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THE CLOCK -WORK LAHAR

**Examining issues management in a
New Zealand public service context**

Mark Dittmer
2008

The Clockwork Lahar:

Examining issues management in a
New Zealand public service context

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Masters of Management in Communication Management at
Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

David Mark Dittmer
2008

Abstract

Issues management has been practised over the past 30 years. However, the literature has focused on how corporations manage issues, while public service organisations have been ignored. This study looked at the issues management of a tephra dam-break lahar from 1996-2007 on Mount Ruapehu, New Zealand by a group of public service organisations. 19 interviews were conducted with people involved with the management of the 'lahar issue' to find out how the issue was managed. Further a content analysis of 309 articles from five newspapers, spanning the full eleven year period, was conducted to examine the salience (attention) given to the issue, the frames commonly used to present the issue and the sources who 'drove' the issue.

The data from the content analysis was interpreted to create a five-stage lifecycle of the 'lahar issue'. Further, data from the interviews was compared with a summary process of the issue management process. This comparison showed that five issues management process stages were employed to manage the 'lahar issue' although they were not referred to as such.

Initially, the Department of Conservation consulted stakeholders during the development of options to deal with the lahar (1996-1999). Later in the lahar's management, lahar stakeholders fell into two categories: internal - those involved with the mitigation and response - and external - the public. Internal stakeholders were communicated with through meetings and email. External stakeholders were communicated with through local media, presentations and meetings.

Overall, it was concluded that media gave substantial attention to the lahar issue over the eleven year period. Some of those involved with managing the 'lahar issue' were able to identify the phases of media coverage. Further, this study identified ten frames that media employed when reporting the lahar. The most-frequently used frames were those focusing on the response (lahar response), describing the lahar (diagnosing causes of problem(s)) and discussing the potential impacts from a lahar (definition of problem(s)). Department of Conservation Scientist, Dr Harry Keys, was shown to be a

primary definer – an influential source. The results suggest he defined coverage because of his status as both an official source, due to the organisation he was associated with, and also as an authoritative source due to his role as a scientist. Further, he was regularly drawn upon as a source over the entire period of the ‘lahar issue’ coverage.

Acknowledgements

Writing a thesis is like running a marathon. And no marathon runner can do what they do without support.

Listed on this page are the names of the people who helped make the Clockwork Lahar happen and to who I owe a big “thank you” for their help...

Thank you to my supervisors, **Associate Professor Margie Comrie** and **Dr Heather Kavan**, for their guidance and feedback.

To my interviewees for their generosity with their time and information. They all deserve to be named here...

- **Shane Bayley (Horizons)**
- **Harry Broad (Department of Conservation)**
- **Herb Christophers (Department of Conservation)**
- **Mike Craig (Police)**
- **Johan Cullis (Ruapehu District Council)**
- **Barbara Dempsey (formerly of Ruapehu District Council)**
- **Roland Devine (Opus)**
- **Paul Green (Department of Conservation)**
- **Harry Keys (Department of Conservation)**
- **Murray Marshall (Ontrack)**
- **John Norton (formerly of Civil Defence)**
- **Annie Pedersen (Ruapehu District Council)**
- **Brad Scott (Geological Nuclear Sciences)**
- **Brian Sheppard (Department of Conservation)**
- **Doug Tucker (Genesis)**
- **Dave Wakelin (Department of Conservation)**
- **Grant Webby (Opus)**
- **Paul Wheatcroft (Ruapehu District Council)**
- **Dave White (Police)**

Special thanks to **Herb Christophers**, **Harry Keys** and **Murray Marshall** for the use of their photos.

Thank you to all the librarians who assisted me at various stages of my research. In particular, **Anne Hall** and **Jane Leighton** of Massey University’s Document Supply Service whose help saved me time and money. Also, **the librarians at the National Library in Wellington**, who were helpful and patient.

Thank you to **Senate Communications Counsel** for the research grant that assisted in the completion of this study.

Thanks to **Hugh Treadwell** and **Jim (James) Mason** for their interest in this study.

Thanks also to **Nigel Lowe** of Massey University’s Department of Communication, Journalism and Marketing for the whiz-bang gadgets.

Thanks you my sister, **Alison**, for the transcribing help. And thank you to **Cheryl McKay** for proofreading.

Thank you **Mum, Dad** and **Nana** for all the little things you did to help out.

And last, but not least, a big thank you to **Luke Anderson** for the company on the Turangi research expedition, content analysis verification, proof reading every chapter and for cheering me on when things were tough.

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Abbreviations

CIMS	Co-ordinated Incident Management System
DOC	Department of Conservation
EOC	Emergency Operation Centre
ERLAWS	Eastern Ruapehu Lahar Warning System
ICP	Incident Control Point
MCDEM	Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management
RAL	Ruapehu Alpine Lifts
RDC	Ruapehu District Council
SRLPG	Southern Ruapehu Lahar Planning Group
TDC	Taupo District Council

Key Terms

Bund	A rock embankment, built on the flank of Ruapehu during summer 2001/2002. It was designed to prevent a lahar from spilling into the Tongariro River catchment, which flows into Lake Taupo.
Lahar	A mixture of rock, ash and other volcanic debris. Their consistency has been compared to flowing concrete. Lahar's can occur in a variety of situations, but the key ingredient is water.
Tangiwai 1953	The fifth-worst disaster in New Zealand's history. On 24 December 1953, 151 people died when a passenger train bound for Auckland went into the flooded Whangaehu River at Tangiwai after a lahar washed out the rail bridge.
Tephra	A term that describes the products of volcanic eruptions: ash, rock and other material.
