

Firefighter Public Information Officers' Communication Effectiveness with the Media During the 1998 Florida Wildfires

Ricky Telg and
Becky Raulerson



Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess how firefighter public information officers perceived their effectiveness as they communicated with the media during the 1998 Florida wildfires. A questionnaire was mailed to every member (99) of the Public Information Officer Section of the Florida Fire Chiefs' Association in spring 1999; 49 responded. A separate survey was sent to 50 newswire agencies, newspapers, and television and radio stations that were in areas impacted by the Florida wildfires to find out reporters' perceptions of public information officers' communication effectiveness. Results from the study include the following: public information officers (PIOs) said having reporters present at a wildfire scene did not affect how command centers fought the fires; most PIOs believed they did an above-average job communicating effectively with the media; reporters gave PIOs good marks for communication effectiveness; and PIOs noted that although most had considerable communication training and/or experience, they would have liked more comprehensive training before the wildfire outbreak.

Ricky Telg is an assistant professor and Becky Raulerson is a graduate student at the University of Florida's Department of Agricultural Education and Communication. Ricky Telg has been an ACE member for six years. Funding for this study was provided through an ACE Development Fund Scholarship.

Between May 25 and July 20, 1998, nearly 2,300 wildfires raged in Florida, burning one-half million acres. The firestorm, caused by severe heat, drought and lightning strikes, was one of the worst wildfire disasters in the state's history. More than 300 homes were damaged or destroyed, and timber losses exceeded \$300 million. More than 10,000 firefighters, representing 47 states, and 150 aircraft were called in to battle the blazes (Governor's Wildfire Response and Mitigation Review Committee, 1998). As the wildfires became more severe, local, national, and international reporters descended on Florida to cover the story.

Media coverage of wildfires is common. When more than 1.4 million acres burned in wildfires in the Greater Yellowstone Area in 1988, the media reported that the Yellowstone National Park had been destroyed (Elfring, 1989). However, Elfring and other researchers and fire officials (Buck, 1989; Reid, 1989) noted that the media's coverage of the Yellowstone fires was "superficial and stereotypical," according to Conrad Smith, a journalism professor at The Ohio State University who studied the media coverage (Elfring, 1989). Smith stated that reporters' stories led people to believe that the entire park had been destroyed. As T.R. Reid, the *Washington Post's* Rocky Mountain Bureau Chief, wrote: "A forest engulfed by a horrendous raging storm of smoke and fire is not only news, it is news that produces stunning color pictures" (1989, p. 37).

Following the 1998 wildfires, Florida Governor Lawton Chiles appointed the Wildfire Response and Mitigation Review Committee, a group of state government officials, technical experts, members of the public and other stakeholders to assess the wildfires and to formulate recommendations on how Florida could better manage its wildfire risk. The Governor's Wildfire Response and Mitigation Review Committee (1998) recognized that "communication during a major disaster has not been adequately improved and remains a critical issue requiring additional effort" (p. 7). Local fire departments also conducted their own assessment of their communication effectiveness (Alachua County Fire Rescue, 1998). Recommendations that the governor's committee (1998) made pertaining specifically to improving information dissemination included:

- better utilizing the state's public information network system—made up of public information officers from state and local emergency response agencies—to maintain contact with county public information officers during crises,

- establishing experience-based classification levels for public information officers in the various emergency response agencies, and
- being informed of the skill level and experience of public information officers dispatched in impacted areas.

Many studies have examined the mass media's role to the public during natural and man-made disasters (Burkhart, 1991; Ledingham & Walters, 1989; National Research Council, Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media, 1980; Ploughman, 1997; Wenger & Quarantelli, 1989). Research has shown that the mass media contribute to emergency management in several ways, including relaying information to citizens about potential hazards and giving citizens information about what local emergency management organizations do (Burkhart, 1991). During disaster news coverage, print and broadcast media play different roles, though, due to their technology, method of transmission, and style of newsgathering (Wenger & Quarantelli, 1989). In an analysis of 15 field studies of natural and technological disasters, Wenger and Quarantelli found that broadcast media are the primary distributors of immediate news, while newspapers were "more dominant during the post-impact period" (p. 27).

However, because the research base of "disaster studies" in communication is relatively new (Walters, Wilkins & Walters, 1989, p. xi), little research was found about the role and effectiveness of persons who provide information to the media—public information officers (PIOs)—during wildfires or other disasters. According to the student manual of the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officers Course, the organization which trains command officials involved in fire-fighting, PIOs have the role during a disaster to report directly to the Incident Command System commander (the person in charge of an emergency scene) and to provide accurate and concise information to citizens, so they can make decisions affecting their lives (1998). Several state-supported fire training schools, such as the Florida State Fire College (1999), and the federal Emergency Management Institute (1993, 1994) conduct public information officer training sessions. However, no national standards for PIO operations exist because "the public information function generally reflects the standards and operations of the media and the governmental agencies of any given community" (Westbrook, 1999, p. 14). The purpose

of this study, therefore, was to assess how Florida's firefighter public information officers perceived their effectiveness as they communicated with the media during the 1998 Florida wildfires.

Forestry is an agricultural industry. Therefore, findings, recommendations, and conclusions from this study are appropriate for an audience concerned with agricultural communication issues. Also the results may prove applicable to agricultural communicators who communicate with the media during crisis and natural disaster situations.

Methods

A questionnaire was mailed to every member of the Public Information Officer Section of the Florida Fire Chiefs' Association. Because the group was relatively small—99 members—it was decided to send a questionnaire to each person. Therefore, the study was not a random sample. The questionnaire was mailed to the PIOs in early March 1999; a follow-up questionnaire was sent to nonrespondents in early April. Forty-nine responded, representing forty-nine different fire-fighting departments; in addition, three questionnaires were returned undelivered.

A separate survey was sent to a total of 50 newswire agencies, newspapers and television and radio stations that were in areas impacted by the Florida wildfires. The surveys were distributed in early March, with a follow-up in early April. However, after the second mailing, only 12 responses—from television, newswire, and newspaper reporters—were received (24 % response rate). Each respondent was from a different media organization. Because of the low response rate, results and reporters' comments presented should not be generalized beyond this study; however, the results and their comments provide insight into the overall communication effectiveness of Florida firefighter PIOs during the wildfires.

Findings

Firefighter Public Information Officer Demographics

Firefighter PIO respondents worked in fire departments that employed an average of 100 firefighters. Respondents had been employed an average of 18.7 years as a firefighter, with a high of 38 years and a low of five years. Prior to the wildfire outbreaks, respondents had served in a PIO capacity for an average of

6.8 years, with a high of 22 years and a low of three months. Fifty-eight percent were employed in a city fire department, 22% were employed in a county fire department, and 20% in another job area. Most employed in “another job area” were volunteer firefighters.

Fifty-five percent worked in departments where they were the sole PIO; 30% worked with another staff PIO; 9% were one of three PIOs on staff; and 2% each (one response each) were employed in departments with a total of 4, 6 and 14 PIOs. Thirty-two percent were employed full-time as a PIO; 40% were employed part-time as a PIO or were employed in another capacity, such as fire chief and battalion chief, at their fire departments but served in a PIO role; and 28% were volunteer PIOs.

Communication Efforts and Resources at Wildfire Command Centers

PIO respondents said that during the most serious or threatening wildfire outbreaks, their command centers held news conferences weekly (8 respondents), once a day (6 respondents), several times a day (11 respondents) or never (2 respondents). Of those who said news conferences were held “several times a day,” the average number of times news conferences were held per day was four. Respondents said command centers decided to hold news conferences based on the following considerations:

- 1) to release important information immediately when it was available, and
- 2) to meet reporters’ deadlines.

One respondent said, “We held news conferences at 10 a.m., 3 p.m. and 9 p.m., based on the media’s deadlines.”

Fifty-five percent said their command centers did not maintain an ongoing record of wildfire-related newspaper or television stories. Only 14% said a record was maintained, with 31% not sure if an ongoing record was maintained. Respondents indicated that less than half of the command centers evaluated or planned to evaluate their communication effectiveness with reporters. Respondents also noted that more resources, including personnel and material resources, such as laptop computers and cellular telephones, were needed to communicate with the media during a wildfire outbreak as large and widespread as the one in 1998.

Media Relations of Command Centers During the Wildfires

PIO respondents were almost unanimous in their belief that having reporters present at a wildfire command center did not affect how firefighters battled the blazes. Twenty-three of 30 respondents said reporters did not endanger themselves in the pursuit of a story. Suggestions respondents gave to protect reporters from endangering themselves in the future included providing “safe areas” for the media, with an on-site, designated PIO; providing guided tours of wildfire areas; and having good stories for the media. Individual respondents wrote:

- “We set up a media pool. We should have done this earlier. We would take a group of four at a time to areas for photos and interviews.”
- “Our policy of constant availability and in some cases transporting news crews into safe areas for ‘photo opportunities’ proved quite successful.”
- “If reporters are given opportunities to get stories safely, they will take it. PIOs should create stories and safe ways for media to get the story.”

Every PIO respondent said having reporters on the wildfire scenes was beneficial. The media’s presence provided timely, important information to the public, and presented firefighters’ efforts positively. “We always want reporters at our emergencies,” one respondent wrote. “They document our work, help with department public relations efforts, and provide a good way to get accurate information (and education) to citizens in the community.”

In a self-evaluation, firefighter PIOs were asked to rate how accessible, helpful and effective they thought they were, in a variety of communication-related areas (Table 1). Most believed PIOs did an above-average job communicating effectively with the media. PIOs then were asked to indicate how they thought reporters would rate the same statements (Table 2). Here, the response averages were slightly lower, overall.

Respondents commented about how they could make a reporter’s job more effective during news coverage of fires. Their responses fell into three categories: PIOs should serve as chaperones for the media into fire-ravaged areas; PIOs should be accessible as much as possible to the media; and PIOs must provide accurate information to

the media. Only one person mentioned the need to provide on-line information to reporters.

Respondents also mentioned ways in which reporters could make PIOs' jobs more effective during wildfire coverage. They suggested that reporters should work with PIOs to get story information and not go "around" them, reporters should not go alone into wildfire areas, and reporters should coordinate communication more closely within their own news organizations. One PIO wrote: "We didn't have too much problem with TV reporters. The problem was with the assignments editors. We received multiple phone calls from different people at the same stations, requesting the same information. People there weren't talking to each other."

Table 1. *PIOs' Perception of Their Communication Accessibility, Helpfulness and Effectiveness with Reporters During Wildfire Outbreaks*

	Mean	SD
Reporters'/photographers' accessibility to spokesperson or PIO.	4.00	.18
Reporters'/photographers' accessibility to information.	4.04	.17
Reporters'/photographers' accessibility to wildfire areas.	3.74	.14
News conference content's helpfulness.	3.77	.21
Public information officer's/spokesperson's overall helpfulness.	4.00	.15
Public information officer's/spokesperson's overall communication effectiveness.	3.88	.17
The media's ability to get wildfire-related information to the public.	4.32	.15
1 = poor; 5 = excellent		

Table 2. *PIOs' Perception of How They Think Reporters Would Rate Communication Accessibility, Helpfulness and Effectiveness During Wildfire Outbreaks*

	Mean	SD
Reporters'/photographers' accessibility to spokesperson or PIO.	3.60	.19
Reporters'/photographers' accessibility to information.	3.64	.18
Reporters'/photographers' accessibility to wildfire areas.	3.18	.17
News conference content's helpfulness.	3.47	.19
Public information officer's/spokesperson's overall helpfulness.	3.57	.18
Public information officer's/spokesperson's overall communication effectiveness.	3.42	.17
The media's ability to get wildfire-related information to the public.	3.91	.15
1 = poor; 5 = excellent		

Principal Spokesperson Duties at Command Centers and Communication Training Needs

Forty-eight percent of PIO respondents said they were the principal spokesperson or shared principal spokesperson duties at their location. The remaining 52% said the local fire chief or another person—usually a county emergency relief agency representative—served as principal spokesperson during the fires. Respondents said the principal spokesperson communicated equally with reporters through individual interviews, and interviews combined with news conferences. Table 3 indicates the methods the principal spokespersons used to communicate with reporters.

Approximately 70% of the principal spokespersons had media relations or media interview training, respondents said. Respondents were asked how prepared they thought the principal spokesperson

Table 3. *Principal Spokesperson's Primary Communication Method with Reporters*

	Percent	n
News conferences/question and answer	7.7	2
Individual interviews	42.3	11
Both equally (news conferences/question and answer sessions and individual interviews)	42.3	11
Don't know	7.7	2
Total	100%	26

was in terms of media interview training, on a scale of one to five, with one being "extremely unprepared" and five being "extremely prepared," to communicate with reporters. The average was 3.54, with a standard deviation of .21.

Respondents provided insight about the scope of communications-related training they thought all firefighter PIOs should have had to better prepare them for communicating with the media during the wildfire outbreak. Most respondents said they had received communications training, either through previous jobs they had in which they dealt with the media or through courses offered at state or national fire "colleges." Many of those who had not received communications training on the job had graduated with degrees in public relations or journalism. Although PIOs said they had adequate communication training and/or experience, they noted that they wish they would have had more comprehensive training before the wildfires in the following four areas: hands-on media relations training (including crisis communication), news-release writing, public speaking and interviewing skills, and technology/computer training. PIOs wrote that communication training should include topics listed in Table 4.

Twenty-eight out of 30 respondents said every fire department should have a trained PIO on staff. On this topic, respondents wrote:

- "You cannot throw an untrained, inexperienced person to the media. They'll eat that person alive. The untrained person will make your department look inept."

Table 4. <i>Topics PIOs Said Should Be Included in PIO Communication Training</i>
Disaster scene preparedness and crisis communication
Media relations, including how the media work
Computer skills
Interviewing/public speaking/verbal communication skills
Written (news writing)
Information gathering

- “A designated PIO establishes a relationship with the news media prior to a crisis.”
- “Every fire department should have a PIO on staff not only to deal with the media, but also to promote the fire department in non-incident times. Fire departments are public relations businesses. We must sell our service.”

Reporters’ Demographics

The average age of reporters who responded in the media survey was 33 years. Reporters had worked an average of 10.5 years in the media, with six working less than 10 years, four working 11 to 20 years, and two working more than 20 years. Six worked for newspapers or newswire agencies, and six worked for television stations.

Reporters Ratings of PIOs’ Communication Effectiveness

Reporters were asked to rate the accessibility, helpfulness and effectiveness of various communication areas and issues during the wildfire outbreaks (Table 5). Ratings provided by television reporters were higher than those given by newspaper reporters. Answers given by television reporters ranged from 3.6 to 3.8, while responses from newspaper reporters were from 2.6 to 3.1. Answers, overall, were lower than those provided by PIOs (Table 2) when they were asked to indicate how they thought reporters would rate the PIOs’ efforts.

Several reporters mentioned that they believed PIOs catered more to national media reporters than to local reporters. One stated: “(PIOs) need to help local media first, before trying to help state/

national media. We're the ones giving important local public safety information."

Television reporters said firefighters should provide more "pool coverage" of video feeds, resulting in fewer video-graphers needing

Table 5. *Reporters Perception of Communication Accessibility, Helpfulness and Effectiveness During Wildfire Outbreaks*

	Mean	SD
Reporters'/photographers' accessibility to spokesperson or PIO.	3.09	.31
Reporters'/photographers' accessibility to information.	3.36	.34
Reporters'/photographers' accessibility to wildfire areas.	3.09	.39
News conference content's helpfulness.	3.00	.27
Public information officer's/spokesperson's overall helpfulness.	3.18	.35
Public information officer's/spokesperson's overall communication effectiveness.	3.00	.35
The media's ability to get wildfire-related information to the public.	3.72	.27
1 = poor; 5 = excellent		

to be escorted into impacted areas. Several television and newspaper/newswire reporters stressed the need to integrate on-line information in future wildfire coverage. One reporter said, "Put as much information as possible out on the Web." Another said, "Volusia County was most effective in getting information out because they put all their information on their Web site." Only one firefighter PIO mentioned the need for using on-line information.

Reporters also highlighted their need to be close to the fires. Several said photographers had trouble getting to fire scenes when areas

were blocked. One reporter, with 24 years of media experience, went so far as to say that well-equipped veteran reporters should be left on their own. "Veteran reporters can fend for themselves in the field. When I tell my PIO I have a 4-by-4 (vehicle), water and a cell-phone, that means they don't have to hold my hand through the fire." However, other reporters said they understood the need to work "within the system" and to be escorted.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, Florida firefighter PIOs perceived that they effectively communicated with the media during the 1998 wildfires. They also thought the media would say they performed their jobs effectively. Reporters, overall, were slightly less favorable with PIOs' communications efforts, and newspaper reporters, particularly, were critical of PIOs. This may be a result of their perception that PIOs catered more to the "10, a.m., 3 p.m. and 9 p.m." deadlines of television reporters for the noon, 5 p.m. and 11 p.m. newscasts. This finding is supported by Wenger and Quarantelli (1989) who stated that broadcast media are the primary distributor of immediate news during a disaster. It would follow, then, that PIOs may spend more time with media that would provide immediate news to local citizens.

Local reporters said that PIOs spent more time helping national reporters, when more should have been done to assist the local journalists in providing immediate information to area residents. A PIO mentioned that the "out-of-town" media were more demanding than local reporters. Many PIOs said that part of their job during crises is public relations: showing fire-fighting efforts in action. Providing communications support to local reporters would promote this public relations effort in the communities where local and state tax money are used to support firefighters.

Many PIOs had media communication training, experience, or education. Yet, they said they should have had more to prepare them better for the 1998 wildfires. This belief coincides with the recommendations from the report of the Governor's Wildfire Response and Mitigation Review Committee (1998). The report noted: "There is a need for comprehensive emergency public information officer training at the state and county level, in cooperation with associations that are capable of dispatching public information officers during an emergency event" (p. 21). One area that could be stressed in training sessions is the need for immediate on-line information. Although

only one PIO mentioned the need for on-line wildfire-related information, several reporters mentioned its need.

This study indicates specific communications-related recommendations, in the event of future wildfires, which are as follows:

- Designate a PIO in each fire department and/or command center. This recommendation was supported almost unanimously by respondents in the study.
- Provide communications-related training opportunities to all PIOs. And emphasize topics PIOs believe to be important when communicating with the media (Table 5). It is not enough to have a designated PIO on staff; that PIO should be properly trained in communication methods.
- Cater to local media before national media. Local reporters will provide immediate, important information to area constituents.
- Don't overlook newspaper reporters. The immediacy of television coverage may have caused PIOs in this study to provide more resources to television reporters and videographers. However, newspaper reporters and photographers' needs also should be provided for during wildfire coverage.
- Consider "media pool coverage," especially of video footage, and/or media tours to fire-damaged areas. This should be a standard feature at all wildfire command center sites and not change from site to site.
- Be accessible or designate someone to be accessible to the media at all times. Reporters should have a contact person's telephone number, cellular phone number, fax number and electronic mail address for around-the-clock contact.
- Provide necessary resources (cellular phones, laptop computers) to PIOs in the field.
- Initiate World Wide Web page development training for PIOs or someone else on staff.
- Provide wildfire information to the public and media on the Web.
- Provide other automated services, such as a 24-hour telephone hotline, for the public to use for wildfire updates.

The scope of the 1998 wildfires stretched the Florida fire-fighting effort to an extreme. As a result, firefighter PIOs also felt the pinch of

a lack of resources, materials and personnel. As firefighters fought the blazes at many fronts throughout the state, PIOs at numerous command centers tried their best to provide information to the media. As one respondent wrote: "We try to control as much information as possible by having field PIOs on the scenes, but these fires were too widespread and media presence was too large to handle this. We needed to be better prepared."

References

- Alachua County Fire Rescue (1998). *After-action review*. Gainesville, FL: Author.
- Buck, B. (1989). A Yellowstone critique: Something did go wrong. *Journal of Forestry*, 87, 38-40.
- Burkhart, F.N. (1991). *Media, emergency warnings, and citizen response*. San Francisco: Westview.
- Elfring, C. (1989). Yellowstone: Fire storm over fire management. *BioScience*, 39(10), 667-672.
- Emergency Management Institute (1993). *Basic public information officer course*. Emmitsburg, MD: Author.
- Emergency Management Institute (1994). *Advanced public information officer course*. Emmitsburg, MD: Author.
- Florida State Fire College (1999). *General catalog and course schedule, January-June 1999*. Ocala, FL: Author.
- Governor's Wildfire Response and Mitigation Review Committee (1998). *Through the flames: An assessment of Florida's wildfires of 1998*. Tallahassee, FL: Author.
- Ledingham, J.A. & Walters, L.M. (1989). The sound and the fury: Mass media and hurricanes. In L.M. Walters, L. Wilkins, & T. Walters (Eds.), *Bad tidings: Communication and catastrophe* (pp. 35-45). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- National Fire Academy (1998). *Executive analysis of fire service operations in emergency management*. Emmitsburg, MD: Author.
- National Research Council, Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media (1980). *Disasters and the mass media*. Washington: National Academy of Science.
- Ploughman, P. (1997). Disasters, the media and social structures: A typology of credibility hierarchy persistence based on newspaper coverage of the Love Canal and six other disasters. *The Journal of Disaster Studies, Policy and Management*, 21(2), 118-137.
- Reid, T.R. (1989). When the press yelled "Fire!" *Journal of Forestry*, 87 (36-37).

- Walters, L.M., Wilkins, L., & Walters, T. (1989). Preface. In L.M. Walters, L. Wilkins, & T. Walters (Eds.), *Bad tidings: Communication and catastrophe* (pp. xi-xv). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Wenger, D. & Quarantelli, E. (1989). *Local mass media operations, problems and products in disasters*. (Report No. 19). University of Delaware: Disaster Research Center.
- Westbrook, G.G. (1999). *Evaluation of the need for a full-time public information officer in the Margate Fire Rescue Department*. Margate, FL: Author.