

An Achilles Heel in Emergency Communications: The Deplorable Policies and Practices Pertaining to Non-English Speaking Populations

Federico Subervi, Ph.D.

Professor

School of Journalism & Mass Communication

Kent State University

fsubervif@kent.edu

Two Guiding Research Questions:

1. What are the emergency communication policies and actual practices related primarily to Spanish-speaking Latinos, but also to other non-English-speaking populations in:
 - Texas (Austin, San Antonio)
 - Illinois (Springfield, Chicago)?

Two Guiding Research Questions:

2. What can be done to contribute to the development of more comprehensive and efficient emergency communication practices and policies pertaining to non-English-speaking populations?

Two Fundamental Assumptions

- The safety of a community is contingent on well informed citizens, regardless of what language they speak or understand.

Two Fundamental Assumptions

- The safety of a community is contingent on well informed citizens, regardless of what language they speak or understand.
- Any individual's safety is potentially at risk if others around him/her are not properly informed on what is happening and what to do during crisis situations.

Three Areas of Inquiry

- Demographic / language dynamics
- Government emergency communication policies & practices
- Spanish-language broadcast media emergency communication policies & practices

Spanish-language speakers

- Central Texas: > 628,000
- State of Texas: > 2,141,599

Government's policies...

- Internet searches
- Interviews (when granted)

Government's policies...

Important, crucial, but limited in multilingual Internet-based information, and immediate delivery, especially during height of any major crisis.

Government's policies...

During height of emergencies,
information for media is delivered
primarily in English.

Information in Spanish or other
languages is not always possible.

Limited funding for staff, other options.

SL media practices...

- Internet searches
- Interviews (when granted)
- Public files

Interviews: Radio

- **Emergency weather alerts aired most of the time (but not always by all stations).**
- **Many in English, especially if no staff available to translate.**
- **Lack of news staff to cover and provide more information if not provided by government.**
- **Little or no follow-up after storms for guidance on shelter, assistance.**

Interviews: TV

- **Limited or no access to top management of Univision TV stations (info from NY hq)**
- **Personal visit to Azteca América Austin.**
- **Personal visit to Telemundo–San Antonio.**
- **Phone conversation with Telemundo-Austin.**

Interviews: TV

- **Severe weather alerts broadcast**
- **Not always in Spanish: Scrolls in English**
- **News coverage from Telemundo: breaking news, interrupted syndicated programs**
- **TV Azteca: no interruptions for emergencies—programming can't be changes without 28-hour notice**
- **Case of hurricane Rita...**

Other interviews

- Civic leaders
- Ms. Ann Arnold, President of Texas Association of Broadcasters
- Mr. David Honig & others in DC working on FCC policies
- Details in report

Recommendations: Government

- Multi-lingual staff, especially at peak times, who can deal with SL media
- More knowledge of and involvement with SL media
- Internet-based information, resources
- Collaborative grants

Recommendations: Government

- Require ethnic language transmissions for ethnic language broadcast media.
- Require this even for low-power outlets such as Azteca
- Require emergency set-up for 24/7

Recommendations: Radio-TV

- Set-up for alerting 24/7, not just 9-5
- Use new technology for remote alerts when stations are on automatic
- Automatic info of more than just alerts, e.g., contact phones and/or Internet sites

Recommendations: Radio-TV

- Pool resources and transmissions when needed and possible
- Train and have extra support staff
- Set up internal chain of command protocols for all the above

Recommendations: Academic units

- Education and training for
 - Students
 - Media professionals
 - Community leaders
 - Collaboration among them

Recommendations: Academic units

- Become conduits for
 - Support staff
 - Alternative, grassroots gatherers and disseminators of reliable information
 - Use of new technologies, social media that need not depend on govt., media

Recommendations: Community Leaders & Business

- Take advocacy roles to pressure
 - Government
 - Media
 - Academic units

Many pending questions

- Are there educational, training programs/options already in place elsewhere that should be considered here?
- What new technologies, social media exist that can make the broadcast media less crucial during emergencies?
- How would the most vulnerable populations—such as Spanish-speaking farm workers in the fields—be better informed?
- What doable policies can be offered at the federal level, especially with the FCC, to make positive inroads?

- [For a full report, executive summary, and op-ed piece, go to:](#)
- <http://www.masscomm.txstate.edu/csImm/research.html>
- For the USDHHS's Guidance for Integrating Culturally Diverse Communities into Planning and Responding to Emergencies: A Toolkit, go to:
- http://www.diversitypreparedness.org/Topic/Subtopic/Record-Detail/18/resourceId__19680/

Federico Subervi, Ph.D.

Professor

School of Journalism & Mass Communication

Kent State University

fsubervif@kent.edu

330-672-6287