

# Developing Consensus-Based Post-Earthquake Messaging for use by News Media

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## Abstract

A major earthquake in California will leave millions of people shaken, injured or displaced, and one of the voices of authority amidst the chaos will be news media outlets. While the public will rely on the news for pertinent information, past coverage of major earthquakes have shown such reporting can sometimes contribute to that chaos. To combat this, a media guide for journalists is being created for their use while covering the immediate aftermath of an earthquake. We reviewed coverage of past earthquakes and collaborated with subject matter experts from various sectors including government, insurance and research institutions to curate the life-saving information that should be readily available to journalists to share with the public immediately after a major earthquake. Using messaging from the Earthquake Country Alliance as a foundation, the two-page media guide contains recommendations on how the public should protect themselves and reduce hazards.

**Figure 1 (right):** Of all the guidance the media shares with the public, "Drop, Cover, Hold On" (for people with mobility disabilities) was determined to be the most important. Journalists should consistently remind viewers to protect themselves during shaking.



The recommendations of "Drop, Cover, Hold On" and "Lock, Cover, Hold On" (for people with mobility disabilities) are prominently placed at the beginning of the document to emphasize the importance of protecting yourself during shaking. This is followed by information about reducing hazards in your surroundings by taking actions such as turning off gas lines, extinguishing small fires and cleaning broken glass. This version of the media guide is meant to be used as a document journalists will reach for immediately following the shaking. Currently in development is the extended version of the media guide, which will include sections on reliable sourcing and disaster psychology. Additionally, the two-page media guide will also be translated into more than 14 languages thanks to NEHRP funding from Cal OES. After the extended version is complete, we will meet with media partners to gather feedback. We aim to make this document useful for all journalists, this way we can ensure the life-saving information the public is receiving from the media is consistent and accurate.

## Introduction

In the fast paced world of news media, journalists must relocate to different markets in order to advance their careers. California's large size lends itself to 14 markets that see journalists come and go. But in the event of a major earthquake, it is important that ALL journalists are ready to cover breaking news. For new journalists, a catastrophic earthquake will be a daunting work environment that may prove to be too complex to quickly grasp. Additionally, analysis of previous coverage of catastrophic earthquakes also showed journalists can unintentionally contribute to misinformation and fear mongering. Keeping this in mind, we recognized the need for a quick tool that will help any journalist cover major earthquakes. To ensure accurate and useful information reaches the public during the critical 24 hours following an earthquake, we decided to create the ECA Post-Earthquake Messaging Guide for Media.

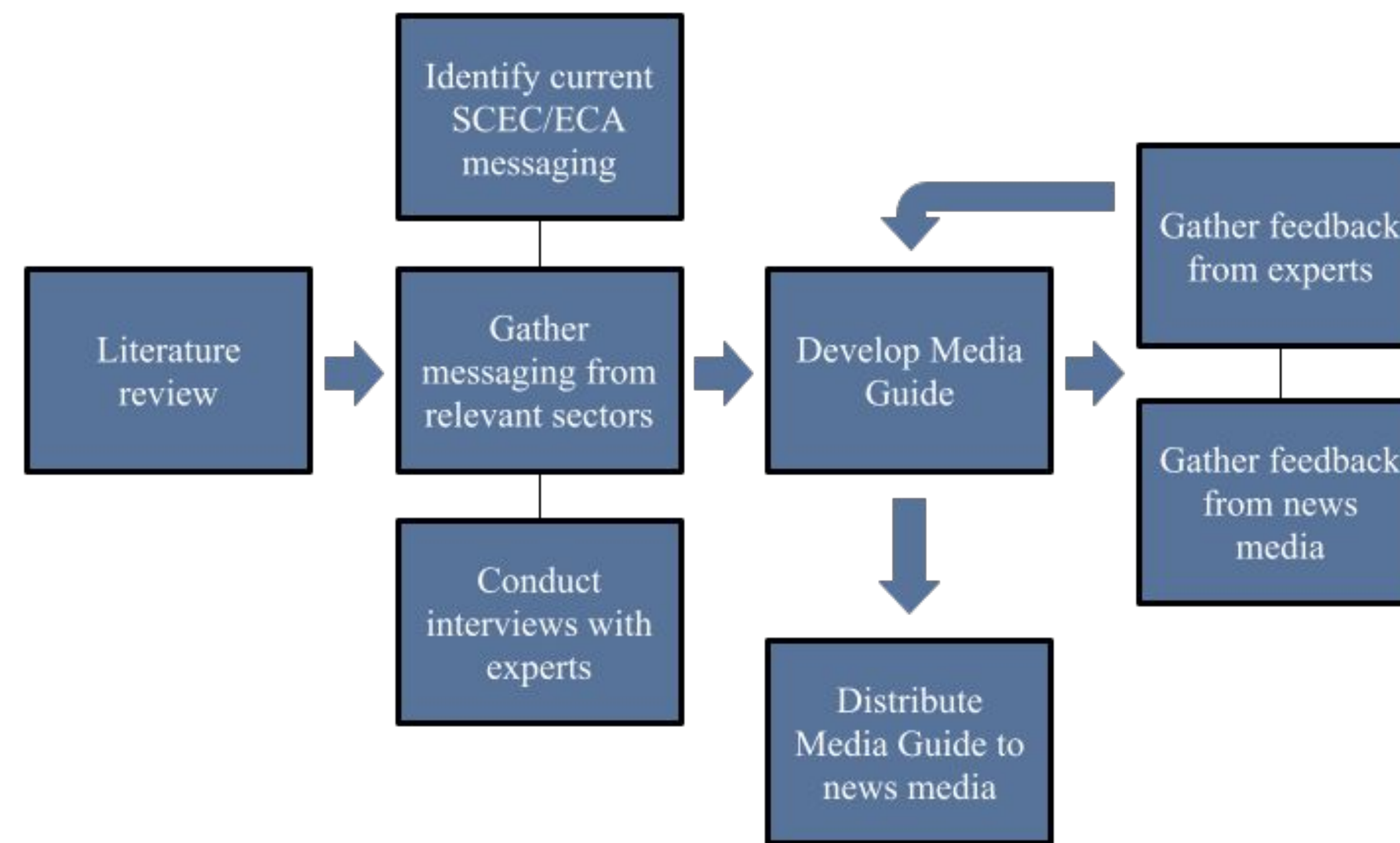
## Neighbors Helping Neighbors

In a catastrophic earthquake, most of the first search and rescue efforts will be made by civilians. Studies show extrication of trapped individuals immediately after an earthquake is usually performed by relatives, neighbors and local inhabitants. Reporting should advise on safe search and rescue operations for civilians.

## 'Golden Day'





'Golden Day' is a term used by urban search and rescue teams to describe the first 24 hours after an earthquake. Because the vast majority of rescues will occur in this time frame, the first 24 hours after an earthquake are crucial. After that, the chances of survival drop as each day passes. Focusing search and rescue coverage in the first 24 hours after the earthquake is important to highlight the importance of this time frame.

## Methodology



**Figure 2 (above):** Visual diagram shows the process involved in the creation of the media guide, including how the feedback will lead to the final distribution of the media guide.

To create the guide, we reviewed literature related to the coverage of past earthquakes and collaborated with preparedness experts from various sectors to curate the life-saving information that should be readily available to journalists in the immediate aftermath of a major earthquake. Once our preliminary guide was put together, we recognized the need for input from sources of government, insurance and research institutions. We consulted several members of the ECA Post-Earthquake Messaging Committee, conducted live one-on-one meetings to discuss relevant topics needed in the media guide, and collected feedback on the progress of the document. Below are the member's we've interviewed so far:

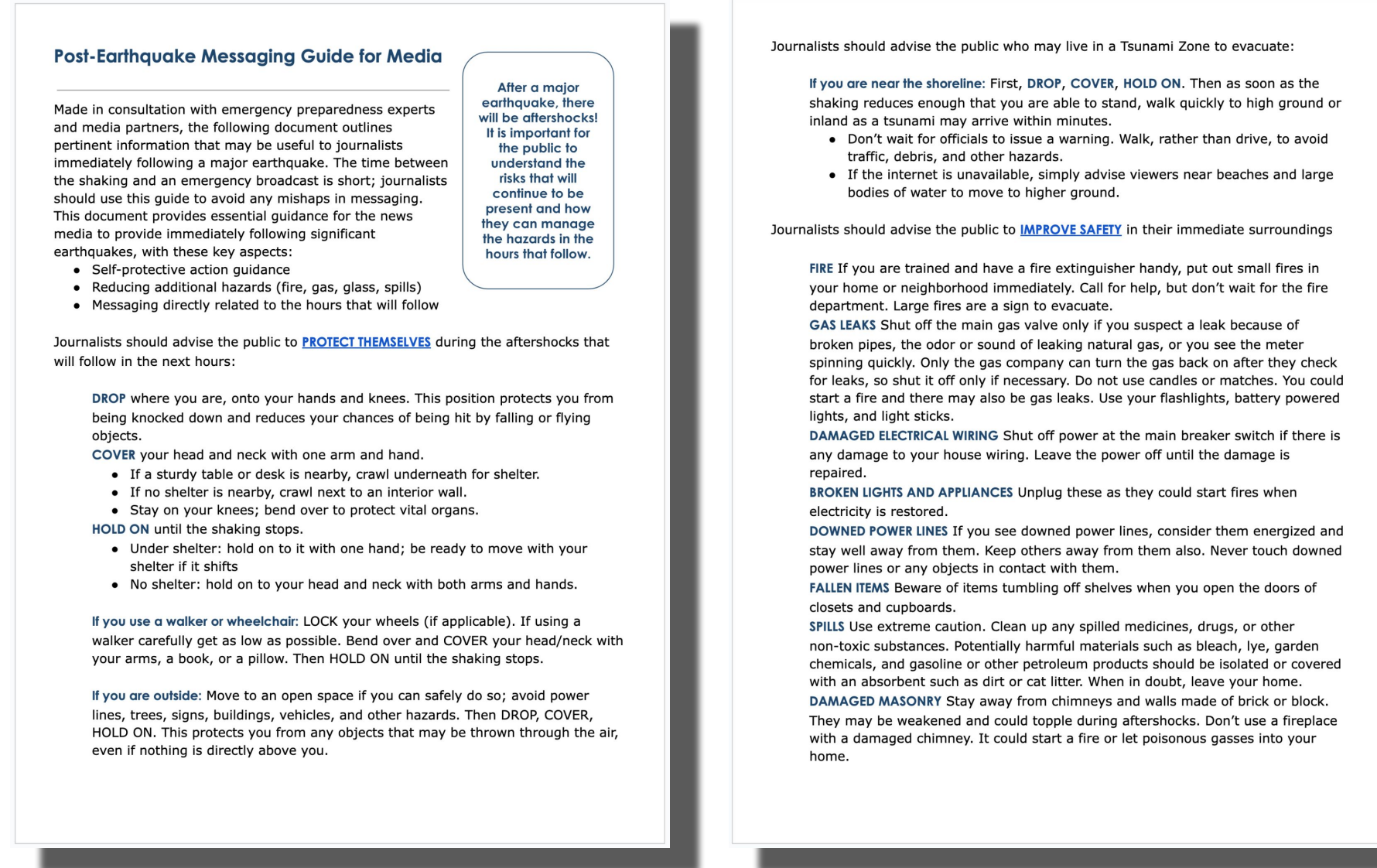
-  Janet Ruiz, Dir. of Strategic Communications, Insurance Information Institute
-  Margaret Vinci, Manager of Earthquake Programs, Caltech
-  Ben Deci, Senior Media Officer, California Earthquake Authority
-  Susan Garcia, Public Information Officer, U.S. Geological Survey



**Figure 3 (above):** Screenshots of live TV coverage of the 4.4M Highland Park earthquake by KTLA, KABC and KVEA on August 14, 2024.

## Results

We create a shortened version (two-pager) and an extended version of the media guide. While the two-pager is intended to be used by reporters immediately after the shaking stops, the extended version can be used once there is more time to put together a broadcast. The extended version is divided into different time periods that better reflect the actions the public should be taking following the earthquake. For example, the first section of the media guide, dedicated to the first 12 hours after the earthquake, emphasized self protection and hazard reduction guidance, similarly to the two-pager, and also emphasizes the need for the public to be self-sufficient. The subsequent sections include guidance for up to 48 hours after the major earthquake. By creating the extended version, we had also an opportunity to add information on topics such as reliable sourcing and disaster psychology. While the extended version is near completion, we are awaiting feedback from preparedness experts to move forward.



**Figure 4 (left):** Preliminary two-page version of the media guide. The guide includes information on taking protective actions during shaking and how to reduce hazards immediately after. Shown is not the final version.

## Conclusion/Discussion

The next step in this process is to consult our media partners to gauge just how useful this guide can be. Based on our preliminary feedback, we know we will have to reformat the guide to make the information easy to read. Once we adjust based on the feedback, we will then be able to move forward with publication and distribution of the guide to all media outlets. While training the media to prepare to cover a catastrophic earthquake is a great way to make sure accurate messaging reaches the public, the only opportunity to analyze this media guide's effectiveness will be when the actual major earthquake occurs. We hope the media guide will serve as a simple tool that can not only aid a journalist during a difficult time at work, but also the general public who will be suffering immensely and watching intently.

## Future Work

- Translation of the ECA Media Guide into more than 14 languages (funded by NEHRP through Cal OES)
- Adding a section to address social media and user-generated content
- Exploring different formats (web, video, etc.) of the ECA Media Guide

## References

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