Dealing with the media

Some things I learned from ~30 years experience that I wish I'd known when I started.

These may make dealing with media less scary, easier, & more effective.

Geoscience interests the public, so we get lots of media interest, often starting early – and sometimes unexpectedly - in our careers.

We get many chances to explain what we do. If you're so inclined, dealing with media can be fun, interesting, and help shape the resulting story.

Two big questions:

***Why and When to talk to the media*: my focus here**

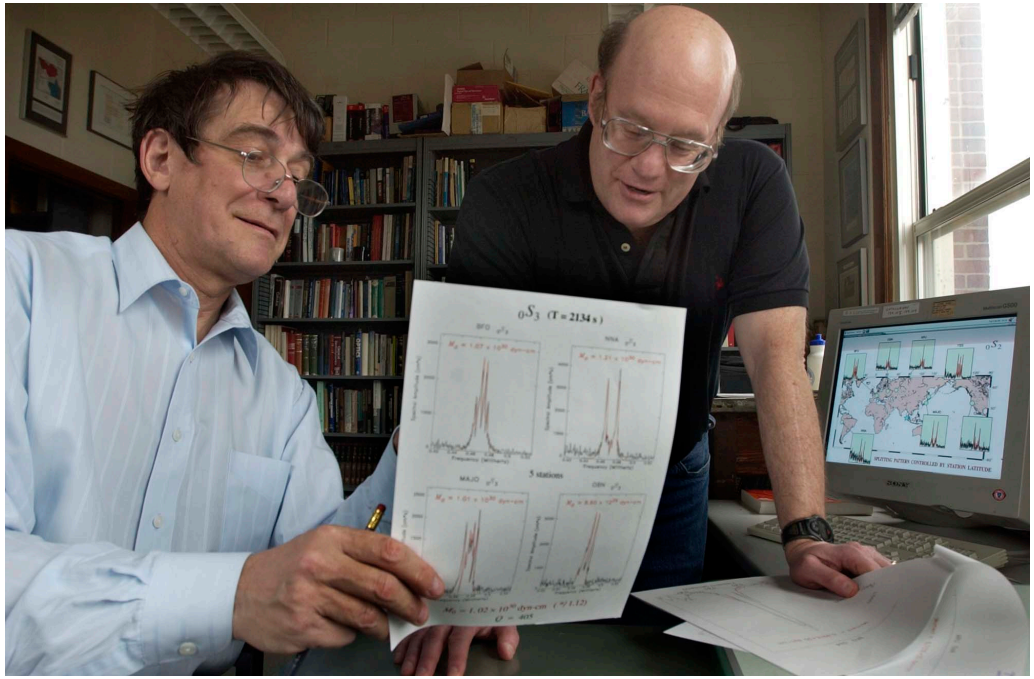
How to talk to the media: **There's lots of good advice out there about including *http://sharingscience.agu.org/***

You don't need to talk to them.

Talk to media only when you want to.

The fact that they want a story isn't your problem, but is an opportunity.

Success with media involves mutual interest.



Northwestern geologists Emile Okal (left) and Seth Stein look over their data on the deadly earthquake. –BOB BLACK/SUN-TIMES

Was quake second worst ever?

The powerful earthquake that triggered South Asia's deadly tsunami was three times stronger than originally estimated, making it the second largest earthquake ever recorded, according to a new study by Northwestern University geologists. **PAGE 31**

Be clear why you want to talk to them:

Options:

- Help explain science to public
- Explain a result you've come up with
- Promote/oppose a policy you favor/ oppose
- It's fun (perfectly good reason)

Earthquake prediction called 'a crock'

By United Press International | Dec. 2, 1990 Follow @upi

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One man's prediction of an earthquake along the New Madrid Fault from Illinois to Mississippi will prove to be the greatest non-event since a 1930s radio drama triggered panic over fictitious invaders from outer space, a geologist said Sunday.

Many residents waited anxiously for Dec. 3 to come and go, the day New Mexico climatologist Iben Browning said was the most likely for a quake. Others more skeptical partied to music like 'Shake, Rattle and Roll' and ordered Jello for dessert so they could watch it 'wiggle.'

Northwestern University Geology Department Chairman Seth Stein joined a long list of experts rejecting Browning's prediction.

'We are about to witness the greatest non-event since 'The War of the Worlds,'' Stein said. 'I'll state it as clearly as I can: Browing's prediction has been evaluated and determined to be complete nonsense, without scientific foundation -- which is our jargon for: 'It's a crock.''

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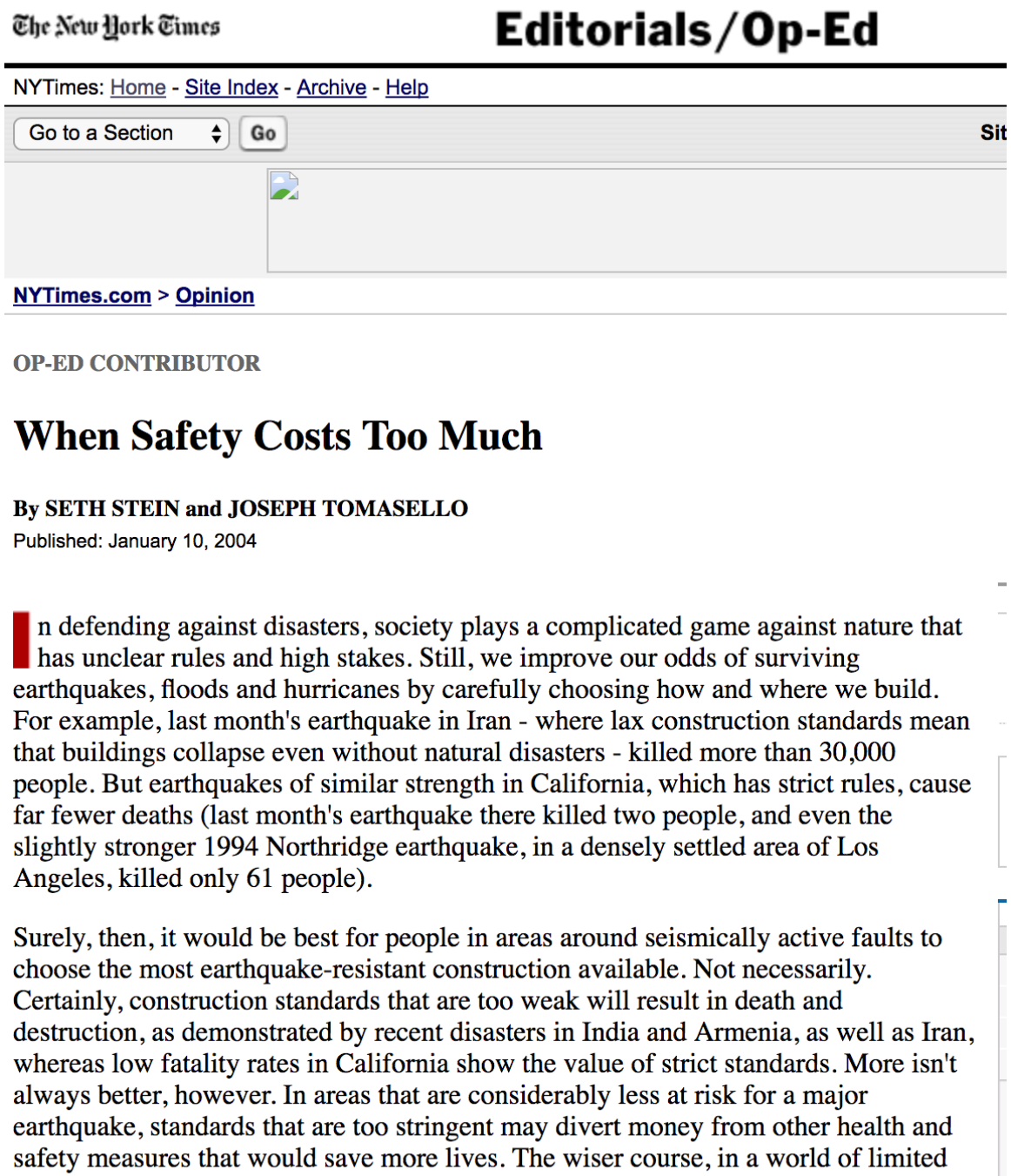

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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

When Safety Costs Too Much

By SETH STEIN and JOSEPH TOMASELLO
Published: January 10, 2004

In defending against disasters, society plays a complicated game against nature that has unclear rules and high stakes. Still, we improve our odds of surviving earthquakes, floods and hurricanes by carefully choosing how and where we build. For example, last month's earthquake in Iran - where lax construction standards mean that buildings collapse even without natural disasters - killed more than 30,000 people. But earthquakes of similar strength in California, which has strict rules, cause far fewer deaths (last month's earthquake there killed two people, and even the slightly stronger 1994 Northridge earthquake, in a densely settled area of Los Angeles, killed only 61 people).

Surely, then, it would be best for people in areas around seismically active faults to choose the most earthquake-resistant construction available. Not necessarily. Certainly, construction standards that are too weak will result in death and destruction, as demonstrated by recent disasters in India and Armenia, as well as Iran, whereas low fatality rates in California show the value of strict standards. More isn't always better, however. In areas that are considerably less at risk for a major earthquake, standards that are too stringent may divert money from other health and safety measures that would save more lives. The wiser course, in a world of limited resources, is to not apply blanket rules but to carefully develop standards for specific regions that balance costs and benefits.

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Hollywood Science

In the quest for a good storyline and lots of action, Hollywood doesn't always get its science right. The science of geophysics can get mangled in the plot. In the 1997 blockbuster 'Volcano', Tommy Lee Jones fights to save residents from volcanic lava flowing through the streets of LA, however the city is located neither near a hot spot nor a subduction zone which would be needed for a volcano to emerge. But rather than worrying about this and getting angry and shouting at the screen, top geophysicist Seth Stein, at Northwestern University, says that pointing out scientific errors can be a great place to engage students in the subject and help inject the healthy scepticism needed to be a good scientist.

Think about the type of media you'll be dealing with (some overlap)

National/international electronic (CNN,NPR,PBS…)
National/international print (NYT, Chi. Tribune…)
Scientific (Nature, Science, National Geographic…)
Regional/local print
Regional/local electronic
Social (YouTube, Twitter… easier to produce on your own, harder to get attention)

What to expect differs (time you get, their preparation & seriousness)
National usually better but local media can be good

Think about what kind of story they're doing

Event driven (earthquake, volcano, flood, hurricane…) very time sensitive

Feature (big picture, less time sensitive)

Discovery report (pseudo-event: meeting talk, published paper)

Profile (~People magazine)

LIVESCIENCE NEWS TECH HEALTH PLANET EARTH STRAN

Live Science › Planet Earth

Scientists Worry over 'Bizarre' Trial for Failing to Predict Earthquake

By Stephanie Pappas, Live Science Contributor | September 20, 2011 09:18am ET

MORE

A view of destruction caused by the terrible earthquake in the village of Onna in Aquila, Italy.

Credit: Franco Volpato | Shutterstock

Six Italian scientists and one government official are set to go to trial today in Italy (Sept. 20) on charges of manslaughter for not warning the public aggressively enough of an impending earthquake that killed more than 300 people in 2009.

While such a trial is unlikely on U.S. soil, experts say, American geologists and seismologists are watching closely, surprised at a legal system that would attempt to criminalize something as uncertain as earthquake prediction.

"Our ability to predict earthquake hazards is, frankly, lousy," said Seth Stein, a professor of Earth sciences at Northwestern University in Illinois. "Criminalizing something would only make sense if we really knew how to do this and someone did it wrong."

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Decide on your message

A long interview often turns into a 20-second sound bite

Either you choose the sound bite or they will

Repeat your message several times

Like Silicon Valley “elevator pitch”

Watch **ONE-MINUTE WORLD NEWS**

Page last updated at 19:45 GMT, Wednesday, 4 November 2009

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Major quakes could be aftershocks

The May 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, China, surprised scientists

Many recent earthquakes may have been the aftershocks of large quakes that occurred hundreds of years ago, according to scientists.

In the journal Nature, researchers described a new pattern in the frequency of aftershocks that could explain some major quakes.

They found that, away from plate boundaries, echoes of past earthquakes can continue for several hundred years.

Here, in the middle of a continent, the earth takes longer to recover.

It's something we had never spotted before," said Seth Stein from Northwestern University in Illinois, US.

"Most big earthquakes happen at [plate] boundaries - like the San Andreas fault. There is a lot of movement there and aftershocks go on for about ten years after a big quake."

You don't need to answer their questions.

If they're going afield, or into a topic you aren't able to discuss or don't want to, return to your message

Don't get dragged into saying things you don't want to

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Illinois Officials Push Earthquake Preparedness Throughout February

By Scot Bertram February 6, 2015 10:54 AM

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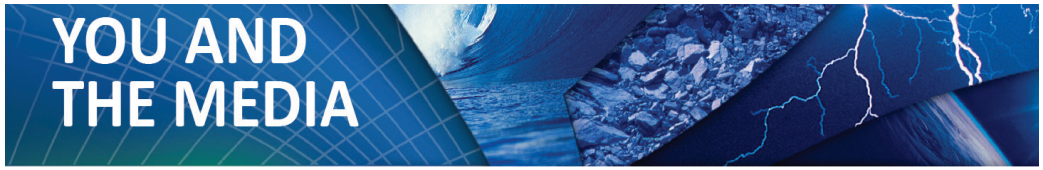
The Illinois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA) and local emergency management agencies are taking the month of February to promote earthquake preparedness.

Now, you might be asking yourself, "Is this really necessary?" The Rockford area **has experienced a couple of quakes** in the past decade, but nowhere near strong enough to do any damage. The Chicago Tribune reports that **we probably don't have much to worry about**:

> *Seth Stein, a professor of geological sciences at Northwestern University, has written a book about the New Madrid zone disputing much of the talked-about widespread damage of the 19th century earthquakes that hit Illinois.*
>
> *In northern Illinois "the hazard is so small" for earthquakes that taking measures like strapping in large furniture is probably unnecessary, Stein said. "If you were going to spend a dollar on a restraining strap, I'd buy a lottery ticket."*

Be responsive to their needs for a timely, good, and clear story, without harming your message

There's no one "right" way to do things, so be yourself.



A few useful tips to keep in mind

when communicating with the media:

Keep it Simple!

- ☑ Be conversational and speak at the level of a 9th grader
- ☑ Use clear, everyday terms and analogies (no jargon!)
- ☑ Maintain good eye contact, voice projection, and helpful hand gestures
- ☑ Keep your answers brief and allow the journalist to interrupt you
- ☑ Be enthusiastic about your work and convey why your research is meaningful to you

Be Prepared!

- ☑ Respect the reporter's deadline by promptly returning calls/emails
- ☑ Have 2-3 key points ready to communicate
- ☑ Never conceal anything! Prepare answers to tough questions or direct the reporter to the PR officer of your institution
- ☑ Provide graphics, good quotes and a compelling story to the reporter
- ☑ If led outside of your line of expertise during the interview, redirect the reporter back to the main points of your research

Follow Up!

- ☑ Offer to do an accuracy check
- ☑ Be available for follow-up questions
- ☑ Offer a polite correction to the journalist if a story contained a mistake
- ☑ Provide background material (especially at press conferences)
- ☑ A compliment never hurts; if you like the story, tell the reporter (or, even better; his/her editor)

Adapted From Herbert O. Funsten • Revised by Nyasha Dunkley

Observe and assess colleagues' media appearances

Accept that no media contact works perfectly

Treat media dealing as fun & enjoy it

2 Centuries Later, Good News for Quake Area, Maybe

The New York Times Science, Tuesday, April 27, 1999. By Sandra Blakeslee

Midwesterners who worry about earthquakes got some good news last week: their risk of catastrophe may have been vastly overstated.

New measurements taken around New Madrid, MO - the epicenter of devastating earthquakes in 1811 and 1812 - show that the ground there is scarcely moving. According to many scientists, this means that it will take 2,500 to 10,000 years before another very large earthquake could occur in the region, although smaller, less damaging earthquakes are possible.

"The motions are small to zero," said Dr. Seth Stein, a professor of geological sciences at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., who made the new measurements. Earlier evidence showing rapid regional ground motion, a geologic sign that large quakes are probable, "was based on honest scientific errors," Dr. Stein said.