

Press Freedom and Catastrophe

© Mark Mantho

In reviewing newspaper and magazine reports on the Three Mile Island incident, the Chernobyl disaster, and the *Challenger* explosion, I came away with the obvious but heartening notion that when catastrophe strikes, media coverage in the United States compels relatively frank and timely disclosure of factual information. Unlike the Soviet apparatchiks of yore, American officials realize they are accountable. That realization often inspires needed change and, sometimes, an opportunity to demonstrate shared values.

When an accident occurred at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant on April 28, 1979, statements by federal and local authorities, and the plant's private ownership, were in frequent and alarming conflict. Initially, Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials stated radiation leaking from the plant into the central Pennsylvania countryside was not life-threatening, and that the incident was caused by a series of faulty filters. Spokesmen for plant operator Metropolitan Edison played down the accident as "some minor fuel failure" and contended that failure of a pump valve led to the release of radiation (an assertion disputed by the pump's makers, who revealed the pumps had no valves). After originally accepting Metro Edison's declaration that radiation emissions were "negligible," then-Governor Richard

Thornburgh complained he wasn't receiving all the facts and reportedly considered a mass evacuation of nearby residents. All of this – and much more – contributed to a skittish public mood and an increasingly antagonistic attitude among the press.

Indeed, just a day after it reported the accident, the *New York Times* ran a front page article ("Conflicting Reports Add to Tension") which brought that antagonism into sharp relief. Recounting contradictory statements about the level of radiation escaping into the atmosphere, the story described how Metro Edison spokesman John G. Herbein was forced to back off his previous claim that radiation levels from the plant were "less than that of a dental X-ray" after persistent questioning by the media. "Reporters grew angry," related the article, "when Mr. Herbein went on to defend the company's repeated emissions of radioactive material ... without prior announcement." The *Times* also noted that in an unfortunate fit of corporate pique, "at one point (Herbein) replied sharply, 'I don't know why we need to tell you each and every thing we do.' "

Combined with other, less than candid statements from Metro Edison – a trend which continued unabated throughout the crisis – such comments precipitated public outrage that in turn led to swift intervention by the federal government. A day after the accident was reported, President Carter dispatched the NRC's chief operations officer to the disaster site and empowered him with the authority to overrule plant officials. In a bid to

reassure jittery Americans, Carter subsequently toured Three Mile Island himself (with the First Lady in tow), ordered an investigation, and assumed personal responsibility for keeping the public informed ("You deserve a full accounting, and you will get it"). Congress, too, jumped into the act.

America's growing cultivation of nuclear energy – cultivation heretofore considered sensible by all but "the radical fringe" – was called into serious question for the first time. NRC officials were grilled relentlessly about lapses in procedure that might have led to the accident, and bipartisan support grew for reassessment and reform of the nation's nuclear energy policy.

It is not untrue to say that none of this would have occurred were it not for the press freedoms enjoyed by America's media and, by extension, the American people. The media was free to "shine a light into dark corners" – to hector, to criticize and, yes, to exaggerate – and the result was a genuine and far-reaching change in public and official attitudes toward nuclear power as a safe, viable source of energy. One may argue that our dependence on nuclear power has changed little in the years since Three Mile Island, yet the fact that we know what happened there at all provides eloquent testimony to the value of an unfettered press.

The same cannot be said, of course, for the Soviet Union's handling of the Chernobyl meltdown which took place a few years later. Unhampered as its officialdom was by any semblance of a free press, the Soviet government employed a familiar strategy of delay, obfuscation and cover-up in its wake.

Unlike authorities in the United States, who are obliged to answer for their mistakes whether they are inclined to do so or not, the Soviet Union disclosed nothing about the accident to the outside world or even its own people.

Grudging acknowledgement of the meltdown came days after the incident occurred – and then only in the face of undeniable evidence gathered by the Swedish government. The acknowledgment constituted but a single paragraph couched in the most tepid language possible. (In its entirety: "An accident occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and one of the reactors was damaged. Measures are being taken to eliminate the consequences of the accident. Aid is being given to those affected. A Government commission has been set up.")

Soviet citizens were given few health and safety directives, Western accounts of casualties were dismissed as "rumors," and Soviet television sought to knock down reports of a fire at the plant. On May 3, 1986 – seven days after the accident – Moscow's Communist Party chief, Boris Yeltsin, told West German media that there had in fact been a fire at Chernobyl, that approximately 49,000 people had been evacuated from the area surrounding the plant, and that "20 to 25" individuals had become critically ill as a result of the accident. An arm of the government, Soviet media reported none of this information. May Day (the traditional Soviet holiday honoring laborers) came and went, and with it an excellent opportunity for President Mikhail Gorbachev to comment on the meltdown and send his people a message of

simple remorse and mourning. Nearly fifteen years later, many particulars about the meltdown, and its continuing fallout, remain a mystery. Were it to happen today, the energetic (if still hamstrung) Russian media would doubtless tackle the story head-on. No press freedoms of this kind existed in the USSR of 1986. Whatever uncertainty they may feel about the world confronting them today, the people of the former Soviet Union have cause to lament that fact.

Americans had a tragedy of their own to lament in 1986, although in stark contrast to the Soviet management of the Chernobyl debacle, it demonstrated the crass but ultimately positive role a free press can play in an open society. On the morning of January 28, and for days thereafter, Americans were repeatedly bombarded with images of the space shuttle *Challenger* exploding and falling from the sky. Following a depressingly predictable pattern, the national media indulged in sensationalistic overkill (a practice which reached its ghoulish nadir when cameras recorded stunned family members reacting to the explosion). Even so, the intensive media coverage of the tragedy, especially on television, allowed average people to share their collective grief as a country – a peculiarly American phenomena inaugurated in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination. President Reagan addressed the nation hours after the explosion, proclaiming a day for "mourning and remembering" and hailing the shuttle crew as heroes who "slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God." He mentioned each

crew member by name, offered their families condolences on behalf of the American government and its people, and vowed the space program would continue.

Reagan learned of the shuttle explosion while preparing to brief network news anchors about his State of the Union address, scheduled to be delivered that evening. The next day's *Washington Post* carried a detailed account of the president's reaction as aides burst into the Oval Office to inform him of the disaster and how White House officials dealt with the unfolding situation. That such a story could appear in one of the nation's leading newspapers (and, in various forms, find its way into several other publications as well) is indicative of the extraordinary access media outlets have to the centers of power in the United States. One is hard pressed to imagine Russian journalists afforded similar entrée – even today. Equally telling was the president's sensitivity to public opinion in deciding to postpone the State of the Union address. And, as with the Three Mile Island incident, the *Challenger* tragedy sparked a national debate about the future of American involvement in space, abetted as always by a robust and vigorously inquisitive media.

In a society less open than ours, and with a press less free, such debate seem unlikely. Whatever its excesses, and they are many, Americans are blessed with a press largely unencumbered by the dictates of government authority. For that, at least, we can all be grateful.