

NEWS vs ENTERTAINMENT

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It was a cold and rainy morning Wednesday in Sacramento when my cell phone rang in the California Room of the Old Town Holiday Inn. I answered and was greeted by a local television reporter who wanted to know what I thought about the Grand Jury Report *Improving Our Emergency Alert System in the 21st Century, Paul Revere-Where Are You?* The media was moving fast considering that the report had been public for less than 30 minutes.

Today many people are addressing the continuing challenges associated with public information. A good deal has been accomplished, money has been spent, agreements have been signed and administrative systems have been put into place. However, in the end not much has changed. The question is why?

The Gaviota Fire on June 12th, 2004 was the turning point for the Wildland Residents Association. Because the freeway was closed by the fire, Highway 154 became a bumper to bumper mess. Several vehicle fires caused additional problems near the summit. For the San Marcos Pass communities, the Gaviota Fire was a significant event. As a result we decided to engage the challenges of the public information business.

Several Grand Jury reports followed the Gaviota Fire with various recommendations. Some flourished, some died in concept. This week's report continues the quest for answers and solutions to a nagging problem.

Local media is profoundly limited in its ability to report the news as it happens because of minimal staffing and funding. Weekends and holidays are particularly problematic. Local broadcasters utilize automated programming oftentimes with no one in the station. We can complain all we want, but as a community we do not sufficiently support our media resources to provide on demand news.

That nasty question of "Who is going to pay?" continues to pop-up when addressing public information issues, the media and who is charged with providing it. Newspapers, television, radio; even blogs have associated costs and time requirements. It is not free.

To address our local issues, the WRA installed the San Marcos Pass Emergency Radio System – 1040 AM. This low-power AM radio station provides local emergency messages 24 hours a day. The station is automated but can be updated instantly via telephone or our two-way radio system. SMPERS has served us well for six years and has become a model for other communities throughout the country. The radio show Community Alert was born from the SMPERS program. For almost three years Community Alert has interviewed a verity guests about public safety and media issues on KZSB – AM 1290.

On Thursday May 7th, Ted and I went into the station to record a show. We did not leave until the next day at four in the morning. We provided 14 ½ hours of continuous broadcasting of the Jesusita Fire. It was here that we learned what it is like to be both information collectors and providers. It is not as easy as it appears from the outside looking in.

During the Jesusita Fire one poor PIO was interviewed by a television crew regarding the loss of structures. While he was unable to confirm any losses, the station was running a live video feed of a house totally involved behind him. This was a classic example of the choking of information during events. Today, the world runs at the speed of light and not everyone can keep up.

In 2005, the WRA joined forces with local public information officers (PIO) forming the Emergency Public Information Communicators (EPIC). In the early days EPIC meetings pulled in as many as 50 local PIO's from public safety, education, utilities and public officials. Regrettably, not everyone within various public safety managements supported the EPIC effort. However, despite the lack of formalized support, EPIC still meets monthly to address local media and information issues.

The reference by the Grand Jury to Paul Revere is a good one because like much of history, tradition and folklore frequently trumps the facts. Several historians accuse poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow of taking "significant liberties" with history including such details as the number of riders. Some accounts suggest there were as many as 40 riders and Revere himself had to barrow a horse from John Larkin. The lanterns placed in the Old North Church "were meant *for* Revere and not *from* him." One other detail of importance is that Revere rode to Lexington, not Concord.

The Revere story is also interesting because it was apparently unremarkable during most of his life. Revere himself reportedly gave three accounts of his April 18th 1775 ride, two requested by the Massachusetts Provisional Congress. The final account was a deposition regarding the Lexington Green battle in an attempt to prove that the British fired the first shot. It was 23 years latter that Paul Revere wrote to Jeremy Belknap, Corresponding Secretary of the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1798 providing his most complete account of the event. It was 40 years after his ride that Longfellow scribed his famous poem.

During the Zaca Fire in July and August of 2007, an email written by a concerned citizen contained significant misinformation and it created quite the stir. Some officials said that it had been around the world at least twice. In some ways this email was more of an issue than the fire itself. The impact was profound as officials scrambled to address the problems created by just one email. This story did not take 40 years but just seconds. While it did not make the history books, it did have an impact on information control and the need to make sure everyone is aware of what is being said and to whom.

Is it news or is it entertainment? What do you need to know vs what you may want to know? How do you know what you are being told is true? What if it is not true, who do you complain to? Who is responsible and who is accountable? These are the tough questions that require

answerers during any event or emergency. Regrettably, it takes too long to get these answers. Unlike the Revere legend, real time events do not enjoy the opportunity of history to catch up with the facts. Are you ready?