



Example of ineffective communication by public institutions in a disaster setting

By far the best-known and documented instance of ineffective communication by public institutions during and after disasters is that of Hurricane Katrina. According to the post-Katrina bi-partisan report issued by the Congress of the United States, entitled 'A failure of initiative' (US Congress: 2006), communication during the event was severely affected by the intensity of the storm. The report details the failures of communication both within the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), between FEMA and other responding authorities and between the authorities in general and the wider population. The first type of communication failure occurred due to the overwhelming nature of the Hurricane and the extent of the floods. The storm and floods severely damaged communication infrastructure. This, together with a lack of proper communication equipment and a lack of coordination between separate agencies (for example through buying interoperable equipment), led to significant difficulties in the transmission of orders between the disaster managers and teams on the ground. In some cases, National Guard officers were forced to resort to communication through written dispatches (US Congress, 2006, p. 163). Thus, according to the report, hundreds of New Orleans first responders were trying to communicate on only two radio channels on a backup system, forcing them to wait for an opening in the communications traffic to transmit or receive critical information (US Congress, 2006, p. 163), which led to a severely weakened situational awareness. One of the key factors which led to negative results was the subordination of FEMA to the Department of Homeland Security and the policy orientation to terrorist-based disaster preparedness. The report also quotes the fact that due to a near-absence of communications between authorities and the general population, sensationalist media reports were allowed to take hold and spread both among the victims themselves and among the population of neighbouring states. The most famous cases were the fake rumours that media generated about events occurring in the New Orleans Convention Centre and the New Orleans Superdome. Media speculated about incidents such as evacuees shooting at the rescue helicopters, the rape and murder of a 7 year old and the existence of 30-40 bodies in the Convention Centre freezer. The main effect of this was that truck drivers carrying critical supply goods became scared and refused to finish their transports, requesting armed escorts. Moreover, authorities from the neighbouring states refused to send emergency personnel to help with the evacuation, as they feared for their safety. Finally, even evacuees living in the Superdome became themselves agitated due to radio reports about what was (supposedly) happening, despite repeated attempts by emergency personnel to calm them down (US Congress, 2006, p. 70).

Note: See source document for full reference.

Applicable to:

Stakeholders: [Worldviews](#), [Local knowledge](#), [Communication](#), [Livelihoods](#), [Rule of law](#), [Attitudes toward authorities](#), [Access and use of infrastructure/services](#)

Disaster Phases: [Response](#)





Types of Actors Concerned: [Government](#), [National civil protection body](#), [Local authorities](#), [Military](#)

Hazards: [Natural hazards](#)

Recommendations:

- [Inform citizens about the risk they may face and about possible actions and measures, they can take to reduce vulnerability and better prepare themselves](#)
- [Use cultural factors to improve the effectiveness of disaster communication](#)

Source

[Deliverable D8.1 "Report on risk communication models and best practices" \(page 34\)](#)

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