# Crisis Communication in Dark Times:
# The 2011 Mouse River Flood in Minot, North Dakota

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Crisis communication is an essential aspect of disaster and crisis management for governments; this is particularly true for local governments, which are first into an event response and last out, and on the front lines of response and recovery. In this article, crisis communication is reviewed generally and then in the context of the 2011 Souris (Mouse) River flood in Minot, North Dakota. Using analysis of primary interview data, I deliberate on the potential that exists for public communication to enhance the responsiveness of government in addressing the public's needs under threat of hazard or disaster. Results and discussion of the analysis are provided. I find that the city learned from the challenges of the flood in a way that suggests improved responses for future events. The case represents an expression of good governance in what have been dark times for the public sector.

*Keywords: public communication, crisis management, Minot, North Dakota, local government, emergency response*

Crisis events challenge assumptions among citizens of not only the role of government but also the role of citizens and businesses in society. The public sector is called upon to be both neutrally competent and passionately involved with the ethos of public service. It has been suggested that public administration is "entrenched in a bureaucratic pathology that limits its abilities to address complex policy problems" (Nabatchi, Goerdel, & Peffer, 2011, p. i39). Public managers may fail to enter the fray and actively create meaning and dispel fear for a concerned and frightened public, or become so charmed with bureaucratic process and form that they miss an important chance to respond with agility when the need arises. The suspicion and spitefulness of the present public discourse call for a return to basic assumptions of the role of the public sector in righting the ship of state when threatened.

Public communication is an essential aspect of crisis management for governments; this is particularly true of local governments, which are first into an event response and last out, and on the front lines of response and recovery. At the heart of public communication in government lies the fundamental element of the social contract: the consent of the governed in exchange for proper responses to events that affect the collective. Public sector legitimacy resides in competent response. In those instances in which public communication is handled poorly, other aspects of a well-orchestrated response to a hazard

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event, whether natural or technological in nature, may be overshadowed by a perception that government has failed. The importance of frankly admitting error when it happens, accepting it, and competently moving forward in the face of crisis is underscored.

This article considers the role of crisis communication in a case that has received little attention in the scholarly literature but that can nevertheless teach us much about the importance of communication with the public, opportunities that exist, and areas where problems may occur. This article seeks to share what impact, if any, crisis communication had on the response and recovery effort in Minot, North Dakota, after the 2011 flood. I will share how the public communications effort between the local government and various groups and partners realized a responsive, capable approach to addressing public needs in light of the flooding—or how it failed to do so. Findings here may have broader implications for crisis communication and disaster mitigation.

First, I generally examine public communication in crisis, highlighting the literature's treatment of the topic in specific cases. Second, the case for the article is introduced: Minot, North Dakota, experienced a 200- to 500-year flood event in 2011. Using analysis of primary interview data, I deliberate on the potential that exists for public communication to enhance the responsiveness of government in addressing the public's needs under threat of hazard or disaster. Results and discussion of the analysis are provided. I find that Minot's response was defined by the need for citizen–government communication in many respects, positive and negative, and that the city learned from the challenges of the flood in a way that suggests improved responses for future events. The importance of capable, professional responses in crisis situations is highlighted against the present context of public governance; even where error occurs or room for improvement is noted in crisis response, government remains responsible to engage selflessly and even heroically in the work of the public, and that competence may trump pervasive public distrust.

## Public Communication in Crisis and Disaster

A crisis may be defined as "a major, unpredictable event that has potentially negative results. The event and its aftermath may significantly damage an organization and its employees, products, services, financial condition, and reputation" (Barton, 1993, p. 2). Crisis communication "seeks to explain the specific event, identify likely consequences and outcomes, and provide specific harm-reducing information to affected communities in an honest, candid, prompt, accurate, and complete manner" (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005, p. 46). Crisis communication includes messages about risk and potential threats, in an effort to reduce negative impacts (Spence, Lachlan, & Griffin, 2007). Skill in crisis communication is a fundamental part of the technical ability of governments to respond effectively to disruption; it is as essential as logistics management or information systems (Kusumasari, Alam, & Siddiqui, 2010).

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a shift in crisis communication from a role emphasizing persuasiveness of message to one representing an awareness of public distrust and a need to convey what is often complex information from a position of credibility (Leiss, 1996). In the case of threats from natural or technological hazards, it often falls to government to explain to the public what is occurring and how best to respond. In crisis situations, risk communication can be especially difficult because citizens

often lack a frame of reference for just how bad the situation may become or their level of personal risk. Governmental agencies have a responsibility to respond timely, accurately, and completely to the public's need for information; they must understand the broad audience of such messages and strive for clarity while inspiring confidence.

How an institution communicates and what people say about an organization shape public perception of institutional quality; this is a prominent issue in the challenging context of crisis (Palenchar & Heath, 2007). For an agency, only part of the dilemma rests with knowing what to say and when to say it. There are questions of which channels to use for communication, how best to address the needs of vulnerable groups, and how to determine the most appropriate mode for communicating what may be uncomfortable or difficult news (Spence et al., 2007). The basic credibility of agencies and their staff members relies heavily upon the notion of transparency and accountability, which has much to do with perception and message management; agencies that are less than forthright with crucial information may do themselves and the public a disservice, even absent ill intent.

How agencies plan for and address the complexities of emergency situations can prevent a hazard event from becoming a disaster and add to agency credibility, or yield catastrophe (Fern-Banks, 1996). Contingency planning is essential to continuity and yet is often overlooked in practice. Governments, businesses, and individuals typically do not want to spend more time or scarce resources in planning for disaster than are necessary. Within the unheeded area of contingency planning, the role of the public relations professional in responding to crisis and reducing public uncertainty is even less understood. The function is sometimes underfunded or missing entirely, relegated as added value rather than as essential. In reality, this skill set does not often come naturally. It has been suggested that public relations capacity is indispensable at every stage of crisis, from pre-event to long-term recovery. Public information officers are thus vital members of an organization's contingency planning team.

The role of public information officer (PIO) is an important piece of the puzzle for many organizations. In crises, PIOs craft messages in ways that advocate for the perspectives of their agencies, solving problems that may result from poor communication while helping to improve dialogue between the public, the institutions, and a variety of stakeholders. Within crises, miscommunication and rumors are problem areas, and official sources of information must be clearly demarcated and utilized (Lindell, 2013). PIOs must proactively gauge the sentiment of the public, which may not accurately reflect the seriousness or scale of the situation. PIOs may have to be very persistent in working within the emergency response group to keep information flowing, the media satisfied, and rumors in check (Militello, Patterson, Bowman, & Wears, 2007). It has been offered that crisis communication demands additional public involvement: "Attending to the various stakeholders is not enough; what is also needed is a greater stakeholder voice" (Palttala & Vos, 2012, p. 41). This bridging of perspectives allows for clear articulation of what constitutes the public interest (Guth, 1995).

Hughes and Palen (2012) suggest that the role of PIO has shifted from gatekeeper of information to translator, making information able to be understood by a larger or different audience. Burns and Slovic (2012) recommend consideration of learning style, cultural identity, and demographics of communities when tailoring messages during crisis. PIOs now worry not only about the official message and receiving

and responding to inquiries, but also about discussions occurring in social media, including the potential need to dispel rumors. Because a goal of communication in crisis is message density, choice of media and message is vital. "Risk communication is dense when it conveys a consistent message, articulated by different information providing partners (e.g., public officials, medical experts), through multiple public communication channels (e.g., traditional and social media) over a sufficient period of time" (Burns & Slovic, 2012, p. 580).

The media choices available for public communications create additional complexity in times of crisis. The emergence of social media as an essential avenue for crisis communication is prominent in works by Yates and Paquette (2011), Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar (2011), and Resnyansky (2014). The availability of official information during crisis via the Internet, through social media, and by other means, such as cellular telephones, is a relatively new area of study. Perlman (2012) finds opportunity for public engagement through social media in disasters. Referring to a study of American Red Cross websites, Schmalzried, Fallon, and Harper (2012) found nine communications elements for websites that "provide a minimal theoretical standard to facilitate organizational success for communicating with the public during and after emergencies and disasters" (p. 205). Engaging in positive online discussion could, for example, aid response efforts by providing additional data on areas of greatest community need (Hughes & Palen, 2012). Consistency in message and serving the needs of website users can be beneficial in the uncertain environment of disaster. Alternately, social media can provide inaccurate information and create dissonance with official messages.

Johnson (2006) noted the difficulty of operating in a fog of disaster, including the tendency to be overly optimistic about a situation, failing to be specific in communications, expecting resistance to the message, and communicating in advance of the emergency situation, among other factors. Messages conveyed may provide comfort to many people while alarming a few (Robertson & Pengilley, 2012), so it is necessary to be certain of the message and approach in context and have a plan that ties communications to other aspects of response and recovery. Palttala, Boano, Lund, and Vos (2012) suggest that "response organizations prefer to follow the general protocols of communication set-up for normal situations also in the event of a crisis" (p. 5), which creates problems when information must be provided clearly, rapidly, and across organizational boundaries.

Heath states, "A fundamental mission for crisis managers is to prevent loss of control before a crisis happens, prevent further loss of control when a crisis arises, and when and where possible regain control when loss of control happens" (1998, p. 140). Crisis workers can appear "off-balance and even secretive when dealing with media representatives and special interest groups" (p. 142) because they may not have been adequately instructed on the importance of communication outside of the immediate organization.

Public communications professionals have the sometimes disagreeable task of becoming the voice of a government under duress; personnel in this role can smooth the hackles of a worried public or ignite a firestorm. Burnett (1998) suggested that the choice of how to respond to a crisis has long-term ramifications; deciding how best to respond to any particular incident can be difficult, given that there is not one best way of responding to crisis. That said, the common elements—poor planning, political

concerns, too much or too little data, or information of questionable merit—are all potential problem areas whether the events are natural or industrial.

In application of these varied concepts, the literature explores crisis communication as an exacerbating or contributing factor for hazard events, and how agencies can more effectively reduce public anxiety and uncertainty through effective use of communication channels. Some of the cases involve actions of government agencies, and some involve private industry in a manner that required public intervention.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is a common case study for its handling of crisis communication. The agency's response to the space shuttle *Columbia* disaster in 2003 was initially commended because information was provided in a well-timed and forthright manner. NASA had worked on emergency response planning and communication in light of previous problems. It commented on what had occurred often and through various media, including use of online fora. However, the agency intervened in investigations and conjectured about what may have caused the accident before it had information to support such assertions. The agency's organizational culture also permeated its response; the agency did not have all the answers, but its overconfident attitude expressed a sentiment of undue comfort (Kauffman, 2005). This raises the idea that planning alone is not a good indicator of the potential for a quality response in crisis; organizational culture and ability for staff members to proactively respond to concerns are also impactful (Marra, 1998).

A review of public relations by BP following the Deepwater Horizon event in 2010 shows that the private sector may do no better than governments in handling crisis communication when they have perfunctory corporate cultures or do not take communications seriously as part of the response (Valvi & Fragkos, 2013). In BP's case, the lack of a professional public relations response aggravated an already difficult situation.

The Three Mile Island accident in 1979 provides an example of how to not handle a crisis from a communications perspective. Friedman (2011) points out:

> Reporting on the accident reflected the confusion among personnel from the utility, the
> state government, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) about what was
> happening in the nuclear plant during the accident and about radiation releases [and a] .
> . . language gap among the engineers, government officials, and journalists. (p. 58)

Friedman's article compares Three Mile Island with Chernobyl and the more recent Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant disaster and finds that the Fukushima event resulted in the creation of vast amounts of information. There were continuing problems with vetting of experts for media coverage; the intricacy of nuclear power also inspired intense anxiety in the general population.

The Fukushima disaster informs us that governments have not, in many instances, learned from the mistakes of others with regard to effective disaster communication; when confronted with the unthinkable, the public sector may respond in a way that is beleaguered. Figueroa (2013) wrote that the

Fukushima case was differentiated by "the denial of risk, the downplaying of the seriousness of the crisis, and the failure to openly speculate about probable events and worst-case scenarios" (p. 58). The results of these communications failures are unmistakable:

> Uncertainty about . . . radioactivity exposures has heightened public anxiety, crippled local economies, and jeopardized the future of nuclear power in Japan . . . frustration and anger at the response of Japanese authorities to the disaster, including bungled communications and withholding of information during and after the crisis, has severely damaged public trust. (Pacchioli, 2013, p. 4)

In the Fukushima case, Ramana (2013) found a "capacity for self-deception and an unjustified confidence in a hazardous technology" (p. 70) that have far-reaching implications.

Organizational culture—specifically culture prone to stasis and passing blame—took a primary position in the collective consciousness during the 2005 hurricane season. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina remains fresh in the minds of those who work in or study crisis communication. Communication during and after Katrina was problematic for a variety of reasons and at all levels of government. Failure occurred at a fundamental level, and involved "communication blackouts that necessitated Civil War-like runners delivering messages" (Menzel, 2006, p. 810). Kapucu and Van Wart (2008) identified a serious lack of coordination and trust among agencies. Communication, a primary leadership skill, was needed but in short supply, and this "failure to create a sense of assurance, order, and/or urgency" resulted in "weak coordination and lack of goodwill" (p. 720). Public anger was stoked and the language of betrayal was broached in public discourse; government had failed so utterly in responding that it turned a bad event into disaster. Katrina and its response remain synonymous with government having failed in its role to set things right after a hazard event, or at the very least, not to cause additional harm.

Hurricane Katrina raised significant issues in communication that have been subsequently taken up in scholarly venues. Disasters require that "a timely, effective, culturally sensitive, and gender-appropriate response must be enacted. Such a response must recognize that those affected by disaster may have standards of justice and ethical traditions that differ from those of the responders" (Geale, 2012, p. 457). Race and gender influence perception of risk; consideration of such factors, which affect vulnerability in the population, has been recommended in several instances (Bourque et al., 2013; Phillips & Morrow, 2007). The possibility exists that the public may not be listening to official media or taking warnings seriously, as found by West and Orr (2007). Providing multilingual warnings has also been mentioned as a need in crisis communication (Benavides, 2013). Attention to psychological aspects of response has been recommended in light of behavioral issues identified during and after Katrina among public sector employees and elected officials (Gheytanchi et al., 2007). The convergence of negative characteristics—personal, organizational, and those stemming from natural hazard impacts—created an untenable situation from a crisis communication standpoint.

Even in Katrina, best practices of organizations such as the Red Cross have been identified that make sense for responses elsewhere. Promptness in response; establishing a crisis communication network and associated partnerships; accepting uncertainty, honesty, accessibility to the media; and

accounting for differences in culture are all generalizable lessons in crisis communications from the Red Cross' experience in Katrina (Veil & Husted, 2012).

When these lessons are applied, not every hazard event becomes a full disaster; communication is the key. In the case of the Tangshan earthquake, promptness in warning was identified as an action that made the difference between life and death (Col, 2007). Regarding the experience of Polk County, Florida, with Hurricane Charley in 2004, Jarret stressed the value of setting up "a communication network between and among key people" (2004, p. 22); the case also emphasized awareness of "procedures for notifying the public at large… [designating a] media briefing location… [and] press releases and public-access television stations being given regular updates and alerts" (p. 23) as contributing to a successful emergency action plan.

In their case study on the 2010 flash floods in Leh, Ladakh, North India, Gupta, Khanna, and Majumdar (2012) offer that "effective communication was crucial for effective coordination of rescue and relief operations" (para. 23).  They mention that the army communication system served as a substitute for the destroyed public communications and mobile network in the wake of the event and allowed coordination to occur. Although lives were lost in this event, the prompt and professional response, adaptiveness, and clarity in communication kept the situation from spiraling out of control.

The responsibility for effective public communications does not stop after the response period, and it is a major consideration for keeping the public engaged over what may be a long recovery effort. From the perspective of ongoing communication after a hazard event, in the instance of the Bam, Iran, earthquake in 2003, "the UNDP [United Nations Development Program] initiated a newsletter to keep the community of victims informed as to the ongoing and prospective recovery efforts" (Moore, Trujillo, Stearns, Basurto-Davila, & Evans, 2009, p. 11). Keeping citizens engaged and active in public discourse in the months and years after a crisis can be a key to ensuring inclusiveness of recovery efforts as communities and citizens strive to attain a "new normal."

I now turn to an overview of the 2011 flood in Minot.

### The Souris (Mouse) River Flood

In June 2011, Minot, North Dakota, experienced the worst flood event in its recorded history when the Souris River (locally called the Mouse) topped its banks. Information on potential flooding from Canadian sources was shown to be unreliable, so the city's response time was further reduced. On June 26, 2011, the Mouse crested at 3.7 meters over its flood stage, and the city and the surrounding area were overcome with floodwaters. The flood affected 4,636 hectares. A total of 4,800 structures were flooded, 4,115 of which were homes. Eleven thousand people were evacuated (City of Minot, 2013). The damage to parks, schools, public infrastructure, and businesses in the community was considerable. As of December 2012, Minot estimated its unmet need at $1.09 billion (Hambek, 2012).

The problem of flooding in Minot was made more difficult by the recent oil boom in the state. Coupled with the housing crunch caused by the oil businesses, flooding placed an immeasurable weight

upon the community. Although the oil industry had spurred growth, which resulted in great potential for economic development and infrastructure revitalization, Minot experienced growing pains. The small city government had a clear and immediate need to serve a larger community and respond to that challenge. However, housing was already in demand before the flood, and short-term lodging in hotels was extremely limited. The flood created complications that undermined response and recovery efforts while muddling the difficult task of imagining a future Minot when the future had in some sense already arrived. The typical vulnerabilities that existed in Minot exist elsewhere, and they represent an even greater challenge in the context of the city's prospects.

The flood did not turn into a disaster event for Minot, although it tested citizens with its damage to the city and disruption of lives. The city could have easily failed to respond to the crisis, but instead it rolled up its collective sleeves and went to work in response and recovery. The effort has valuable implications for how communities respond to hazards, from small cities to larger metropolitan areas. The response is even more striking in light of what has become a dark time for government and community relationships.

## Methodology

This study relies upon qualitative data analysis of primary interviews. More specifically, it uses grounded theory, defined as "theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process . . . theory [emerges from] the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). Interviews formed the basis of the study as field notes and were reduced through coding; data was classified and themes developed that support theory building and provide explanation of phenomena. The approach taken here approximates an open-axial-selective coding process. As Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) explain, "coding is analysis" (p. 72) and a data condensation task. The heuristic method allowed exploration of the disparate interviews, and common elements and themes became clear through the refining of codes into themes from description and evaluation to analysis.

The unit of analysis for this case is Minot, North Dakota, because the city tended to be at the center of the flood, the initial response, and the subsequent recovery efforts. Ten interviews were conducted for this study—two by telephone early in 2012, and eight in person in July 2012. The two telephone interviews were the initial exploration of the concepts that led to the fully realized interview and study process. One of the telephone interviews yielded contact information for major officials for the city and nonprofit organizations involved in the response and recovery effort. The officials listed represented a strong purposive sampling (Miles et al., 2014) of senior decision makers across various organizations, including public sector, faith-based groups, and nonprofits. The interviews focused on events leading up to the flood, as well as the flood itself and the response and recovery effort.

All 10 interviews were used in the coding process, yielding major themes about the response and specifically about how public communication in the flooding aftermath contributed to a return to normalcy or potentially hindered such an outcome. The interviews reflected disparate perspectives, based on the interviewee and organizational affiliation. Nevertheless, the emergence of clear themes indicates community-based tendencies to perceive the flood response and recovery experience in distinct ways. This

tends to support and validate the study's findings, in terms of identifying and describing the community's perception and active creation of reality in the flood's aftermath, particularly where this behavior involves crisis communication. The inherent limitations of a single case with only 10 interviewees are acknowledged; however, a fairly strong cross-section of official actors informs the perspectives presented here, and the case is worthwhile even with the relatively small sample.

The interviews relied upon a semistructured interview format, given the need to understand the rich context of the event, the community's culture, and their impacts on response and recovery. The study was exploratory and sought to understand what happened in Minot from the perspective of the officials and tried to avoid researcher impact as much as possible (Miles et al., 2014). Officials were asked the questions and encouraged to respond as they wished, highlighting points that they felt most important to the conversation. This allowed for additional exploration of facets of response and recovery that could not have been assumed or defined via a structured interview format or more quantitative-based approaches. The conversations revealed a depth of meaning in how the various actors saw their roles in the response and recovery and the creation of identity among various organizations. Interviews featured both general questions and a few more specific questions related to the official's particular role. General queries included:

- Tell me about government's role in responding to the flood.

- Was the response effective?

- Was the response efficient?

- What could have been done better?

- How would you characterize the Minot community? What makes it different or special?

Interviews were recorded on an MP3 recorder and then transcribed by a third party (www.rev.com). Officials are referred to generically in this paper for anonymity. Qualitative analysis was facilitated through the use of MAXQDA. Given the particular research question addressed here—What impact, if any, did crisis communication have on the response and recovery effort in Minot, North Dakota, after the 2011 flood?—I focused most intently on the themes and insights that suggest a connection with crisis communication.

**Results**

Table 1 is a contrast table of various groups involved in the flood response and recovery in Minot. The table includes pre-event, response, and recovery phases and describes themes related to each group from a communication viewpoint. I found that crisis communication did have an impact on response and recovery in the 2011 flooding event, in a variety of respects. Some of the impacts were positive, and others allowed for opportunities to improve response in the future.

*Table 1. Contrast Table: Group Response for Pre-event, Response, and Recovery Phases, 2011 Minot Flood.*

|  | PRE-EVENT | RESPONSE | RECOVERY |
|---|---|---|---|
| **FEDERAL AND STATE GOVERNMENT** | Considerable resources available, but tone of conversation with city about not being able to account for or respond to all losses after the flood was blunt and not particularly reassuring. | Some difficulties dealing with FEMA during response phase. Levels of government not working together well. Federal rules described as out of line with local needs. | Coordination: City was able to work with federal and state authorities to align requirements. City was ready to use funding when it became available. |
| **LOCAL AND NATIONAL PRESS** | Little coverage of the threat of flooding outside the community. Some knowledge of city in context of oil boom, but city and the flood threat were not well-known throughout the country. | National press coming into Minot to cover the event did not help response or recovery effort. Event was not adequately covered. Considerable early coverage gave way to the event's response/recovery largely being ignored due to coverage of other hazard events. *Minot Daily News* and other local media covered the event in impressive fashion. | Some coverage of events held as part of the recovery, given the participation of nationally known figures (e.g., Black Eyed Peas concert called "Minot Rising"; involvement of actor Josh Duhamel, a Minot native, in organizing event, "Summer of Hope.") |
| **LOCAL GOVERNMENT** | Disaster planning awareness existed. Communications problem with Canadian officials about river flow and flood threat was apparent. | Absence of PIO on city staff created problems in communicating with the public. Information did not come out fast enough. City staff committed to response and recovery, and worked long hours. Mayor's response inspired confidence. | PIO added to city's response team; city recognized the important role of dissemination of information. Need recognized for definitive plan to deal with flooding threat in the future. Public participation emphasized in recovery effort. |
| **NONPROFITS** | Skill existed in the community nonprofit organizations to respond to potential hazard events. | Need was recognized for director of long-term recovery for consistency in process and approach. Key staff stayed on to help. City and nonprofits somewhat frustrated with each other at times, but still committed toward a common goal of response and recovery. | Could have made better use of e-mail communication since it is fixed; using mail service tended to create problems in getting information to residents. Had information that could have been used for follow-up with residents but did not use it. |
| **FAITH-BASED GROUPS** | Faith-based groups had experience and were able to mobilize. Skilled with logistics and management of volunteer personnel from various faith communities. Diverse faith communities shared a common goal. | The people who came to Minot to volunteer were professionals at the top of their game. Willing to work hard. Recognition that hiring recovery staff was needed. | Instrumental in the positive recovery effort, through Hope Village program. Were able to communicate among faith-based groups and with community partners to accomplish tasks. |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Groups willing to set aside differences and come together in the effort. |

As shown in Table 1, successful coordination of community-wide resources and creation of goodwill through a united effort in response and recovery were major themes in the interviews. The story of the impact of crisis communication in Minot's response lies at the local level. Discussion here tends to focus on those instances in which response was deemed not as effective as it could have been, mirroring the personal and searching tone of the interviews. This is not intended as a negative judgment on the case; public officials were self-reflective leading up to the crisis, throughout the event, and in the aftermath about what was occurring and how their service to the public could be better. The capacity to recognize issues as they arose and be adaptive in addressing them is unusual and striking in this case. In crisis, failures of all kinds are expected; it is not that they occur, but how we respond to them. This is a positive attribute of community capacity. It is not equally shared in all communities, but it could be emulated. As part of a larger study of the event, I found that government did a particularly strong job of responding under difficult circumstances, generally speaking (Atkinson, 2014)—hence the focus on divergences here.

A key point from the literature mentioned by several interviewees was the importance of a PIO—a central contact for coordination of critical response communication who would be relied upon by the public as authoritative and trustworthy. One official commented:

> I think the single thing that I would do differently in that regard is we would have a public information officer. We do now. . . . We were able to hire a firm to provide those services to us, and it's made a world of difference since we had that person aboard because there are things that those of us who aren't in that field don't recognize always, the difficulty . . . we may think we're getting the message out but not everybody is hearing it or seeing it because we're not thinking broadly enough. . . . The City of Minot [never had] a public information officer that was an employee of the city. They never had someone whose key job was to work with the media or to disseminate that information. And they recognized that, actually pre-flood, that that was a position they wanted to fill eventually. And it became incredibly obvious during the flood and the day of the flood that they needed it fast.

Even without a PIO in place at the start of the crisis, the city sought to communicate about the response the best it could under the circumstances; this emphasizes the importance of institutional culture and ability of staff to adjust to changing needs. The mayor did an admirable job of communicating with the public and inspiring the city's legitimacy in leading response efforts. Recovery went more smoothly because of a coordinated communications effort, as an official remarked:

> We also have education and public awareness . . . that's all the information that we discuss at our meetings every Monday in Long-Term Recovery, then go out to

communities. We have a media person involved, the news stations, everybody, *Minot Daily News*, any publicity [and] volunteer management.

An official made clear the need in crisis situations to respond in a timely and effective manner to the public's need for information:

I can tell you that I felt like from a city government perspective our greatest downfall was communication. We had a website that we used, we had news conferences daily, sometimes several times a day, we had news releases, we had all kinds of interviews, people that were intimately involved with the mayor [and other officials], [and] a number of people from the city . . . being interviewed by people locally and by national interviews. We did . . . a lot of stuff. At one time I had a list of seven different ways that we tried to communicate, but it wasn't enough. . . . There was just too much need for information, and we weren't getting it there fast enough.

Others commented that media consultants may have helped with getting the message out more quickly. In addition to city officials, other interviewees pointed out that identifying and encouraging volunteers was difficult due to a lack of communication. This likely left the public unclear on some aspects of the response early on. The city had a Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/minotnorthdakota), for example, but there was relatively little posting interaction between the page and citizens in the days leading up to the flood. The lack of a PIO for local government prevented rapid sharing of official information and interaction with citizens. This represented a missed opportunity for clear, official communication, and was a serious issue in this case early on because rumor control became a real concern. An official raised this issue:

Lack of communication causes considerable mistrust because there's all kinds of misinformation. . . . What I learned is don't believe anything on [social media] because most of it wasn't true . . . was stuff coming out about the recovery . . . [and I thought] "where on Earth did you get that from?"

Clearly delineated and utilized social media channels may have cured this problem.

Local television stations, which stayed on the air with coverage of the flood and aftermath, were praised for their commitment to covering the event and reporting essential information. KXMC-TV used Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/kxnewsminot) to gather information about the flood's impacts from viewers, and offered live camera feeds in its multimedia coverage. *The New York Times* ran a story about the station's up-to-the-minute coverage (Stelter, 2011), which was being used by residents to observe how much damage their property had sustained. The coverage was so popular that, according to one interviewee, the station did not know when to discontinue it. As of this writing, examples of the extensive coverage exist on youtube.com (KXMC-TV, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d, 2011e). The coverage filled an apparent void, given comments from viewers and traffic to the station's website, and helped residents make sense of the event more quickly, so that they could deal with it personally and move on. An official stated, "The communication that really took place, the really effective day-to-day, hour-to-hour communication that took place was from the local media, and that was really good. It was invaluable to

the community." The *Minot Daily News*, the local newspaper, was also instrumental in getting the story of the flood out to the community and the world outside Minot. Newspaper reporter Kim Fundingsland also participated in a poignant June 22 interview on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* as the waters of the Mouse River continued to rise (Siegel, 2011).

Contingency planning was another theme of the interviews. Related to crisis communication is the need for continuity of operations planning. If operations are so affected by an event that basic processes are in doubt, it will not be likely that communications about the state of response or recovery will reduce fears or uncertainty from the public. An official stated:

> Having a good continuity of operations plan [was critical]. Because we were moved . . .
> ultimately our office was moved twice . . . actually three times if you want to count [an
> earlier evacuation]. We lost our office, too. For us, it was having a good plan in getting
> set up, business as usual, wherever we were set up.

The sense of goodwill in the community for neighbors helping each other was especially strong. An official offered:

> When the call went out that . . . the flood was imminent and there was no way the city could stop
> it, literally, there are hundreds of stories that some people were just walking down the street
> saying, "Who needs help?" People from the Air Force base, only 10 minutes away from town, and
> some of them were students from the Minot [State] University; some of them were just complete
> strangers.

The fact that the call went out and the genuineness of the threat was communicated was crucial to the very early and proactive stance the city took in response. What motivated the community? An official suggested, "Maybe it's faith, that could be what it is. It might be people have learned from their church or their faith to try to take care of their neighbors, and that's important in our everyday life."

Even with the mostly positive characterization of the response, including networking, partnerships, and ability to adjust, there were still opportunities for improvement. There were e-mail address databases that could have been used for contacting residents, particularly given the prevalence of cell phones and ways of accessing e-mail even when citizens are evacuated. An official reflected:

> One of the failures that we did, and I really do feel bad about this, on the survey we had
> almost everybody surveyed, pretty close, gave us e-mail addresses and we never used
> them. Well, we were overwhelmed. What an opportunity.

This opportunity was doubly important because of the problems seen by the postal service in trying to contact people: "We could have created a communications method because the postal service failed and I understand why. They couldn't find people."

It was generally recognized that poor flood planning had created vulnerability for the city and its residents.  An official observed:

> First of all, if you live in an area where a river flows through . . . know your elevations of your buildings. We had become complacent here in Minot because we really felt that the Flood Protection Plan had taken care of everything, and not only did it flood, it flooded worse than it ever has in recorded history.

Fundamentals of preparation can impact communication during crisis. Several interviewees raised concerns that local government, nonprofits, and others did not approach recovery with one vision and voice as much as they could have. Other interviewees pointed out that disaster planning is an ongoing process: "We're still at least meeting and communicating but we have to get to the point of in the event of a disaster . . . this is what we need." Coordination in disaster planning was recognized as key, and community partners were coming together to identify skills in the event of future crises:

> They're starting to take profiles of us and find out who could do what in what situation. If this disaster happened tomorrow, at least we'll know everybody and we can all say, "[Group] was good at cooking, which they still do. Here's where we maybe can have an emergency shelter which there's no place to have one right now because of everything else going on right now."

This is indicative of long-term network creation that is so essential to quality public communication, and evidence of a learning community at work.

Finally, the national press was criticized for not remaining in some capacity to tell the story of Minot after the flood. This event did not constitute a disaster, so the interest of the national media in covering it was fleeting, as an official witnessed:

> We had every media outlet in the world, it seemed like, for a few days. It was right here, right now, and then when they left there was a void. We had the local media and that was about it. We had a few [news outlets] from maybe Fargo or from Bismarck, but the national media was gone.

Another official suggested:

> We were *the disaster* for about a week and [the national press] moved on. So being on that national spotlight this can hinder our growth a little bit . . . [we lost] the opportunity to continue to tell our story . . . to get the assistance . . . in any which way shape or form that we can.

I now turn to discussion of the results and concluding thoughts on the case study.

**Discussion and Concluding Thoughts**

Communication was a major feature of the response and recovery effort for the 2011 flooding event in Minot, North Dakota, and it was instrumental in the city's outcomes. Although there were some issues with communication in the response, notably the initial absence of a PIO, the city and its partners nevertheless sought to communicate with the public in a way that was forthright and honest. The city came together in support of itself, with neighbors assisting each other. The city and its partners are further differentiated from official actors in other notable cases by their understanding of the need to make good use of the feedback from the event—what worked well, what could be improved, and how new or improved use of communication channels may provide an improved communication standard in the case of future crisis events. The self-evaluation was insightful, honest, and comprehensive. Although the demographics of the community are perhaps more homogenous than in other cases, there is reason to believe that this city acted in a manner that would characterize any tightly knit community, whether in western North Dakota or within a bustling metropolis someplace else. A safety net existed, and this reduced vulnerability; therefore, safety nets based on shared understanding and clear communication can be encouraged in other communities.

When the national media left Minot, an ability to voice the need that still existed for recovery operations was lost, and this was detrimental to the city's efforts. The city had to rely upon itself even more as a result, and make use of existing networks and home-grown determination to rebuild and recover. There was almost no coverage of the event after the threat of tragedy went away. Tragedy sells in dark times, which says more about base instincts than it does about the ethos of public service and the ability and capacity of public servants to serve their communities in crisis. We may be inclined to ignore the everyday incidence of heroism and dedication to public service. Perhaps the future of the public service is not nearly as dark as it might seem from news coverage, because there are instances of those who quietly carry out their business of serving communities in the face of overwhelming odds. Although aspects of the response did not always work optimally, communication, openness, and candor still allowed for the maintenance of goodwill that carried into the recovery effort. An interviewee confirmed this sentiment: "I think there's a wonderful story here of community cooperation and success in rebuilding, and I think it's a story that does need to be told."

In his moving vision of the Haiti earthquake as apocalypse, Junot Díaz (2011) wrote: "We need the revelations that come from our apocalypses. . . . Because we must change, we also must refuse the temptation to look away when confronted with disasters" (p. 50). Díaz echoes the sentiment of dark times that began this paper and mentions that "sometimes we have to look in the ruins for hope" (p. 52).

Minot was not a disaster per se, or a catastrophe on the level of Haiti's earthquake or Hurricane Katrina along the Gulf Coast, but the event does provide an example of how communities communicate during crisis, how residents and institutions respond to the challenge, and how people move forward in recovery. Learning from this case is applicable to more communities and circumstances because communities must contend with hazard events of all sorts, understand public needs, and communicate effectively. Minot found hope through its unflinching approach to the crisis and belief in its future. One official offered:

Neighbors that were not neighbors before, I mean they lived next door, but they weren't the real definition of a neighbor, now know each other. The bad stuff that we look at, there's so much good that came out from the other side. I think that's why we're recovering at a faster rate than anybody else has done. Those pieces, I think in a few years, five years down the line, ten years, we're going to be ten times the community we ever were.

Another official notes a remarkable point:

I think that there are a couple of things that are indicative of the city and one of them is the fact that in no time during the flood we had more than 300 people in temporary housing. So as people brought people in, they took care of people, and that was a pretty awesome thing.

A "Summer of Hope" theme branded Minot's recovery in 2012. This showed a noteworthy response to menace and calamity that may not have been expected by people outside the area. However, for the community itself, perhaps there could have been no other way forward. The combination of strong worth ethic, faith in community, and personal relationships among neighbors made a tremendous difference in the outcome Minot experienced. The theme of crisis communication underlies the case, for both positive traits and issues that undermined response and recovery efforts. It is notably true in dark times that citizens need reinforcement of their belief in the public sector; this case shows an example of community elements coming together to respond to a threat and recover from it. The city and its partners did not reflect the negative portrayal of bureaucracy mired in process above outcome, they sought ways to work together and to keep the public informed. Even where there were failures in this regard, they showed that it is indeed possible to learn from mistakes made and to take proactive stances to secure more positive outcomes in the future. This expression of capability and selflessness from the public sector highlights an optimistic response to a jaded public—a light in a dark time of crisis, and genuine hope among the ruin.

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