

AFTERSHOCK ACTION ALLIANCE



DISASTER SERIES
V.1

MANY HANDS MAKE LITTLE WORK.
THE STRENGTH OF COMMUNITY

CROWD IN CONTROL.
DECISION-MAKING DURING DISASTERS



MANY HANDS MAKE LITTLE WORK:
THE STRENGTH OF COMMUNITY



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16 ble power imbalances and hierarchies that maintain their privileged positions, even at the detriment of their stated goal of providing relief and recovery. Research and common sense flies in the face of the centralized and information-control models utilized by the authorities. We must assume that they are well aware, as we are, of the thirty-plus years of research and disaster case histories that advocate for decentralized and open information systems. Their continued emphasis on hierarchical and centralized models shows clearly that they have an agenda other than providing effective aid and relief. The Aftershock model, on the other hand, promotes the application of decades of research and understanding, with the goal of strengthening and defending our communities.

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Disasters can be viewed as a problem of human resources. It may be strange to think of individuals as "resources" or "Human Capital" as the academics may call it, but the idea is really nothing more than the old adage, "Many Hands Make Little Work." This idea has been receiving attention throughout various sectors of society (such as business, government, academic, and social science think tanks) and places an emphasis on ordinary people as the most important aspect of any successful endeavour. This model, which we will call the "Many Hands" model, tends to focus on productivity (or the lack of it) and various indicators (such as GNP, crime rate, academic innovation, or civic involvement) suggest that individuals are more important than technology, infrastructure, and natural resources in predicting the wealth, diversity and complexity of social groups. FEMA, unlike the earlier Civil Defense program (which we discuss later), has rejected the Many Hands model, instead focusing on technology, supplies and technocrats. The model Aftershock Action Alliance promotes is a way to maximize people's active involvement and problem-solving skills—which is a return to the primacy of action by people affected by crisis. Emergencies are events that are particularly dependent on the actions of people and communities in order to avoid unnecessary suffering.

One of the major hurdles during a disaster is finding enough people to help with relief and recovery efforts. This shortfall can dramatically accelerate the negative impacts of an emergency and create a negative feedback loop. FEMA and other disaster professionals, despite decades of independent research and commonsense, still try to limit spontaneous involvement by individuals during times of crisis. This approach by the government has continued with the current 2008 budget, which savaged the only civilian emergency training program by 75 percent, despite the record numbers of people signing up for trainings. Institutional NGOs have followed suit, sinking more and more of their budget into technology and specialists while simultaneously reducing their budgets for public education. The Red Cross has doubled the financial resources available for technological items while whittling away their public outreach programs by almost 80%. Money allocated by the Federal Government for emergencies and civil defense has gone from spending 1 out of every 3 "disaster dollars" on local groups and agencies to 19 out of 20 "disaster dollars" now going to universities, private military contractors and technology corporations. Even the Emergency Broadcasting System (now called the Emergency Alert System) has been reduced to to about 10% of its 1966 budget—all broadcasters have been removed and it is nearly fully automated now. We have gone from active agents (neighbors helping neighbors) to "resources" that need to be managed by government specialists wielding a large array of expensive technology.

The emphasis of emergency managers to control, evacuate and contain

whole communities has actually reduced effective response to disasters—conventional full-time emergency services are dramatically overloaded, with conventional fire-fighting response times often exceeding several days. Staffing levels for hospitals drop by up to 70 percent, with an often dramatic increase in patients exacerbating the shortage of staff. The International Institute of Disasters Studies published an exhaustive paper comparing mandatory versus voluntary evacuations in 13 countries. The researchers found that mandatory evacuations actually slowed recovery efforts and perhaps more surprisingly, led to more injuries and deaths than in people who evacuated voluntarily. They also found that fewer people left during voluntary evacuation orders (22% left compared with 70% for mandatory evacuations enforced by law enforcement) and concluded that it was access to “in situ” social relationships that aided rescue and recovery efforts “despite the lack of resources and training.” Removing populations, breaking up communities and hindering self-organization are surefire recipes for turning an emergency into a disaster. This policy has not always been the norm (even in this country) and is a recent development, successfully promoted by capitalists and authoritarians.

Traditionally, the response to disasters on civilian population centers was to maintain a mass-trained force of volunteer emergency workers. In the 1930’s when “Civil Defense” was first formed under FDR, it had close to 500,000 participants and many more volunteers. The Red Cross and Salvation Army had nearly twice the staff and volunteers as they do today despite having 30% of their current budget (in adjusted dollars). Studies in World War II showed that if trained, civilians in self-organized teams could perform up to 95% of emergency services/activities with less than 40 hours of training. It is important to note that this Many Hands approach to emergencies and disasters was during a time with less education and access to resources than today. In this model, communities of people rescue themselves from most situations and prioritize emergency services.

A further example of specialization and its ramifications, is the consolidation and elimination of volunteer fire/ambulance brigades in the rural Midwest. A 1997 study in the Stokes & Peters *Journal of Fire Professionals and Prevention*, strongly suggests that the creation of professional fire departments across three states in the Midwest actually reduced services. They looked at injuries, building damage and response times and found that the better-trained and technologically-sophisticated fire departments provided a lower quality of service than the volunteer groups. Stokes & Peters answered the question of why professional fire departments with more money, better equipment and 20 times the training compared so poorly with volunteers by citing the lack of community participation and involvement in the new model. They argue that there were more volunteers who were more logically

to consensus (despite its practical benefits) and exposure to the process will not necessarily engender satisfaction with this mode of decision-making. However, this problem does not outweigh the benefits and we will need to do more research and thinking about how to reduce the frustration with consensus decision-making.

The P&H model also has the added benefit of best utilizing the skills and knowledge of an ad hoc group. It is difficult for C&C groups to effectively gauge and utilize the abilities of participants and thus they prefer to use only known subordinates (trained professionals). That is why there is so little effective inter-agency cooperation between both government agencies and NGO relief groups. By creating and utilizing an open P&H model, individuals can more easily share their abilities with the group. A decentralized system allows for greater and more timely feedback loops that will allow groups to adjust their strengths and weaknesses. This can be crucial in the ever-shifting landscape of a disaster—individuals in a group can quickly replace someone and switch roles more fluidly than in a C&C system that doesn’t allow for such transitions.

COMMUNITY-EMPOWERMENT

The model that Aftershock proposes allows for greater community empowerment. People who have the experience of direct decision-making during a crisis are less likely to abdicate that collective power to authorities. Joint decision-making also creates important social bonds between individuals and groups that can be used to network both knowledge and resources inside a community. We believe by supporting and participating in community self-organization efforts, we can foster greater possibilities for active resistance. Active resistance can mean protecting a community from destructive and exploitive recovery schemes and/or be used to challenge oppression. A successful community response to disasters can be a powerful tool in creating greater autonomy and strengthening the interconnectedness of dependent and fractured neighborhoods.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Choosing how to manage information and utilizing effective decision-making methods are two of the most important aspects of successful disaster/emergency-relief efforts. The model promoted by the Aftershock Action Alliance is in stark contrast to the traditional methods of Government and NGO emergency management. The emergency managers’ approach is a direct result of the way power is manifested in our society—they seek to continue inequity-

sions to emerge. Extreme errors in judgment can be checked in a horizontal structure, that might be missed with only a few commanders calling the shots. Sharing power allows actions to be more timely since the center of decision-making is with the group. In C&C models, groups must await orders before acting even if they know what to do, and this delay can be catastrophic (e.g. helicopters being grounded during Katrina). Sharing power also increases investment in the decision, creating greater cohesion and coordination. When people are not invested in a decision, other influences must be brought in to ensure compliance—such as training, retribution and reward. These types of influences may be difficult to muster during a disaster, especially if it is widespread and unpredicted. People who feel invested in a decision will be more likely to go out of their way to ensure its success, even if that means sacrificing their own immediate needs or concerns.

We believe consensus is the best way to ensure maximum input, participation and investment in the decision-making process. Many believe that consensus is not effective in large and diverse groups but research doesn't support this proposition. Experiments conducted at Stanford University suggest that diversity has little impact on a group's ability to reach consensus regarding concrete goal-directed actions. The study consisted of two groups of students that took a battery of personality tests and surveys. Group A was made up of people with similar profiles while Group B was purposefully made up with people to maximize diversity. Each group had to use consensus to work their way through a digital maze in a certain amount of time, and if they succeeded they received a monetary reward. While both groups succeeded at the task, Group B outperformed Group A every time in terms of speed and accuracy (although reporting they found it to be a more difficult experience). So while consensus may be filled with some arguing and frustration, it doesn't seem to negatively impact the actual decisions being made.

Another common criticism is that consensus takes too long. While it is true that a dictatorship is the most efficient way to make decisions in regards to time (assuming the dictator has an efficient way to disseminate their commands) most other decision-making models are not significantly faster than consensus. According to the same Stanford researchers, voting takes only about 20% less time than consensus when they added a majority voting system to the groups, and when there is significant time pressure, consensus groups can make decisions in a reasonable amount of time. However, the subjective experience of time is very different between voting and consensus. The Stanford researchers found that the voting groups could accurately assess the amount of time their decisions took, while the consensus groups invariably overestimated the time it took to make decisions. This may be the result of the reported frustration of consensus building. This will be a stumbling block for the P&H model in that many people will at first be resistant

distributed (more volunteer corps were located in areas with high instances of fires than in lower risk areas) than their professional counterparts. One might also suspect that volunteers had an inherent advantage in knowing the areas where they worked better and had an even greater commitment to helping fellow community members. Stokes & Peters also found that a greater fire awareness existed in the general population prior to the creation of the professional, specialized fire departments. This is common sense—a volunteer force was required to dialog and interact with the community, for both volunteers and resources, and thus created effective local outreach and educational programs. This contrasts sharply with the abysmal success rates of professional fire departments' educational/outreach programs, despite spending thousands of dollars and engaging professional PR firms.

The success of volunteer, civil and other non-professional emergency responders suggests that most activities required during a crisis are relatively simple (though essential) to perform. Nearly all emergency literature and research advises that the simple act of turning off utilities post-disaster (e.g. Floods) can reduce fires, injuries and damage to property. In about 30 minutes of training, and with a \$3.00 commercial tool, most people can learn to turn off the water-main, gas and electrical power in their homes. This simple act can reduce the damage of a disaster significantly. Another example is CPR—while it is true that forced-air bags, low-voltage defibrillators and flexible-molded alternative airways are more effective than CPR in saving lives, there is no doubt that more actual lives are saved by the simple CPR technique. Nearly half of all Americans have had CPR training of some sort, and while there is no reliable data on how many lives are saved each year (since most CPR incidents are not reported) it is quite common. The majority of CPR classes are taught by community groups (less than 5% of all classes are sponsored by NGO's, corporate entities and government agencies) with the average cost being less than \$5.00 and most often, free of charge. There is no centralized bureau or governing body in charge of CPR courses or the technique itself, and yet it works. Once again, proving that ordinary people can have a large impact in emergency situations.

Aftershock, along with scores of other researchers, believes that the more people you engage in emergency preparedness, the greater success you will have in mitigating the negative effects of a disaster or crisis. Decentralized community-based emergency preparations allow and require many different people to "pitch in," which is easy, since most work during a disaster is unskilled, based on commonsense, and has a limited need for high-tech gadgets. One benefit of this community participation is that it decreases the negative psychological impacts of crisis on people. All "disaster psychology" research acknowledges that meaningful activity offsets many detrimental impacts of disasters, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. If people feel needed, as

4 part of a team and are engaged in tasks they have confidence in, they are less likely to exhibit negative psychological symptoms during and even after a disaster. It is ironic that emergency managers spend so much time worrying about “mass panic,” when the solution is simple—allow people to be active in aiding their own communities. Research and commonsense both indicate that in times of crisis there is an outpouring of help and mutual aid by average people. Instead of thwarting this valuable and appropriate response to disaster by forcing people to become passive consumers of aid, we can use this powerful force to protect and rebuild our communities.

Unfortunately, the government agencies and groups that make up “emergency management” continue towards a centralized and technological approach to disasters even though, as we have learned, community-based models are more effective and less expensive. One might ask why this is the case, and the answer is simply: money and power.

Grassroots community-centered relief training is very cheap—average people train their friends, neighbors, families and co-workers and they will often do this for free. Successful civilian relief models are almost inherently low-technology and usually rely on common resources available in their own areas. By necessity, they are open source, which means they cannot be regulated or controlled by corporate interests. There is simply no money to be made out of this type of emergency preparedness. This is the bottom line for not only corporate interests, but also for large NGOs that rely on donations and grants to provide relief and rescue efforts. There is increasingly little difference between major international NGOs and corporations, which often work hand in glove in reaping resources and profits from disasters. Disasters have become major revenue generators for both of these groups, so it is no surprise that many executive directors of NGOs were once major CEOs in the private sector, and that most NGOs contract out equipment and other services to large international corporations. Too much money can be made off emergencies for these groups to support community-based models and the very effectiveness of these models threatens the privileged position of bloated government agencies, NGOs and corporations.

Money and power always go together. Not only are there large amounts of money to be made from disasters (read Naomi Klein’s exhaustively researched book, *The Shock Doctrine*, for details) but governments, individuals and corporations also use crises to increase their political power. Disasters create a great deal of fear, and fear can easily be turned into political currency. Various leaders, corporations and institutions demand our loyalty in exchange for security and we acquiesce to these power grabs in exchange for aid. But if we could provide for ourselves and our own communities, if we knew beforehand that not only can we help ourselves but that we are more

13 ing complex behavior (and high degrees of coordination) is egalitarian power sharing. While it is true many social animals, such as wolves and baboons, exist in rigid hierarchies, their ability to be flexible is seriously compromised. Biologists have noted that in times of environmental changes, wolf packs and baboon troops actually become less hierarchical. This probably serves a variety of reasons that allow these groups to maximize their adaptability.

Egalitarian groups are more adaptable because they can break up and reform. An example of this dynamic is a flock of birds that is attacked by a predator like a hawk. The hawk will swoop in and the flock disbands and then quickly reforms, over and over again. This both tires and confuses the hawk and minimizes the damage it can do to the flock as a whole—increasing the survivability of each individual. The fact that all factions have the same ability to decide how and when to reform with the other splinter groups allows them to be very adaptive. This scenario also plays out during disasters. Instead of predators, groups are confronted with various unknowable factors that can destroy both individuals and the cohesion of the group. When communications, transportation and other key infrastructural elements are disrupted, larger groups need to be able to break up and reform. This idea was practiced during both hurricanes Andrew and Katrina, when amateur radio operators improvised and used a variety of systems both collectively and individually to get important information out to both locals and the wider world.

A myth abounds that disasters are just emergencies writ large. Some disaster experts, like NYPD chief Kelly, believe disasters are “like huge car accidents.” They believe that disasters are simply a matter of scale-- not quality—and this can be a costly mistake (though common of C&C models). Hierarchical structures, with power concentrated in a minority of individuals, allow for greater disruption to occur. A factor that many C&C models don’t take in account is the disruption that occurs in their own system. If 10% of professional emergency responders cannot get to the disaster site or report to duty, then how will that affect the chain of command? The loss of an individual or a group of individuals in a hierarchical system can have devastating effects at both ends of the chain. Then there is also the problem, which occurs quite frequently, of C&C leadership being unable to communicate its commands to subordinates, and subordinates who are not around to carry out the tasks of commanders. During Katrina and 9/11 we saw this play out—in 9/11, the Office of Emergency Management was physically located in the World Trade Center and those in charge were unable to meet and to send out commands. In Katrina, over 50% of patrolmen did not report to duty so commands by higher-ups went unheeded.

Sharing power, like sharing information, allows for more balanced deci-

DECISION-MAKING

Government agencies and relief organizations use a top-down decision-making model, often called “command & control” (C&C). The problems with this model are obvious as C&C models tend to be slow-reacting when time is of the essence, and often lack appropriate flexibility. Flexibility is key when dealing with disasters because of the large amount of unknowable factors. C&C models also do not promote individual and/or small group initiative. They put a primacy on a by-the-book analysis rather than on-the-ground knowledge and are much better at reacting to predictable events where people have been trained for specialized actions, rather than the chaotic nature of disasters and crises.

Instead of command & control, with its structure of overlapping authority, a participatory and horizontal (P&H) model allows as many people as possible to participate in decision-making. Participation is useful during disasters because all researchers agree that being actively involved in decision making can actually reduce the harmful psychological effects of emergencies on ordinary people. However, this beneficial psychological effect is not the only reason to use a participatory model. As James Surowiecki points out, crowds are often smarter than the smartest person/people in them. This phenomenon has to do with the aggregation of information and an ingrained desire for mutual aid/cooperation. Since all participants are deeply invested in coming up with the best solution to their own problems, they will minimize damaging decisions and maximize decisions that can aid them in reaching their own goals. Recent research in self-organizing models also suggests an emergence (a moving from simple to complex behavior) occurs when certain principles are met. These crucial principles are: feedback, size and egalitarian power-sharing. Feedback and size are related, in that if the size of a group gets too big, feedback systems are less effective. Research shows that humans can reasonably “read” others in groups of about 60 and that when groups get bigger, the feedback system breaks down. When feedback is no longer working, many negative characteristics can manifest: aggression, suspicion, gossip, isolation and so on. Size also affects the level of coordination of a group. For instance, geese can engage in complicated aerial maneuvers in flocks of about 20, while bats can coordinate their actions in the thousands. If you double the size of a flock (geese or bats) their coordination drops substantially and they will almost invariably break into smaller groups.

The P&H model must allow for groups that become too large to break off into smaller groups in order for both feedback and coordination to continue. Flocks, herds, ant hills, bee hives, and so on show that the key to maintain-

likely to be successful in doing so, the control of these various groups over us would be limited. By pulling us out of our communities and putting us into situations where we cannot provide for our own basic needs or make meaningful decisions about our own lives, the emergency management model turns us into helpless children. When armed National Guardsmen control even our access to water, we are in a poor position to check abuses of power or even make legitimate demands. When we are dependent on impossibly expensive technologies and arcane expertise, we have no choice but to surrender our autonomy to those who claim to protect us from disasters while they simultaneously line their pockets. Emergency management is less effective in relief and recovery than community or civilian models, but it is more effective in consolidating power and generating huge profits for a few selected NGOs and corporations.

The model Aftershock Action Alliance promotes, like the earlier civil defense model, supports the creation of self-organized community approaches to emergency preparedness, relief and recovery. We recognize the strength and the usefulness of creating low-tech grassroots models of dealing with emergencies that not only protects our communities but also empowers them. We rely on the “Many Hands” of our own communities for aid and support in times of crisis. Aftershock also promotes easy-to-replicate models of action that utilize available resources to create sustainable and community-enriching approaches to crises, which people in all areas, no matter how resource-poor and politically-marginalized can use. We understand that NGOs, government agencies and corporations have the most to lose from the wide dissemination of this approach and we expect resistance from these groups to our efforts. We are willing to fight for the right to protect and provide mutual aid in our neighborhoods because we know that in addition to developing alternatives that exist outside the spheres of the emergency managers, we must also be ready to challenge their exploitive and dangerous models. A community-based model that highlights our Many Hands can be a powerful force in not only protecting ourselves from the negative impacts of disasters, but also building confidence and sense of real solidarity in the very neighborhoods we live in.

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community that we are confident that the information we need will be accurate and useful—if enough people can share information.

The inherent problem of second-hand sources, which the Government, media and NGOs almost entirely rely on for their data, can be demonstrated in the "telephone game," where information is passed on from one person down a chain and by the end it is completely changed. We want to allow individuals that have first-hand information to be able to share it in an uncensored way. We believe that if there is substantial first-hand information available, the need to use possibly inaccurate second-hand sources will be greatly diminished. This will also allow for the most up-to-date information since it will not have to be "managed" before it is released, for as we all know, timely information is crucial during a crisis.

The question then is how can regular people share the information they have during a disaster? In addition to developing a number of decentralized models in which people can bring information and report what is going on, how can we then provide that first-hand information to the public? We must come up with ways to take the decentralized reports and expand their reach as quickly as possible. Broadcast radio seems ideal for this type of timely dissemination—it is relatively simple technology and would allow an am/fm or shortwave broadcast to reach a large number of people spread out geographically. Radio technology is relatively efficient, the power requirement minimal and it could be kept operational with a generator or alternative energy resources. Radio has the advantage of allowing anyone with a radio or within hearing distance of a radio to obtain information simultaneously. A crisis center, or any other meeting place could, with one battery/crank/solar radio, provide information to hundreds of people at once without using precious resources or labor. To collect information, the use of small digital recorders and other devices could reduce the time of writing or reproducing information and could easily and quickly be disseminated by a transmitter. Radio broadcasts also allow people to obtain information while doing other things (e.g. first aid), requiring no focal point and minimal attention drain. It also allows people to take information, if they have a radio, and be mobile with it.

Another aspect of information dissemination that must be taken into account, is that to be truly useful, information will need to be in languages used by the people in the area. First-hand accounts will aid this by allowing participation by various segments of the population. It also makes literacy a non-issue. Psychologists have done studies on freshman students and found they can retain 50% more information from audio resources than written resources in the same amount of time. Maximizing the amount of information people can absorb may be crucial during a crisis when meaningful decisions need to be made.

For example, in a 1999 University of Wisconsin psychological experiment, they allowed long-time gamblers to look at one card at anytime during a standard five card draw poker game. Those that looked bet more even if they had a losing hand than those that were not allowed to look (who bet less even if they had a good hand). The effect on the poker game was large despite the small statistical significance of looking at one random card. What this showed is that people who get secret information, even when it is not important, will overestimate the value of that information and so will everyone else—even if they have no idea what that information is and whether it will be useful for their actions. What this means during a crisis is that even though the government has information the rest of us don't have and which allows them to exert greater control over our actions, this is done regardless of the usefulness of that information. This breeds a foolish arrogance in the part of those in possession of such supposed knowledge and is probably the real reason governments spend so much time and resources "protecting" the public from panic by withholding important information.

Conversely, we believe information should be publicly shared. With the understanding that there are many unknowns during a disaster and that normal communications systems will undoubtedly be impaired, the approach we take relies on the "many eyes, big voice" model of information sharing. People are reasonably capable of providing useful information about key issues regarding a disaster, and groups tend to increase the accuracy of eye-witness testimonies. Research suggests that 4 people witnessing a car accident can get over 90% of the "relevant" details correct. Obviously a car crash is not the same as a disaster, but we can reasonably extrapolate that the more eyes you have, the more likely you will get accurate information. In James Surowiecki's influential work, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, he shows that over 140 years of research in biology, sociology, psychology and information systems suggest that larger groups of people can make better decisions and accumulate more useful and accurate information than smaller cadres of experts. There is some precedent for this in our own experiences—At mass mobilizations, decentralized information gathering systems like Indymedia1 are superior (in terms of speed and accuracy) in relaying crucial information about arrests, injuries, and flashpoints when compared to official government agencies (e.g. the police department) or the corporate media (e.g. Local news). During Katrina, amateur radio buffs provided a better description of the damaged areas and the type of flooding in New Orleans than FEMA or any other organization. The model we promote seeks to maximize the number of people that can participate in the information sharing during an emergency. This larger number of reporters or collectors of data helps to ensure that widely inaccurate information is weeded out. Wikipedia, according to a Nature article (December 2005) is as accurate as the Encyclopedia Britannica when experts compared randomly selected articles. It is with the help of our neighbors and

CROWD IN CONTROL: DECISION-MAKING DURING DISASTERS



8 The two primary and interrelated activities any response must confront during a disaster are the dissemination/control of information and decision-making. How information is shared and decisions are made shape every other aspect of relief and recovery. How a team or organization decides to implement these important activities must be decided upon before crisis hits, especially if the individuals and collectives involved hope to be able to respond effectively to the many unknowable factors during a disaster. The model utilized by the Aftershock Action Alliance uses a decentralized and autonomous approach to both information and decisions—an approach that is at odds with most government and private emergency management plans. We believe that there are very good reasons for bucking the trend of centralization and information control, and that this in turn will lead to a more effective relief/recovery effort and promote community empowerment and active resistance.

SHARING INFORMATION

There are a number of theories about how information is gathered, disseminated and analyzed which we will not go into here, but we accept the etymology of the word Information, which means “to give form” to something. Information allows us to form in our mind what something is, and since it is nearly impossible to imagine action without some kind of information, it is a key component of decision-making. In a crisis, there can be many types of information but usually there is only an incomplete idea of what is actually happening. This is a result of factors such as a disaster’s surprise and speed, as well as the interruption of normal flows of information (e.g. The knocking out phone lines). It is not that there is no information during a disaster, but that the context in which crises play out is often disrupted to such an extent as to make their comprehension difficult. For example, the power may go out in our home and we look out and the street is black. In this context, we do not know if the entire city, county or state is without power. We may also not know what caused the power outage or how long it will be out. The normal attempts to seek information may be thwarted by not having access to phones, Internet, television or radio. We must decide “What is happening?” in order to form the context in which we decide what action is to follow such an event— If it is a blown fuse, then we will search out the circuit box in our home; if the entire state is in a black-out, then going to the fuse box is foolish.

Obviously, the more correct the information we have is, the better we will be able to decide and plan action that is in sync with events. If we have little context or bad information, our ability to make good decisions—and thus take appropriate action—will be severely impaired. It is for this reason alone why every organization dedicated to responding to disasters puts such a pre-

mium on information collection and management. In this way, Aftershock is no different than government agencies or NGOs, but where we differ significantly from these other organizations is in our belief that “Information wants to be Free.”

Government/NGO organizations spend thousands of dollars to create encrypted and scrambled communication devices so their communications (and thus information) can be private. They also use a variety of scientific and military jargon, code and abbreviations to make their communications unintelligible for the average person. It is telling that the guidelines for the Emergency Alert Service (what used to be Emergency Broadcast System) never mention providing “information” to the general public—only “instructions.” The motivations (and the information they are based on) for these instructions are kept secret from the public. This is the position of the most “public” of the emergency management agencies. The government and most private relief agencies operate under the assumption that the public cannot understand the information coming in and out of disaster areas, which one might logically presume is based on some sort of research—but this isn’t the case. Even a cursory glance at research from sociology, psychology and even disaster studies demonstrates that ordinary citizens can assimilate vast amounts of data and “give form to” reasonable scenarios based on what they’ve learned. One study, by the Santa Fe Institute, gave a group of ten emergency managers and ten civilian survivors of tornadoes from New Mexico information about a group of tornadoes that hit Kansas in 1962. They found that on 7 factors (e.g. Estimated number of casualties) both groups did similarly. In fact, the ten civilians had greater agreement internally than the “experts.”

But the authorities persist in hoarding information from and doling out instructions to the public. They have a variety of rationales, and their greatest by far is the fear of “mass panic.” As we have discussed in detail elsewhere, this is mostly a myth and there exists over 20 years of research disproving this government/NGO line. In the rare occasions that panic does occur, it is generally in very specific situations which are characterized by factors such as a lack of familiarity with the environment, over-crowding, lack of access to normal social networks, and expert over-reaction. But even in some of these situations, panics do not occur and it seems the authorities’ fear of panic is wholly over-blown and not a good excuse for withholding information.

And yet controlling/withholding information from the public can have other negative impacts, besides allowing the authorities to exert control over others who do not have access to information. Psychology experiments have suggested that people over-estimate the value of secret of information.