

### DENIAL OF PROBLEM CAUSES CRISIS FOR ONTARIO'S PRIME MINISTER

A continuing judicial investigation, begun last October 16, into the deaths of seven people and sickness of 2,500 more from contaminated water in Walkerton, Ontario, has created a crisis for Ontario's Premier Mike Harris. The town is a farming community 90 miles west of Toronto with a population of 8,000. Opposition parties say there's mounting evidence the Harris government ignored repeated warnings that might have averted the tragedy. Harris's budget cuts and privatization measures may have **undermined public trust** by reducing government accountability.

#### PUBLIC NOT NOTIFIED OF DANGER

Ostensibly, blame for the tragedy falls on Stan Koebel, the manager of Walkerton's water supply, who admittedly falsified water quality reports, often drank alcohol on the job, and did not understand how testing worked. A year ago, toxic E. coli from piled up manure at nearby animal farms infiltrated one of the town's wells after a heavy downpour. It became the worst E. coli outbreak in Canadian history. Citizens weren't told about the problem until a local doctor, noting illnesses, went on the radio over a holiday weekend to warn citizens to boil their water. Walkerton's public utilities commission and the province's Environment Ministry (EM) had utterly failed to protect public health and safety, although the EM asserts it couldn't have known what was happening.

The judicial inquiry showed that the EM failed to act even though officials were aware the water was contaminated. Former Environment Minister Norm Sterling blamed previous lack of response on his counterpart in the agriculture ministry. Sterling had voiced "serious concerns" about the "Right to Farm" legislation enacted in 1998. It prohibited municipal bylaws from interfering with "normal" farm practices, including how farmers dispose of manure. There are still no provincial standards or regulation of animal waste disposal, such as setting minimum distances to separate manure from wells and water recharge areas.

#### THE LARGER ISSUES INCLUDE:

- **Budget cuts.** The larger political issue is the Harris government's "Common Sense Revolution" that advocates reducing government. This goal has had public support as shown by the re-election in 1999 of Harris and the Conservatives. After coming to power in 1995 on a pledge to balance budgets and streamline government services, the Harris government cut 48% of the budget of the Environment Ministry in Canada's largest province. Howard Hampton, leader of the opposition's NDP, charged, "the Premier and his entire caucus decided that tax cuts were more important than safe water."
- **Privatization of the province's water-testing laboratories.** Just before the crisis hit, the private lab that tested Walkerton's water uncovered potentially lethal contamination of water. But because of confusing protocols, it only notified the manager of the town's public utilities commission, who didn't pass the information on to either the ministry or public health authorities.

Although he denies responsibility, Premier Harris calls Walkerton's crisis "a wakeup call for all of us" and states that water-testing and reporting protocols have since been changed. The Ontario government paid the town \$15 million to cover the cost of cleaning the water. **No organization, especially government, can be oblivious to the impact of its actions on public health and safety.** And when an incident occurs, it must immediately warn the public and take corrective action.

### J-SCHOOL CHALLENGES POINT TO WAYS INFORMATION CAN BE DISTRIBUTED IN THE FUTURE

Keynote speakers at the AEJMC (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication) conference, held August 5-8 in Washington, D.C., noted challenges to their profession:

- enrollment of j-students is down, as many are attracted to other disciplines such as pr
- public is losing confidence and trust in journalists
- Internet is screwing everything up: "How will reporters be paid? How can newspapers compete?"
- public's appetite for spin doesn't seem to be on the wane (yet spin is what makes papers lose credibility)
- newspaper readership is down, from 56.9% last fall to 56.2% this past spring

"When I browse the papers, I sometimes find myself drawn to a story I'd normally avoid like the plague by an interesting photo or a catchy lead sentence. In short, something I was certain I wasn't interested in until it turned out that I was. In the download-now culture of the Internet, such serendipity would be lost," notes Kurtz.

What's the future for journalism? It might be scary, as Salon.com illustrates. It recently laid off writers who received few hits on their sites. "Imagine if a newspaper were edited in such a popularity contest fashion," says Howard Kurtz, *Washington Post*. "If foreign news didn't score well enough, boom, it's gone. Perhaps affluent subscribers don't want to depress themselves by reading about poor people. Space would be slashed for the less-than scintillating Bush-Gore campaign."

#### HOW NEWSPAPERS CAN REACH THE GEN - Y SET - AND KEEP EVERYBODY ELSE

These issues seem to point to new needs and expectations, especially among Gen Y

(people born after 1977). Based on surveys, the Freedom Forum devised a plan for papers trying to survive, which is *instructive for all communicators*:

1. Just because Gen Yers are comfortable with the Internet doesn't mean they don't like newspapers. Studies show **most prefer a combination of print and on-line news.**
2. **Gen Yers need to see themselves in the paper** (but they don't). "They don't want their news to be segregated." They want to look at business pages and see advice for paying college loans, interviewing for jobs. They want to see their accomplishments in the local news pages, their music in entertainment sections.



- 3. **Use the young to cover the youth public.** "A large paper brings in someone with 10 years' experience, then waits until that person has 10 more years of experience to make him the pop music critic," complains John D'Anna, an editor at *Arizona Republic*.
- 4. **Don't aim a newspaper at a particular generation.** That will turn off the people coming up in the next generation.
- 5. **Print the truth, not speculation.** Do research before printing the story. People like the Web, but tend to realize a lot of what they find there is rumor. This offers papers an opportunity to be the *voice of truth*.
- 6. **Create an authoritative source,** not a static archive. Create links to specialists in everything your readers might want to know about. Look for ways that readers can plumb stories (perhaps a series on-line, accompanying the story in the paper).
- 7. **Investigate whether long, in-depth stories would work better than short bulletins.** Many people admit distaste for reading long stories on screen but don't mind length in the paper.
- 8. **Talk to readers** and find out what they distrust in papers.
- 9. **Interactivity is crucial.** One reason young readers are drawn to the Web is interactivity. They can organize and shape their own coverage, communicate with the sources of information. It's not a top down structure.
- 10. **Don't try to use Gen-Y slang.** "It always comes out crummy," says one survey participant.

Remember, this public and people in general are becoming increasingly visually stimulated, time constrained, and accustomed to having a role in choosing their news coverage.

(To obtain a copy of "Recapture Your Youth: How to Create a Newspaper for Future Generations," contact Freedom Forum at 703/528-0800.)

### "SPIRAL OF SILENCE" PREVALENT AMONG DISABLED PUBLICS; HOW CAN PR HELP SILENCED VOICES BE HEARD AND COUNTED?

The "Spiral of Silence" refers to the increasing pressure people feel to conceal their views when they think they are in the minority. Developed by researcher Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, founder of the Allensbach Institute (referred to by some as the Gallup Organization of Germany), the concept is rooted in the thinking of philosopher John Locke: public opinion as a *tangible force* that keeps people in line. Noelle-Neumann defines public opinion as "opinions on controversial issues that one *can* express in public without isolating oneself." Therefore, the "silent majority" may end up voting for Ronald Reagan over Jimmy Carter, even though public opinion polls were slanted in the latter's favor prior to the 1980 election. "What they [pollsters] should have asked was, 'Who do you believe is more likely to win?'"

Panelists at the AEJMC conference discussed how pr can "bring in the out" and allow isolated voices to be heard. Consider three groups:

- 1. **physically disabled individuals** are silenced by lack of access to buildings, churches, facilities

- 2. **deaf people** are silenced by communication barriers
- 3. **mentally ill** suffer ridicule, which accelerates the spiral of silence

### DISENFRANCHISED, NOT BY CHOICE

According to Robert Weinstock at Gallaudet U (D.C.), deaf people are especially isolated because they face a communication barrier. "Society looks at disabled individuals as isolated so people continue to experience isolation, which dictates their behavior," he says. "There is an assumption that everyone has access to information...that everyone receives this information and reacts to it in a passive or active way." But it's not the case for the deaf, many of whom can't respond at all.

**How can deaf people use pr?** Traditionally, much of the advocacy for deaf people comes from the hearing community. The downside is the trust issue: "Should you allow another community to speak for you? What are they going to be saying?" Also, for hearing people to take the lead in advocacy suggests a sense of paternalism, with the focus on help, not empowerment.

"The deaf community needs to define who it is that is speaking for them, who is making decisions for them. They also need to **think of themselves as a niche market**, not a disenfranchised group. This group can provide something that the others cannot."

When Gallaudet appointed a hearing president over two deaf candidates in 1988, students mounted a protest and closed the campus for a week until their conditions were met.

Consequently, the administration installed a deaf president, appointed more deaf than hearing council members, forced the resignation of the hearing council chair, and guaranteed there would be no reprisal against the protesting students.

¶ **Paradigm Shift.** The Internet, closed captioning, two-way pagers, offer new access for the non-hearing community. It should be noted that Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone while trying to help the deaf. Closed captioning is becoming pervasive because it is used not only by the deaf community, but also by bar patrons trying to watch a sporting event in a noisy environment, by people new to the English language, and by kids learning to spell.

### A DISABILITY COUPLED WITH SHAME

Ann Marie Major, Penn State, says mental illness is the one disability the public finds "socially unacceptable," according to surveys. Mass media do more damage by skewing perceptions – making fun of sufferers or depicting them as dangerous. Consider: 1) the movie ad for Jim Carrey's recent movie, "Me, Myself and Irene," reads "From gentle to mental," featuring Carrey with his head split in half; 2) A recalled Sprint ad featured a "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" scenario with nurses dispensing phones instead of pills; 3) A Kodak ad features a camera in a straight jacket – the idea being the multi-task camera has "multiple personality disorder."

Concerning mentally ill people as being violent, Major notes the stats: "The majority is not violent – furthermore, the vast majority of violent people are not mentally ill."

¶ **For people with mental illness** (which is one in five people, according to Major), the spiral of silence is hard to escape. "These people are silenced and dependent on advocates. The result is isolation." *PR should frame the issue as a disability and stop using it to spoof.* "Would communicators use cancer or diabetes as a vehicle to another kind of message campaign?" Instead, work with advocates to persuade companies like Kodak to stop using these campaigns.