

Week 4 – Paper #1: Rhode Island Night Club

It was really difficult reading the NY Times articles about the Rhode Island night club that caught fire. I will briefly describe what happened, and then I will address my thoughts on the matter.

On Thursday February 20, 2003, a nightclub owned by Michael Derderian in West Warwick, Rhode Island caught fire as pyrotechnics used by band Great White malfunctioned. The nightclub was a one story, wooden structure. It had no fire sprinklers. Whether the band had permission to use these pyrotechnics is still a controversy.

As of February 24, 97 people died and 187 people are injured from the fire. The NY Times graphically detailed some of the wounds suffered by the victims. Dr. William Cioffi, chief of surgery at Rhode Island Hospital said that many victims remain in critical condition – that some could remain hospitalized for two to three months. When Dr. Cioffi was first called to the hospital on Thursday night, the hospital was anticipating having to care for 100 burn victims – even though the hospital only has 74 intensive care beds.

Just days before the Rhode Island fire, 21 people were killed in a people stampede as club goers in a Chicago club were forced to pile through a narrow stairway as security guards used pepper spray to break up a fight between two clubbers.

The question I pose is, how can we look at and solve these problems from the STS perspective, and how can we use technology to prevent further disasters of this sort from happening? –or— is the only solution stronger governmental regulation?

Crowd or mob related deaths are nothing new. It seems like every year we hear about a riot during or after a soccer game that leads to injury. People dieing in a mosh pit is nothing new. Is the club or rock concert mentality of craziness and rebellion from rules part of the cause?

Currently, there are no fire or people control laws at the federal level. The National Government leaves it up to the individual state to determine the safety of these clubs. Would stricter laws help enforce safety?

Can we use technology to solve this problem? Unfortunately, I believe the answer is no – at least not as a part of an elegant solution. Simply stated, humans are animals, and in certain circumstances, when panicked or when in a large group, we do act instinctively, even if this instinct ends up doing more harm than good. I think that no technology will ever change this fundamental, primitive human instinct. The only technologies that may help are safe building planning, i.e lots of exits and no narrow hallways, as well as fire suppression systems inside the building – all this enforced by law.