?

Micki Olson:

And so, but when I say "eliminate your jargon", I get a little bit of pushback from people saying, "but Micki, I don't wanna seem like I'm talking down or dumbing things down to my audience." And to that, I say when you enter a conversation with someone, and just 'cause you send a message and don't get a reply, doesn't mean you're not in a conversation. When you enter a conversation with someone, we have norms and rules for each other that we're gonna understand the intent of each other's messages and jargon impedes that. It also puts the burden on the message receiver to understand your technical, professional, specialized language. And that's not fair, right? The burden should be on the person in order to send understandable messages. So just thinking, when we're speaking to a large group of people, in particular, you're communicating towards everyone—lower English proficiency, lower, lower literacy levels, right? So really speaking in a plain language, it's a matter of accessibility and equity and equality.

Jessica Wieder:

Vincent, I'm gonna ask you to go next.

Dr. Vincent Covello:

You alerted us, you would ask this question at the end.

Jessica Wieder:

I did.

Dr. Vincent Covello:

And I also changed my answer too, based on—I had a different answer and based on listening today, I wrote it out in less than 27 words, nine seconds, three messages. And that is meet people where they are as emotional sentient beings using evidence-based, science-based risk and crisis communication tool.

Jessica Wieder:

Well, Ceeon, I would like to give you the last word of our panel.

Dr. Ceeon Quiett Smith:

I'll end with you know, George Washington Carver solved the national crisis by doing something very simple. He took his, his lab partners, his teachers—he walked out of Tuskegee Institute at the time and to the community, to the farmers, and he solved the national crisis, right? When you do the common thing in an uncommon way, he said, the world will take notice. So what have we been talking about today? Listening, giving a voice, being inclusive, being timely, simple, short words makes a difference. I ask all of you who are PIOs, if you are, if you have ever led or you lead a Joint Information Center, bring in your colleges and universities. We have an opportunity to educate, train the generations behind us about the importance of risk and risk communication. And they know their communities, right? Historically, black colleges, universities, the HBCU consortium—colleges are in universities and communities, and I think we need to include them in our planning to protect our nation.

Jessica Wieder:

Amazing on that. Please give it up for our panel.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Finally, effective communicating in the midst of a crisis can be extremely difficult. Our crisis communications panel talked through how we can balance the multitude of needs as information pours in. I was fortunate to moderate this panel and was joined by Noah Gray from DC Fire and EMS; Mahina Martin, the Director of Public Affairs from the county of Maui, Hawaii; Yasamie Richardson, our External Affairs Officer from the National IMAT; and Daniel Watson, who's the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs at the Department of Homeland Security.

Speaker 1:

Setting the stage for our panel on Crisis communications. Please welcome Marty Bahamonde, Director of Disaster Operations at FEMA's Office of External Affairs.

Marty Bahamonde:

Hello, everybody. All I'm gonna say is you are hardcore; it's 4:15 at the end of the day, and you're still here. So I appreciate it. I'm gonna try to make it that at least valuable that you stayed so that this next 30 minutes, 45 minutes is valuable to you. Crisis communication—we've heard a lot about it today. And I'm just gonna tell a quick little story about it, but I need to have some information. So I need to poll all of you first. How many in this room drink coffee? Wow, that's a lot. Now, how many in this room "need" coffee? Okay, that's pretty good.

Marty Bahamonde:

So other day, I was at home; I was getting ready for work. I was in my kitchen. I was there with my two daughters. They're college-age students. And we were all getting ready to leave for our various appointments. I was getting ready to go to work. My wife comes into the the kitchen. She's very focused, goes over to the cabinet, she opens it, looks around. She doesn't find what she's looking for; so she looks in another cabinet, another cabinet, and all of a sudden I can feel some anxiety in that room and some tension. And I say to her "honey, what's wrong?" She goes, "there's no coffee". And I go, "ah no coffee?" And she goes, "no, I've got a meeting in five minutes and I need one of you to go to the store and get me coffee."

Marty Bahamonde:

Now, I don't drink coffee. So I don't understand that crisis that she's now going through, okay? But she's made it very clear that we need to solve her crisis. And I said to her, I go, "I think there's coffee downstairs in the, in the pantry." My daughter says, "yeah, I think it's up in the top shelf." Well, before we're even finished, she's downstairs. Okay? She's moving down there—30 seconds passed. And she comes up, and I swear to you, it was a different person. She had a smile on her face. She was relaxed. She was comfortable. She was—there was no anxiety. There was no tension. I could tell that she was relieved. And she had her coffee. And now I tell that story to you because I think it encompasses what we've been talking about here today.

Marty Bahamonde:

There was a crisis in my kitchen. It wasn't my crisis, but I recognized the crisis. She didn't have to tell me it was a crisis, but I recognized it. How did I recognize it? I listened and I watched. I listened to what she said, and I watched how she became anxious, okay? So I was able to perceive that something was going wrong here. Then I asked her, or I told her where to get that coffee, okay? And I gave her that information that she was so, so desperately looking for. After she saw a solution to get that coffee by sending me to the store—which I didn't have time for, okay? But I gave her that information, and she went and she took that information, and she solved her own problem. So she went down, she got the coffee, she came up and she was complete, okay? So I know that's a simplistic way of talking about crisis communication, but I think what you've heard here today is—it's relevant because there was an individual involved in that. And when we break down crisis in our disaster world, it's about the individual. And behind all of that—whether it's a hundred people that were destroyed in a tornado or killed in a tornado, or a thousand or 30,000—there's an individual behind each one of those crisies. And we have to recognize that.

Marty Bahamonde:

We also have to listen to folks when they're reaching out for help. And you have to be able to perceive what they're asking, okay? What they're asking for is help, but how do they ask it? They ask it in many different ways. But if you're trained in crisis communication or you recognize it throughout your daily life, you can pick up on those nuances about what they're really looking for. And that's what the essence of ESF 15 is—that we've talked about a little bit today. It is that foundation of understanding—truly what a crisis is and how you deal with it. And so I go back to that story about the coffee, because it's something that over 32 years that I've learned with at FEMA is there's crisis at various levels. And while I said, I don't drink coffee, so it wasn't a crisis to me, and I couldn't relate to that crisis. It's the same thing that I deal with in every day in my job. Never been in a tornado. But it doesn't mean that I can't relate to what they're looking for—what information they're seeking. Never been in a hurricane. I've been in many hurricanes, but not as a, as somebody who's lost their home. But I can relate to what they're looking for and asking for. Okay?

Marty Bahamonde:

ESF 15 was born out of Hurricane Katrina. And Hurricane Katrina really changed the fundamental way that we deal with disasters—but we also—also a fundamental change on how we deal with crisis communication in this country. 'Cause we've never had a disaster of that magnitude before—that impacted that many people, that were spread out across all 50 states. It was something that was new. And so dealing with that level of crisis caused us to look at things a little bit differently. At that time, we had a philosophy—that we would put out a lot of messages, but only one person speaking from one voice is what the the adage was. We'd have one person convey all of those messages, and it caused some real problems because one person speaking about all those messages—they lost a lot of credibility because they certainly felt that how can, that one person know so much about so many different things. And that was a fundamental problem that we had there. So you've heard a talk about today, many messengers, but a very targeted message. And when you target that message at the right timing, that's when you start to fundamentally help people with what we call crisis communication.

Marty Bahamonde:

I imagine—going back to the coffee story—if when my wife said, "I don't have any coffee." What if I would've said "what do you want me to make for dinner tonight?" Or "do you think you're gonna be able to pick me up at work?" Do you think those messages would've got through to her? No, she wasn't focused on that at all. So in a crisis communications moment, we have to listen, we have to target that message and we have to use everybody to spread that message. We've heard from Congressional Affairs, we talk about IGA, we talk about local organizations, voluntary organizations—all of that family needs to come together and spread that message at that moment in time when people are ready to listen to it. Outside of that is just noise. And so, crisis communication is really a foundation of processes and timing that reach somebody when they most need it. And if anybody in here has ever delivered some information that has changed the outcome of somebody's trajectory, following a disaster, you never forget it. It's very personal.

Marty Bahamonde:

Today our panel is gonna talk about that—their experiences with crisis communication in moments of disaster. And it's a very esteemed panel, and I'm excited to introduce them to you. First of all, we have Noah Gray, Chief Communications Officer from DC Fire and EMS; all the way from Hawaii, Mahina Martin, Director of Public Affairs for County of Maui, Hawaii—and you know how busy she's been; Yasamie Richardson, Deputy External Affairs Officer for FEMA's National Incident Management Assistance Team; and Daniel Watson, Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs for the Department of Homeland Security. And the person who's gonna moderate this esteemed panel is Mark Peterson, the Director of External Affairs for FEMA, Region 5. And he'll moderate the panel.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Good afternoon, everyone. Here it is. It's 4:30. And it's so appropriate after we've digested just a, a wealth of information from so many experts, and we are feeling full, but also probably a little tired. Here comes the crisis, right here comes crisis communication. It's not Friday but it's still late in the day. So it seems very appropriate. We heard earlier today that it takes—an audience starts to tune out after about 27 words. So I think I'm up. And we can get to some of the questions here today. We're gonna sort of guide this conversation in, in three parts.

Mark Peterson - Host:

The first is how we learn from past events and then be able to apply them to future events. The second is thinking through the idea of leadership, both leader—leading the message, but also leading the structure in which the message is conveyed. And then we're also gonna talk a little bit about traditional and new media in the Information Age. And so that's kind of how we're gonna guide the conversation as we move forward. I thought Marty's intro about the coffee crisis was amazing. Mostly 'cause I had my coffee, and so I have no crisis at the moment. But I think it highlights the—the question of understanding the communications needs and understanding what it is that we are confronted with. And so my first question is to Yasamie; you've been in a variety of, of of crisis events.

Yasamie Richardson:

Yes. Yeah.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Both at the state level and at the national level sort of with the National IMAT team parachuting in, if you will, into the midst of the crisis. So in your experience, how do you get your arms around the communications needs of the event that you're faced with?

Yasamie Richardson:

I think what I'm about to say is nothing this group hasn't heard already today, because we are the last group to go. So at first when I was listening to the other presentations, I thought, wow, they're all saying the same thing I was planning to say, and then it dawned on me, you know what, that's a good thing because as communicators, we wanna speak with one voice, and we wanna walk in with one like goal and plan in mind. And that goal is to listen. How do I get my arms around it as the lead communicator for whatever response I'm going to? We have to listen. Oftentimes we think because it's a crisis, because it's a IMAT team, because it's a disaster, we have to go fast. But really, when we stop and we listen, we hear more of what the need is, how they want to receive that communication, the tactic, and the tools and the methods to communicate in a way that is effective. So when I stop and listen, the message is more effective than when we just speak, just to say we've spoken. Because oftentimes when, you know, ESF 15 report out in meetings during disasters, what's the first thing we say? Oh, we issued a press release about this. Oh, we pushed information about that. Oh, we said this. But what we often don't say is, how did the community respond? Are they taking action on what we said? So my first task, listen first and then take action.

Mark Peterson - Host:

You know, but we—certainly as FEMA come into a situation with a variety of tools, right?

Yasamie Richardson:

Yes.

Mark Peterson - Host:

And so do you have, in your mind, a checklist per se, of how you are gonna move through those tools and effectively use them at your disposal?

Yasamie Richardson:

So yes, I have a checklist of what the tools are, but how I effectively use those tools depend on what I'm getting back from the state—what the state tells me. If the state tells me, our group likes to communicate via social media. If someone tells me they like to communicate via graphics or via news releases, that's the tool in which we use. I'll give you a case in point; we did—I responded to Miami-Dade County for the building collapse. For that response we issued no news releases. We, we only did fact sheets because that method worked for that response. In Hawaii when I met Lahina—and we worked, you know, well together and learned so much from her. And from that response, we learned that we needed to shift to graphics more. And not only the graphics that were in the toolkit that we already had. Our wonderful graphic artists, Ms. Zella Campbell, created graphics tailored to that response. And we got that from the feedback we were getting from the county, from the need. So while ESF 15, we have a, a wide array of tools, but it's after we listened, do we know what tool to pull out to, to execute.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Noah, from the local level, being the Chief Communications Officer for DC Fire and EMS, does that resonate with you?

Noah Gray:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think one of the things we rely on is—there's, there's a different scale of event that we, that we handle on a daily basis. And that changes. And I think that when—I don't wanna say when it really matters— 'cause it all matters, but when more eyeballs are on it, we're lucky to have people like DC you know HSEMA, that comes in that's using kind of more of those SOPs that, that you're speaking of, that we're working with our, you know, local and federal partners. And we're kind of using that structure that was created on, on this side of things. And we have those additional resources and we're actually able to kind of confer. I think I don't have any coffee, so I have a personal crisis right now, but—and maybe some, some others in this audience right now.

Noah Gray:

But one thing that Marty said is something that I, that I really that really resonated with me as we talk about leadership. He knew there was a crisis because his—how his wife was, was carrying herself and talking about it. I think that if, if we're in the middle of a crisis, whether it's the operational person that's leading that response, or whether it's the communicator that's messaging that response—how they're presenting themselves and can help influence how big of a perceived crisis that is; and I think that that's so important in, in carrying yourself.

Noah Gray:

I've only been at DC Fire and EMS for about a year. Before that I was a national television producer and reporter on the other side. So I've, I've covered a lot of crises, and I remember one of the, one of the ones that that was not a great situation was Ferguson. I was on the ground in Ferguson, and and, and I don't remember who was messaging that before, but I remember when Ron Johnson came in. The state trooper came in and he had that measured—they had a nice battle rhythm. You kind of knew that things were, you know, getting better and that they were managing that crisis a little bit better. So how, how your principal is kind of presenting themself. And Chief Donnelly wasn't able to to be here today, but he's a great person to, to have at that podium, because I know he's always going to be calm, cool, collected, measured, and, and he'll say the bad stuff. But, you know, it's not, it's not as, oh my God, you know, it's, he's gotta get it out there.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Dan, from the national perspective being the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs at DHS, you know, from that national level, one of the maybe resources of organizing crisis communication is the battle rhythm. How do you start thinking through, when we're in a national level event, how we organize that timeline?

Daniel Watson:

Sure. So I think it—I mean, it goes to the same theme that I, I think has come up throughout the day, which is around identifying the audiences, right? So the battle rhythm generally is a tiered set of communications you're doing throughout the day to media and other stakeholders and making sure that everybody is kept up to date. I think one of the biggest mistakes that's made during a crisis is communications silo. And not everybody is getting either the same information or any information at all. So I think this is a lesson for any organization, whether it's the complexity of the federal government or a private organization—knowing who all of your audiences are what information needs, needs to be tailored to them. And at DHS, Secretary Mayorkas likes to say that we are a department of partnerships, and that is key to how we act during a crisis, too. To making sure that —there are so many audiences that are reliant on us for information—state and local, law enforcement, our IGA contacts, members of Congress, and then the media and the public. So making sure that you're coordinated across all of those audiences is incredibly important.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Mahina one of the things that we talked about backstage that really resonated for me, and—think about the battle rhythm, right? Like, so the schedule throughout the day, the schedule throughout the week, it can become taxing, right? And so it takes an emotional call on, of course, not only the survivors and the people experiencing the crisis, but also the communicators themselves. It's a lot of work. So I wonder if you could talk through, given your recent experience, how you deal with that and have a level of maybe being dispassionate while also being empathetic in the way that you're communicating.

Mahina Martin:

Sure, absolutely. And first of all, before I even launch into that, I just wanna give a message from the people of Maui and Lahaina and Kula country. You know, we really send our aloha to all of you who have played a role in caring for us and coming, and especially embracing our need, but even more importantly, helping us on the ground as FEMA has done many other agencies to steady us when we were, really in the early days. So I bring a message of gratefulness from the people of Maui to all of you, and we cannot thank you enough. And I'm listening to all of this, and I'm thinking what recent experiences is current. I'm also listening to my colleagues here and listening to all the experts. And aside from thinking, I wish I could put the researcher group, the doctors in my suitcase and take them home with me. I sure could use that in many moments.

Mahina Martin:

But, you know, I just wanna say that everything always looks good on paper. And then, you know, if you have the battle scars of having to face down your own community or public in distress and crisis, and then you have to face down the outside world—who maybe wants to help or just wants a story—depends on that. It's a really difficult place to be. And, so we were having a great conversation about how do you do trauma-informed work and not be in trauma? And how do you do crisis communication when you may be in crisis, when your own family can be in crisis because they themselves have not seen you for weeks, days, months. For us in Maui, you know, we've had FEMA folks that came over literally for three weeks and stayed for six months, and we know they have a gaggle of kids at home. Some have missed, you know, important activities, the holidays. It's very demanding work.

Mahina Martin:

And so, you know, when I hear all the things that we have to do to try to embrace the tools and, and cope with that and deal with that—we threw everything we had in the early days of the Maui crisis with three fires burning on one island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. No highway, no freeway, no helicopter coming in the, you know, in the next several hours—101 fatalities, who unaccounted for—21 cell towers, total failure in two days. We could not communicate in the midst of a crisis because we had no communication available in a remote area in West Maui—as our community faces disaster. We had no idea until the key information started coming in. And as all government agencies and responders and our own people reacted and responded, it was you know, we threw everything.

Mahina Martin:

We had civil air patrol flying out to try to find people. We had the radios—we were reading press releases on the radio. You know, there was no internet for many. We, we did everything. Even today, we're doing community meetings weekly in Lahina. We were doing them in Lahaina and Kula; 700 people at a community meeting weekly, averaging two hundred and fifty. Thirty-three meetings later, we're still at it. So, this is a difficult path we're all on. I'm always impressed; I learned so much from every agency that came, but what I learned, I think the most was that everything looks good on paper. And then when you have to run with it, your founding grace is going to be your people, your team and your community. And then you use whatever you can to find a way out and through. And that is the best we can do.

Mahina Martin:

So, you know, we embrace everything. We take every tool possible. We, we do whatever we can. We stick the mayor out there, we bring the governor in. President Biden was there. Oh, by the way, I've had an Instagram photo with President Biden. I did! You know, I really did! That was just a picture I didn't know—my granddaughter said, "grandma, is it true you were on President Biden's Instagram?" I said, "I was? What?" And, and he visited Maui and we're so grateful for, you know, his attention to it. It drew what we needed; it was attention from the world and our country and our federal supporters and Congress as well. And I was actually trying to get out of his Secret Service's way. I was trying to move through the gymnasium, and he came by and I was holding my phone as we all do. And he said, "oh, here, gimme that phone. I know how to do that." He thought I wanted a photo. I was just trying to get outta the way. I was like, excuse me. And so he took my camera literally and said, "come on, I know how." And I was just like, oh my God, okay! The things we find ourselves in, you know, so it grounds you, it reminds you that not everything will be perfect and, and it'll be okay. So roundabout way of answering that, but, you know, we want all of you to know it's—we share in, in all of your experiences.

Mark Peterson - Host:

I wanna turn briefly over to leadership. That's certainly a large aspect of crisis communications. And as I said earlier, not just in one, maybe voice being sort of the leader out there visually, but also the structure as Marty talked about ESF 15. So Dan, to you, how do you go—and you talked a little bit about partnerships, but how do you go about creating that sense of structural leadership around the message?

Daniel Watson:

I think the first part of it is clarity, right? Clarity first in who is lead, what the operational roles are and reflecting that in your communications. And then secondly your message. So typically after an incident, you'll see leadership on TV in the morning, setting the tone and the message for the day and the response, and then—and then that message is disseminated through you know, your various communications channels afterwards. So I think that clarity piece is most important.

Daniel Watson:

And I think the second part goes to exactly what you're saying is flexibility, right? You can have a plan, but it can go out the window when you—the structure sees challenges, and and, and you have to adapt. So in order to adapt with that, you need a leadership team that is ready to make decisions in those sorts of situations. So it's not going to be the normal process in steady state. What's your tight-knit group of, of leaders, senior advisors, you know, having your you know, communicators, general counsel your folks who work with congressional affairs or intergovernmental—having that core group so that you're able to adapt to the situation. And then I think the last point, it goes to what Yasamie was saying earlier about listening, right? Things are gonna change, and you need to be listening to what's happening on the ground, but you also can't be afraid of the criticism, right? You have to be willing to go out and welcome criticism and show that you're there and listening and doing everything you can to respond.

Mark Peterson - Host:

The other, the other piece of that is the—the leadership of the speaker, right? You know, the common speaker. And we heard this numerous times today, and a couple of the sayings that stand out to me—the currency of communications is trust. Trust is earned and not given. And so Noah, to you, how does trust play a role in that leadership role?

Noah Gray:

Yeah, so for me and for DC Fire and EMS, I think trust, trust is a buildup process, right? And it's not, you know, how do you earn the trust during a crisis? It's, you establish that trust—that trust when you're not in a crisis and being authentic. And I think you spoke a little bit about community engagement earlier today. One of the things that we do in, in our public information office is we're, we're, you know, ambassadors for the, for the fire department and EMS department on a daily basis. So we're out in the community, we're going to birthday parties, we're going to do blood pressure and, and glucose stuff. And we're out there and, and we're establishing that trust. You have to establish trust with so many different people and—and knowing what your audience is. And I think you spoke about a little bit about leadership externally and, and internally—building trust with reporters, building trust with the community, building trust with, with your social media following.

Noah Gray:

And, and everyone as you were mentioning, communicates differently. We are very big on, on X formerly known as Twitter—which sometimes we might still refer to it as. But I think—but with that is—as you were speaking, I was thinking about the the gas leak and daycare explosion that we had in Anacostia a few months ago. And, and when, when the fire chief got out there, and then the mayor ended up coming, and then we had you know, Clint from Homeland Security and Emergency Management. We had—you get all these different principles, you get all these different leaders, and when you put all of these people out there, it's important, but at the same time, you can sometimes get away from the people on the ground that are directly knowledgeable of what's going on.

Noah Gray:

So one of the things that I did was I put Lieutenant Ryan Bolton, who was the lieutenant, who essentially evacuated the daycare. And if you've seen the video of the explosion—they were the ones that really saved lives that day. And I thought it was important for, for a matter of, of one, highlighting really excellent work that we did, but two, was being authentic and helping establish that trust. So I put Lieutenant Bolton at that press conference and he didn't speak, but he was available for questions after. And, and showing that the people that are out there doing, doing the on-the-groundwork, I think really, you know, can help connect that—that authentic trust to a community member, to a viewer, to someone watching.

Noah Gray:

I think with reporters, as a former one and one that covered a campaign that didn't always give you information, —having, as we spoke about backstage—having that trust with the right people and the right trust on both sides. With that, off the record relationship is so important because I think on this side, you can sometimes be hesitant to give out information, to give out a timeline to give out x, y, z. And on the press side, a lot of the members of the press are going to come from it as, how are you trying to screw me this day? How are you trying to withhold information? What's going on? And on this side, I think what's—what's been most eyeopening to me is we don't always know everything immediately. We have to figure out what's going on. And it's more important for us as the government to get something right than it is for the press to get something right. You talk about people, you know, losing trust in the press—they'll really lose trust in us if we're wrong, because when we're wrong, the press is wrong, and then everything is getting out there. So it's really important for us to get everything right.

Noah Gray:

I was on the scene of a shooting a few a couple months ago, and it was a police officer who unfortunately shot one of our, our patients in the back of an ambulance. And, and that was a eally awful scene, but we had the police command bus out there, and you had a bunch of reporters out there, and we were gonna have a press conference, and the podium was up, but no one was talking to them in, in that, in that moment. And they thought that—that the police were hiding information. They weren't, we were all on the bus trying to figure out what happened. And, you know, having—I think someone eventually went out and said, "hey, off the record, like, we're figuring out what's going on. We're gonna get you what we need. This is a police involved shooting." So I think just being real with people and being authentic is, is really important because the press isn't always out to get you. If you're giving them what they need, they're not gonna be trying to gotcha, gotcha, gotcha all the time.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Yasamie, there are times when FEMA is called into events around the country, and the, the trusted source is maybe not a professional communicator—maybe hasn't gone through some of the communications classes that, you know, maybe FEMA offers. How do you support those leaders who are maybe apprehensive about being out there, but are the trusted source? How can we maybe bolster their trust so that we can they can help be communicators.

Yasamie Richardson:

We just, we just coach 'em up. We just coach them up. Get 'em ready and send 'em out the door. Because we all know, just like all of us, we're not all great communicators. You know, we all have different skill sets. Some of us are great writers, some of us are great editors and some people are great speakers. And so we sometimes will have, in our field of work, FCOs or Deputy FCOs who are not the best at that, but we just prepare them as best we can. We have all the tools, we have all the resources, we have a great communications and, and public affairs team that will prepare them to get them ready to speak. But one thing I also wanna add is we can't discount the importance of involving our state and local resources too, as we're communicating. Because while we are there on behalf of, you know, the state at their request. It's important, that when we have that communication with survivors, with the communities, with those impacted, that it comes as a unified message. So it's not just the FEMA message, but it's a message on behalf of all of these entities working to support them. So we prepare those SMEs, we prepare those FCOs the best way we can, and we send them on out the door.

Mark Peterson - Host:

I feel like Mahina, you're, you're thinking of some, some thoughts.

Mahina Martin:

I'm just thinking how, you know, my boss is the mayor of Maui County, and he's a former prosecutor and a 17-year judge—a jurist of the year in our state. Quite a, you know, quite an accomplished man. And in disaster, I just think back and I said mayor, I need you to talk to media. He goes, no. We have a crisis. Said, no, I need you to talk to the media. He said, no, you do it. I said, I know I can do it, but—and we harnessed a team that's important to do. So that lesson became very valuable because we had, you know, so many incidents going on—three around the island. It—it was just very, very demanding on all of us. And so when I hear Noah talk about, you know, media reading more into it than there really is—on day one, I went from I think 20 something media inquiries, and it ramped up in the next 24 hours it was 170 media inquiries. It was just myself. No one else had arrived yet. We were still actually in the midst of moving shelters as the fire approached one, we moved one shelter over. Another fire approach that one, and we moved that shelter over. So we had quite a bit of things going on; It was very difficult to convey.

Mahina Martin:

So, you know, needing leadership to be informed first and foremost, and building that trust through information and the rapport. Because I'm born and raised in Maui, you, you know, it's a little easier for me to say and look someone in the eye and say, no, really. But when they arrive from other countries, we had nine countries on, on the island—roaming from media outlets. We don't have that rapport, and they're coming in with a different feel. Our small town media was literally pushed out by national and international media. So our press conferences became quite a zoo at some point, and very difficult to control. So we lost—trust eroded pretty quickly as it was not managed. And then as we began to manage it, we had to gain ground one more time, and the information did not help us gain trust in the community because of that window of time where it just was all over the place. So those are very important lessons that we learned just through those early days.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Sure. Just shifting to sort of our last theme of the questions—the traditional and new media in the Information Age. Mahina, I wanna keep going with that. In your role during the initial response, the process of recovery and then continuing now with the Maui wildfires, what were some of the challenges and opportunities that you experienced that were, were maybe primarily difficult or great opportunities to learn from?

Mahina Martin:

Learning to use social media, especially for rural communities where your main source of media information is more in the urban or city areas. In our case is Honolulu or a mainland outlet on a continent here. So understanding that those communities go there. So we learned pretty quickly that that's where we needed to be on social media. But the misinformation, the disinformation—it was horrific for a period of time, especially when we could not account for lost ones. And at one point, you know—if you were following the story, it was in the thousands, hundreds—it was just enormous. Of course we landed on 101 that we could verify that we lost from our community. But there was, you know, where are the lost children? Where are the children? It's still surfacing just from that misinformation. We had the laser theory—that the fire was started by lasers and we learned in due time that it was from foreign bad actors, I guess as they call them—that we're influencing and using that as a vulnerable point within our country and within our community. And we brought a little bit of a clip for that. If you don't mind, we'll go ahead and share it really fast here.

Speaker 2:

And for the first time, we're seeing new videos now of what may have started these fire in the first place. Dozens of conspiracy theories seem to think that Maui was targeted by a blue wavelength space laser. All three are older images taken from other parts of the world. Dozens of Lahaina residents will be allowed to go back to their properties early next week. In Maui County announced who will be the first to return to Lahaina. Mayor Bissen has also established an office of recovery. It's gonna be a very heavy lift, and the work is lighter with many hands. Starting tomorrow, weekly disaster recovery meetings in upcountry Maui. Residents and officials walk side by side to help one another heal and unite. As this rebuilding phase begins in Lahaina. Crews have started clearing debris from one Lahaina property. The cleanup, you may remember, began back in January. Maui County's recovery permit center issues its first building permit to Lahaina couple. The vital step toward rebuilding and hope for a brighter future.

Mahina Martin:

That should actually say 43—worst wildfire disaster in a hundred years in the country. But you know, to, when you see the AI, when you see the misinformation that tore our community apart with the the use of some foreign influence—it took us a while to build the, the kind of level set and steady our community a little bit, but we just had to keep at it and keep at it. We're still going at it and just putting in the context of we're making progress. Leave that behind. You know, leave the misinformation. Leave the frustration. Yasamie talked, Yasamie talked about, you know, the graphics versus the text. And the reason why that was helpful and important is because when you look at crisis and the public, their heads—there is no more head room. There's no space to read one more article, to watch one more news, to just decipher government acronyms to understand what is it that's going on.

Mahina Martin:

So the pictures, the infographics, those things help to alleviate the need to—that we would require them to invest in. So that's why that was purposefully asked for—you know, with all of our federal agencies and ourselves as well. But you know, when we talk about the lessons learned and the things going forward, you must anticipate and expect misinformation. So when the ball is rolling, you know, I would, looking back, I would've assembled a team very rapidly to—and when you're from a small town, you know, you just don't have the teams, but you probably could call outside of that and look for anyone that can help within your organization. And their sole job is to pull that out. Now, FEMA does that really well; they start identifying. But in the early days of a disaster, it doesn't come. And by then it's taken root. And so then you bring in the federal government to try to deal with it. By then, it's, they don't trust government. They don't trust federal government. So you're, you're just facing layers and layers of it. So dealing with it early on has to be a very, very mindful and deliberate decision and stopping for that one moment and saying, wait, I need to bring in the team for this.

Yasamie Richardson:

And Mark, if I could highlight one thing too—that I forgot to mention in my opening remarks that I also think is important. When you see a community like Maui County—they were so stretched thin, so overwhelmed, but we were still looking for information. We, FEMA looking for sources of information. The best source for us was a social listening report. We talk about it all the time; we know what it is. But that social listening report was our tool into the how we needed to communicate and what we needed to communicate and where the gaps were. It was showing us where, where survivors were confused, where communities didn't really get our message, where we were pushing information, what we saw wasn't resonating. So in absence of us being able to talk to the county, just because all the inquiries coming in—the phone calls, the emails, the last thing she wanted to hear was from another person asking another question. So until they could get their arms around that part, we still had a job to do. But to help us with that, we had that social listening report that had really good information that gave us ground truth.

Yasamie Richardson:

Actually, it was a social listening report that told us that we had misinformation between what CNA and what IA was. We all know in the FEMA world, what, what used to be Critical Needs Assistance versus IA. Zella created a graphic that outlined that now it's Serious Needs Assistance—Serious Needs Assistance. But the whole point is that social listening report identified that gap absent of us being able to talk to the folks on the ground until we could get that part going. So that gave us what we needed to adapt and adjust the message to get to the heart of some of the issues there.

Mahina Martin:

You know—one thing that FEMA and any other large entity that comes into a jurisdiction in terms of responding, just as the operational side of a team integrates themselves in you, you see all the different ESFs, I walked out of the experience thinking that under crisis communications under this, there should be a more structured approach to it. No one could catch my attention in the first month. I know probably—I was [...] in the parking lot, the elevator, you name it. Our, our building the elevator open—all National Guard. It would closed and I'd wait for the next one—all National Guard. Geez, you know, I'm not climbing nine flights of stairs. And, and it was just so difficult. But, you know, had there been a point in time when someone said, county communication, stop. We want one hour of your time. You are gonna get a social listening. You're gonna get this, this is what it looks like. This is our language for the next 48 hours is what we can help you with. What are the lessons that you want us to hear now? That, that didn't happen partly 'cause I was in, you know, it was just so chaos for our office and with the media and everything, and just, there was very little integration in the early part. By the time we, we figured it out, we had lost some ground.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Wanna jump in?

Noah Gray:

Yeah I think that for us is time. And, and we talked a little bit about this, and Chief Donnelly and I spoke about this earlier today. Everyone thinks they're a—a citizen journalist these days. And, and there are some good ones. And just because you have a, a phone with a video camera and access to the internet doesn't mean you're a journalist. But it means that my phone starts to blow up a lot of times. And I think what's interesting in, in, in working for a fire department in the nation's capital is you have your kind of beat local reporters that are going to everything that you're going to and then you have your national news media that kind of chooses when to be interested or not. And that's always because of the people that are on, on X that are, sending stuff out.

Noah Gray:

By show of hands, does anybody know what Data Miner is? Okay, so Data Miner is what ruins my Sunday evenings. It, it was, it was a great tool when I was working at CNN and we were trying to figure out what was going on, but there are a few journalists that will just listen to scanner traffic all day long. And obviously we all know that initial reports are not always accurate. So you hear something like—on a Sunday evening when I'm giving my son a bath that says there's a person on fire at Union Station. That's how the initial report comes out. And then one person tweets it and then it gets data mined, and then every single national news outlet is going, oh, I need to be interested in this now, what's going on with that? And then my cell phone starts blowing up and blowing up and blowing up and blowing up. Can I have a statement? Can I have a statement? And time is what's so important in getting the trust. Because that was not true. And the first thing I did was take my phone—and put my son in a secure area where he would've drowned—and, and, and, and, and, and tweet. And I, and I just kind of got into it and I quote tweeted the person that did it, and I said, this is not accurate. This, this is the size up for accurate information follow DC FIRE and EMS on X. And I went direct with that person too, and I slid into their dms and I was like, Hey, this is not right—please, please stop. And they deleted it. So I think that that part of it is also having that relationship with some of these people as well. And, and using, using them to get accurate information out.

Noah Gray:

Because not everyone follows us on, on social media, but you know—whether it's Instagram or TikTok or whatever, you know, people are getting their, their news from—being able to kind of double down on that and establish. And it's something that I need to do a better job with. Honestly, it's on my to-do list to try and reach out to some of these social media influencers in, in DC and get them together where you can pick up that phone and have that, that trust and that relationship and, you know, get them what they need, but say, Hey man, you know, this is not right. Help us out here. And, and normally it, it works out, you know, well.

Mark Peterson - Host:

I'm interested in that situation. The multitasking is interesting, but you know, there's a feedback loop there, right? Like you, you have to find out like did that resonate? Being that direct? And also is your organization okay with being that direct?

Noah Gray:

Yeah, I mean, I'm not like, you know, doing what some other people, you know, do on there and, you know, angry tweeting and sometimes I have to put my phone down. Obviously, 'cause I'm representing, you know, you know, the fire department in the nation's capitol. But I, what I want to tweet is not what I'm going to but—but I'll say that, you know, there's another, there's another person that you know, furiously puts out information. And, you know, I think we had a police officer shot and multiple other people shot, and this person, you know, was publicizing hospital destinations. And, you know, my colleague at MPD called me and was like, why are you putting hospital destinations on the radio? But, and I was like, okay first of all, we can try and work on that. But then I, then I reached out to this other person, I said, "Hey, can you please not put out hospital destinations in there?" And this person apologized and said, "I keep forgetting, I'm sorry." So I think a lot of, a lot of them just want to be relevant and want to get stuff first and, and be right. And helping them be right, I think can, can be appreciated by some of them. So kind of bringing them in on that.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Real quickly before we go to like a very brief lightning round, we talked about this backstage, even in the midst of social media being a great tool for putting out information, but also an opportunity for misleading information—like we talked about. There's still a role for traditional, right? The, the press conference. How, how is that effective for you still?

Noah Gray:

Yeah, I think that 140 characters or whatever you can pay for it to be now, I mean, does, does only so much. And [...] one, being able to control your message with putting good quotes in and more information in a press release or something. But getting that principal to a microphone to speak directly to the people is something that's just going—face-to-face, whether it's on the operational side or whether it's on the press side. It's just so important.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So real quickly, we have a couple—we have like two minutes left. We're gonna do a quick lightning round. The question is, what is your advice for the front end work that communicators can do to have effective crisis communication? Who wants to go first?

Daniel Watson:

I'll, I'll jump in.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Okay.

Daniel Watson:

And I think it goes to what we've been talking about here. There's in any crisis, this is the, this is the core issue. The tension between the demand for information, fog of war, and the misinformation that gets in the way. And I still think the, the best advice is to wait and be sure you get it right. Because going too early and getting it wrong is far worse.

Yasamie Richardson:

My advice is have a strategy. It's a crisis, but you still have time to plan and get it right and have a strategy. And know where you're going and how you're going to get there and outline it so your team can follow you—and you're not just shooting from the hip.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Sort of like, take a breath.

Yasamie Richardson:

Exactly.

Mahina Martin:

My advice is stock up on aspirin, coffee, red bull, get your marriage in order, hug your grandkids—explain your job. My best advice is find ways to deal with what you have to go through. Anticipate it. Know it's gonna come. You'll survive it and it'll be okay because others have as well.

Noah Gray:

Incorporating everything that was just said and adding that—we're all human first of all, and I think—working with each other as fellow human beings. But it's better to be accurate than it is to be right. And that's something that I learned in, in news as well. The other one is also, and, and you made me think of it, it's, I'm a big fan of radios and I get made fun of a lot for it. But radios are really important. And you know, Charlie Guddemi, the SWIC here will always tell you, have your [...] plan. Cell phones aren't gonna always work. The emails not gonna always work. Always have redundancy, plan and plan, plan, plan, have a, plan b, a plan C, et cetera. But, but interoperability, radio communication, I think is so important on the communication side as well.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Fantastic. Thank you all. Let's give our panel a hand.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Hey, thanks for listening to this episode of "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA." If you'd like to learn more about this episode or other topics or have ideas for future episodes, visit us at fema.gov/podcast.