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THE COST OF COAL:
THE WESTRAY MINE EXPLOSION, MAY 9, 1992

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN
THE MINE OWNER, THE MEDIA
AND THE COMMUNITY**

by

Trudie Richards, B.A.

**A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Journalism**

**School of Journalism and Communication
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
June, 1994**

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THE COST OF COAL: THE WESTRAY MINE EXPLOSION, MAY 9, 1992
An Examination of the relationship between the mine owner,
the media and the community

submitted by Trudie Richards, B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Journalism

Thesis Supervisor

Director, School of Journalism and Communication

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June 1, 1994

ABSTRACT

Technological crises are predictable and inevitable, particularly in a high-risk business such as mining. Corporations are advised to have a crisis plan with a communications component to facilitate proactive behaviour.

Journalists should also have a crisis plan so that they are prepared for inevitable events, informed about the industries in their area and able to tell the story substantively, accurately and in context.

The Westray coal mine, owned by Curragh Inc. of Toronto and located in Pictou County, Nova Scotia, exploded on May 9, 1992, killing 26 miners. This thesis analyses corporate and media performance in that event, and tests it against the research literature on the relations between journalists and public relations practitioners. Interviews were conducted with public relations advisers, journalists, mining industry representatives and miners, as well as with community leaders and members of the dead miners' families. Print and television coverage was also reviewed.

The thesis concludes that neither Curragh nor the participating media had crisis plans, which negatively affected their behaviours during the event. The company did not satisfy media demands. Journalists searched for human interest, made mistakes and decontextualized their coverage of the story.

The literature suggests failure to be prepared often means the business will not survive and that organizations which try to conceal information usually get caught. Curragh faces criminal charges resulting from the explosion, most of its assets are in receivership, and it is unlikely to recover.

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This thesis could not have been completed without the patient support and the critical eye of Gordon MacDonald.

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I am also grateful to Professor Joseph Scanlon, of Carleton University, for his help in the early stages of research.

The many people who so willingly offered their time and their thoughts have my heartfelt thanks.

DEDICATION

Twenty-six men died
in the explosion of the Westray mine,
leaving wives, parents and children
without husbands, sons and fathers.
This thesis is dedicated to the memory of those men.

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CHAPTER 1

THE EXPLOSION AT THE WESTRAY MINE

At 5:18 Saturday morning, May 9, 1992, a violent explosion erupted at the Westray coal mine in Plymouth, Nova Scotia. The explosion was so strong it blew the top off the mine entrance, more than a mile above, and shattered steel roof supports throughout the mine, trapping 26 men below. In the nearby towns, windows shattered and houses shook. Kathy Dobbs, a mental health worker at the Aberdeen General Hospital, lived close to the mine, and the force of the explosion woke her. "It was this incredible thud like I'd never heard before," she said. "The windows rattled. And the house shook -- just this little jar. It was like a noise that filled the atmosphere" (intvw).

She went on. "I felt this fear and dread. I remember thinking, 'Oh my God, the vastness of this.'" Within minutes, the phone rang, and she was instructed to stand by. She would spend the next week with the families of the trapped miners (intvw).

Kevin Cox, of the Halifax bureau of The Globe and Mail, was called at home by the Globe's weekend editor in Toronto about 9 a.m. that Saturday. He immediately started calling Westray, but there was no answer. Ten minutes later, his

editor called back to say Cox should contact a public relations company in Toronto for the latest news. Cox recalls thinking at the time this was an inauspicious beginning. Here he was, a reporter based in Nova Scotia, about to cover a major story in the province, having to call a Toronto information management specialist for his news (intvw).

Curragh Resources Inc., the owner of the Westray mine, had concluded a difficult annual meeting just days earlier -- difficult because the company was having financial problems. Curragh's chief executive officer, Clifford Frame, and his wife were en route to Japan for a combined business trip and holiday when the explosion occurred. They no sooner landed in Tokyo than they turned around and headed for Nova Scotia (Curley, Reid, intvws).

In the early hours after the explosion, three distinct groups positioned themselves for their roles in this tragic incident. The families of the trapped miners, supported by a community of friends and neighbours, gathered to seek and provide comfort, and to await news. The media converged on Plymouth, to collect news. And Curragh's senior managers were installed at the minesite, to manage the incident and to disseminate news.

There is one other main player in this sad tale: the police. Kevin Cox was one of about 100 reporters who came to Plymouth to tell the story of the Westray mine explosion. Plymouth is about a 90-minute drive from Halifax, and Cox was there by about 11 o'clock. He had decided to go straight to the mine, tried one road, and was met by, in his words, "about a dozen cops." A heated discussion ended with a plea from one officer. As Cox recalls, the officer said to him, "Whatever you do, don't get into a confrontation right now." Cox says he appreciated the warning. He turned his car around and proceeded to the other entrance to the minesite. Again, there was a roadblock.

Cox says the police presence was overpowering, and other reporters agree. They believe the police were there not to participate in the rescue effort, but to protect the company, and the families, from the media (Cox, Lightstone, Allison, intvws).

And so throughout that long week, there were essentially three camps. Curragh managers were in the minesite office; the media were in the community centre; the families were across the road in the fire hall. Police barricades ensured that movement was in one direction only -- from the company, to the families, to the press (see diagram, p.87).

The draegermen were the heroes in the immediate aftermath of the explosion. Draegermen are miners trained in rescue work, and their name derives from the German company, Draeger, that produced their breathing gear. Their role has evolved from an unwritten code that goes back in time as far as mining itself. The code is that miners who aren't trapped go to help those who are (Beach and Lucas, 1960, p.136).

The draegermen spent the next week cautiously and slowly working their way through the wreckage, burdened by breathing gear that weighed 35 pounds, and wary of repeated rock falls and secondary explosions. They were looking for survivors, knowing the chances of finding anyone alive were slim. On the second day, they discovered 11 bodies. Three days later, four more. As each day passed, hope faded that anyone would be found alive.

George Muise, a Cape Breton miner who has been a draegerman for 14 years, was captain of one of the mine rescue teams at Westray. Muise was worried about some of his men who had never seen bodies before, even though they said they'd be all right (Robb, 1992, p.45). It is believed the first 11 men they found died of poisoning from carbon monoxide, produced by combustion. "There were signs of high heat," Muise said later. "The hair was singed, the hands were closed into fists" (Robb, 1992, p.45). Muise recalled that

two of his draegermen were "apprehensive" about approaching the first victim they found:

They started to handle him like he was a little baby, like they were going to hurt him. That's where I had to step in... You have to try to snap them out of that (Robb, 1992, p.45).

The four bodies the draegermen found on Wednesday were in much worse condition. They "were burnt pretty bad," Muise said. "All their clothes were burnt off" (Robb, 1992, p.45).

Muise said they also found one other man:

He wasn't in pieces, he was all together, but it was like someone had put him through a trash compacter... Certain bones I could recognize, but you couldn't recognize anything as being human (Robb, 1992, p.47).

But before the draegermen could recover that body, the search was called off. On Thursday, May 14, Colin Benner, Curragh's president of operations, told the press there were no survivors, and that the risks to the draegermen were too great to continue the search for bodies. That was a difficult decision to make, because in mining communities there is a strong commitment to bringing up the dead. As George Muise later told journalist Nancy Robb, "We at least wanted to get the bodies out... it would never be over for some of these people, and we at least wanted to do that" (Robb, 1992, p.47).

By the next day, Friday, for the rest of the world at least, the tragic event was over. Most of the media had left. And the grieving community of Pictou County began the painful process of adjusting to terrible loss.

Twenty-six miners died. The remains of 11 bodies are buried in the sealed mine.

It is now believed the tragedy was caused by an explosion of methane gas. Methane gas is a natural by-product of coal, and when it is mixed with oxygen, it is combustible, which is why proper ventilation underground is so critical. The presence of coal dust makes mining even more dangerous, because a single spark can ignite the dust, and travel through it, as if it were gunpowder. As the flames lick up the dust, they strike pockets of methane and air, and the explosion intensifies. That's why it's crucial to treat the coal dust with rock dust, or ground limestone. Rock dust is heavier than coal dust, so it pushes the coal dust down to the mine floor, and covers it, so it won't explode.

This thesis will explore the evolution of relationships among the mine owner, the media and the community. In particular, it will consider how the public relations performance of Curragh affected the media's telling of the story, and how both affected the community. From a

reporter's perspective, Curragh's efforts to control the media, and information flow, were excessive. Lack of access meant reporters resorted to other methods, some of them questionable, to get the facts. For the families, protection from persistent media inquiries was, initially at least, gratefully received. In the early days, the families considered the company and police their allies.

And finally, for Curragh, the public relations component of this crisis -- dealing with the families and the media -- was only one priority. The rescue operation itself was a major preoccupation, and executives also had company shareholders and lawyers to consider.

Chapter 2 sets the framework by which the relationships described above will be judged. The literature review assesses the power of corporate public relations, the ways PR professionals and the media view each other, how the public views the corporate sector and the media, and how those relationships shift in time of crisis.

Chapter 3 will describe the players in this event. It will provide a portrait of the mining community in Pictou County, reflecting a tradition which dates back over 200 years. It will tell the story of Curragh's beginnings, the company's early prosperity and its subsequent decline. And it will

profile the media in Nova Scotia, and their common behaviour.

Chapter 4 will explore the relationships between Curragh, the media and the community following the May 9 explosion, and how antagonisms were established and relocated with the passing of time.

Chapter 5 will compare the reality of this tragedy with the experience as related in the literature.

And the Postscript will place the story of the Westray mine tragedy in the context of 1994, two years after the event.

The thesis will raise and address the following questions: How did Curragh manage a crisis for which it appeared to be so unprepared? If, as is alleged by some miners and reporters, the company had something to hide, is there a communications strategy that would have worked to better advantage? What insights can the media gain from examining their behaviour during this event? Are there steps journalists can take to ensure more thorough and accurate coverage, the next time a crisis occurs? And finally, what can the corporate sector and the media do to more sensitively consider the needs of relatives and the community at large under such unfortunate and stressful

circumstances?

It is hoped this analysis will contribute in some small way to a better understanding of the relationship between the corporate sector and the fourth estate in time of crisis -- why that relationship is so often adversarial, and why that need not always be the case.

Curragh has not cooperated directly in this research project. An initial approach was made by letter in February, 1993. A follow-up phone call referred the writer to Advance Planning and Communications of Toronto, the public relations company Curragh hired nearly two months after the explosion, in June, 1992. There were several conversations with Advance president Paul Curley, including one recorded personal interview with him and later, with his associate, Elizabeth Hoyle; these occurred on March 19, 1993. Curley is a former president of the Conservative Party of Canada and advised former prime minister Kim Campbell during her successful leadership campaign. His company's corporate brochure boasts political connections to the Conservative, Liberal and New Democratic parties. Curley agreed to recommend to Clifford Frame that he participate in this thesis. But on April 6, 1993, with losses of almost \$150 million in the previous two years, Curragh sought court protection from creditors. According to Paul Curley, the ensuing preoccupation with

financial matters placed the writer's request at the bottom of a long list of priorities. Curragh never recovered from its financial crisis, and is now in receivership. On April 20, 1993, the RCMP charged Curragh and two mine managers with manslaughter and criminal negligence causing death. Renewed efforts to interview Clifford Frame, or his assistant Diane Webb (whom the writer contacted both by mail and by telephone at her home) were met with the response that the matter was before the courts and lawyers had instructed that no one from Curragh speak about Westray. Former Westray employee Bill MacCulloch did agree to be interviewed, and his observations have been helpful.

Two other people were directly involved in managing media relations for the Westray explosion. Tom Reid of Reid Management in Toronto has been very co-operative. Neale Bennet, formerly of Bennet Communications in Halifax, has declined to participate, citing client confidentiality.

Furthermore, most coal mining companies have stood silent, in solidarity with Curragh. The public relations spokesperson for Devco, the Cape Breton Development Corporation, told the writer no one from Devco would speak either about its operations or about Westray. In fact, the former president of the Coal Association of Canada, Giacomo Capobianco, says he left his position last year at least in

part because he was so dismayed by his colleagues' refusal to comment about Westray. Capobianco is now retired, and his observations about coal mining and Curragh have been very helpful.

CHAPTER 2

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CORPORATE PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE MEDIA: WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

An overview

To better understand the Westray story, it is necessary first to explore the relationship between the corporate communicator and the media generally, particularly the degree to which the former influences the latter. A growing literature on this relationship is of help.

The relationship between public relations professionals and journalists often appears to be one of conflict. Public relations practitioners complain their work is misunderstood, and the media complain about the degree to which PR people try to manage and influence them.

But in reality the relationship is one of interdependence (Charron, 1989, p.42). They are both engaged in information dissemination, the former as information source and the latter as information processor (Sigal, 1973).

The organizational, non-government communicator may be considered one of four primary news sources, the others

being the government communicator, the private citizen and the journalist. Organizations view the public relations function as a method of influencing the news to enhance the bottom line:

Large corporations ... have also realized the purchasing power of public-relations operations. Private capital is invested in the symbolic politics of news and advertising because sophistication in defending against bad news and trafficking in good news is seen as an essential part of achieving capital gains (Ericson, Baranek, Chan, 1991, p.14).

Herbert Gans likens the relationship between sources and journalists to a dance:

[S]ources seek access to journalists, and journalists seek access to sources. Although it takes two to tango, either sources or journalists can lead, but more often than not, sources do the leading (1980, p.116).

Sources actively participate in the process of news making and reporting, although their participation is not always co-operative. When the relationship functions smoothly, sources cater to journalists' demands -- they provide background briefings, they schedule press conferences at times convenient for journalists' deadlines, and they write press releases in journalists' style so they can be easily reproduced. Sociologist Mark Fishman describes the players as "news promoters" and "news workers." And the news promoters' efforts, he suggests, are "conveniences for

newswriters" (Fishman, 1980, pp.152,153). There are times, however, when the relationship is strained by unco-operative public relations strategies, such as occurs when a press release containing bad news is poorly written to disguise the significance of the information, or when press conferences are intentionally scheduled right on deadline so that reporters do not have time to seek reaction.

Often, journalists resent the manipulation. One newspaper managing editor explains he took his wastebasket with him when he changed positions at the paper, so that:

I can slide press releases into it while talking on the phone. I don't need to crumple anything, or even aim carefully. I seldom need to read anything (Honaker, 1981, [qtd. in Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p.224]).

A Canadian reporter on Parliament Hill had a similar method of dealing with the overwhelming volume of press releases, speeches, reports and "assorted junk." "Survival means finding the quickest route from the mail box to the garbage pail for most of this material" (Jones, 1971, p.90).

Reporters have tried to resist. In 1982, the editorial page editor of the Washington Post, Meg Greenfield, wrote a memo to executive editor Ben Bradlee, expressing the frustration she and many of her colleagues felt toward public relations advisers.

Why should we be in their [politicians'] campaign plans as something 'deliverable' by their various agents [PR people] who can 'reach' us? ... We have adopted a rule of simply refusing to deal with these people -- period (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p.224).

The persuasive power of public relations

Repeatedly, surveys suggest journalists' resistance has met with limited success. Leon Sigal surveyed 1,146 stories in the Washington Post and the New York Times, over a two-week period in each of five different years. He found that the stories which originated with routine sources, such as official documents, press releases and press conferences, outnumbered reporter-initiated stories by more than two to one. When he factored in background briefings, meetings and leaks, the number climbed by an additional 16 per cent (Sigal, 1973, p.121). More than a decade later, researchers found journalists still relied on source-generated news. "Most reporting relies on routine channels such as press conferences and press releases," reported Jane Brown et al (1987, p.53).

In 1989, Professor John Soloski compared the sources of news in a smaller American paper (circulation 17,000), owned by a large newspaper chain, with the observations from Sigal and Brown et al, noted above. Soloski observed that the newspaper concentrated its beat coverage on "institutions

that [were] most visible to readers," such as municipal governments, police, the courts and education. He surveyed 632 locally-produced, by-lined stories over a one-year period, and analyzed them according to their "news channels," as defined by Sigal: routine, such as press releases, press conferences and official meetings; informal, such as stories arising from backgrounders, leaks and personal contacts; and enterprise, such as stories based on a reporter's original research or analysis.

[W]e found 337 or 53.3% of the stories...came from routine channels, 120 or 19% from informal channels and 175 or 27.7% from enterprise channels (Soloski, 1989, p.867).

In its March/April, 1980 issue, the Columbia Journalism Review published an analysis of one day's edition of the Wall Street Journal. The CJR contacted each of the 111 companies that appeared in the October 4, 1979 edition, to see which stories were based on press releases. Seventy companies responded.

In 53 cases -- 72 per cent of our responses -- news stories were based solely on press releases; in 32 of these examples, the releases were reprinted almost verbatim or in paraphrase, while in 21 other cases only the most perfunctory additional reporting had been done. Perhaps most troublesome, 20 of these stories carried the slug "By a Wall Street Journal Staff Reporter" (Columbia Journalism Review, 1980, March/April, p.35).

Scott M. Cutlip, retired dean of the Henry W. Grady School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of

Georgia, does not put the number quite so high.

Nevertheless:

It is a safe generalization to say that 40 per cent of the news content in a typical newspaper originated with public relations press releases, story memos, or suggestions (Blyskal and Blyskal, 1985, p.50).

In 1979, two Carleton University journalism students studied four issues of six Canadian daily newspapers to determine the degree to which public relations sources influenced the news. They analyzed all sections of the newspaper, including editorials, sports and entertainment, and found that 14 per cent of the items analyzed contained public relations input (Loder and Rose, 1979, p.5).

There is a more recent Canadian illustration of the degree to which journalists appear to rely on official or "institutional" news, and official sources. John Miller of the Ryerson School of Journalism surveyed the Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail and the Toronto Sun for a week in May, 1990. He found:

[I]nstitutional news made up 93.2 per cent of the content of the Sun, 84.5 per cent of the Star, and 80.2 per cent of the Globe. In other words, they used most of their resources to react to planned events (Miller, 1990, p.24).

He also found:

The most popular source of news in the three papers was press conferences, press releases or public non-governmental meetings or speeches -- between 33 and 37 per cent of the total content. (Miller, 1990, p.24).

Furthermore:

Only 6.8 per cent of the news content in the Sun, 15.6 per cent in the Star, and 19.8 per cent in the Globe could be classified as "unofficial," meaning it demonstrated the reporter's own initiative (Miller, 1990, p.24).

Miller concedes the survey is flawed scientifically. It considered only the quantity of stories, not length or positioning in the papers. Nevertheless, it does indicate the degree to which reporters tend to react to official agendas, rather than initiate news themselves.

How public relations people and the press view each other

There is a substantial gap between how journalists and public relations professionals view themselves and each other, and an examination of several studies suggests the gap has not narrowed with the passing of time. In 1975, Craig Aronoff surveyed the attitudes towards PR people of 48 journalists and 25 public relations practitioners in Texas, and found that although journalists accept the role public relations can play in information dissemination, they "continue to associate the public relations profession with unacceptable practices" (Aronoff, 1975, p.24). Public relations practitioners, on the other hand, thought much more highly of their contribution, although they too were critical of some PR practices:

A majority agreed that products, services and other activities are frequently given undeserved promotion. Minorities agreed to charges of obstructionism (38%), cluttering channels of communication with pseudo-events (42%), disguising publicity as news (29%), attaching too much importance to trivial happenings (33%), and using shields of words for practices not in the public interest (12%). However, majorities of public relations practitioners deny these practices (Aronoff, 1975, p.25).

In a 1984 survey in Florida, journalists ranked themselves first out of 16 professions in terms of status. They ranked PR professionals second last, just ahead of politicians. On the other hand, public relations people ranked themselves fourth, and journalists ninth. (These observations are very similar to those noted in the Aronoff study nine years earlier, except that in the 1975 survey, PR professionals ranked journalists third, one notch ahead of themselves.) The Florida-based newspaper editors who participated in the survey complained that public relations practitioners sometimes "disguise" publicity as news, and that they "often act as obstructionists, keeping reporters from seeing people they really should be seeing" (Kopenhaver et al, 1984, p.863).

The survey suggested journalists and public relations people attach similar values to news, but the PR professional accords the journalist greater respect than the other way around. Both journalists and public relations practitioners

considered accuracy "the most important element in a story," followed by reader interest. But journalists perceived that PR people placed accuracy fourth, and that their main priority was obtaining favourable coverage. As the authors point out, the fact that journalists perceive the motives of public relations professionals differently than the PR people perceive them may interfere with the communication process. If a journalist does not accept particular public relations-generated information for example, because he distrusts it in general, he may miss out on important news. Furthermore, public relations professionals may adhere to certain motives in theory, but apply different ones in practice. (Kopenhaver et al, 1984, pp.864-865,884).

Similar perceptions are reinforced in a later study by Stegall and Sanders (1986). This survey of education reporters and public relations directors in educational institutions also suggests there are two types of public relations practices, particularly distinguished by their differing views on whether it is a public relations person's job to depict his employer in a favourable light. Nevertheless, its findings in general reflect earlier observations:

[J]ournalists relegate PR practitioners to a lower status not only because of perceived poorer job performance and lower ethical conduct, but also because they perceive PR practitioners to have less honorable intentions (Stegall and Sanders, 1986, p.347).

According to a study conducted by Jean Charron (1989), public relations professionals say the best method of establishing their credibility among journalists is through "openness and collaboration," while journalists, by contrast, say they prefer to keep their distance, and operate either competitively or even by practising avoidance, as the situation warrants (Charron, 1989, pp.50-51).

It is clear, then, that journalists continue to hold negative perceptions of public relations practitioners. Public relations people have yet to convince journalists that their professions have equal status. Furthermore, it would also appear that public relations practitioners are not necessarily clear among themselves precisely what their responsibilities are, in terms of the employer/reporter dynamic.

How people view corporations and journalists

People's attitudes toward business and the media, as suggested by polls and surveys, appear to be influenced by current societal realities, such as political and economic stability. The observations cited below suggest different but not contradictory views.

The firm of Yankelovich, Skelly and White conducted a poll in the United States, to find out "how well business strikes a balance between profit and the public interest." In 1967, 70 per cent of the people surveyed responded positively. By 1981, however, the positive response rate had dropped to 19 per cent (Gray, 1986, p.15).

In the spring of 1993, the Los Angeles Times conducted a poll which indicated the public considers reporters to be "insensitive elitists out of touch with the common people" (Halifax Chronicle-Herald, July 16, 1993, p.C2). According to the poll, only 17 per cent of those surveyed agreed the media were doing "a very good job." Sixty-five per cent said the media "look out mainly for powerful people" (Halifax Chronicle-Herald, July 16, 1993, p.C2).

However, a poll of 10,000 people in eight nations conducted by the Washington-based Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press in January, 1994, suggests people's attitudes about the media are not quite so negative. Majorities in most countries thought the media are good for democracy and generate a good influence on the country, although people said journalists invade people's privacy, and that "newspapers did not deal fairly with all sides in reporting social and political issues" (The Seattle Times, March 16, 1994, p.A5). That survey also suggested "majorities in every

country did not find government officials, legislators and advertisers believable" (The Seattle Times, March 16, 1994, p.A5).

According to The Globe and Mail, Canadian opinions about business and journalists were more optimistic than those in some other countries. For example, 51 per cent of those polled thought business executives were a "good influence," and 73 per cent of those polled thought newspapers were a "good influence" (The Globe and Mail, March 16, 1994, p.A2). Analysts suggested the positive opinions might be because Canada had come through the tensions of the failed Charlottetown constitutional accord the previous fall, and had decisively rejected the Conservative Party in the ensuing election. Their anger was exhausted (The Globe and Mail, March 16, 1994, p.A2).

The challenge for corporate public relations people

The public relations profession has devised ways of establishing relationships with the media, to address negative perceptions. Public relations scholar James Grunig describes what he calls the "two-way asymmetric" and "two-way symmetric" models of the PR function. Both initiate messages and invite response. With the asymmetric model, practitioners intentionally construct messages to promote

the aspects of a business which are most likely to appeal to a specific public. The symmetric model, on the other hand, seeks to keep lines of communication open between business and its publics, to build good relationships between them. Grunig and Hunt estimate that the two models are followed by 20 per cent and 15 per cent of practising PR professionals, respectively (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, pp.37-43).

In terms of the application of these models to a PR person/journalist relationship, the asymmetric model suggests a greater degree of control on the part of public relations practitioners, in which they try to ensure the media disseminate the information that they put out. They speak the media's language, make sure their events are legitimate, and respond to inaccurate or otherwise objectionable coverage by rebutting it.

The symmetric practitioners open their organizations to, and encourage, media examination. There is a greater degree of risk in this model, because there is less source control. However, "the more open you can make your organization, the greater is the likelihood of fair and accurate media coverage," say Grunig and Hunt (1984, p.229).

Grunig and Hunt also describe two other models, both of which do more to create tension between the two professions

than they do to address it. In both, the information flow is one-way. The press agent/publicity PR person has a propagandistic role, is most interested in getting media attention, and does not consider truth essential. The public information PR person is also concerned with generating news in the media, but truth is more important. The authors suggest this latter category represents 50 per cent of all PR people (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, pp.22-27).

The corporate sector has a variety of publics it must address. The fourth estate is not only one of them; it is also a conduit to many others: investors, consumers and the community, to name several (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p.223). The corporate sector cannot ignore the role of the media in this process without serious risk. Media attention, as well as intense competitiveness and government regulation, ensure the corporate sector is carefully scrutinized (Chajet and Shachtman, 1991, p.8).

A corporate priority, then, is to establish a positive image and maintain public confidence. But the corporate image reflects the corporate reality (Chajet and Shachtman, 1991, p.7). One cannot be changed unless the other changes as well. Furthermore, a company shares an image with the industry in which it is involved. Unless it goes some distance to separate itself from the common image, or refine

it, the company acquires the negative as well as the positive industry-wide associations (Chajet and Shachtman, 1991, pp.33,34).

The mining industry, in Canada and elsewhere, has historically had a problem with its image (O'Keefe, 1984, p.81). The legacies of child labour, harsh living and working conditions, and high risk of accidental injury or death have contributed to a negative perception of the industry. For example, the May, 1993 edition of Liaison, a Labour Canada bulletin about occupational safety and health, includes the following paragraph about accidents in mines under federal jurisdiction:

In 1991, the mining industry recorded the highest disabling injury incidence rate at 27.1 [injuries] per 100 workers, followed by longshoring at 15.7, road transport at 9.26 and air transport at 8.

Another publication from the same department, titled Employment Injuries and Occupational Illnesses, 1985-1987, suggests that "for the period 1983-1987, approximately 42% of deaths from occupational illnesses occurred in mining" (p.23).

Furthermore, "the public has a morbid fear about underground places which may be impossible to dispel" (O'Keefe, 1984, p.81). O'Keefe adds every mining accident further entrenches the negative perceptions of the industry. The challenge for

a contemporary mining company is to create a corporate reality that will justify an improved image.

The disenchantment attached to the corporation also applies to its leader. A Harris poll measuring public confidence in corporate executives shows the percentage dropped to just 18 per cent in 1984, from 55 per cent in the mid-1960s (Gray, 1986, p.73). Gray says one way to improve the image of the corporation, and that of its chief executive officer, is to design a media strategy that incorporates proven methodology. For example, he argues, corporate spokespersons, from the chief executive officer down, should receive media training, be consistent and be accessible (1986, p.83).

Public relations practitioners have a role to play in improving the image of their corporate employers, but their success rate may be hampered by their own image problems with journalists in particular (see pp.18-21).

The relationship as partnership: cases in point

It has been shown that the relationship between public relations professionals and journalists is symbiotic -- the one depends on the other in the news-making process to a substantial degree. It has also been shown that in spite of

this dependence, journalists at times resent and try to resist public relations initiatives. However, there are other times when journalists neither resent nor resist, but actually become partners in the process to a degree that perhaps should be of concern. The following examples are dramatic illustrations of that partnership.

Joyce Nelson devotes an entire chapter of her book Sultans of Sleaze to the relationship between the public relations firm Burson Marsteller and the government of Argentina during a period of brutal repression. Jorge Videla was President of Argentina from 1976 to 1981 and during that time, it is estimated, 35,000 people "disappeared." Thousands of others were tortured and imprisoned. Videla's regime hired Burson Marsteller to promote the image of Argentina as a good place to do business. Harold Burson told Nelson he was able to separate the economic reality from the political reality of Argentina. His advice, he said, was not in any way connected to the human rights abuses that were appearing in the news at the time. "We regard ourselves as working in the business sector for clearcut business and economic objectives" (Nelson, 1989, p.23). One of Burson's media strategies was to encourage key business and travel reporters to visit Argentina for a first-hand look. Frederic Wagniere filed a story for the Financial Post on December 11, 1976.

Credit can be given to the military for acting decisively. It wasted no time in cracking down on the terrorists and eradicating subversive elements from the ranks of the administration ... The country could start thinking about living again, instead of just surviving.

John Van der Feyst wrote a feature story for Canadian Business in February, 1977.

During almost a year of military rule, substantial results had been achieved which enabled [Videla] to look with optimism towards the future ... When the word "terrorism" was mentioned, President Videla admitted that it still exists, but that the shoe is now on the other foot, with more subversive elements being killed than law enforcement authorities.

In this context, the media have been described as being more the guard dogs for powerful interests than the watchdogs of the public interest (Olien et al., 1989, p.160). This was particularly evident during the Gulf War of 1991. According to Stanley Cloud of Time magazine, the media's sycophantic acceptance of censorship as a ground rule for war coverage allowed the Pentagon "to control everything we did in the Gulf War" (MacArthur, 1992, p.9). The public relations firm Hill and Knowlton was hired by the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the United States, under the cloak of a group called Citizens for a Free Kuwait, for \$11.5 million. One of its most notorious achievements involves orchestrating a particular story of Iraqi brutality. The story was that Iraqi soldiers had raided a hospital in Kuwait, taken newborn babies away from their incubators, and left for Iraq with the

incubators, leaving the abandoned babies to die. The media accepted the story, and reported it, almost unchallenged. It was not until after the war that they began to realize the story was essentially untrue (MacArthur, 1992, Chpt. 2). In early 1991, reporters were referring to the deaths of as many as 312 babies. But in March of that year, John Martin of ABC interviewed officials from the Kuwaiti hospital, and reported that although some babies died "as a result of chaotic conditions ... no babies had been dumped from their incubators." Other media did not seem to want to correct their earlier versions, and only Reuters picked up his story. Almost two years later, the number of deaths was still being disputed -- it most certainly wasn't 312, but it may have been more than zero (Rowse, 1992, p.25).

In the relationship between corporate public relations specialists and the press, the methods can be more subtle. For a six-month period in 1981-82, the G.D. Searle pharmaceutical company tracked the publicity its public relations program generated for "Equal," a sugar substitute. The company selected two market areas, Pittsfield, Massachusetts and Marion, Indiana. Surveys revealed:

the publicity (not including advertising) had generated 1.5 million impressions -- exposures to mention of the product -- in the two markets, or an amazing 31 impressions per household (Blyskal and Blyskal, 1985, pp.94-95).

Then Searle began using quotes from favourable PR-generated news items in its advertising, so that the media actually provided the effective third-party endorsements. Here is a partial transcript of one ad:

Now, the revolutionary new sweetener discovery you've heard about is here! Introducing Equal. A news story in the Washington Post reports, "Good-bye sugar, saccharin, and calories." A story in the Chicago Sun-Times reports, "A taste virtually indistinguishable from sugar..." (Blyskal and Blyskal, 1985, p.95).

The relationship in time of crisis, from a public relations perspective

The incidence of corporate crises is increasing. In the introduction to an emergency management manual for American government officials, authors Thomas Drabek and Gerard Hoetmer attribute the increase in technological crises such as chemical explosions to the fact that there are so many new substances created every year, "giving rise to that many more opportunities for human error" (1991). According to Bruce Blythe of Crisis Management International, an Atlanta-based firm which specializes in crisis readiness programs, more than half of the major industrial disasters that occurred in this century occurred in the eight years prior to 1993. And, as if the devastating effects needed to be underscored, "forty-three per cent of companies hit by severe crises never reopen, and 29 per cent close within two

years" (Blythe, 1992, p.14).

The Institute for Crisis Management, based in Louisville, Kentucky, defines crisis in the business sector as "a significant disruption in the organization's normal activities that generates media coverage and public attention." According to Robert Irvine, president of the Institute, the biggest single growth area in corporate crises today is in human resources -- discrimination, sexual harassment, and the like (intvw).

(There is a tendency to use the word "disaster" for what is more accurately called a "crisis." Although the definitions of both are evolving, they are distinct terms by virtue of degree. Not all crises are disasters. Charles Fritz (1961, p.655) defined disasters as accidental or uncontrollable events,

concentrated in time and space, in which a society, or a relatively self-sufficient subdivision of a society, undergoes severe danger, and incurs such losses to its members and physical appurtenances that the social structure is disrupted and the fulfilment of all or some of the essential functions of the society is prevented.

Although the Westray tragedy has been labelled a disaster by many public relations practitioners and reporters, for the purposes of this thesis, a discussion in the context of "crisis" is more appropriate, because the incident did not

"incur such losses to its members and physical appurtenances that the social structure [was] disrupted." Instances will arise, however, where references to disaster literature are unavoidable.)

There is perhaps no time when the relationship between public relations practitioners and the media is more severely tested than during crisis.

PR people argue that preparation for such an event must begin long before the event itself. Jon White, a public relations expert based in the United Kingdom, says corporations must work at trying to establish a positive, open relationship with the media well in advance of a crisis so that, if and when a crisis occurs, there is a history that will help both sides deal with the event. "If no preparation has been made, the organization can find itself having to deal with the situation **and** with learning how to work with journalists" (White, 1991, p.32; bold added). White cites the example of Air Canada, an organization which, he says, actively cultivates a relationship with the media by encouraging and training its line managers to deal directly with press requests. He says during one emergency, when an Air Canada jet ran out of fuel in transit, the company was able to rely on its "reputation and credibility with journalists," and survive the event with no lasting

damage to its image (White, 1991, pp.32-33). This illustration suggests a successful two-way symmetrical strategy, as described by Grunig and Hunt (see pp.23-24), in which a previous relationship of openness meant the journalists told the story much as the PR adviser would wish (although not perhaps in such a way that would fully inform the media consumer).

An organization's behaviour during a crisis can affect its treatment in the aftermath. People will remember how it behaved, which may affect the outcome of a subsequent inquiry, for instance (White, 1991, p.118).

After the crisis is over, the organization may have to try to regain credibility. Sometimes this is impossible if, for example, the organization behaved poorly during the crisis or if the damage is so great that "public confidence is lost" (White, 1991, p.119).

Business leaders know if they are involved in a high-risk operation. Mining is considered high-risk (Pinsdorf, 1987, p.40). Corporate officials are advised to have an emergency plan and test it, revising it if necessary (White, 1991, p.113). An organization in crisis is under public scrutiny. The event is significant, and will be remembered. The high level of stress during a crisis can be reduced if people

know what to do (White, 1991, pp.110-111).

Advance crisis planning means forcing oneself to consider the worst-case scenario and devise a plan to deal with it. "Public relations' contribution to crisis planning is to help the organization and its senior managers to consider what might go wrong" (White, 1991, p.112). A crisis plan provides the corporation with a model for behaviour when the event occurs. It identifies the crisis team. The chief executive officer is most often the corporate spokesperson. He or she is considered the one who is best able to both be in control and show concern. The plan also identifies risk areas, and how to respond in each case to key publics: employees, media and the community at large (Murray and Shohen, 1992, pp.18-19).

It is difficult to make disaster planning a priority. People's daily demands are such that it is often all too easy to postpone the planning process, even when they know being prepared will reduce the damaging effects (Scanlon, 1991, p.79). But if there is no plan, the crisis may unfold at two levels. The first is the crisis itself. If the company is unprepared, that in effect precipitates a second crisis. "The company is reactive rather than proactive and the result is a crisis in public perception" (Murray and Shohen, 1992, p.14).

Michael Regester, a British public relations practitioner with expertise in crisis management, recommends that corporate officials establish several rooms during a crisis: one for decision-makers (such as the chief executive officer), one for advisers (such as public relations people and lawyers), and one for the media. Each of these groups needs to be able to work alone. Each also needs to be in frequent contact with the others (Regester, 1989, pp.127-129).

White (1991, pp.116-117) also recommends information be made available to the media as soon as possible. Journalists will have something to report, and officials will demonstrate "a willingness to communicate."

Public relations professionals often recommend the following cliché: "tell it all and tell it fast" (Pinsdorf, 1987, p.45; Regester, 1989, p.123). Marion Pinsdorf, a former journalist and PR practitioner, argues that giving out information in stages only guarantees a longer lifespan for the story. This advice is not always easy to follow. Often, information is only known in stages, and often it takes time to establish rumour as fact. Furthermore, corporate decision-makers may be reluctant to divulge information they know may be damaging, such as legal liability and responsibility to employees and shareholders. But ideally,

the more accurate the information and the more openly and honestly it is shared, the better the image. Pinsdorf qualifies the idealism with a dose of reality:

Spokespersons must carefully watch what they say, must be sure the information is complete and honest, and must consider as many ramifications as time and deadline pressure permit (1987, p.58).

Not to underscore the obvious, corporations with something to hide are at serious risk. If that is the case, Pinsdorf argues, "tell the truth up front. Concealment -- which never works in the long term -- only heightens media coverage and scepticism" (1987, p.52). Robin Cohn, who has his own crisis management firm in New York, puts it this way: "The cardinal rule: never hide the facts. If the media doesn't get information from the company, they'll get it from other sources, usually unfriendly" (Cohn, 1991, p.19).

The relationship in time of crisis: from a journalism perspective

It is part of the media's role to describe and interpret a crisis event (Dynes, 1970, p.88). However, the media often tend to use personal stories and selective visual images to illustrate their news. When fire swept through Yellowstone National Park during the hot, dry summer of 1988, the media covered the story exhaustively. Professor Conrad Smith (1992) of Ohio State University was curious about why the

stories were covered the way they were. He conducted a survey of both the sources quoted in the coverage and the reporters who quoted them. His research suggests the media searched for a narrative that reflected their agenda.

A merchant from a town near Yellowstone National Park who was featured in a network story about the fire said that national television reporters came not to seek information, but to cast playlets they had already written (Smith, 1992, p.230).

Such selectivity may cause media consumers to form general assumptions based on specific incidents, although, as Thomas Drabek (1986, p.166) has pointed out, "significant portions of the public ... are distrustful of media coverage."

It has been shown many times that, in disaster coverage, the media often get the story wrong (Scanlon, 1970,1985; Smith, 1992; Kreps, 1980). In their haste to get the story, and get it first, they can be sloppy with the facts. Joseph Scanlon and his colleagues from the Emergency Communications Research Unit at Carleton University examined media coverage of six events in Canada, ranging in type from a murder to a mudslide to a snowstorm to an explosion. They found that although the reports were generally accurate, they often erred in detail. The number of dead, the number evacuated, the correct age of a victim, the spelling of someone's name: such information varied from one newspaper or television report to another. Some of this information was verifiable; some was not. Verification can often be achieved by

attribution, but not one of the inaccurate pieces of information was attributed (Scanlon, 1978, pp.68-72).

Smith (1992, p.227) found the same problems in the Yellowstone story: "According to one source, a Chicago Tribune article published on September 8 contained more errors than facts."

The media are active players in the process of informing. They contribute to the information load with what they omit from their reportage as much as with what they include. Smith (1992, p.282) found that "local residents outnumbered scientists two to one in television sound bites, and three to one as sources named in print stories." The media also have a tendency to rely on too few people, or the same person, for comment (National Research Council, 1980, p.3).

On the other hand, reporters argue official sources are a big part of the problem. In his analysis of the Yellowstone fires, Smith (1992, p.230) found officials often gave inaccurate or exaggerated information to reporters. After a tornado swept through Edmonton, Alberta in 1987, a CBC Radio producer said officials had not been helpful to reporters who were trying to cover the story. "The reason they fail is because they don't understand or trust the media and they are not trained to package information" (Alberta Public

Safety Services, undated, p.159).

The media cling to misconceptions about human behaviour during a disaster. They expect to see panic and chaos. Ben Baldwin, a radio reporter in Houston, Texas, wrote of the media's view of disaster: "The first few minutes or hours after any major disaster undoubtedly will be packed with confusion, if not panic" (Baldwin, 1980, p.190).

Despite these problems, the media can contribute in a positive way to reducing the impact of disaster. Well-informed media can provide accurate updates of developments and needs to friends, family and concerned citizens on a local, regional, national and even international scale (Scanlon, Alldred, Farrell and Prawzick, 1985, p.123). They can maintain and improve public morale (Dynes, 1970, p.88).

Scanlon has found that the media will co-operate with officials and withhold certain information, if officials convince them that it is necessary. The media will also withhold information of their own accord, if they believe its dissemination would be harmful (Scanlon and Alldred, 1982, pp.14-18).

Convergence is a feature of disaster behaviour. People and material goods, such as food, converge on the scene. Myth

has it that the people who arrive at a disaster site have negative motivations, such as looting, but that is rarely the case. People come to help, and some come just to look (Fritz and Mathewson, 1957).

By keeping people informed, and limiting convergence, the media can help reduce the potential for confusion and impeded relief and rescue efforts (Scanlon, Alldred, Farrell and Prawzick, 1985, p.123).

On the other hand, the media can also cause serious convergence problems, by virtue of their numbers and demands (for telephones, accommodation, transportation), not to mention the dissemination of information that may be incomplete, or inaccurate, or both, to a very wide audience (Scanlon, Farrell and Prawzick, 1985, p.124).

Another concern identified by some scholars is that the media tend to interpret each disaster as a unique, rather than as a "normal" occurrence (Wilkins, 1989, p.172). Lee Wilkins, a communications scholar at the University of Colorado, studied the way the media covered the tragedy at Bhopal, India in December of 1984. A leak from a chemical plant owned by Union Carbide caused between 2,700 and 8,000 deaths, and injured hundreds of thousands. Media coverage was intensive during the event, but it was also intensively

event-centred. Journalists infrequently went beyond the event to provide the context. They did not stand back from the details of the specific event, to examine the general. A report prepared for the federal government six months after the tragedy revealed:

[T]here had been at least 6,928 chemical accidents in the United States since 1980. In those accidents, the bulk of which occurred during the manufacturing process, 1,500 persons were injured and 135 killed (Wilkins, 1989, p.21).

During coverage of the Bhopal disaster, the wider issues of the frequency of chemical accidents and consumer/industrial reliance on chemical products were not covered. Wilkins says this tendency to isolate disaster events "leads to a serious form of decontextualization" (1989, p.172). That is, the media do not examine the event in the context of the technology, in which such accidents are both predictable and inevitable.

This lack of contextual layers compartmentalizes disasters and hazards away from the systems that produced them, making debate over genuine solutions difficult at best (Wilkins, 1989, p.173).

On December 7, 1992, an accumulation of methane gas caused a violent explosion in the Southmountain No. 3 coal mine in Wise County, Virginia. Eight miners died. This is how author Robert Cullen described media coverage of the event:

The national media covered the disaster for a few days, until the bodies were recovered and it was

clear that there would be no dramatic rescue story from Southmountain No. 3. No one pointed out to viewers or readers the link between the miners' deaths and the television they were watching or the light that illuminated their newspapers. The fact is, though, that today coal provides more than 55 per cent of the electricity generated in the United States (Cullen, 1993, p.38).

To ensure better disaster coverage, Deni Elliott of Dartmouth College suggests the following:

1. Journalists should familiarize themselves with the contexts in which disasters occur, in advance of an event.
2. They "should be sceptical of information provided by official sources," because self-interest often frames the message.
3. Journalists should try to prepare the public for the possibility of disaster, rather than doing what most people do, which is believing the worst won't happen.
4. They should try to provide as much information as possible during the event.
5. They should make sure their information is accurate.
6. They should concentrate on the "why" of the event, rather than on the drama and the victims.
7. And finally, journalists ought to "participate in setting the agenda for public and governmental discussions on issues involved with the disaster" (Elliott, 1989, pp.169-170).

The relationship in time of crisis: cases in point

The standard by which most corporate crises are judged is the Johnson & Johnson/Tylenol drama, which began in September, 1982. Some person, or persons, still unknown, laced Tylenol capsules with cyanide. Seven people died. Johnson & Johnson did not have a crisis plan at the time. But it had a credo: the company has four responsibilities, and, in order, they are to the consumers, the employees, the community and the stockholders (Fink, 1986, p.217). The company acted swiftly and decisively. Its chief executive officer, James Burke, took personal control, and assembled a crisis management team. All Tylenol capsules were recalled. Burke spoke regularly and openly to the press. Specific public relations programs were developed for consumers, the media, employees, government and stockholders. The crisis cost the company approximately \$100 million. Before it erupted, Tylenol outsold the next four brands combined, and many believed at the outset that Tylenol would never recover. The product was re-introduced in tamper-resistant packaging about ten weeks after the withdrawal, however, and Tylenol managed to recapture 98 per cent of the market it had before the crisis (Fink, 1986; Regester, 1989).

Steven Fink (1986) tells a particularly interesting anecdote in the remarkable Tylenol story. Larry Foster, the corporate

vice-president in charge of public relations for Johnson & Johnson and a former journalist, was a key player on the crisis management team. One of the leads the media pursued was that the source of the cyanide might be inside the manufacturing plant itself. Foster had been told there was no cyanide at the plant, and for three days he repeated this information to the press. But an Associated Press reporter persisted with his investigations. At one point, he called Foster to say he had learned there **was** cyanide at the plant. Foster checked again and found the reporter was right. He called him back, and told him frankly what he now knew -- that there was cyanide, that it was used in quality testing, and that "there is very little ever kept on the premises; none of it is missing; and it could in no way have gotten into the capsules in the production facility" (Fink, 1986, p.210). Foster asked the reporter not to run the story, because he knew the cyanide in the capsules did not come from the plant. True to Scanlon's (1982) observations that the media will withhold information if they are convinced that is the wisest strategy, the reporter agreed, on condition that if anyone else got wind of the same story, Foster would call AP back. A second reporter did get the story. The second reporter also agreed not to run it. However, when a science reporter from the New York Times got the story, Foster knew he couldn't keep the information back any longer. He called the other two reporters, and released

them from their agreement. "All of the media buried the cyanide reference so low in their Sunday stories that it had little impact" (Fink, 1986, p.211). In other words, there was sufficient trust between those journalists and the public relations practitioner that the journalists believed and followed advice honestly given. The cyanide at the manufacturing plant was unconnected to the current crisis. The media agreed not to raise the issue because they believed assumptions would be made that there was a connection. And when they did run the story, they did not attach particular significance to the presence of cyanide at the plant, because that presence was not significant to the crisis itself.

One of the reasons the makers of Tylenol managed to survive this disaster is that they too were victims. This was not the case with Perrier, a bottled mineral water with a worldwide market. In early 1990, traces of benzene, a carcinogenic industrial solvent, were found in North American bottles of the mineral water. According to The Economist (August 3, 1991), when Perrier Group of America was informed that there were contaminated bottles in the United States, it moved swiftly to recall over 70 million bottles from the North American market. American distributors tried to downplay the seriousness of the problem. "Before it even knew the source of the benzene

contamination, Perrier's American arm was confidently announcing that the contamination was limited to North America" (The Economist, August 3, 1991, p.67). They "told it fast," as recommended (Pinsdorf, 1987; Regester, 1989), but they got it wrong. Source Perrier in France stopped bottling the mineral water. Then a spokesman for Source Perrier said that the source of the benzene contamination had been found, that it was in a cleaning fluid used in error on the bottles destined for North America, that the machinery had been cleaned, and that independent tests showed the water was pure. But that information too was wrong. The source hadn't been found at all. It was with great embarrassment that Perrier finally had to admit the real cause -- the benzene came from the water itself. The implications of this crisis magnified with that news. A product that boasted of its pure and clean content contained a carcinogen. The benzene appeared in the bottled water only because staff had not replaced the charcoal filters which are used to filter out impurities. "Six months' worth of production was affected, covering Perrier's entire global market. Perrier had to change its story" (The Economist, August 3, 1991, p. 67).

Because Source Perrier mistakenly identified the problem initially, according to The Economist, the company and its product received critical press coverage. Furthermore, even

though the impurities were normally removed, and even though scientists said the presence of benzene posed no real health risk, consumers' loyalty changed. Perrier in the United States hired Burson Marsteller to help relaunch the product, and spent \$25 million on its ad campaign, four times what it had spent on U.S. advertising in all of 1989. The ads themselves were criticized for "making light of the benzene incident" (The Economist, August 3, 1991, p.68).

Perrier was already competing intensely in a crowded market. After the benzene scare, Perrier's share price dropped by one-third by the end of 1990. And its market share in the United States dropped to nine per cent after the crisis, from 13 per cent before (The Economist, August 3, 1991, pp.67-68).

Perrier later acknowledged it learned the hard way about the need for co-ordinated control. The company is highly decentralized. Prior to this crisis, there was no international crisis management plan. Not only were consumers badly served by the confusion; Perrier says many of its trade customers also found out about the benzene from the media (The Economist, August 3, 1991, pp.67-68).

Concluding observations

Scanlon and other disaster scholars have argued that, particularly in areas where disasters are not unknown (such as earthquake or flood zones, or the chemical industry), an emergency plan must be in place and it must include key representatives of the community and the media. Research to date has not concentrated on the role of the private sector in such plans, even though disasters, or crises, do occur on private property. According to a 1990 Crisis Management International survey, 75 per cent of corporations either have no plan or have minimal planning (Blythe, 1992. p.13).

So although it is possible that a corporation has its own crisis plan, which includes a communications component, it is not likely. It is somewhat more likely, given the national presence of organizations like the Emergency Measures Organization, that a municipality will have a plan. But it is rare that public- and private-sector plans are collaborative.

Thomas Drabek (1990, p.249) says regulation of industry in this regard is a sensitive issue. It goes to the heart of what the word "private" in the private sector really means. The corporation prizes its independence.

But industry and government are beginning to change. In May, 1991, the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) published the first national standard on emergency planning. The preface of Emergency Planning for Industry says:

Communication and coordination **between industry and local officials** is indispensable, since they initially respond to emergencies. Competency in responding requires a complete understanding of the roles and practices of each responding party (p.7; bold added).

The document was co-authored by The Major Industrial Accidents Co-ordinating Committee (MIACC), and according to the director of technical services, Duncan Ellison, 10,000 copies of Emergency Planning for Industry have been sold. MIACC and the CSA have not tracked precisely how many organizations have actually implemented the recommended emergency plan, although they are considering doing that (intvw).

CHAPTER 3

THE KEY PLAYERS: THE MINE, THE MEDIA AND THE PEOPLE OF PICTOU COUNTY

Pictou County

Pictou County is a small, close-knit community of about 50,000, clustered in towns, villages and hamlets along the shores of, and inland from, the Northumberland Strait of Nova Scotia (see maps, pp.52,53). There's a serene and soft-edged beauty to the landscape. Gently rolling hills slope down to the sea. And although the forests have largely been cleared, reforested wooded areas border the farmed land.

Scottish highlanders first settled the area in 1773. They cleared the land for farming, and they fished, in both fresh and salt water. Mi'kmak Indians told the settlers about gas deposits very near the surface. They spoke of fires that would suddenly and spontaneously erupt from the ground (Ryan, 1992, p.2).

Coal was discovered just before the turn of the 19th century. At first, the gassy seams were convenient. The women of Lower Plymouth would wash their laundry in the East River (see map, page 53). They would dig holes in the sand,

light the leaking gas, put iron pots over the flames, and boil water (Cameron, 1974, p.163).

But by the early 1800s, mining was the economic backbone of the community. In his History of the County of Pictou (1877), Reverend George Patterson wrote that Pictou was "up till this time the greatest coal producer in British America" (p.398).

The towns of Stellarton, Westville and New Glasgow, and the hamlet of Plymouth, are steeped in mining tradition. New Glasgow and Stellarton run along the East River, once a shipping route to Pictou Harbour and beyond. The towns' street names reflect their past: Foord Street, Acadia Avenue, Drummond Road. They are names associated with mining: the Foord seam, the Acadia mine, the Drummond mine.

Most of the houses are built of wood, often brightly painted. In fact, some of the original miners' homes, built without foundations in the 1890s, still stand. They are tiny duplexes built close together, with very small rooms, but they are intended to accommodate large families. Mine managers' homes, in contrast, were large and grand, on sizeable lots of land, and sometimes built of brick. Although they were built to last, they were also in what became prime real estate locations. Sobeys, a Nova Scotia

grocery store chain, acquired most of the estate land and demolished the homes to make room for their stores (Hault, intvw).

For as long as Pictonians have been mining, they've also been dying underground. No accurate records of fatalities from mining accidents in Pictou County go back far enough. (Official record keeping began in 1866.) But from 1809, when commercial mining began, to the 1950's, for example, the number of deaths is estimated to be more than 600 men. Of those, 246 are known to have died from explosions (Cameron, 1974, pp.163-253). One of the first recorded major disasters occurred in May, 1873. Sixty miners died. In 1880, another explosion killed 44. In 1891, 125 men died. And on it goes (Cameron, 1974, pp.163-253).

By the end of the 1950s, underground coal mining had basically ended in Pictou County, because markets were poor, the seams were deep, and the facilities were old.

According to Stellarton Mayor Clarence Porter, the history of mining in Pictou County is a history of tragedy. About the only thing the community has to show for its coal-mining tradition, he maintains, is a monument to the dead. "When the last mine closed here," Porter says, "I think people of my generation thought that if there was any other possible

way that these people could earning a living, then thank God the mines are closed" (intvw).

The Origins of the Westray Mine

The Westray mine was owned by a Toronto-based firm, Curragh Inc., formerly called Curragh Resources Inc. The driving force behind Curragh is Clifford Frame. He has worked for mining companies all his life, as did his father. Frame's brother, Mervyn, died in a mine at the age of 28. Frame has done well by mining. He graduated with a bachelor of science degree from the University of British Columbia in 1956, and started working with Denison Mines the next year. In 1985, after almost 30 years with the company, Frame left Denison for the third and last time. By then he had become president and chief executive officer and, according to a lengthy portrait of Curragh and Frame in the now-defunct Northern Miner magazine, Denison had spent \$2.3 billion on projects around the world during the latter part of Frame's tenure, from 1974 to 1985 (Svela, 1992, p.10).

Frame was fired from Denison Mines, and the reason is best summarized in one word: Quintette. "The disastrous story of Quintette has been told and retold and every time it is, the fellow who ends up wearing the laundry is Cliff Frame," Jennifer Wells writes (1992, p.37). The Quintette mine,

located in northeastern British Columbia, failed for a variety of reasons: energy prices dropped and Denison's contract with Japan did not guarantee a minimum price, the saleable coal was embedded in seams of "garbage" and was therefore expensive to get at, and, once mined, the coal did not meet contractual standards (Wells, 1992, p.37). Frame had borrowed heavily to finance Quintette. The year after he left, Denison wrote off its Quintette investment of over \$240 million. The banks lost a total of \$700 million. Moreover, the government of British Columbia had spent \$1.5 billion on infrastructure for Quintette -- roads, housing and railway lines (Wells, 1992, p.37).

Kevin Cox of The Globe and Mail calls Clifford Frame "the Wayne Gretzky of fund-raising" -- a reference to his skills in negotiating loans (intvw). Linden MacIntyre of the fifth estate has called him "a hard-nosed capitalist with a soft spot for politicians and public money" (December 11, 1990).

According to one portrait, Clifford Frame fits the mould of a "colourful, hard-driving, hard-living character full with ego" (Wells, 1992, p.41). He moved in the corridors of corporate power in downtown Toronto, proud that he had worked his way up from underground. His gold nugget cufflinks are symbolic of that climb. An early morning visitor to his office in downtown Toronto recalled

the way an unnamed woman brought the corporate leader his fine cigar so early in the morning, with the requisite clippers, and the three fingers of single malt Scotch poured for the chairman and his associate. The visitor was offered naught (Wells, 1992, p.41).

In 1985, Frame decided to go into business for himself, and created Curragh. Curragh Resources Inc. began by investing in the Faro lead/zinc/silver mine in the Anvil Range, 200 kilometres northeast of Whitehorse, Yukon. The purchase price was \$124.6 million. Again, the venture was heavily backed by government guarantees. Curragh managed to negotiate a \$17.5-million unsecured note from the federal government, federal and Yukon guarantees of up to 85 per cent of a \$15-million bank loan, as well as a \$3-million incentive grant from Yukon. In addition, the Northern Canada Power Commission bought a \$7-million turbine generator from Curragh, and agreed to reduce the mine's power rates (Wells, 1992, p.39).

Frame's strategy paid off, for both Curragh and Yukon. By 1988, the company showed a net income of \$61.6 million (1988 Annual Report). In 1989, the picture was almost as rosy: \$60.7 million (1989 Annual Report). Curragh had become the largest employer in Yukon, although its 1990 profits were down to \$32 million (1990 Annual Report).

But there were complaints from the mine union about safety.

Ironically, exactly three years to the day before the Westray explosion, the Halifax Chronicle-Herald carried a story in which the union leader from Faro urged Nova Scotia to impose tougher safety standards on Curragh than were applied at Faro (Chronicle-Herald, May 9, 1989, p.35).

When the Faro mine site was pretty well exhausted, Curragh wanted to convert it to a processing centre. Frame also had expanded to other deposits in the Anvil Range. And again he negotiated for government loans. Yukon kicked in \$5 million for one site. Curragh had been negotiating for further loans from the federal and Yukon governments, but the Westray explosion and low lead and zinc prices stalled those talks.

While Curragh was making money at Faro, Frame decided to cast a wider net. There is apparently a sentiment in the investment community that single mining properties are not as attractive as multiple ones (Wells, 1992, p.41). Frame explored several options and, in late 1987, he paid \$7 million for an option on the Westray mine.

Frame again put his fund-raising skills to work. The coal in the Foord seam is considered to be "clean" coal; that is, it is low in sulphur. Frame negotiated a 15-year contract to supply 700,000 tonnes of so-called clean coal to a power generating plant in Trenton, approximately six miles from

the Westray mine. The Trenton plant wanted the low-sulphur coal, so that it could avoid installing expensive scrubbers to reduce sulphur emissions from dirty coal, like the type mined in Cape Breton. In a separate agreement, which did not become public knowledge until 1990, Frame also managed to get a "take or pay" deal for another 235,000 tonnes -- in other words, the province agreed to pay \$14 million a year for 15 years, even if there was no market and the coal stayed in the ground (New Glasgow Evening News, Dec. 14, 1992).

Financing Westray was difficult. Initially, the provincial government authorized a \$12-million loan, and construction of the mine tunnels began in April, 1989. But federal bureaucrats were worried about the economic implications that Westray might have on the coal mines of Cape Breton, also heavily funded by Ottawa, so federal funding was therefore delayed. Devco, the Cape Breton Development Corporation, had submitted a confidential report to the federal and provincial governments in December, 1987, opposing the development of a coal mine on the mainland. In August, 1989, a spokesperson for Industry Minister Harvie Andre said Westray was asking for too much money from the federal government, and construction stopped (Chronicle-Herald, August 10, 1989).

The Liberal member of the provincial legislature for Cape Breton The Lakes, Bernie Boudreau, argued it made little sense to pour government money into two coal mining enterprises, both selling to the Trenton plant, since the end result would be an oversupply, and potential layoffs.

Here, under the guise of industrial development, we were taking a static market, not one that was going to expand, and dividing it between two organizations, both heavily funded by government. The net result would be the expenditure of vast additional sums of public money, and a net loss of jobs (intvw).

But in Pictou County, understandably, almost everyone wanted Westray. At that time, Curragh was projecting 310 permanent jobs (press release, September 1, 1988), although the number was later revised to 241. And the prospect of 15 years of employment was very attractive. In April of 1988, an expedition of local politicians made the trip to Ottawa to lobby for funding. Mayor Mary Daley of Westville described it as "your typical trip to Ottawa that we're very familiar with in this neck of the woods. You go to Ottawa to make pleas for money, when times are rough" (intvw).

Clifford Frame has strong political connections, and he made good use of them. Don Cameron shepherded the Westray project through the approval stages at both government levels when he was the provincial Minister of Industry and later, Premier. Initially, the mine was located in the riding next to Cameron's (though many media reports initially located it

in his riding). But, ironically in the context of the explosion, a lengthy process to redraw constituency boundaries placed the community in Cameron's riding in time for the 1993 provincial election. Many of its workers were his constituents. Elmer MacKay, who also intervened, represented the riding federally until the 1993 election.

Then-Prime Minister Brian Mulroney encouraged his government to support the project. He held MacKay's seat briefly after his election as national leader of the Progressive Conservatives. Lobbyist and former Conservative defence minister Robert Coates lobbied on Curragh's behalf. Former Prime Minister John Turner was a member of Curragh's Board of Directors (the fifth estate, Dec. 11, 1990).

Eventually, Frame got what he wanted. On October 2, 1990, Curragh issued a press release announcing the "immediate start of the construction and development of the Westray coal project." According to the release, the federal government guaranteed 85 per cent of a \$100-million loan from the Bank of Nova Scotia, and also agreed to an additional interest buydown of \$8.75 million. The project was estimated to cost \$139 million (Curragh press release, Tuesday, Oct. 9, 1990).

In the spring of 1990, Curragh publicly traded stock.

Initially, shares were sold at \$12. That same year, Curragh also bought the Stronsay lead/zinc mine in northern British Columbia. But things soon started to go wrong. Curragh was pushing ahead with Westray and another Yukon zinc mine, Sa Dena Hes. The company was over-extended, and the zinc market had collapsed. By the end of 1991, shares had fallen to just \$3.

In November, 1991, just two months after the Westray mine opened, Frame put it up for sale. He also went to the federal government for more money for the Yukon project, and he sold Curragh's stake in a zinc smelter in Spain for \$60-million.

When Curragh held its annual meeting on May 5, 1992 (just four days before the Westray explosion), the financial picture was not healthy. Curragh posted losses of \$98.3 million for 1991. But there was some good news, in that zinc prices were climbing. Frame talked of diversifying again, this time into gold.

The Westray mine before the explosion

The Westray mine opened in September, 1991, with a ceremony attended by hundreds of guests -- Cameron, MacKay and Turner among them (see photo, p.64). But Westray was plagued with

Courtesy: Len Bonner

The Westray mine, with Nova Scotia Power
generating station in Trenton in background

problems. There were rock falls and cave-ins underground, and the mine was having difficulty meeting production targets. Shaun Comish worked at the mine and wrote a book about his experiences (1993), in which he says there was a cave-in his third day on the job. He had been a miner for 11 years, but "this place proved to be the worst" (1993, p.12). "I swear," he wrote, "if the newspapers or TV had reported every rockfall that occurred, that's all that would have been in the news" (1993, p.19).

Unions had tried without success to organize the miners. Westray was the only non-unionized underground coal mine in the country. After the explosion, the United Steel Workers were successful. Randy Facette, the first president of Steelworkers Local 2332, said later that "everybody was scared to back anybody up here, scared of losing their jobs. Probably the biggest intimidation here was, if you don't like it, get the hell out" (Wells, 1992, p.48). Comish wrote of similar pressures. After one particularly serious cave-in, the pit boss ordered the men to return to work right away. They wanted to catch their breath. "The pit boss started yelling and screaming like some kind of maniac: 'If you don't get back to work, you can go the fuck home!'" (1993, pp.18-19). Westville Mayor Daley believes the men "were really scared into keeping their mouths shut" (intvw).

Sociologist Rex Lucas points out that anxiety is a way of life in communities like Pictou County. The workers are subject to fluctuating economic demands and depletion of non-renewable resources (Lucas, 1969, p.96). There is also the fear of mine disasters. Disaster literature suggests people who live in mining communities have learned to live with the potential of, and in many cases the inevitability of, disaster (Lucas, 1969, p.6). In sociological terms, they have formed a disaster subculture -- a "group level coping mechanism" (Hannigan and Kueneman, 1978, p.130). People are aware that disaster may strike, and know what to do should that occur.

In an early study of disasters, Charles Fritz (1961) refers to a 1951 coal mine explosion in West Frankfort, Illinois. It killed 119 men. Because the mining community had had similar experiences before, everyone knew what had happened. As one miner said, "They just told us there was an explosion. That was enough right there. In fact, that tells the whole story. It was just a matter of how many" (Fritz, 1961, p.660).

In these communities, there appears to be a fatalistic attitude. These are the words of a miner's wife who spoke after that 1951 explosion: "That's your life as a coal miner's wife or daughter. You feel like these accidents are

going to happen from time to time. You never know whether the next one will be yours or not" (Fritz, 1961, p.661).

All miners, especially coal miners, know they work in a dangerous place. But miners in Pictou County have always known that if their mine wasn't working, they weren't working. So they weren't likely to complain too much. In one way, Pictou County's mining community today is different from the norm. Because mining on a significant scale had been dormant for over 30 years, there was only a limited available workforce of trained coal miners in the immediate area when Westray started up. Curragh hired some experienced miners from elsewhere -- Alberta, Newfoundland and Wales -- but the company also trained local men who had little or no experience underground.

When disaster strikes a community, residents with previous experience tend to be better prepared. There is an intuitive sense of familiarity with what has happened, and of what to do. They proceed to the next stage, and gather together for support, and to help in the relief effort.

There is considerable irony in the fact that Pictou County had conducted an emergency training exercise exactly one week before the explosion. Although the event bore no resemblance to the Westray tragedy, it put emergency

organizers on the alert. In fact, when the mine exploded early on the morning of May 9, several organizers who received the call, but lived far enough away to be out of earshot of the explosion, thought it was an extension of the simulation from the week before.

James M. Cameron wrote a history of the Pictonian colliers, published in 1974. He concludes his introductory chapter with these words:

If there is a moral in the tale it is that human beings should not have to earn a living in dark holes thousands of feet from sunshine and fresh air, holes wherein too many men have died. The history of coal mining in Pictou County differs from coal mining history elsewhere only in the names of people and places. It is a sorry history (Cameron, 1974, p.4).

A profile of the Nova Scotia media

This section provides an overview of the Nova Scotia journalism community. It will also explore a striking characteristic of journalists in Nova Scotia, which goes some distance to explaining why they tended to ignore safety concerns at Westray prior to the Westray tragedy.

In beginning a profile of Nova Scotia's news media, one is almost compelled to start with the Chronicle-Herald, a morning paper, and its sister paper the Mail Star, which comes out in the afternoon. Owned by the Dennis family of

Halifax, they are Nova Scotia's largest dailies. A provincial edition of the Herald is like the metropolitan version except for its earlier deadline. The two papers share the same staff and the same stories, although the Mail Star will update Herald stories, or drop some to make room for late-breaking local, national or international items. The papers employ 116 full-time reporters and editors, and 20 part-time employees. As of November, 1993, the metro Herald and Mail Star had a combined circulation of 73,769. The provincial Herald's circulation was 73,966. The average size of the Herald and Mail Star from Monday to Friday is 50-60 pages and on Saturday, the papers expand to between 68 and 74 pages. The papers have nine bureaus across Nova Scotia.

The Herald and the Mail Star compete, at least in metropolitan Halifax, with a daily tabloid, the morning Halifax Daily News. In November, 1993, its circulation was 25,900 for the Monday through Saturday papers, and 38,000 for its Sunday edition. The weekly circulation broke down into 20,000 for metropolitan Halifax and 5,900 for the rest of the province. The Daily News employs an editorial staff of 50, and the average size of the paper is 48-56 pages Monday through Saturday, and up to 90 pages on Sundays. It has no bureaus. The Daily News is owned by Newfoundland entrepreneur Harry Steele.

Despite the fact that its news staff numbers less than half that of the Herald, the Daily News covers local and political issues at least as thoroughly, at least in terms of number of stories, if not in terms of length. Daily News reporters are expected to cover two and sometimes three stories a day. The Daily News had three nominations for Atlantic Journalism Awards in 1993, in the commentary and editorial writing categories, compared to one nomination for the Herald (Parker Barss Donham of the News and Dean Jobb of the Herald won.) This year, the News again has three nominations in those combined categories, and the Herald has none. The winners will be announced later in May.

The Cape Breton Post, the New Glasgow Evening News and the Truro Daily News are the province's only other dailies, and all three are owned by Thomson Newspapers. They all publish Monday through Saturday (although the Daily News publishes an entertainment supplement on Sunday), and, as of last November, their respective circulation numbers were 30,500, 12,000 and 11,000.

Three television stations broadcast in the province: ATV, a CTV affiliate; the CBC; and MITV, owned by the Global network. ATV has held first place in the supper-hour newscast ratings for many years. The following ratings are taken from the Spring, 1994 Bureau of Broadcast

Measurements, and indicate the percentage of viewers watching television in mainland Nova Scotia who are over two years of age. ATV's is first at 20 per cent, followed by CBC at 12 per cent and MITV at four per cent. MITV hopes to improve its ratings by expanding its coverage base from metro to the entire province. As of November, 1993, ATV had a news staff of 28 (reporters, writer/editors, producers, management, anchors, technical editors and camera operators), CBC's First Edition totals 39, and MITV's news staff numbers 29.

CBC Newsworld originates from Halifax from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. Atlantic time, Monday through Friday, and the unit also produces two-minute news packages overnight on week nights. Total staff is 51, of whom 26 are involved in news reporting, including the executive producer, producers, news writers and editorial assistants.

The nine radio stations in Halifax are: the CBC's two English networks, three private AM stations (CFDR, CHNS and CJCH), four private FM stations (CHFX, CFRQ, CIOO and CIEZ) and Dalhousie University's FM station. The Fall, 1993 BBM ratings (the most recent available) suggest that from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m., CBC has dropped from first to second place. Although it maintained the same 21 per cent rating it scored the previous Spring (the percentage denotes listeners 18

years of age or older who are listening to the radio at that time), CHFX Radio took the lead, with 22 per cent. In the other prime information programming time slot, 4 p.m. to 6 p.m., the ratings as of Fall, 1993 are as follows: CHFX, 19 per cent; Q104, 18 per cent; C100, 14 per cent; and CBC, 12 per cent.

CBC Radio's news staff in Halifax numbers seven (four reporters, two writer/editors and one senior editor), as of November, 1993. CBC's Sydney radio news team totals four.

CFDR (AM) and CFRQ (FM) are both owned by Harry Steele. The two stations share a news staff of eight, which includes reporters, assignment editor, writer/editors, newsreader and Program Director Gary Vaughn. Vaughn says everyone takes turns with the various responsibilities, and they do their own newsgathering as well as "rip and read." CFDR changed its music format to country and western in January, 1994.

The situation is similar at CJCH (AM) and CIOO (FM). They are both owned by Toronto's CHUM, and share a news staff of five, who alternate between reporting, editing and reading on air. According to news director Rick Howe, he and his colleagues try to spend half of each work day doing original reporting.

CHNS (AM), which plays music for seniors, and CHFX (FM), a country station, belong to the Maritime Broadcasting Corporation, owned by Maclean-Hunter. Again, the five full-time employees, including news director Jir Crichton, and one part-time worker, do everything. Crichton says he can spare only one reporter to gather tape outside the newsroom. The rest gather news by phone.

Sun Radio Ltd., a publicly-traded company, owns CIEZ (FM), which began in 1990 and is the newest station in metro. Its music caters to older people, and it does not generate its own news. CIEZ has one of its on-air hosts read wire copy, and it subscribes to Standard Broadcast News, which sends taped news reports down phone lines.

Standard Broadcast News is a Toronto-based news network (wire and audio service), owned by the Slade family. It has had a two-person office in Nova Scotia since 1990. They cover the Atlantic region, mostly by phone, although they travel occasionally. SBN also employs stringers. SBN competes with Broadcast News, and, like BN, the news it covers is of a regional and national focus, not local.

Broadcast News, formed in 1953 as an affiliate of Canadian Press, services radio and television subscribers across the country. BN opened an office in Halifax that same year and

currently employs three reporter/editors.

Canadian Press has been in Halifax since 1917. Its staff totals 11: six reporter/editors, two supervisors, two editorial assistants and one photographer. BN and CP share two support staff, a technician and a computer operator. Last year, CP moved 3,894 stories from its Halifax outlet and seven daily newspaper members in Nova Scotia. CP generates 10-15 reports per week from its Halifax newsroom, although some of those are regional, not just provincial stories.

Elaine Flaherty is the Southam newspaper group's reporter in Atlantic Canada, based in Halifax. She files approximately three stories per week, she says, and each appears in at least one paper. Flaherty believes 60 to 70 per cent of her items run in all Southam papers. At least half her stories originate from Nova Scotia, in part because she is based there, but also because Halifax is a regional centre for economic and news round-up stories. Flaherty says she does mostly political stories and features, and her reports are often summaries of Atlantic Canada events of interest to a national audience (intvw).

Kevin Cox, The Globe and Mail's correspondent for the Atlantic Provinces, files two or three Nova Scotia stories a

week. Approximately 60 per cent of his reports originate from Nova Scotia -- again, because he's there and because he writes national trend stories out of Halifax. Cox says his reports always appear in the paper, because he works very closely with the assignment desk in Toronto (intvw).

An alternative voice in Nova Scotia journalism belongs to a magazine called New Maritimes, which began in 1982 and appears every two months. The magazine prides itself on its critical political comment. For example, several months after the Westray tragedy, the editors reprinted an article by Skip Hambling of the Ottawa-based National Union of Public and General Employees. It began, "The truth about the Westray mine disaster is that we will never know the truth about the Westray mine disaster." Hamblin talks about "The Big Lie:"

The Big Lie that miners live to die underground. The Big Lie that dying for a living is a way of life, that it's in the blood, a part of the Mystery of the Maritimes... We like this lie. It gives us collective comfort... Now, we want to make heroes of coal miners. Now, we want to honour the dead... This is not the truth. And it is not enough. How much better to honour them while they live, with safe mines. How much better to honour them -- and all hard-working people everywhere -- with a real chance at a real life, with jobs that don't kill them and that don't evaporate when the government money runs out. How much, much better for us all to give the lie to The Big Lie (Sept.-Oct., 1992, p.2).

The Nova Scotia media as well-wishers

Most journalists in Nova Scotia appear to share with Nova Scotians in general a desire for positive development in their province. Linden MacIntyre, a host of CBC Television's the fifth estate, describes it as "a symbiotic relationship between the Nova Scotia population and the news media" (Starr, 1992, p.11). MacIntyre, who is from Cape Breton, says, for example, that many Nova Scotians believed Donald Cameron's claim that Westray was a good idea because they wanted to believe it. He adds that the local media followed suit because "they seem to be in sync with the mental state of the province" (Starr, 1992, p.12). That general desire may have diminished journalistic zeal to cast a critical eye to the Westray project prior to the explosion.

This regionalism goes even deeper, say Bruce Wark, a journalism professor at the University of King's College in Halifax, and Betsy Chambers, legislative reporter for the three Thomson newspapers in Nova Scotia. They believe there is a bias among many of the province's mainland journalists against Cape Breton; this reflects a similar bias among much of the mainland population in general. Wark and Chambers also believe the two biggest mainland papers, the Herald and the Daily News, reflect that bias. It is especially strong, they claim, against the Cape Breton Development Corporation

(Devco), a federal crown corporation responsible for mining operations in Cape Breton, and the Sydney Steel Corporation (Sysco), a provincial crown corporation, which are viewed as bottomless money pits. They also say many people in Pictou County, Donald Cameron among them, resent Devco, because they perceive that Devco's coal mines were developed at the expense of Pictou County coal (intvws). Opinions about Devco may have to be revised, however. The federal crown corporation posted a profit in 1993, its first.

Reporters also seemed to want to believe in former premier Donald Cameron. Bruce Wark, who is a former CBC radio reporter, says Cameron "had a long honeymoon" with journalists, who "took Donnie's side on everything because he seemed clean" (intvw). Elaine Flaherty believes the media, again like most Nova Scotians, found Cameron "a refreshing change after John Buchanan" (intvw), a reference to the previous Conservative premier whose time in office was marred by scandal. Betsy Chambers agrees that was the prevailing sentiment, although she adds it is not one she shared.

Given what appears to be a strong pro-development, pro-mainland, pro-Cameron perspective among many members of the Halifax media, it is not surprising they didn't respond to occasional cues that there were safety problems at Westray.

The story the Nova Scotia media missed

In December, 1987, Devco sent an unsolicited, confidential report to the governments of Canada and Nova Scotia. The memo warned that the Westray mine would be neither safe nor economically viable. It said the Pictou County area had a history of geological faults and methane gas that would make the mine "extremely liable to spontaneous combustion" (p.5). It also warned that the market for thermal coal wasn't big enough to sustain both a mine in Pictou County and Devco's own mines, and the jobs touted for Westray, through federal and provincial funding, would come at the expense of jobs at Devco (Devco report, Dec. 8, 1987).

The report did not remain confidential for long. In early 1988, the opposition Liberals used it to attack the Westray proposal in the Nova Scotia Legislature. But the debate over Westray at both government levels, and media coverage of that debate, concentrated on the politics and the economics of the proposal. Safety was generally not an issue.

Exceptions were very rare. On August 18, 1989, the Halifax Chronicle-Herald ran a front page story headlined "Caution urged in working coal mine," by reporter Stewart Lewis. Lewis referred to James Cameron's book, The Pictonian Colliers, and recalled that between 1836 and 1952, 246 men

had died from explosions in Pictou County's coal pits. Lewis also quoted a warning from mining engineer Derek Rance that Westray would have to be very cautious if it wanted to prevent deaths from methane gas explosions. Rance, a former head of Devco, said that "in order for that mine to be safe, **everything is going to have to work right all of the time**" (bold added).

Lewis's story stood alone until December 11, 1990, when Linden MacIntyre of the fifth estate ran his first report on Westray. It was a political story, documenting ties between federal and provincial politicians, and mine owner Clifford Frame, but it contained a very brief mention of safety concerns at Westray. A former executive of Esso Resources, which had considered developing a coal mine in Pictou County, said the president of Imperial Oil had been worried about the history of fires and explosions in Pictou County's coal seams. MacIntyre asked the question: "There's a long history of fire, explosion, bump in that area [a bump is a rock disturbance, often an explosion, underground]. Did that give you concern?" Giacomo Capobianco, who later became the president of the National Coal Association, responded: "It did to a certain extent and I think it gave the President of Imperial Oil even more concern." But other than that brief clip, which ran :07 seconds, the fifth estate story didn't pursue the safety angle.

Betsy Chambers filed a story for the Cape Breton Post and the New Glasgow Evening News, which ran October 23, 1991, shortly after the mine opened. The story was headlined "Mine worker scats citing safety scare," with the sub-head in bold, "GM discounts complaints." The story began:

Although management at the Westray Coal mine has played down recent safety charges, some underground employees have apparently decided to quit.

Chambers interviewed a Westray miner who quit his job because he was worried about his safety. Chambers' story referred to his allegations of high levels of coal dust in the mine and frequent rock falls, but her source insisted on anonymity.

Wark and Chambers argue that journalists missed the safety angle in the Westray story at least in part because they perceived the complaints from Cape Breton as sour grapes, and because they wanted another part of the province to be the beneficiary of the financial largesse that had previously been directed to Cape Breton (intvws).

News coverage of Westray's opening was flattering. Wilkie Taylor of the New Glasgow bureau filed a story in the Herald on September 12, 1991. The headline ran "Westray mine \$11.5m under budget." The story's lead said the mine was constructed on schedule and under budget. Clifford Frame

called the development of a mine "a wealth-creation situation." Donald Cameron said the controversy surrounding the development was a symbol of how "politics gets in the way of good things happening." Paragraphs seven and eight of the 16-paragraph item referred to opposition from organized labour, and from "the Cape Breton Development Corporation and some Cape Breton politicians."

Six months later, on March 24, 1992, a story appeared in the Nova Scotia Business Review of the Daily News. Headlined "Westray mine says critics proved wrong by progress," Reg Fendick's story read more like an editorial column than reporting:

Despite the billions that have been pumped into Devco over the years, it begrudged Curragh the much smaller financial support it wanted from the federal and provincial governments.

In the following paragraph, Fendick wrote that the company "is paying its bills, meeting its production quotas and sales prospects look bright for its product, a high heat content, low-polluting coal." In paragraph six Fendick reported, "Westray is a no frills operation. There is no elaborate railway system to ferry miners and equipment back and forth to the mine surface. The gigantic wash plant is state-of-the-art and needs only five people to operate it."

Not all of that information was true, nor was the story

complete. For one thing, Westray was not meeting its production quotas. For another, a "no frills operation" may not necessarily be a good thing for a worker. And finally, the absence of a railway system to and from the surface meant miners had to use tractors. A former mine manager in Pictou County, Nearing Sarson, believes tractors were dangerous, because their brakes weren't strong enough and their engines could spark an explosion (Sarson intvw).

Both stories gave the impression that Westray was high-tech and state-of-the-art. Bruce Wark says that sort of reporting can lull people into a false sense of security, because of what he calls the "technology bias." He says many people wanted to think such mining accidents as rockfalls, fires and explosions wouldn't happen anymore, because modern technology would prevent them. Wark says the media went along with that notion, too (intvw).

There are other, more pragmatic explanations for the media's failure to pursue safety concerns about Westray. Dean Jobb, who was assigned to cover Westray full time for the Herald after the mine exploded, believes journalists were doing their job -- no more, but no less either.

What are you going to do every time an industry comes to town? Say it kills people? How do you say this company is putting its workers' lives in danger every day, especially when you've got a provincial Labour department that says the mine is conforming to our safety guidelines? (intvw b)

Jobb says there weren't many miners coming forward with complaints, and those who did would not let their names be used. Without any empirical evidence, he adds, "how do you know these guys don't just have an axe to grind with the company?" (intvw b)

Betsy Chambers agrees. She says an assignment editor could look at allegations from one or two disaffected miners, and wonder if they were really whistle blowers or just troublemakers. She also says a safety story could be done on just about any heavy industry in Nova Scotia, because they're all dangerous. And Chambers says most reporters knew very little about the technology of mining, so they didn't know how to evaluate the dangers of rock falls and methane levels (intvw).

There is another explanation for the media's unwillingness to pursue every twist and turn of the Westray story. They grew tired of it. Liberal MLA Bernie Boudreau raised the Westray issue in the provincial Legislature 45 times, by his own count. Although his preoccupation was the political and economic dimensions, he also asked about rock falls, roof collapses and coal dust levels. He reminded the government about the methane gas and fault structure in the Foord Seam, referred to the high accident rate at Clifford Frame's lead/zinc mine in Yukon, and raised the spectre of the

potentially lethal mix of "a dangerous mine and apparently a lax operator" (intvw).

According to Kevin Cox, the media grew tired of Boudreau (intvw b). Geoff D'Eon, former executive producer of CBC Television's supper hour news program, First Edition, agrees.

When Bernie Boudreau sounded warnings about safety, they were taken with a grain of salt. When an MLA from Cape Breton complains about a coal mine on the mainland we assume he is doing it to protect the best interests of his constituents (Starr, 1992, p.13).

"We simply got burnt out on the story and we didn't think Boudreau had any credibility," says Mike Hornbrook, CBC Radio's national reporter for the Maritime provinces. "People would roll their eyes when Boudreau got up on his favourite sawhorse again" (Starr, 1992, p.11).

Reporters cannot be chastised for dwelling on the political dimensions of the Westray mine. What is regrettable is the virtual exclusivity of that focus, and that is a regret with which, a year later, journalists still struggled (Cox, Jobb, intvws).

Organizational review

To this point, we have discussed the explosion at the Westray mine on Saturday morning, May 9, 1992, and its probable cause, an excessive accumulation of methane gas. We have conducted a review of the literature, as it relates to the behaviours of corporate public relations and the media; this suggests organization and openness on the part of the former are essential for positive relations with the latter. And we have provided a portrait of the three key players in this tragic event: the company, the Nova Scotia media and the community around the mine.

The dynamic of their relationships reveals a great deal about the interdependence of corporations and publics. Chapter 4 will explore those relationships and assess how they evolved. Analysis of media content is drawn from a thorough survey of the New Glasgow Evening News, the Halifax Daily News, the Halifax Chronicle-Herald, The Globe and Mail and CBC Television, First Edition in particular.

CHAPTER 4

THE CONFLICTS: CURRAGH VS. THE MEDIA VS. THE COMMUNITY

An overview

Although accidents in the mining industry are not uncommon, Curragh was not prepared for this event, any more than most mining companies are (Hudon, Capobianco, intvws). It had no crisis plan (Reid, intvw). The absence of a 'what-to-do-when-the-unthinkable-happens' guide meant that Curragh was forced into a reactive position. And, as White suggests (1991), Curragh was dealing with two crises: the event, and how to handle the event. Curragh installed the media in the local community centre (see diagram, p. 87). The journalists had no access to the company offices or the minesite, except at the company's initiative. Curragh installed the trapped miners' families in the fire hall, directly across the street from the community centre. There were similar restrictions for them. Police patrolled the street that separated the two buildings. So there were essentially three camps: Curragh, the media and the families. Initially, this arrangement seemed acceptable. The media appreciated having the basic necessities: a roof over their heads and electrical power (Allison, intvw). The families appreciated being able to be together at the fire hall, close to the

Courtesy: New Glasgow Evening News

minesite, where they could receive information from the rescue operation as soon as it was available, and rely on each other and community supporters. They also appreciated being protected from the media (Gillis; family member, intvws).

According to Paul Curley, who became one of Curragh's PR advisers after the explosion, the strategy was as follows:

To make sure that whatever information was given out to the press and the public was informed. So they put all the families to one side. And they held briefing sessions for the families on an hourly basis, or every three hours. They had the RCMP cordon off the mineshaft so you didn't have a lot of media people trying to get information. And the families were isolated from the media, so the media didn't have a chance to go around and ask everybody what they thought. And so there was not a lot of freelancing. They really had a significant sense of control of the media (intvw).

Curley acknowledges that "one of the negatives to come out of that is that the media were hostile to them [Curragh] after it was all over, because they didn't have access" (intvw).

Movies, novels and other mass media have encouraged certain assumptions about individuals' behaviour patterns during a disaster (Fritz, 1961, p.654). Many believe that people panic or go to pieces, or that there is mass confusion. For example, Bob Allison, senior producer of First Edition, said his team was quite certain by the day following the

explosion that no one would be found alive. But, he said, "we didn't want to go ahead and create alarm," so they decided not to say anything at the time (intvw).

Mayor Clarence Porter of Stellarton reflected similar thinking: "When something just happens, there has to be panic and confusion. People run in all directions" (intvw).

In fact, crisis research shows behaviour usually runs counter to that stereotype. During those early hours of the Westray tragedy, the families did not go to pieces, according to Mayor Daley of Westville. Their shared needs further strengthened the family unit, and forged new bonds with the families of other trapped miners (Daley, Gillis, intvws). Although there were occasional moments of tension, that mutually supportive relationship between families lasted throughout the week, and beyond. Even people who left the fire hall to identify the bodies of their loved ones returned to be with others who were still waiting for news (Thompson, intvw).

And there was very little confusion. The community mounted an organized relief and comfort effort that was truly impressive. Mayor Porter recalled that the Stellarton fire department collected, cooked and distributed food. The Sears store donated freezers. Sobeys donated a delivery truck. A

local hotel, which was closed for the season, opened its doors to weary families. Taxi drivers donated their services. The Mayor himself convinced K-Mart to open early one morning so he could fill his car with diapers for the temporary nursery (intvw). Volunteers set up a day care centre for the children of rescue workers and relatives who were waiting for information in the fire hall (CP, May 15, 1992). Hairdressers from local salons washed, cut and set hair, at no charge, to help weary family members feel more presentable (Daley, intvw).

The Emergency Measures Organization was at the fire hall primarily for its social services role. EMO workers provided support to the families, and they acted as a conduit for communication between Westray and the families. The Red Cross and the Salvation Army, traditionally called into service during disasters, had trained staff and volunteers on the scene throughout the tragedy. They supplied beds and blankets, and offered counselling. The Red Cross made sure there was a designated area for each family, so they'd know where to find each other (Baxter, intvw).

Even the media were beneficiaries of the community's generosity. Food started arriving at the community centre, where the press corps had been installed. The reporters, who were surviving on Twinkies and cold pizza, were grateful. At

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local hotel, which was closed for the season, opened its doors to weary families. Taxi drivers donated their services. The Mayor himself convinced K-Mart to open early one morning so he could fill his car with diapers for the temporary nursery (intvw). Volunteers set up a day care centre for the children of rescue workers and relatives who were waiting for information in the fire hall (CP, May 15, 1992). Hairdressers from local salons washed, cut and set hair, at no charge, to help weary family members feel more presentable (Daley, intvw).

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one point the journalists were told Westray was paying for the food. Bob Allison recalls they almost choked, and decided they preferred the cold pizza. But that rumour was corrected and they learned the people of Pictou Country were paying for this out of their own pockets. Within minutes, the press corps had collected about \$200 as a contribution (intvw).

The narrow road that separated the media from the families became known among reporters as the White Line. Rarely did anyone from one side cross over to the other. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police enforced the barrier. According to Staff Sergeant Ron Peers of the New Glasgow detachment, his officers protected the families from the media, at the families' request (intvw).

But the positioning of the media and the families in such close proximity guaranteed animosity. The fact that the police blocked media access to the families heightened the tension. Globe and Mail journalist Andre Picard, who arrived in Plymouth to back up Kevin Cox, wrote that there was a "strange tension between local people and journalists." The journalists felt Curragh had wrapped them in "a virtual cocoon," he wrote, and the families and the press were kept apart by the RCMP, "with strict orders to keep the media in their place" (The Globe and Mail, May 13, 1992, p.A4).

Because the mine owners were on the other side of the barricade, all that the media and the families could do was wait for something to happen. The media actually had a lookout posted by the window, to watch for activity. As soon as someone saw a Curragh car headed towards the fire hall, all the journalists in the community centre would snap awake and ready themselves for a news briefing.

The relationship between Curragh and the media

Tom Reid of Reid Management in Toronto handled initial press inquiries. Reid had had a long association with Clifford Frame; he was a PR consultant when Frame was at Denison mines. The relationship continued when Frame started Curragh. Reid wrote annual reports and press releases, and advised Frame on media strategy. Reid says as soon as he heard about the explosion, he knew what he had to do -- "get the facts out as soon as possible" (intvw). He maintains a crisis plan would never have occurred to the key players at Curragh. "They're very meat and potatoes guys," he said (intvw). Furthermore, Reid argues, Curragh didn't need a crisis plan:

I can't imagine that you would have to draft a crisis management brochure, like we've done for other clients. You're not dealing with idiots at Curragh. They're very smart, very resourceful people. They were very quick to react. They knew exactly what had to happen (intvw).

And although Kevin Cox of The Globe and Mail was sceptical about having to rely on a Toronto-based source for information about a Nova Scotia story, Reid believes he performed a useful function:

We had set up an information command post at my office, and they [the reporters] could call me and get whatever facts they needed, diagrams, maps. ... I had the background. The employees at Westray didn't -- things like when Curragh got the contract, or how big the site was, or what the projections were. They wouldn't know that. So people were directed to me. We didn't leave people hanging on the phone for more than 60 seconds. And every fact we gave out was verifiable (intvw).

Cox recalls being amazed at Reid's grasp of what was happening.

He knew everything. He knew how many guys were supposedly involved. He gave the exact location of where the mine was. He knew exactly how it was being handled. And I was amazed (intvw).

Reid doesn't believe he would have been more useful if he'd gone to Westray. "Telephone and fax communication are so efficient," he says. And besides, he says, his role at this point was to "put some meat around the absence of facts, such as what actually was going on underground. It was days before the media got a feeling for that."

If you're right in it, you really can't sort out what's important and what isn't. There are opinions flying, speculation flying. What I would have to do is say, no matter what they (Westray officials) said to me on the phone, I'd say 'this is the information I'm looking for, go and get it, and verify it.' And they would do that. And I could only do that by phone... you can put

perspective on things very quickly, staying outside the loop. It's very helpful (intvw).

Reporters respond they didn't get "a feeling for that" because Curragh officials were using technical jargon that journalists didn't understand. As Bob Allison recalls:

What we were trying to learn was what were so many 'parts per' of methane. We were trying to find out whether those numbers were high or low. They weren't forthcoming in describing how high or how low. And we were trying to come to grips with what were minute numbers (intvw).

Kevin Cox was also having problems following the jargon. When officials first started talking about "crosscuts," he says, reporters didn't know what the word meant.

We didn't even know what a crosscut was. We thought a crosscut was a barrier, a cement barrier. And then we found out that these were actually alleyways [connecting main shafts]. And then we learned why they were going through this crosscut to get to this point ... So we gradually understood, but they would make no effort to tell us (intvw).

Bill MacCulloch, a training officer for Westray Coal and a former journalist in Pictou County, divided his time between the community centre and the mine office, and he agrees the use of technical language probably made it more difficult for reporters to understand what spokesmen were saying, although he believes that was not intentional (intvw).

From Toronto, Reid provided information to reporters on

request, advised on the tone of voice Curragh spokesmen should use, and suggested the following priorities of what should be said to the media: that the explosion was a terrible tragedy which could not have been foreseen; that the mine owners ran a safe mine; that the families and the rescue workers were showing great courage; and that the company would participate fully in any investigation (intvw; fax from Reid to Westray, May 9, 1992).

The Halifax Daily News is the only Nova Scotia paper which publishes on Sunday, although the New Glasgow Evening News put out a special edition on May 10. The Daily News carried five stories the day after the explosion, three describing rescue efforts, one recalling the political controversy surrounding the mine which briefly refers to safety, and the fifth raising safety concerns. Marvin Pelley, president of corporate development and projects, is quoted as saying, "Our safety record for this mine has been very very commendable." A paraphrase from Colin Benner promises an independent investigation. There was also a chart of the coal mine and description of Westray's operation, as well as a list of deaths from previous coal mining disasters and accidents in Nova Scotia.

The New Glasgow Evening News published a four-page special edition, with 14 stories and a full page of photographs.

There was no mention at all of safety concerns.

From the company's perspective, then, Tom Reid's counsel seemed to be working in Sunday's print news. Reporters had access to Curragh spokesmen: Marvin Pelley, president of operations Colin Benner and Westray general manager Gerald Phillips, although it was limited; and Reid's background information and graphics were useful. The safety story in the Daily News came from union organizers and one unnamed miner, and it was dismissed by both Benner and Pelley.

Television coverage was much more critical, however. The National, on CBC-TV, devoted 31 minutes to the Westray explosion. There were four reporter-stories, two feature interviews, and re-broadcast of a portion of the fifth estate story from December 11, 1990. Safety was addressed in the first report, filed by Kas Roussy, in which a former Westray miner said he was fired because he complained about safety. And it reappeared in a background report by Keith Boag, who referred to documents from the Ministry of Labour which showed that there had been seven different roof falls between 1989 and the fall of 1991.

Anchor Peter Mansbridge interviewed Bruce Stephen, a brother-in-law of one of the trapped miners, who said the company "was doing the best they can." The National's

coverage also included a mood piece by Brenda Craig.

By Monday, the safety angle was evident throughout media coverage. A headline in the Toronto Star ran "Why did safety system fail? Sad questions grow louder" (May 11, 1992, A1). CBC Television's The National ran a separate story on safety concerns at Westray, as did Newsworld. Kevin Cox painted a sensitive portrait of a community in mourning in The Globe, describing Colin Benner as "shaken," "his voice choking with emotion" as he gave the news that the bodies of 11 men had been discovered. Cox also mentioned safety, but only once, in paragraph 13 of a 27-paragraph story.

The Halifax Chronicle-Herald devoted all of its front and second pages, plus a special four-page report, to the explosion. The first story began with the words, "Hopes of finding 15 trapped miners alive were slim Sunday night..." Although the safety angle was not explored on page 1, it was peppered throughout the rest of that Monday's coverage, which included two stories suggesting the mine was not safe.

CBC-TV's First Edition devoted the first 22 minutes of its Monday program to the explosion. There were five reporter-stories, and the third dealt with safety concerns.

Tom Reid says he raised the safety issue with Curragh very

early. He recalls that the media started asking him questions about it almost immediately. "I would say that every third question was a safety issue" (intvw). Reid was not pleased with the way the issue was being addressed. On reflection, he says, he can see why Curragh officials might have preferred he stay in Toronto.

It was probably a wise thing on their part to say, 'you stay in Toronto and give us the perspective,' because they know I have certain standards, shall we say. And I would just fight them, if they had something that was of concern that they'd made up their minds they didn't want anybody else to know about, until they either address it or they find somebody else to represent them. That's always a risk, with every client I have, that they will conceal something from me (intvw).

Reid recalls that it was day four, Tuesday, when he started to notice something about the way Curragh was treating the media:

They were devising strategies that they weren't asking me about. I'm sure there was a good reason, but they never bothered to explain it to me. And that was they'd make a statement, they'd answer two or three questions, and then they'd get out ... When I saw that happening I thought that was not a positive, healthy, constructive strategy. And I tried to advise them against it. I said, 'Once you're in the room, you stay there until you're satisfied you've answered all the questions. Then excuse yourself and get back to your operations.' But they maintained this 'in, quick hit, couple of answers, and then out.' I didn't understand that strategy (intvw).

Tom Reid has maintained during several conversations with the writer that Curragh Inc. owes his company about \$25,000. Although he is somewhat bitter about the debt, and although

he acknowledges Curragh did not always follow his advice, he maintains a professional loyalty to his former client. So Reid will not be more specifically critical of Curragh's behaviour.

Client loyalty is a professional commitment to which Bennet Communications of Halifax adheres as well. Neale Bennet was hired to advise Curragh at the minesite, and was there from Saturday on. It is not possible to confirm Bennet's precise role, because he has declined to participate in this project, citing client confidentiality, even though Clifford Frame agreed to release him from that agreement (Curley, intvw). Former Westray employee Bill MacCulloch believes Bennet's role was to "coordinate the whole process relative to getting the information out" (intvw).

It is useful to differentiate between the perspectives of the local and the distant media. Their attitudes and their coverage of the Westray story are different.

A local media perspective

The local cable company was the first to have any video on the air from the site, of which Lorne Seifred, the program manager at Shaw Cable in New Glasgow, is immensely proud. "We couldn't go live," he said, because they didn't have the

technology for a live hookup. "But what we did is, we taped it, and hopped in the car, drove 10 minutes up the mountain here, and we rewound the tape, pushed play, and it was on the air" (intvw). Seifred and his staff were critical of the way the rest of the media were covering the story.

They were being very clinical as to what was going on... We felt there was still a huge hole in the coverage. The people of Pictou County are very close, and from the feedback I was getting, they didn't want the finger pointing... They wanted the hope. So we went on the air with the mandate of providing some of that hope (intvw).

As is often the case with disaster coverage, the local media provided basic information (Scanlon, Alldred, Farrell and Prawzick, 1985, p.127). Seifred's staff broadcast information about which facilities were open and when, about church services and the candlelight vigils, and about where people could pick up the black ribbons everyone had decided to wear.

The local Thomson-owned newspaper, the New Glasgow Evening News, had a firm editorial policy that editor Doug MacNeil said had to be followed at risk of dismissal: Reporters would cover the press conferences and write on the tradition of mining in the area, but they were to stay away from the families. According to MacNeil, the national press has a lot to answer for, in terms of their behaviour during the tragedy.

The entire community was invaded. Reporters parked on people's doorsteps. Every time a family member turned around there was a camera or a microphone stuck in his face (intvw).

David Glenen, a reporter with the Evening News, was one of the first members of the media to arrive at the mine, at about 8 a.m. on Saturday. There were no roadblocks then and he had a very close view of the explosion. But at that stage, everybody thought it would all be over in a day. They were just waiting to see the survivors come up from underground (intvw).

Wilkie Taylor has been a reporter for more than 40 years. He is, in his words, "a New Glasgow boy," and now reports from New Glasgow for the Chronicle-Herald. He covered the Springhill explosions of 1956 and 1958, and Taylor says he had much more access then. In 1958, he says,

reporters were all on the property. We drove up in afternoon or evening, and the first place we headed for was the draeger crews' hut... They'd tell us what was going on down below. Now this time [Westray] we couldn't get on the mine site, and the draeger crews were held under almost protective custody in a motel. The draegermen would have talked to us if we could have gotten to them. If there wasn't the security, I'm sure, in the first days anyway, there'd certainly be people willing to talk (intvw).

There was another significant difference, according to Taylor:

When we went to Springhill we were on the grounds. We were watching for men to come up, standing with

people who had next of kin trapped inside. It was in the rainy fall nights. You stood this vigil, shoulder to shoulder with these people. And you bonded with some. You'd say to the person next to you, who was standing in the rain, look, I'll hold your place, go down to the Salvation Army and get yourself a coffee. And if anything happens here I'll make sure someone runs down and gets you. You do this for two or three nights and you form a bond with the person. These people are looking for support. And the reporters, many of them, became the support. So it was entirely different from [Westray] (intvw).

Glenen recalls that the relationship between Westray officials and local reporters changed dramatically on May 9. Previously, mine manager Gerald Phillips had been very accessible, press releases were issued frequently, and Westray employees generally were very open with local reporters. But that completely changed after the explosion. Phillips was unavailable except in controlled press conferences, press releases virtually stopped, and employees spoke to no one. Glenen says the change was particularly noticeable because the community is so small, and many of these people were personal acquaintances (intvw). MacCulloch agrees some reporters had expectations that he "could do things, because they knew me, and I couldn't." In particular, reporters wanted to get to the minesite, as had been done at Springhill.

Having come from the journalism field, I could certainly understand the desire to get there, but we're talking about different days in terms of journalism. We tried to accommodate them as best we could by doing scheduled trips that we could control (intvw).

The "Come-From-Away" Press

"Come-from-away" is a term Maritimers often use to describe people who are from somewhere else, and to the people of Pictou County, most of the journalists who covered this story were not from the area, and were considered "come-from-away" people (Hault, intvw). Throughout that tense week, about 100 journalists and support staff converged on Pictou County (Allison, Lightstone, intvws). The media often contribute in a negative way to convergence. They arrive in great numbers, and make tremendous demands on limited facilities (Scanlon et al, 1985, p.124). At Westray, for example, there were very few available phone lines. In fact, residents in nearby homes agreed to temporarily give up their lines to accommodate the media's needs.

Sometimes the media can help to mitigate convergence (Scanlon et al, 1985, p.129). If they are regularly informed, for example, they can help control the volume of inquiries by passing on information to worried friends and relatives, and they can even make requests for certain types of aid (Scanlon et al, 1985, p.123).

But at Westray, there was very little information from the company, so the media remained part of the convergence problem and contributed not at all to its resolution. The

media were at the mercy of Curragh. That was intentional. In an atmosphere where so little was known, Curragh believed information control was essential, in order to make sure everyone had the same information and that speculation was kept to a minimum.

The only information they had was being supplied by the company... The people who were involved felt that it was the only way they could control the situation, by giving everyone the same amount of information at the same time (Curley, intvw).

Kevin Cox recalls that throughout the entire tragedy, Curragh released only two written statements to the press. The first was issued at 12:01 a.m. on Sunday, May 10, and the other at the end of the day on Friday, May 15, about which more will be said later. There were only about four journalists still in the media centre at midnight that first night (Cox, intvw). The release was very confusing, and contained no less than 21 references to statistical data, in both percentages and parts per million. It disclosed that carbon dioxide levels taken in the mine earlier that evening, more than 12 hours after the explosion, registered 100 and 200 parts per million. The release said that methane levels were also still high, at 1.25 per cent. Government standards dictate that a mine must stop production if carbon monoxide levels reach 50 parts per million, and if methane levels reach 1.25 per cent (Statement to the Press, May 10, 1992). The reporters learned from local miners, retired

miner Robert Hoegg in particular, that even if anyone survived the intensity of the explosion, they would be unable to survive the lack of oxygen. But Curragh was searching for survivors, and the media were unwilling to go so far as to say the search was futile.

Kevin Cox's first story was headlined "Holding on to hope." He wrote that "there seemed little hope that anyone would emerge alive" (May 11, 1992, A1). And for those discouraging words, the families were angry at Cox (Cox, intvw).

Elizabeth Hoyle, a vice-president with Curley's firm, Advance Planning and Communications, defends the limited information flow:

You shouldn't be feeding information if it's in a situation that can be premature... You only go out with information if you're close to 100 per cent sure it's correct (intvw).

According to the on-air comments of First Edition hosts Jim Nunn and Norma Lee McLeod, however, even the minimal information was not always accurate.

At one point we reported rescuers were 100 metres from the trapped men. They [Curragh] said they were 300-500 metres from the trapped men. Then there was an indication today that they had moved back, uh, to a less deep position in the mine, to a new fresh air base. It is very difficult for us to tell you what is going on in the mine. It is very difficult for us to **know** what is going on in the mine (CBC-TV, May 12, 1992).

It has been shown, as in the Tylenol case described above (pp.44-46), that journalists are sometimes willing to withhold information if they believe it is in the public interest. In Curragh's case, however, the public's interest may not have been the issue. If allegations of conditions in the mine before the explosion are proven to be true, Curragh may have been more concerned about releasing information that might be damaging to itself.

Journalists recall that Curragh held press conferences irregularly, and they were often at awkward times: midnight, 2 a.m., 6 a.m., frequently just before deadline. Dean Jobb, who was the on-location editor in charge of coverage for the Chronicle-Herald, said the press conferences invariably would occur right on his deadline, so he barely had time to file a story, and hardly ever had time to get reaction. Jim Nunn and Norma Lee McLeod referred to "information by news conference, when mine officials are ready to share it with us," and later, to "broken deadlines, 'about to have' news" (First Edition, CBC-TV, May 12, 1992). On one edition of the program, the press conference had barely ended as the program began; on another, the press conference began while the program was on air. Bill MacCulloch was at the community centre for many of the press conferences, and he says the company tried to schedule them frequently. "We tried to give them the information they needed to get out to their

publics" (intvw).

It wasn't intentional to have press conferences at inconvenient times. If you're looking at it from their side, that might have been, but it certainly wasn't a design feature. One certainly doesn't try to schedule something to meet the requirements of the news media, that was the farthest thing from our minds. Trying to make sure that they got the information as fast as we had it, and that we could verify it, that's what we tried to do (intvw).

Usually the president of operations, Colin Benner, spoke, although chief executive officer Clifford Frame was on site almost from the beginning. Benner is photogenic, telegenic and he comes from a family of miners. Benner certainly knew mining, but he was new to the Westray operation. His first priority had been Curragh's Yukon operation (Curley, intvw). Benner was getting all his information from others -- the mine managers and the draegermen. Curragh rarely provided first-hand information to the press about what was happening, although reporters asked repeatedly to speak to a draegerman (Cox, Allison). Jim Nunn said to First Edition viewers that "mine company officials prevented us from interviewing any miner who is working in the Westray mine. And we have not been permitted any contact with any draegermen" (May 12, 1992). Curragh's position was that the draegermen had no time to talk to the media. They were either working in the mine, being de-briefed, or resting between shifts (MacCulloch, intvw).

As Tom Reid has indicated, often questions were not allowed, especially questions about safety. Reporters would rotate responsibility for asking "the safety question," to make sure someone always asked (Cox, intvw). On the Tuesday, Benner used this phrase to deflect the safety issue: "Mother Nature cannot always be predicted or controlled," and reporters were offended (Cox, Lightstone, intvws).

Michael Lightstone of the Halifax Daily News describes the relationship between Curragh and the media as follows:

We were feeding off each other ... We were holed up there, waiting for these briefings, even though they were sometimes completely useless. There was no real news, they just felt that they had to come, and we felt that we had to write or broadcast something (intvw).

The New Glasgow Evening News carried the headline "Still Praying for a Miracle" on Wednesday. Jim Nunn said to viewers that day he was still praying for a miracle, too.

But on Thursday, Colin Benner announced that the search was being suspended, that there was no hope of finding survivors.

That evening, First Edition ran a story that was more thorough and more critical than any other that appeared that week, in the television or print coverage surveyed. Reporter Rob Gordon prepared a four-minute piece which charged that

10 hours before the mine blew up, methane levels exceeded 3.5 per cent (and government regulations state production must stop if levels reach 1.25 per cent). Gordon said he had spoken to draegermen who were too upset to go on camera, but they told him that high methane levels were so common it wasn't unusual for miners to pass out at their work station, that miners saw one or two cave-ins "almost on a daily basis," and that "it was push, push, push. They were behind in their production. Management was pushing everybody to the limits" (CBC-TV, May 14, 1992).

The relationship between Curragh and the families

The early relationship of trust between Curragh and the families is understandable. Both were victims, and both had much to lose. In some crises, a bond not unlike the Stockholm Syndrome emerges, wherein "the hostage is usually dependent on the hostage-taker for life and death, food and sustenance, over an extended period of time" (Mitroff and Kilmann, 1984, p.59).

They also shared an antagonism toward the media. Family members say Curragh told them not to believe or co-operate with the media, because the media lied (Gillis, intvw). Initially, the families believed the company, and occasional media transgressions, to be discussed shortly, reaffirmed

their dislike of the press. But as the days wore on, the trusting relationship between Curragh and the families was severely tested.

One family member, whose husband died in the explosion and who has asked that her name not be used, says the people in the fire hall were getting even less information than the media. She says they were initially informed by an accountant, who would respond to the most basic of questions by saying, "I don't know. I'm only an accountant." She also says there was no map and no audio equipment in the fire hall. She says there were hundreds of people in the room, and since many didn't know much about mining, they didn't know what questions to ask (intvw). The family member also said Curragh officials would not only tell the media first, they wouldn't tell the families and the media the same thing.

I'd leave the fire hall and go to a hotel for the night, and watch television. [Colin] Benner and [Gerald] Phillips would appear before the media. It'd be a totally different story from what they told us. It was a more complete story. I'd rather myself know than the country (intvw).

Daryn Smith, an employee of the municipal social services department of Pictou County, was the Emergency Measures Organization co-ordinator throughout the tragedy. In his report after the event, Smith wrote that by Monday evening, the situation in the fire hall was becoming critical. Part

of the problem was that Curragh was not giving enough information to the families. Smith wrote:

Constant delays in information and the fact that accountants were often giving the briefings were leading to this tense atmosphere. At the 1 a.m. briefing, which reported nothing of substance to the families, people's emotions were running very high and the mood worsened. By 4 a.m., the situation continued to deteriorate, so I called Westray officials and informed them of the gravity of the situation and the need for substantive briefings. I was informed by mine officials that someone would be down at 5 a.m. to present a technical report. When [information about that planned briefing was] relayed to the families, the tension became almost unbearable (Westray Mine Incident Report, undated, p.3).

Many of these people had had no sleep since Saturday morning. Because they were exhausted and frustrated at the lack of information from mine managers, they'd begun arguing with each other. "It was at this point I spoke to the families to try and bring them together and not confront each other," Smith wrote. At his encouragement, the families agreed to present "a unified front" and decided on a list of questions which they phoned in to Westray officials -- questions about conditions underground, and about why they had not been getting "information of substance" at previous briefings. Finally, at 5:15 that Tuesday morning, Colin Benner arrived at the fire hall with two other Curragh officials.

The concerns [about the way they'd been treated] were relayed to these men and when these were addressed, families began to feel better, as they

felt they were finally being treated appropriately by the Mine officials (Westray Mine Incident report, undated, p.3).

Smith's report suggests that Monday night was "pivotal." Many family members left the fire hall to go to hotel and motel accommodation which had been set aside for them (at Westray's expense). The weather had improved so they were able to go outside occasionally for fresh air, and other friends and family members would join them in the evenings.

But Curragh made another mistake which made officials appear insensitive. On Thursday, the families decided they wanted to issue a press release to thank everyone who had been so supportive. According to Smith's report, they were about to release it when Colin Benner arrived to say the rescue operation was being discontinued.

Unfortunately, we had received no advance warning of this announcement, and we were caught off guard and had to try and comfort all the families with our existing staff (Westray Mine Incident report, unpublished, p.4).

Daryn Smith and grief counsellor Dr. John Service presented the families' announcement to the press after Benner's statement.

The relationship between the media and the police

The media dubbed them the Royal Curragh Mounted Police. During the busiest time, there were between 90 and 100 officers on duty. Staff Sergeant Ron Peers of the New Glasgow detachment of the RCMP was the incident commander. As Peers describes it, normally the police are at a tragedy to attend to the injured, and to notify victims and next of kin. Since this incident was underground, rescue operations were left to the trained draegermen. According to Peers, the RCMP therefore assumed a different role. For one thing, they blocked the road, to make sure it was reserved for emergency traffic. Michael Lightstone of the Halifax Daily News said it bothered him that a public road, maintained with taxpayers' dollars, was blocked by the RCMP, also paid with taxpayers' dollars (intvw).

At the families' request, the RCMP "discouraged" the media from getting too close (Peers, intvw). The police were put in a very difficult position. A mental health worker inside the fire hall says an RCMP official told the families he really had no legal right to prevent the media from coming over to talk to them (Dobbs, intvw).

Police officer Clarence Fiddler was installed in the media centre throughout the week. Peers says Fiddler was the media

liaison officer for the RCMP, looking after relations between the media and the police, for example, and distributing RCMP press releases (which confirmed the names of the dead miners, for example) (intvw). But he was in plainclothes and wore no identification. Kevin Cox had no idea Fiddler was a police officer until the week was almost over (intvw). Journalists believe Fiddler performed very little media liaison. They believe Fiddler took his orders from Curragh and passed information along to the company. At that first press conference on the Saturday, two labour organizers were in the centre. Fiddler insisted they leave, telling them Curragh said only the media were allowed to stay in the room (Gordon, intvw). Lightstone says Fiddler assumed the role of bouncer (intvw). Westray employee Bill MacCulloch recalls that he and Fiddler helped clear a path for Curragh spokesmen when they had news to impart to the media at the community centre (intvw).

Cox believes the RCMP felt increasingly uncomfortable with their role. They thought they were going to be part of the rescue effort, he says, and instead they were security guards for Curragh (intvw). "That's completely unfounded and untrue," says Staff Sgt. Peers. "I don't know why they would make such a statement. They were not security guards for Curragh in any manner, shape or form" (intvw). It is difficult to reconcile these points of view, and neither of

Curragh's public relations consultants who were interviewed were able to clarify the precise role of the police.

Reporter Stevie Cameron (May, 1994) investigated the slow progress of the Westray case before the courts for Saturday Night magazine on the second anniversary of the explosion, and she quotes a lawyer associated with the Westray case as saying the police should have immediately "secured the scene ...What they should have done was cordon off the area, seize everything they could....," but instead, the officers were there "to keep press off the site" (Saturday Night, May 1994, p.59).

Not long after the explosion, an RCMP constable confided to the thesis writer that the force had decided to conduct an internal investigation into its own behaviour. Both reporter Rob Gordon and the writer have asked the police about the inquiry, and have been told there was no such thing (Gordon, intvw).

Gordon says the RCMP encouraged him to file a complaint against them. He never got around to it. Cox says the same thing. A year after the explosion, he had documentation still filed in his computer, but when it came to choosing between working on a story and filing the complaint, Cox

never hesitated to put the complaint aside.

Gordon also says he wanted to challenge the RCMP. He wanted to say to the police, "We're going past you, and you can try to stop us" (intvw). So did Michael Lightstone. He says he thought to himself, "What would happen if I just drove or walked across? What would they do?" (intvw)

It is significant that none of them actually did anything. The reporters said they didn't want to grandstand, or risk losing the chance to cover one of the biggest Nova Scotia stories of the decade.

The relationship between the media and the community

Relations between the media and the families were tense from the very beginning. Curragh told the families not to trust anything the media said. Intentionally, there were no televisions or radios in the fire hall, and no newspapers until Wednesday (Daley, Dobbs, family member, intvws), so initially the families did not hear the media reports of the rescue effort, or the speculation about safety concerns. They heard only what Curragh officials wanted them to hear.

Curragh told the media the families didn't want to speak to them. For some of them, at least, that was true. As one

member said, "You don't look your best, and you want to be alone" (intvw). Company officials spoke separately to each group (Allison, Cox, Lightstone, Jobb, Gillis, Smith, intvws).

Cox recalls one of several low points during that long week. On the Sunday afternoon, Colin Benner came into the community centre and began his remarks by saying:

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the report that we all hoped we would not have to give. Rescue teams have reported that they have located the bodies of 11 men in the southwest area of the Westray coal mine. These bodies will be brought to the surface for identification by the RCMP as soon as possible. It would appear that these men died instantly (transcript).

As Cox says:

We'd been up all night. People were in pretty rough shape ... And then we think, well obviously, you have to go out and get reaction. Well, your heart just falls to your feet. I mean, you don't like doing this job. This is the worst part of journalism (intvw).

So they went outside, on a cold sunny day. Cox continues:

And there are these guys, you can just see the sun glinting off the holsters. That's all I can remember, the sun glinting off these holsters, and just having the really awful feeling that they'll use them. That it was just so tense that they'd use them if you tried to cross that line. And yet, what was the line there for? Who put it there? (intvw).

Cox remembers that when the skies cleared again on Monday, people from both sides ventured outside for fresh air.

Although police were everywhere, he noticed one family member get into her car in the parking lot. He figured the parking lot was fair game, so he walked over to her car and tapped on the window. Much to his surprise, the woman asked Cox to get in the car. She was angry at the press, and asked him why the media were saying there was little hope anyone would be found alive. (Even though there were no radios or televisions in the community centre, families would go home briefly, and turn on one or the other. Or they would hear developments from friends.) Cox said they had reported that because the midnight press release told them how high the methane and carbon monoxide levels were, many hours after the explosion. Then she got really angry, Cox said. She said the families were never told about those levels; if she had been, she said, she would have given up hope, too (intvw).

Michael Lightstone of the Daily News recalled covering one of the funerals:

I have three small kids and all I could think of was, Oh God, these guys were all my age, and they all had small kids, and how sad that was. Plus they all didn't want you there and hated your guts (intvw).

Lightstone was standing beside his photographer as the hearse pulled up and the pallbearers came out to take the coffin.

As one of the pallbearers came out of his own car to go towards the hearse, he was smoking a

cigarette, and he came and flicked it at us, or toward us, and said something like 'fucking bastards.' I probably would have done the same thing (intvw).

On the other hand, Rob Gordon of CBC-TV News was angry about the way the media treated this story right from the beginning. He says journalists weren't looking for information. They were looking for feelings.

The coverage centred around this press conference-driven thing. You know, the draegermen have moved four feet. We have established a fresh air base. We have discovered 11 bodies. And then there was a mad scramble to find the relatives of the 11 bodies. How do YOU feel about this? (Gordon, intvw)

As Gordon bluntly put it, "How the fuck do you think they feel?" Gordon's anger stemmed from his frustration that so little of the coverage concentrated on what caused the explosion. He says he had that story by Monday. Rather than staying at the community centre and waiting for press briefings, Gordon went looking for original sources. He found draegermen who were staying at one of the motels, and convinced them to talk to him. They spoke of alleged high methane levels before the explosion, about alleged oil-soaked rags in the tunnels, and about rock falls and roof cave-ins that should have been warning signs. It wasn't broadcast until Thursday, because he'd been trying to convince the draegermen to go on camera. But no one else had even come close to getting the information he'd been sitting

on for four days. Gordon believes print reporters, who weren't slaves to pictures, should have had it. Jobb, a print reporter, tends to agree.

Rob was one of the few people who got out there and did some digging. But, there's a real shift in the media these days. It's the trivial now, it's the fluff, it's the feelies, it's the people angles, human interest. I mean, there's nothing wrong with any of this, but is that all there is to this mine disaster? (intvw)

It would appear, then, that Curragh intentionally fostered suspicion among family members about the media. The families were experiencing severe stress by the very nature of the event. The placement of the media directly across the road aggravated their condition. And it was further exacerbated as families learned that the media knew more than they did about what was going on.

Because the media were denied direct access to Curragh, the mine site and the families, their news gathering behaviour was inclined to excess. Very early in the event, a television crew, from Radio France but based in St. Pierre and Miquelon, tried to cross the White Line. They were forced back by the police and by the rocks angry family members pelted at them (Allison, Cox, Lightstone, intvws). Significantly, at this point other members of the media had still agreed to respect what they were told were the wishes of the families that they be left alone. Reporters were

angry at the Radio France crew for breaking that bond (Allison, Cox, Lightstone, intvws). But that sensitivity did not last.

Rob Gordon knows of one national television reporter who went to a draegerman's home. There was no one there but, this being New Glasgow, the door was unlocked. The reporter went into the house and walked through the kitchen and hall to the living room. She left a note on a coffee table, requesting an interview. When Gordon spoke to the draegerman that night, he was hostile. "He felt invaded," Gordon said (intvw).

The family member who did not want her name used said she was approached by one woman who was crying. The family member said, "What family are you related to?"

And she said, 'I'm not a family member, I'm just concerned.' And I said, 'Well who are you?' And she said, 'I'm so and so from the Montreal Gazette.' And I literally chased her down the field. To put on false tears! (intvw)

These incidents suggest that the more detached reporters are from the event, the more aggressive they are prepared to be to get their story. But their willingness to go to such extremes only made their relationship with the families that much more strained. In fact, in one particular case, the families chose to believe an example of media excess which

the media say is untrue. Reverend Glen Matheson, who was in the fire hall for a good part of the week and whose wife is an RCMP constable, says he knows the media had installed sophisticated scanners to eavesdrop on private conversations. He says an RCMP officer saw the equipment in the media centre (intvw). Mayor Daley of Westville says the RCMP asked her to tell the families the media had this gear (intvw). The reporters deny this categorically. They say no one had scanners, and no one eavesdropped on private conversations. Significantly, Staff Sgt. Ron Peers, the RCMP's incident commander, says he had no knowledge of scanners and was not aware his officers had given the families this information (intvw).

Bob Allison recalled that the CBC finally found out the name of one of the men trapped below. They knew he was from Antigonish, a town about a half hour's drive from the mine. They called every person in the phone book with that surname who lived in Antigonish. According to Allison, one of the people the CBC called was so angry, he drove to the community centre, stormed over to the CBC contingent, and said if anyone called the family in Antigonish again, he'd be back with a gun (intvw).

Rob Gordon believes the families had reason to direct their anger at the press. They were constantly under a camera's

gaze. Camera lenses were set on the family centre. Gordon says, "What you'd see on TV is people with tears streaming down their faces, hugging each other. What you didn't see is two seconds later, they were giving the camera the finger" (intvw).

But Gordon also says people unfairly blamed the media for telling the truth. Because Curragh held out hope, the families held on. They did not want to hear the media say no one survived. As Gordon says, they were mad at the media, but "the media didn't blow the mine up. The media didn't allow a buildup of coal dust. The media didn't practise unsafe practices. Curragh did. But we were the bad guys. And the company was the good guy" (intvw).

The families had a point. As one member said, hope was all they had.

How do you think the families were able to last six days in the fire hall? That's what they were going on. You heard about Springhill. You knew they could be trapped down there. And the company was saying the air they were breathing down there was cleaner than what it was up here (intvw).

The New Glasgow Evening News ran an editorial on the Thursday, titled "Sensitivity required," which referred to the undescribable sadness of events so far, but also expressed some of the community's concerns. It concludes:

Sadder still is the lack of consideration for the

families' privacy shown by some visiting journalists ... Maybe the bottom line is some of the visitors won't be here after this terrible tragedy is all over. They will move on to another story. But in the meantime they should be professional enough to respect the deep sensitivity of the people of this community, or leave us alone (p.4).

As often happens in crisis coverage, there were examples of reporters making mistakes. The chances of getting it wrong are enhanced, however, when the source provides so little solid information. For example, Curragh was slow to reveal the names of the trapped, and even of the dead, miners. That's why Allison's team did what they did. The trouble was, Curragh wasn't altogether sure who was down there (Wells, 1992, p.34). Eugene Johnson's wife, Donna, says she got a call from Curragh minutes after the explosion, asking if her husband was on shift (Daley, intvw; Wells, 1992, p.34). Joyce Fraser says the first two times Curragh tried to provide the families with a list of the trapped men, they left off her husband's name. She had to keep telling them, "My Robbie's there too" (Daley, intvw).

For Dean Jobb of the Herald, it was a journalist's worst nightmare. One of his reporters filed a story on the Monday which incorrectly identified Mike MacKay as being one of the first 11 miners whose body was found the previous day. The reporter said she got the news from the man's uncle. But MacKay's body had not been recovered. It was an embarrassing

moment. A correction appeared on page one of Tuesday's edition, with the following addendum: "The Chronicle-Herald regrets the anguish this mistake has caused Mr. MacKay's family." Jobb also personally apologized to the miner's brother. Jobb said that man couldn't look him in the eye, he was so enraged. The man said his mother had been getting condolence calls all day. Jobb felt like saying to him, "Go ahead, hit me. I wouldn't blame you" (intvw).

When Colin Benner said the Westray miners died instantly, the media reported that (Chronicle-Herald, May 11, A1). When Nova Scotia medical examiner Roland Perry repeated that information, the media reported it again (The Globe and Mail, May 15, A3; Toronto Star, May 15, A4). But it wasn't quite true. Rob Gordon is one of the best reporters in Nova Scotia. He is now with CBC-TV news, but cut his teeth as a print journalist specializing in defence issues. Gordon learned from his sources that some of the miners had time to get their self-breathers out of their pouches and up to their faces. Self-breathers are portable canisters of oxygen. There was even evidence they ran several hundred feet. "They knew what was happening. They didn't die instantly at all," he said (intvw.) George Muise made the same observation to journalist Nancy Robb (1992).

One of the most common mistakes which every journalist made,

almost without exception, was that the Westray mine was located in then-premier Donald Cameron's riding. It wasn't, although the redefinition of constituency boundaries for the 1993 election put Westray where most journalists thought it had been all along.

The families' hostility toward the media was shared by the local population, and the journalists knew it. Kevin Cox had an experience which reveals a great deal about just how high feelings were running in the first days after the explosion. He had booked a room at Stellarton's Heather Motel in advance of the event, because he had planned to participate in an annual marathon scheduled for the weekend of May 9. Of course, when the mine exploded, the race was cancelled. Management at the motel asked Cox if he would give up his room, because it would be needed for either Curragh officials or the families. Cox agreed, but didn't have a chance to get back to the motel until Sunday, the day after the explosion. He decided to take a break for a couple of hours in the early evening, get something to eat at the motel restaurant, and check out of the room he'd barely used. He sat down at a table in the restaurant, and began listening to his taped notes and working on his laptop computer. He ordered a glass of water. The waitress brought it. He took a large drink. He choked, gasped and yelled. The waitress came running over, and he recalls saying to her,

"What are you trying to do to me? This glass is full of vinegar! Warm vinegar!" Worse still, there was a bar of soap at the bottom. Cox says he almost lost control. He'd had almost no sleep. And the tension between the press and the community was so strong, he actually thought he'd been given the glass of vinegar deliberately. In fact, the waitress had brought him the wrong tumbler, the contents of which were normally used to clean the counters (intvw).

The people of Pictou County consider themselves a friendly and sharing community (Smith, 1992, p.5; First Edition, May 14, 1992). So even though they resented the media's intrusiveness, they were as generous with the reporters as they would be with anyone else. They gave up their telephone lines, and they cooked meals for families and the media alike, throughout the week.

The ensuing months

Bob Allison was at the site from Saturday afternoon until Friday. He makes no apology for the media's behaviour, under the circumstances. He says the last time he experienced restrictions to parallel those at Westray was during a prison riot, when the RCMP and prison administrators initially refused to let reporters on the property, and finally permitted them only inside the administration

building, which was outside the prison wall (intvw).

The Globe's Kevin Cox says he's never seen anything like it. He covered the CN train accident near Hinton, Alberta in 1986. Twenty-three people died and another 71 were injured. Reporters were allowed to walk to the site of the collision, with CN police escorts, view the mangled trains, even look at the bodies inside. He also covered the 1987 Edmonton tornado, where reporters were not only allowed to explore the devastated suburban trailer park, but the police also provided them with bus transportation to and from the site (intvw).

On Friday, May 15, one week after the tragedy, and one day after Curragh announced rescue operations were being discontinued, the company held one more press conference. The news was that Curragh would not "reactivate the search." Clifford Frame appeared before the media for the second time that week, to read a statement. It was 5:30 p.m. (just 30 minutes before First Edition goes on the air), and almost all the press had already left. Frame said, "I would like to state that any coal produced for sale from the open pit mine at Stellarton ... up to a certain sum, will be contributed to a fund ... for the benefit of the families and children left behind" (Statement to the Media, May 15, 1992).

Frame had been trying to get permission to take coal from the Wimpey open-pit mine in Stellarton, without a lengthy environmental assessment. The mine is near, but not connected to, the Westray underground mine. This surface coal is very easy to get at. But the people of Pictou County have always considered it their insurance policy. They have chosen to leave it in the ground, for now. According to Mayor Porter, "The value of that resource should stay in this community for re-investment." He says what Curragh was looking for in Stellarton was "not really a coal mine, it's a diamond mine, because it's so rich" (intvw).

Bob Allison was busy rewinding a tape when he heard Frame make that comment. He said to himself, "That's a bribe" (intvw). Cox and Jobb had the same reaction (intvws). Frame must have anticipated that. He said, "I acknowledge that I may be criticized in the media for making these announcements today" (Statement to the Media, May 15, 1992).

But it was too late to do much about the so-called bribe. There was barely time to get an item ready for the 6 o'clock news, or a story written for the next day's early edition. Because news programming is reduced on the weekend, it is standard practice in most newsrooms to reduce staff. News that breaks late in the day on Friday often dies during that two-day lull. In the public relations industry, it is known

that late Friday is a good time to release controversial information to the press -- it's more difficult for journalists to get reaction and points of view so late in the day, and news editors like to start the next week with a fresh slate. Saturday coverage concentrated on the other elements of Frame's statement, the provincial government's announcement of a public inquiry, and reaction from family members.

The relationship between Curragh and the media collapsed during the week following the explosion. Prior to May 9, the media in general had accepted much of what Curragh maintained at face value. As has been documented elsewhere (see Chapter 3), safety was not an issue -- not for the media, and not for Curragh. Olav Svela, the editor of the now-defunct Northern Miner magazine, says he accepted Curragh's word when he inquired about cave-ins and rock falls at Westray and was told the incidents had been brought under control (intvw). David Glenen of the New Glasgow Evening News says the same thing (intvw).

But after the explosion, the relationship between Curragh and the media was redefined. Reporters like Kevin Cox and Dean Jobb started placing freedom of information requests while they were still in Plymouth (intvws). The Chronicle-Herald is not known for being particularly critical of the

business establishment, but reporter Dean Jobb has vigorously pursued the Westray story since the explosion, and is currently completing a book on the subject.

On May 28, 1992 the fifth estate told the story Rob Gordon had told two weeks earlier, about unsafe working conditions in the mine, and this time, Linden MacIntyre managed to convince the miners to go on camera.

On June 20, the Herald ran a story on the first page of its second section, titled "Westray's last day." In her report, Herald reporter Janice Tibbetts interviewed miners who worked the day shift on May 8. They were the last men to leave the mine alive. In Tibbetts's story, the miners said Friday had been a day much like many others at Westray:

That Friday had been another day of high methane levels. Another day of faulty equipment. Another day when the ventilation system had been tampered with. Another day when miners were wading through ankle-deep coal dust. Ten days earlier, the province had ordered Westray to clean up the combustible substance.

Jobb filed a front page story on July 15, which disclosed that officials of the provincial department of natural resources criticized Westray in November, 1991 for changing the design of the mine, so that it could get its men and equipment to the coal face more quickly. The following is from a memo written by the province's director of mines, Pat

Phalen, and obtained by Jobb under the provincial Freedom of Information Act.

We believe Westray are making important decisions regarding the mine plan without sufficient input from professional engineers who have sufficient experience in this type of operation.

Less than a month later, Jobb reported, the provincial government made a complete about-face. On December 20, Phalen told Westray the revised plan had been accepted. And on December 31, Phalen wrote that his department realized the complex geology of the Foord seam made it "impractical" for Westray to follow a strictly detailed plan.

Jobb won the 1992 Atlantic Journalism Award for Enterprise Reporting for that report.

Three days later, on July 18, the Herald ran a follow-up front page story in which Dean Jobb charged:

The cave-ins and production problems that plagued Westray Coal's ill-fated Plymouth mine were a direct result of the provincial government's decision to allow the company to re-route its main access tunnels, government documents show.

On August 7, the Herald ran a front-page story by Jobb and staff reporter Paul MacNeill, titled "Westray manager held key post at ill-fated Alberta mine." Their story relates how Westray mine manager Gerald Phillips left his position as manager of underground operations at a coal mine in Alberta,

just weeks before four miners died in a cave-in:

[A] commission of inquiry later concluded that the deaths were caused in part by the mine's layout and the way coal was extracted over the previous two years, which included Mr. Phillips' tenure at the mine.

That story was runner-up for the 1992 National Newspaper Award for Enterprise Reporting.

In the ensuing months, a rift developed between the families of the dead men, and the unemployed miners. Initially, the families allowed their silence to be interpreted as loyalty toward Curragh, while the former Westray miners complained bitterly about working conditions underground. On July 29, however, a petition with the names of many of those same miners was presented to the provincial government, urging that Westray be allowed to strip mine the open pit coal mine in Stellarton, so that they could get back to work. And a month later, on August 26, twenty-five of the 26 family members held a press conference to oppose the petition. Ken Teasdale, whose son-in-law Myles died in the explosion, read a statement which criticized the way the families said they'd been treated by the company, the government, and the provincial public inquiry set up to investigate the explosion. The statement began by thanking the media, "who, for the most part, respected our requests for privacy and sensitivity during these most difficult times" (Press

release, August 25, 1992).

The Westray story reappeared on the national media scene on three particular occasions, apart from regular news reportage. Lindalee Tracey is a Toronto-based journalist who was passing through Pictou County when she heard about the explosion. Tracey volunteered to work in the temporary day care centre set up at the United church in Stellarton. While there, Tracey was not a journalist, but a sympathetic mother who wanted to help. She wrote of the experience in the October, 1992 issue of Canadian Living. It is the kind of personal story telling that gives the reader a sense of the intense anguish suffered by the wives and children of the trapped miners. Tracey writes of seven-year-old Holly's need to pray for her father, five times in one day, and of how she breaks down when she's told her father has died. Holly sobs, "It's not true, it's not true. My daddy's down there with tea and biscuits, waiting for help" (p.117).

In December, Jennifer Wells's story, "The Fault Line," appeared in The Globe and Mail's Report on Business. Wells provided the first lengthy portrait of Clifford Frame, and her description is anything but flattering.

For Frame personally, this [Westray] was meant to be the apogee of his career, a triumph over a spotty past. The days were designed to be shorter, allowing him to drive the Jag back to his Uxbridge farm daily at 4 p.m. where he would be greeted by his second wife, Catherine, his seventh child,

Merv, and 150 black Aberdeen Angus cattle. Frame, you see, is just an old farmer at heart (p.34)

Wells took a hard-line approach to Frame's, and to Curragh's, performance in other ventures as well as at Westray, and she enhanced the critical tone with hurting, angry comments from widows Genesta Halloran and Isabel Gillis (pp.33-52). Paul Curley was Frame's public relations adviser when the interview occurred, but Frame did not check with him before consenting. Curley believes he would have prepared Frame for Wells' approach, had he had the opportunity (intvw).

Finally, in May, 1994, two years after the explosion, Stevie Cameron and Andrew Mitrovica wrote "Burying Westray" for Saturday Night magazine, in which they suggest politics has continued to play a role in the Westray saga. The story is primarily an investigation into the performance of Nova Scotia special prosecutor John Pearson, who is accused of seriously mismanaging the criminal investigation into the explosion, but it also repeats allegations about coal dust accumulation at Westray prior to May 9. Cameron's story concludes with a quotation from Ken Teasdale:

Our faith in each other, not governments, the prosecution, or even the RCMP, has helped us endure this. We have suffered together, we will continue to suffer together...(p.84)

CHAPTER 5

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE COMPANY'S AND THE MEDIA'S PERFORMANCE

Curragh

Public relations practitioners and the media have much to learn from the Westray tragedy, and although pending court cases may somewhat curtail observations, this concluding chapter will test the way relationships evolved during the event as compared to the literature.

It has been observed that public relations practitioners often control the agenda of newsmaking, the dance between PR people and journalists in which, Gans (1980, p.116) says, "more often than not, sources do the leading." The Westray tragedy reflects that observation. Curragh controlled most of the information flow, and the media relied on that source for much of their news. However, rather than responding to journalists' needs, by providing background briefings or scheduling press conferences at convenient times, as Fishman recommends (1980, p.152), perhaps unavoidably, but regrettably nevertheless, Curragh did the opposite and often held press conferences at inconvenient times. Company officials made only a limited effort to help the media understand what was happening. They used unfamiliar language, and they provided no mining expert the media could

turn to for explanation. It should be noted here that such an expert would not excuse the media from seeking out another, more detached perspective. But if Curragh wanted to encourage a relationship of trust and openness, providing such a person would have helped.

Journalist Bob Allison recalls an earlier mine explosion at which the relationship was very different. It occurred in 1979 at the #26 Colliery near Glace Bay, Cape Breton, run by Devco:

We were still kept off the mine property... but they were offering up experts... We had access to their experts, and we had access to the schematics. We were right in the Devco office outside of Glace Bay. That's where the newsmen were. There were officials available there (intvw).

Allison remembers that the head of Devco at the time impressed the media with his frankness. When asked what he thought happened, Allison says, the mine president replied, "I don't know, but I want to find out." Allison says that comment defused suspicion completely (intvw). (Devco has refused to comment on the Westray explosion in any way.)

The Globe's Kevin Cox says the dynamic at Westray might have been very different if Clifford Frame or Colin Benner had ever said, "I can't possibly answer your questions now. And I won't be able to, until we know what caused the explosion.

But I want to answer them." "That's all they had to say," Cox says, but they never did (intvw).

The unfamiliar terminology which was not explained made the journalist's job more difficult, and so strained an already stressful situation. Bob Allison recalls that CBC-TV News went through an intense learning process, "trying to cut through the jargon, trying to come to grips with what were minute numbers. Curragh wasn't very forthcoming" (intvw). That was not necessary, but it is not unusual. In March, 1979, when the Three Mile Island nuclear energy plant leaked radiation into the atmosphere, journalists in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to cover the story also had trouble getting information they could understand. The Columbia Journalism Review paraphrased Jim Zanyard of the Philadelphia Bulletin this way:

Sources seemed to speak a foreign language. You asked them a straight question about how much radiation is escaping and they answered with mumbo-jumbo about millirems, manrems, rads and picocuries (Sandman, Paden, Griffin and Miles, 1979, p.44).

PR specialist Michael Regester (1989) recommends that the media have some sort of access to decision-makers. He suggests three connected rooms so that decision-makers, advisers, and the media can work separately or together as appropriate. At Westray, the mine office was too small to accommodate that suggestion. But the media had to rely

exclusively on Curragh to generate events. The media could not approach Curragh, with a question for example, on their own initiative. And Curragh spokesmen rarely allowed questions (Reid, Allison, Cox, intvws).

Crisis management specialist Jon White recommends information be made available to the media as soon as possible. Tom Reid of Reid Management in Toronto did that on Curragh's behalf, but that arrangement was only satisfactory in the immediate aftermath, on May 9, 10 and perhaps even 11. By Tuesday, May 12, Reid was of limited value because he was so far from the incident. And by then, Curragh was providing less information, not at all demonstrating the "willingness to communicate" that White suggests is so important (1991).

As White recommends (1991), Curragh had established a relationship with the media prior to the Westray tragedy. In Pictou County, journalists were generally supportive of the Westray mine, as demonstrated in Chapter 3. In Halifax, Curragh was essentially considered a political story, and so it was covered by political-beat journalists. And Curragh's national status was covered by mining-beat reporters, such as Alan Robinson of The Globe and Mail and Olav Svela of the now-defunct Northern Miner magazine, both based in Toronto. When the Westray mine exploded, the reporters who converged

on the scene were, for the most part, generalists. Those from Halifax in particular had little or no association with the mine itself. The relationships that Curragh had earlier established might have served the company well if it had been open and accessible with the journalists it knew, as well as with the novices. That did not happen.

The absence of a plan

The literature recommends that corporations have a crisis plan (White, 1991; Murray and Shohen, 1992), so that their strategy in times of upheaval can be more proactive than reactive. This is particularly so in an era when the incidence of corporate crises is increasing (Drabek, 1991; Blythe, 1992), and beyond that, in an industry like mining that is considered high risk (Pinsdorf, 1987).

Curragh's long-time public relations adviser, Tom Reid, does not agree. He argues Curragh's management was smart enough to function efficiently without a plan. Reid says this is not the case with some of his other clients:

I can't imagine that you would have to draft a crisis management brochure, as we've done for other clients like Ontario Hydro. But I mean these guys are absolute, stunning morons, and you have to write down everything -- pick up the phone, hold it in your left hand, dial with your right finger ... Ontario Hydro had to do it because the Solicitor General insisted on it, because they knew they were blithering idiots ... But you're not dealing with idiots at Curragh ... Even if

they'd had a textbook beside them and they went through it chapter by chapter, they would have ended up doing the same thing. But they saved all that nonsense (intvw).

Nonetheless, if Curragh had had a crisis plan, the company might have been able to reduce media antagonism, at least to a degree. The plan would have forced Curragh to think in advance about media needs. For example, Curragh could have suggested the families choose representatives to talk to the press, rather than insist that journalists leave the families alone. In his internal post-event assessment, Emergency Measures Coordinator Daryn Smith recommends just that (Westray Mine Incident Report, undated, p.2). Even family member Isabel Gillis says the restrictions on the media were too severe:

If the media were allowed more access to the fire hall, I mean, okay, you set guidelines -- no ifs, ands or buts. The guidelines that were set were followed pretty well, I have to admit. But they didn't have to be as broad, and if they hadn't been as broad the media would have got their information. They wouldn't have had to hound the families to death to get it (intvw).

Joseph Scanlon, a Carleton University disaster specialist, says there usually are victims who want to talk. He says that when an American military aircraft crashed near Gander airport in Newfoundland in December, 1985, relatives gathered in Fort Campbell, Kentucky to await word. Reporters gathered there, too. The Army's Chief Information Officer

told the media he was not prepared to allow reporters to talk to the families of the soldiers unless the families asked. They asked. According to Scanlon (1993), a lot of families want to speak to reporters:

If you've just had a horrific experience, letting yourself go to somebody who's sympathetic is a very positive relationship. So the journalist does not need to cause emotional damage. He may well be cathartic if he's empathetic.

Furthermore, there was no need for Curragh to prevent the draegermen from talking to the media. It is true the rescue operation was their first priority, and de-briefing and rest shifts were also important. But an opportunity could have been found on a regular basis to give the media access to a draegerman's perspective. Draegermen are miners. They work for mine owners. They are not likely to disparage their employers, although there are no guarantees they might inadvertently say something damaging to Curragh. The media wanted that first-hand accounting and should have had it.

A plan might also have reminded the company to provide scientific expertise about the mine, because it could have anticipated the need. Bill MacCulloch acknowledges that in hindsight that would have been a good idea (intvw). In addition, the plan would have anticipated that someone must try to be almost always accessible.

These media needs were entirely predictable and not unreasonable. A plan might have enabled Curragh to meet them. Had Curragh done so, the media might not have been so suspicious, so quickly, about Curragh's behaviour.

Tom Reid believes the media were not a top priority for Curragh. The company had other key publics very much in mind -- shareholders and lenders, and ultimately a judge and jury:

A lawyer always gets precedence. We know that from our experience with other clients. They didn't want the media in there. If they'd made some horrible screw up, then who was liable and how much liability was there, was it the end of Curragh -- And they didn't know. 'We're all going to go to jail.' These are serious questions that come long before the media (intvw).

Perhaps if Curragh had had a crisis plan, it would have been able to better anticipate the needs of another of its key publics, the trapped miners' families. Initially, they were Curragh's most loyal constituents. But their understandable concerns were not addressed. Isabel Gillis, whose husband Myles was among the first 11 bodies found on Sunday, says she will never forget how she heard the news her husband was dead:

He [mine manager Gerald Phillips] walked in the fire hall and got his coffee first. He put his hand through his hair, and walked down to the front, dry-eyed as can be. I passed out when I heard, just for a moment, but I came to, and they [Curragh officials] didn't even come to see

if I was okay. And I was not that far away from them (intvw).

According to the Emergency Measures Organization report on the event, "the Westray Mine officials were not always as open to sharing information with our Centre. This hesitation created some difficulties before this disaster had run its course" (Westray Mine Incident Report, undated, p.4). In fact, had a plan been in place, it might have led to a clearer understanding of the roles and responsibilities of both Curragh and local emergency officials, as the Canadian Standards Association recommends (1991, p.7).

Crisis specialists recommend the chief executive officer be the designated spokesperson, because he can show both authority and concern (Murray and Shohen, 1992, pp.18-19). But Frame appeared only twice before the media, on Tuesday and Friday. Reid says he recommended that Clifford Frame play a greater public role:

I advised them to actually put Cliff in that community and that he should be there until he was satisfied that he'd done everything he could do for the families, emotionally or financially, or whatever it took to help them. And they just saw that as too much of an investment, the company's investment ... But I wanted him there, walking on the street, talking to the families and attending to their every need (intvw).

According to the former president of the Coal Association of Canada, Giacomo Capobianco, mining companies in general (and

coal mining companies in particular) tend to play down the importance of the role of public relations. He recalls that several years ago, when the industry's finances were stronger, he and an associate recommended a public relations/education plan be adopted by the member coal companies. The companies decided against the \$25,000 investment. "They just don't consider it a priority," Capobianco said. "They don't understand the soft stuff. They're miners, who've usually come up through the production side" (intvw). Capobianco argues this was counter-productive, precisely because of the likelihood of events generating media interest, and because of the negative perceptions about coal mining (intvw).

Jon White (1991) suggests that if an organization does not perform well during a crisis, it may have difficulty recovering. Bruce Blythe (1992) has written that almost 50 per cent of organizations hit by "severe crises" never recover. Although Curragh may rise again from the ashes (most of the business's assets are being held in receivership, and the company is on the verge of bankruptcy, see Postscript), the Westray tragedy played a significant role in the company's demise.

Sharon Stevens, a Halifax-based public relations professional with expertise in crisis communications, says

her main criticism of Curragh's strategy is that it concentrated on the immediate reality, not the long term. But she believes Curragh got the best advice it could from Neale Bennet, the Halifax PR consultant retained following the explosion and who has declined to participate in this project. Says Stevens:

If anything suffered in the long term, that was Curragh's problem. There was nothing more a public relations person could have done, being thrown into that situation. If there'd been a plan, we could have watched a whole different story. But there wasn't (intvw).

The simplistic advice PR people suggest, "tell it all and tell it fast" (Pinsdorf, 1987; Regester, 1989), warrants examination here. Curragh Inc. and two of its managers are currently facing charges of criminal negligence and manslaughter, so comment must be subject to legal constraint. But it can be said that if any of the allegations against Curragh are proven true, the mine owner most definitely did not "tell it all and tell it fast." There are allegations of such things as poor ventilation in the mine, dangerous accumulations of coal dust, and the discovery of oil-soaked rags underground, all of which could have contributed to the intensity of the explosion (Comish, 1993; Gordon, intvw). Pinsdorf and Cohn, two public relations specialists, argue that concealment never works. "Never hide the facts. If the media don't get information from the company, they'll get it from other sources, usually

unfriendly" (Cohn, 1991, p.19).

Sharon Stevens puts it this way: "The hardest part is saying what you don't want to say. But if you don't, it will come back to haunt you later. It always will" (intvw).

Again, the charges are only allegations at this point. Curragh must be presumed innocent. But if the allegations are true, Curragh must have agonized over how to deal with them -- what to say, and what not to say. If they're true, it's small wonder the legal implications of the explosion were a major preoccupation, as Tom Reid suggests (intvw).

The Westray mine explosion had a negative impact on coal mines across the country. Capobianco, formerly of the Coal Association of Canada, admitted in a story in the Chronicle-Herald on May 16, 1992 that the Westray explosion caused "a very big dent in our public image, justified or not." He said that, regardless of the outcome of a public inquiry, the damage to the industry cannot be undone. Jacques Hudon of the Mining Association of Canada was quoted in the same story agreeing with Capobianco, and suggested that the negative perception will affect mining in general (1992, p.B1).

But Capobianco was scolded by members of his association for

being so blunt. They told him he should have done what they did -- "keep your head down, don't answer questions, and nobody will bother you." "Talk about strategy," Capobianco says with some irony. "That's guaranteed to give you disaster" (intvw). In fact, Capobianco is so discouraged by the indifference coal companies have shown to the role of public relations, and the importance of image, he left the Association permanently this year, rather than renew his contract (intvw).

The media

When the Westray mine exploded, media interest was intense and immediate. The mine had been politically controversial in Nova Scotia since 1988. Journalists had acknowledged former premier Don Cameron's commitment to Westray, the location of the mine in former Conservative MP Elmer MacKay's riding, and the bickering over competition between heavily-subsidized Devco coal and Pictou County coal. On the morning of May 9, as journalists learned of the violent, lethal explosion of methane gas, an awareness dawned that there'd been another Westray story they had not much told. And so they converged on the village of Plymouth in very large numbers. It is estimated 100 journalists and support staff were installed at the community centre (Allison, Lightstone, intvws).

Because the media had concentrated on the politics of Westray, they found themselves in the position of trying to cover a major technological crisis for which they were not at all prepared.

It has been shown that journalists tend to rely on human interest to tell their stories (Smith, 1992; Gans, 1980). But in the case of Westray, the search for emotional detail was problematic, because the families and the draegermen were off-limits. Journalists searched for the human interest component. But they did not succeed in exploiting it to its full potential, because of the lack of access. This intensified media demands for other angles, such as alleged safety violations, the technology of the Westray mine, and the known dangers of mining the Foord seam because of the concentrations of methane gas. Ironically, Curragh's decision to prevent media access to the families and the draegermen may have resulted in more journalistic inquiry, more quickly, than might otherwise have been the case.

The media made their share of mistakes in covering the Westray tragedy, as is often true (Scanlon 1970,1985; Kreps 1980; Smith, 1992). The Chronicle-Herald mistakenly identified one of the first 11 bodies removed from the mine (Jobb intvw). In initial reports, journalists attributed information to Colin Benner that the 11 men had died

instantly. Later, they reported that information as fact (The Globe and Mail, May 19, 1992, p.A), when it was incorrect (Gordon, intvw; Robb, 1992). It is understandable that reporters would report news and attribute it, but once the information is used and the attribution is dropped, the information is assumed to be true. Furthermore, it has been argued (Koch, 1990) that merely attributing information should not absolve the reporter from his or her responsibility to try to determine its veracity, as Rob Gordon did.

To be fair, inaccurate official information was part of the problem, as is often the case (Smith, 1992). First, Curragh was slow to identify the dead. And second, because Curragh prevented access to first-hand accounts from the draegermen, reporters had to initially rely on official, second-hand sources for their news.

Dean Jobb has speculated that in future, rather than have a phalanx of reporters installed at an event to cover press conferences, editors might be better advised to assign someone to screen the conferences on an all-news station such as Newsworld, and free reporters on the scene to "beat the bushes." "It would have been in the paper a lot quicker, and would have saved us an incredible amount of time" (intvw).

The decontextualization of the Westray tragedy

Disaster scholars have lamented the way the fourth estate turns its microscope on disaster events for as long as the ghoulish details sustain interest, only to turn their attention to the next assignment once those details are exposed (Wilkins, 1989). To a degree, this was true at Westray. Because the mine had been treated as a political story prior to the explosion, journalists were caught in the position of trying to explain an event they didn't understand. The effort required to do that meant the crisis was compartmentalized, as if separate from the wider context of technology and Canada's reliance on the resource, which make such events both predictable and inevitable -- although Wilkins would argue that opportunity has little to do with it. She suggests (1989) that decontextualized reporting is not at all unusual, and worries that decontextualization makes "debate over genuine solutions difficult at best" (1989, p.173).

An illustration of the type of context to which Wilkins refers appears in a document titled The Westray Story: Death by Consensus, in which authors Glasbeek and Tucker point out:

From 1985 to 1990, a total of fourteen companies were charged with offenses under the Occupational Health and Safety Act [Nova Scotia], and the maximum fine imposed appears to have been \$2,500.

No mining companies were prosecuted, however, despite the fact that, according to another tabulation, between fiscal years 1987-88 and 1991-92, 1,037 directives were issued to mining companies. The fact that directives never result in change [means there is not] much compliance, as the Westray saga shows (Glasbeek and Tucker, undated, p.43).

A survey of the content of each First Edition program from May 11 to May 15 reveals not a single mention of that kind of context, in spite of the fact that the program often devoted almost half of its 60-minute time slot to the tragedy.

There were exceptions in the print media, but they were rare. On May 11, two days after the explosion, a background report appeared in The Globe and Mail, headlined "Perilous industry vital to province." The story concentrated on the history of mining accidents in Nova Scotia and throughout Canada; but it also quoted the president of Nova Scotia's mining association, John Amirault, as saying that for each of the 5,500 people employing in the mining industry, four ancillary jobs are created. That report was almost 500 words long, and the description of economic interdependence ran about 125 words.

An editorial in the May 12 Chronicle-Herald lamely tried to justify the way the fourth estate treated the Westray story prior to the explosion.

A tragedy that was not only predictable, in general terms, but was in fact predicted by some before the mine was built. They were voices in the wilderness at the time -- dismissed as naysayers opposed to "progress" and economic benefits for a depressed region. Disturbing too is the evidence the mine was as much a political decision as it was one based on either need or economics. It must be acknowledged, however, that such judgments are easy to make with hindsight. What now appears obvious was almost certainly less so previous to the disaster.

The editorial takes no responsibility for journalists' failure to probe beyond the position of official sources prior to the explosion. It does, however, raise the issue of technology, in this sentence: "The limitations of modern technology is one lesson to be learned in this tragedy."

Globe writer David Olive wrote "a discourse on events" one week after the explosion. It provided the context other reportage missed. It began, "Lest we forget:" and proceeded to remind readers of how "the promise of economic prosperity can overpower even the strongest doubts."

That even before disaster strikes, even the most obviously risky of propositions can be sugar-coated as an alarmist hypothesis when placed against the sirenic lure of ready wages and profits. This is the principle underlying Exxon's decision not to use tankers with costly double-lined hulls in Alaska's Prince William Sound; Union Carbide's willingness to operate a pesticide plant at Bhopal, India, whose casual management standards would never make the grade at Carbide's U.S. facilities ... That for all our heartfelt concern about workplace safety, somehow little progress has been made (May 16, 1992, p.D4).

The only other striking exception to decontextualization came from New Brunswick historian David Frank, whose analysis appeared in the May 19 Globe and Mail. Frank documents in about 1,100 words the tradition of lives lost in mining accidents in Nova Scotia, the miners' "remarkable historical achievements ... to enforce rules and regulations to improve the safety of the workplace," their respect for coal as a people's resource which made them "strong supporters of public ownership," and their stubborn refusal to enter the mine when conditions were unacceptable. He argued that most believed the mines are much safer now, "or so it seemed."

Then there is an explosion in a modern coal mine in a province with more than two centuries of mining experience and a large volume of legislation and regulation. Twenty-six men, most in their 20s and 30s, are lost. Tragedy. In the months ahead the question will be asked, what went wrong? In looking for answers, we can also look to the past. We need to know whether, somehow here in the work world of the 1990s, we have been cut off from the history of achievement and improvement in coal mining. For all the accumulation of experience and knowledge in the industry, the price of coal is still paid in blood.

The absence of a plan

None of the news organizations whose reporters were interviewed have a plan for dealing with emergencies. This is unwise. Natural disasters happen. Technological disasters happen. The latter is especially true in a country so

heavily dependent on resource extraction.

A competent media plan ensures news outlets know what to do when disaster strikes. They know how to get access to equipment if the event occurs during off hours. They have a tentative staffing schedule, if the disaster continues, especially for overnight and weekend shifts. The plan would even prepare the media for emergency power needs, emergency transportation needs, and food (Scanlon, Alldred, Farrell and Prawzick, 1985, p.126). Dean Jobb of the Chronicle-Herald recalls there was an unnecessary delay leaving for Pictou County on May 9, because no one could find the keys to the car in which the cellular phones were locked (intvw). Kevin Cox of The Globe and Mail remembers how thoroughly exhausted he was because he had no relief until well into the week (intvw).

Since coal extraction is an industry with a long history in Nova Scotia, a media plan for crisis coverage might have ensured journalists would be at least somewhat familiar with the industry, as Elliott recommends (1989). In this case, familiarity existed at the local level, but the Halifax-based media were the major news gatherers, and none of their staff knew much about mining.

They also didn't know any mining experts. Valuable news time

was lost while researchers sought analysts who could explain the technical side of mining. Curragh didn't provide such a person, and spokesman Colin Benner used technical jargon which was difficult to follow. A media plan would have anticipated the need for such a person. Several reporters at the Westray mine site said they tired of using a retired miner, Robert Hoegg, as their designated expert, over and over again. It was not that his perspective was illegitimate, although Westray employee Bill MacCulloch believes it was out of date (intvw); it was that he could add only so much.

The emotional dimension

One word was repeated over and over again by almost everyone interviewed for this paper. It was "hope." Even those who said there was none, still "hoped."

Curragh said there was hope. They encouraged the families to have hope. The families were angry that the media said there was no hope. The media were responding to what little scientific information they had which suggested there was indeed no hope.

But throughout the week-long ordeal, the journalists hoped too. They hoped they were wrong. They hoped for some kind of

miracle. The families didn't appreciate that.

Perhaps Curragh would have been wise not to keep hope alive. Officials knew the methane levels were lethal. Perhaps if they had said the draegermen were looking for bodies and not survivors, tension would not have been so high for so long. Perhaps they would have been wise not to suggest to the families that the air in the mine was cleaner than the air above it, thereby keeping hope alive (Gillis, intvw). The body of Myles Gillis was the first to be brought out of the mine. Isabel Gillis said a week later she would always be grateful for that, that at least she didn't have to spend a week wondering whether her husband was dead or alive, only to have the worst fear confirmed. She told First Edition's Jim Nunn on May 19, the day of the memorial service, that as far as she was concerned, the company was wrong to keep hope alive.

The things that were told to us -- to me, it wasn't the truth. They knew all along. They were coming and giving us hope and more hope, when really they knew from the very beginning there was no hope (First Edition, May 19, 1992).

Major David Thompson, the director of public relations for the Salvation Army in Nova Scotia, agrees with Gillis. He was with the families in the fire hall, and says the agony of that week was "a roller coaster ride." Thompson believes Curragh should have "come clean" on Sunday, after officials

disclosed the high methane and carbon dioxide levels, and found the first 11 bodies.

I don't think the families wanted to know about a lot of the devastation. They were more interested in whether anyone was alive down there. They [Curragh] could have said then, clear cut, 'No, there's no chance. We will continue to look for bodies.' Why prolong the agony? (intvw)

After some reflection, Cox agrees. If Curragh had decided to say on Sunday that there were no survivors, Cox believes,

Everybody would have started heading home. And they could have done it. Quite honestly, if I were media manager, that's what I would have told them to do (intvw).

Not to diminish the pain of those who lost loved ones, the Westray experience was also emotionally traumatic for the members of the media. Most admit to having wept at some stage during or after the event. Several required medical treatment for sleep disorders or depression. A year later, every one of them was still troubled.

Rob Gordon says the worst time for him was one of the long nights he spent with three draegermen who had just come out of the mine. Two of them had worked the last shift. They were the last to walk out alive.

I was in a room with a big, burly miner, and he's crying, tears streaming down his face. And the next moment he's standing up like there's a bug in his pants, screaming he wants to kill a certain mine manager. Minutes later he's whimpering about how 'we should have done more, we should have said

more.' That was hard (intvw).

Dean Jobb thinks there should be counselling for journalists who experience this kind of stress.

One of the reasons the media workers remained troubled may be because they also suffered from a degree of collective guilt. Reporters concede that they felt guilty (Cox, Lightstone, intvws). They knew there were problems at Westray. Cape Breton MLA Bernie Boudreau says he raised a question about the mine in the provincial legislature no less than 45 times in the months preceding the explosion (although a review of Hansard suggests Westray was raised only 16 times, and five questions were about safety). He admits his early concerns were financial and political, but he raised safety issues as well. The story then was rarely told (intvw).

Almost every reporter interviewed acknowledges that if the fourth estate had been doing its job in the early days of the Westray saga, it is just possible the explosion might not have happened. Kevin Cox put it this way:

There's a certain amount of guilt from the media's point of view ... I felt kind of sick ... We all had that feeling afterwards. Why did this fall through the cracks? I guess it's the oldest question in journalism (intvw).

Michael Lightstone shares the concern:

There's no question ... If we had all dug a little deeper then, perhaps something might have been reported and something might have been done prior to the explosion (intvw).

That guilt goes some distance to explain why journalists have been pursuing this story so doggedly since.

Kevin Cox read the 2,000 pages of documents that the federal government released in June of 1992. This is what he says he learned from all that paper:

You know, the whole nub of this story is that 26 men are dead, we don't know why, and these documents don't even discuss the possibility. The finest minds in the country have put these documents together, believe it or not, the leading politicians from the prime minister on down, one of the leading mining companies in Canada, the best mining experts in Energy, Mines and Resources, and nobody says, this might not be safe. This place has got a history of explosions. That says something about society: that we don't care about that (intvw).

POSTSCRIPT

A monument dedicated to the memory of the 26 miners who died at Westray now stands in New Glasgow, above the approximate place where the explosion occurred, many metres below. Two years later, many family members say that is about all that's been accomplished since their nightmare began on May 9, 1992.

The families are no closer to knowing what happened at 5:18 that morning. In the aftermath of the tragedy, there were four inquiries established. Curragh's inquiry was internal. The provincial Department of Labour laid 52 charges under the Occupational Health and Safety Act, and they were all dropped. The RCMP has laid charges of manslaughter and criminal negligence causing death against Curragh and two former mine managers, Gerald Phillips and Roger Parry, but the court case has yet to begin. A provincial inquiry has been delayed until the criminal trials are over, although that decision is under appeal at the Supreme Court of Canada and the case will be heard at the end of May. In other words, it could be years before anything resembling closure of this case occurs. One family member put it poignantly, in a June, 1993 interview:

We've been through so much over the past year. I don't even know if we've had time to grieve. We're all single moms now. There's over 43 children under the age of 19. At the time of the

accident, my little girl was only nine weeks old. My little boy was 16 months old. I've lost my husband, my sole supporter, and my best friend. I don't have my husband's body back yet. We don't know yet what caused the explosion. We don't have any more answers. We've been tossed around like yo-yo's. But in the meantime, you're supposed to be dealing with it. You're supposed to be over it (intvw).

The families of 23 of the miners filed a civil lawsuit in 1993 against the provincial and federal governments, Curragh Inc. and companies that manufactured equipment used at the Westray mine (family member, Gillis, intvws).

After the miners' unemployment insurance benefits ran out, some went on welfare, some lost their homes, and many left Pictou County to find work elsewhere (Langlois, intvw).

According to Jack Langlois, who was the President of the local Chamber of Commerce at the time, Westray was contributing about a million dollars a month to the local economy (intvw). In an area familiar with economic hard times, the closing of Westray dealt yet another blow.

The Westray mine tragedy exacted its toll from Curragh Inc. as well. After the explosion, the Bank of Nova Scotia demanded payment of its loan and Curragh paid the 15 per cent that wasn't guaranteed. The federal government paid the remaining \$80.5 million. The government of Nova Scotia wrote

off its \$12 million loan. Former prime minister John Turner, a member of Curragh's board of directors, was Chair of the 1992 audit committee for Curragh. The company's financial report for the year ended December 31, 1992 painted a gloomy picture. Curragh posted a loss in 1992 of over \$45 million. No sales revenues were recorded from the company's Westray coal mine, because commercial levels of production had not been achieved prior to the mining accident. Curragh also suspended mining operations at its zinc and lead mines in Yukon in December 1992.

The following comments from the report were foreboding:

The future of the company is dependent on its ability to obtain additional financing in the near future, in order to enable it to continue operations until the prices of zinc and lead return to normal levels... If additional capital or short term financing cannot be obtained, the assumption that the company will be able to continue as a going concern, at present market lead and zinc prices, may not be valid (p.14).

On April 5, 1993, Curragh went to court in both the United States and Canada to seek protection from its creditors. At the time, Curragh owed them about \$221 million (The Globe and Mail, April 6, 1993, p.B1,18). The company reported a 1993 second-quarter loss of \$29.9 million, which included a \$25-million write-down of assets at Westray. Curragh blamed a weakening Canadian dollar, the shutdown of its Yukon operations, and falling zinc and lead prices for its losses,

but said it was still trying to restructure the organization. As of May 1994, however, most of Curragh's assets are in the hands of a receiver. The company's financial collapse has meant Curragh is unable to pay for its defense, nor for the defense of the company's two managers who face criminal charges, Gerald Phillips and Roger Parry. At time of writing, Curragh has no legal representation, Gerald Phillips has hired his own lawyer, and a portion of Roger Parry's legal fees will be paid for by legal aid in Nova Scotia.

On the political level, the terrain has changed since May of 1992. On April 17, 1993, the day after the RCMP let it be known criminal charges would be laid against Curragh and two of its managers, Premier Don Cameron called a provincial election in Nova Scotia. The opposition parties did not make Westray a major election issue because of pending court cases. Nevertheless, on May 25, the provincial Conservatives were soundly defeated. The Liberals swept to power under the leadership of former Dartmouth mayor, John Savage. Don Cameron resigned, and retired from politics to accept a patronage position as Canada's Consul General in Boston.

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