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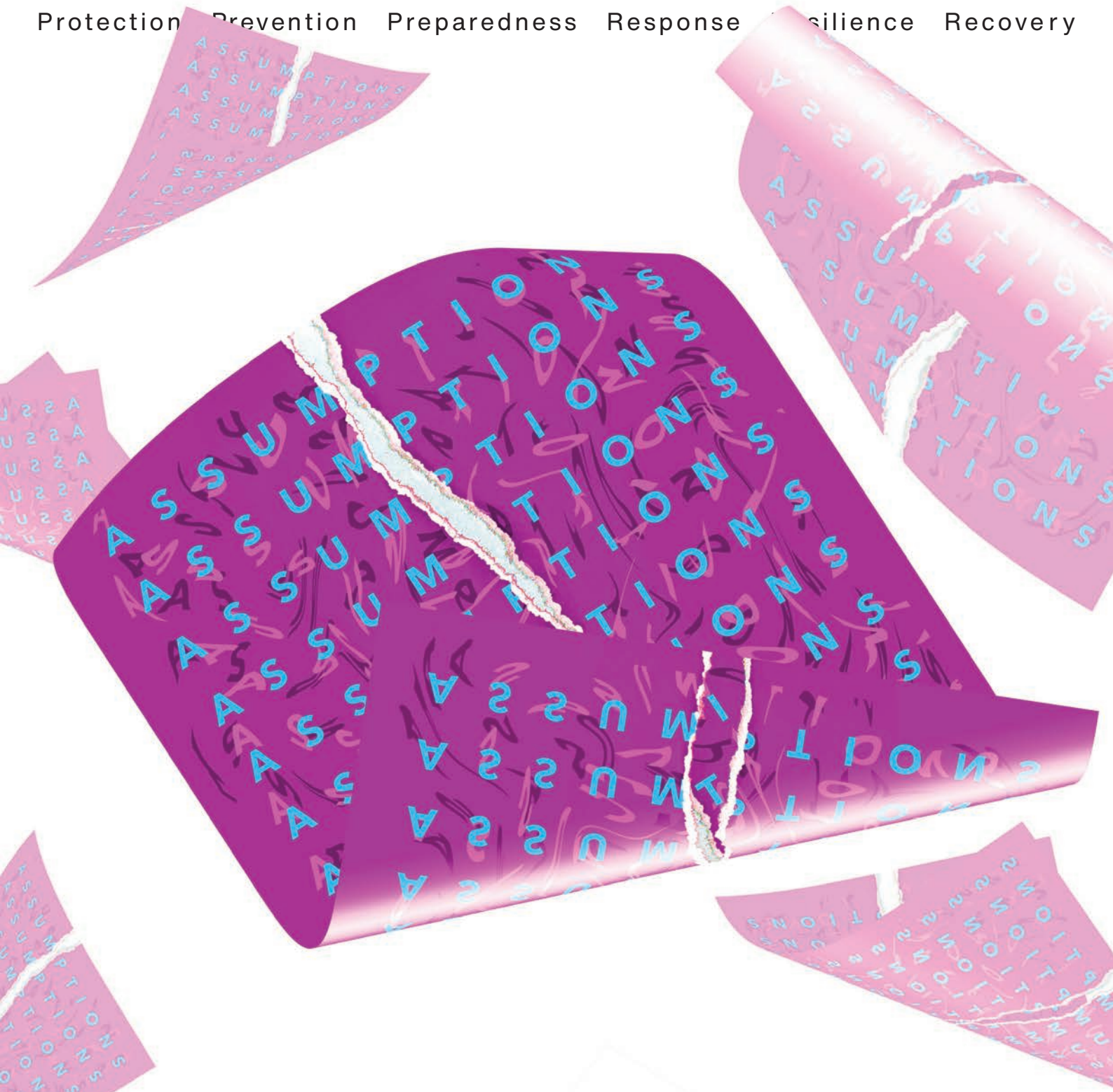

RIP THEM UP AND START AGAIN?

Travel industry resilience | Covid-19 debate | Cybersecurity | Online tribalism & vigilantism | Frontline responder wellbeing | Karachi floods | Asteroids

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This edition of the *CRJ* is about challenging assumptions, unpicking the strands of the Covid-19 pandemic and its multiple cascading consequences, all the while being mindful of how they are conflating with other disasters and emergencies, such as the storms, other extreme weather and wildfires sweeping across the world.

Many cosy assumptions about emergency preparedness systems, society, security and international relations have clearly been misguided and, in part, this stems from a historical lack of emphasis on preparedness and mitigation in favour of post-crisis response. On p28 Eric McNulty notes: "The ever greater demands we place on responders are the result of design failures in our institutions and communities," asking, "How often have you seen ... honorifics bestowed on those who labour on mitigation, preparedness and recovery?"

This leads us to the status of the complex horizontal and vertical relationships between governments, emergency preparedness experts, responders and, most importantly, the public. Assumptions are all too often being made about public involvement in – and experience of – emergencies, as emphasised by David Wales on p16.

When systems are found wanting and citizens don't feel that their needs are being addressed or recognised by authorities, unrest and dissent can proliferate. Starting on p60, *CRJ* looks at some of the manifestations of such unrest, from lockdown tribalism to overzealous digital behaviour. These trends affect us all – business, emergency planners, responders, governments, communities and individuals – and Jennifer Hesterman provides a sobering reminder of what happens when online crime, terror and vigilantism spill over into the real world (p64). This is backed up by the heightened vulnerabilities highlighted by authors in our cyber feature (p40).

CRJ is not for tearing down systems that work, nor does it advocate the indiscriminate ripping up of assumptions. But failure to ask questions and debate the more difficult subjects that have been skirted around for many years, can only lead to crippling atrophy.

Putting the customer at the heart of response

The Covid-19 pandemic has made more visible something that has been bubbling below the surface for some time: the need to orient future strategies in a much more human-centred mindset and design, according to **David Wales**

If nothing else, 2020 will be remembered as the year the world was, in many respects, caught out by an event that had long been expected and planned for. Was this down to the specific characteristics of Covid-19, or does it suggest something more fundamental about how we prepare for, and respond to, emergencies? There are many signs in support of the latter.

It is important to state that raising this debate is not in any way intended as a criticism of the individuals or organisations within the current structures, who have worked tirelessly and achieved incredible feats. The question is whether, in a rapidly changing world, this model will serve us well in the future? A mature and progressive profession will always seek to be curious, question and challenge itself. It is in this spirit the observations are made and the discussion is proposed.

Arguably, the pandemic has made clear the need to orient future strategies in a much more human-centred mindset and design. Being human-centred is a multifaceted issue and must be the starting point for developing future services if they are to remain legitimate, relevant and trusted. Achieving that requires reconsidering the relationship between communities and the organisations that provide services on their behalf. Contemporary structures largely reflect their origins in a 'done to' model of state and institutional interventions. Yet societal trends have moved on and people both expect, and are enabled (by technology), to have a greater say in services and how they are delivered. Equally, they are also keen to contribute actively and take ownership as individuals and communities. To support this public desire and capability, official bodies need to move from 'command and control' to 'support and enable'. Currently, there are insurmountable limits to their ability to do so.

Understanding the changing nature of the relationship between organisations and the public requires a deep exploration and broad contribution. A better ability to articulate individual and collective purpose should emerge from the process.

Why do we do what we do, and how do we know whether it is the right thing? We must develop a human level of understanding of what people need, how they experience an emergency and their aspirations beyond it.

Mindset and methodology

In some respects, this echoes the debate captured in the Royal Society publication, *Risk: analysis, perception, management*, in 1992. Then, as now, the risk and emergency profession was rooted in, and dominated by, a quantitative/engineering mindset and methodology. One of the features of this is the desire to create certainty from complexity and ambiguity. Numbers and scales are generated to quantify and order, creating a world that can then be known and managed objectively and dispassionately.

The report was unusual and progressive in that it recognised the need to understand risk from the public perspective. Crucially, it confirmed that there is a difference between professionals and the public in terms of knowledge and experience of emergencies. This should not be understood as an either–or option, but one in which each perspective is valid and necessary. The question of which has primacy is relevant, but may vary in line with individual and common good considerations.

However, the quantitative/engineering model of risk and emergency management, with all the apparatus that has grown around it, still dominates. Continued over-reliance on this model is increasingly revealing its flaws.

My own path to appreciating the disconnect between the professional and public experience was more imposed than willingly sought. But it illustrates many of the issues.

My standard response to being asked why I joined the fire service was that I wanted to help people and serve our communities. But, if I am honest, when I joined at 18 it was probably for more selfish rather than selfless reasons. I was attracted by the pay, work patterns and the active nature of the job. My recruit course threw me into a world of learning procedures, followed by continuous technical training and studying. The logic was simple: the better my colleagues and I were, the better the public was served. That was a given.

Despite attending numerous incidents, it was 15 years before I really spoke to a customer (or victim, as they were then called) in a meaningful way. I produced a video about how a farmer, the head of a secondary school and a priest all experienced arson. Their personal accounts and description of the consequences of arson were immensely powerful, personal and human. Although it made an impression on me at the time, it quickly faded as I continued with my career.

Years later, with a view to reducing the injuries associated with fires in the home, my colleagues and I asked: "Why doesn't the public behave as it is told, or as we expect?" This well intentioned, but paternalistic and arrogant question led me on my research journey, fundamentally changed my understanding of the job and continues to drive my thinking and work.

> The absence of the public voice at the heart of what is done in its name, skews all the data collection, targets and organisational activity

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The presumption behind this initial question was that once we knew why members of the public were acting inappropriately, we could find ways to correct this behaviour and all would be well – it was simply the case that the public was clearly ignorant of the risks. Fortunately, we in the fire service knew better, and were there to step in and save them from themselves.

In the first phase of the research project, we interviewed ten customers who had experienced a fire and incurred a minor injury. This time, their stories struck a deeper chord. The more we spoke to members of public, the more it became apparent that they were not wrong, they just experienced fires differently. They described the incident in emotional, rather than process terms – how it affected them personally. Most firefighters go to work expecting such incidents, some even look forward to them, then they walk away after the incidents have been handled. The public, however, neither expects nor desires such incidents and those affected by them live with the consequences long afterwards, sometimes for life. The public assumes we will

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Despite all our data and analysis, we had never identified how strong an influence pets exert on people's behaviour in an emergency. Although this is obvious in hindsight, we only found it out by listening to the public

do our job – dealing with the emergency – and pays little attention to the equipment and processes that are the focus of our post-event evaluations. Members of the public who had been involved in incidents placed more value on whether we did our job humanely and with empathy; the ways in which we had recognised their personal priorities and circumstance were easily recalled and highly valued.

A quote by Maya Angelou captures why the role of emotion is so influential and important:

"People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

How much of the studying, training and exercises undertaken in preparing for emergencies addresses the question: 'How do we want people to feel?' This should be central, not just because it is the right thing to do for customers, but because the risks of failing to do so are increasing.

In times of mass distress, emotions rise high and often supersede rational argument. Whether the source is scarcity of essentials such as food or fuel, perceived social injustice or some other threat to a large section of society, unpredictable behaviour change becomes more of a risk. The failure of service providers to understand and empathise with their customers at this point could have dire and widespread social consequences.

Until I spoke to the public, I thought I understood my job, having been to fires as a firefighter, fire officer and fire investigator. But the tone and content of the way people described encountering a fire made me realise I had only ever it seen it on my terms. We had erroneously relied on myths and assumption, rather than seeking to understand the public perspective.

The research took us in many directions; in some areas we were able to shed light, in others we could only acknowledge the limitations of what we knew. But among the many findings, one central truth stood out. We knew almost nothing about our customers' experience.

We did not know what people valued or the impact a fire had upon them. And we were wrong in many of our assumptions about their motivations and behaviours. For example, despite all our data and analysis, we had never identified how strong an influence pets exert on people's behaviour in an emergency.

Although this is obvious in hindsight, we only found it out by listening to the public. This is one example of where public behaviour is unlikely to change, so services need to work respectfully with this strong instinct rather than against it, creating a shared aim of achieving the customer's desired outcome, but with our help to stay safe in doing so.

Among all our externally imposed or internally generated targets and key performance indicators it was obvious that we did not particularly care for the public experience. Beyond a simple 'were you satisfied?' our customers rarely got the opportunity to comment on our services in a meaningful way. We assumed and meant well, but ultimately that was not enough. This is not a superficial oversight, because ignorance leaves the public vulnerable to a whole range of avoidable and potentially life changing consequences.

Organisations and professions simply cannot assume they know their customers' needs, as illustrated by one case involving a mother and son who experienced a minor fire outside their front door – an incident that was quickly forgotten from our perspective. However, eight months afterwards, the mother told me how badly her son, who was 11 years old at the time, had been affected. He was concerned that he had responded inappropriately and was scared that a fire would happen again. She said: "If only you could have sent someone to talk to him." I offered to do so, but she told me it was too late. Her son was still traumatised by the fire and fearful of the sights, smells or other cues associated with a potential blaze. This could last for years, or his whole life.

Had we taken the time to listen after the incident, we could have avoided this outcome and potentially turned it around completely. We could have confirmed that the cause of the fire was very unusual and unlikely to happen again and that he had done everything right.

If we had praised him and given him a badge, or even honorary status, he may not have experienced ongoing anxiety and might have been motivated to share important safety information with his peers, a group that is otherwise hard to engage.

So, while we had done our job at a functional level, we had completely missed its human impact and subsequent harm.

Sadly, this was never about the cost or suitability of resources. Firefighters were in the area the day after, carrying out fire prevention leaflet drops. We just did not knock on the most important door.

The model is not sufficiently human-centred. And the danger is that the absence of the public voice at the heart of what is done in its name further skews all the data collection, targets and organisational activity.

This was evident as we researched the public response to dwelling fires and found that people dealt with between 70 to 80 per cent of fires in the home without ever calling the fire service. Yet, we knew nothing about this and did not recognise the public's contribution in any strategy or policy, nor did we provide any services in support of this group. As a result, they effectively remain invisible in formal data and publications.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of public willingness, contribution and capability, current messaging still advocates to 'leave it to the professionals'. Fortunately, not everyone does this, as the services would be unable to cope with the demand. But in spite of their potential needs, they did not conform to what we understood a customer to be – someone in need of a physical response – and so they were overlooked.

One of the other important insights identified was that typically it is only the customer who experiences any response end-to-end. We looked at the journey and experience of a burns survivor and found they experienced a 'sum of the parts' outcome as a result of the current fragmented model of multiple agencies delivering sections of care. The absence of a pathway owner, common framework or agreed principles were all to the detriment of the survivor at the time and in terms of outcomes achievable (see below for link).

Short term risk aversion

I reiterate that the above is not intended to be critical of those who work in the emergency sector. But preparing for the future requires honesty, multiple perspectives, evidence – both formal and lived experience – and, most importantly, the willingness to accept that what worked before may not be suitable for a changed world. To avoid the debate would be to knowingly face a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous future, by assuming that the existing capability and processes are fundamentally sound, but may just need a few tweaks. That seems unlikely in the face of the continuing scale and pace of change.

An incremental improvement approach would exhibit a predominantly internal focus. It would consider how the established stakeholders and service providers could enhance what they do. New protocols and procedures may emerge, but the public contribution would be limited, perpetuating the professional/public gap. This could be very damaging to individuals and wider society.

Or does the future require a fundamentally different approach? One in which the focus is on the understanding problem, without resorting to established solutions? One in which the solution is then identified from the outside-in and not the inside-out? One in which both human-centred and engineering approaches are recognised and used appropriately?

Many businesses are faced with the same dilemma – the need to have absolute clarity of purpose, to stay close to the customer and build new flexible and adaptive ways of delivering products and experience. Short term risk aversion and trying to avoid the need for transformational change, while more comfortable, could have significant and damaging consequences.

The public and emergency sectors are not immune from this environment and will need to innovate and prepare for a vastly different future as well.

Whether this is a threat, or an exciting opportunity is a matter of debate, but what is certain is that the world will carry on changing regardless. CRJ

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