News & Terrorism: Communicating in a Crisis: The Media as a Critical Infrastructure

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Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government has repeatedly warned citizens that a similar (or even more deadly) attack within the country is "not a matter of if, but when."

Far reaching efforts have been made to prevent and prepare for such a crisis…officials working to harden every conceivable critical infrastructure target. But, at first, one was overlooked – the news media.

Maybe that's because few people think of the news media as part of their nation's critical infrastructure and, in the United States, it is (thankfully) outside of government control.

When we think of infrastructure, we usually think of tangible things like water supply, transportation systems, and energy pipelines. But the news media also belong in this category. They are – still, despite Twitter and other new media – the main communication conduit to any nation's most important infrastructure: its citizens.

While we worry about a lot about breakdowns in other parts of the infrastructure system, the news media may in fact be the weakest link. So we need to protect it as zealously as we protect the electric power grid and nuclear reactors…and I'm not just talking about their printing plants and broadcast towers.

Those working to shore up national security – indeed all of us – need to work *more* closely with journalists… because journalists need to be armed with the knowledge to work effectively as part of a nation's response to terrorism.

Unfortunately, many in the U-S government (probably in all governments) think of journalists as pests…even as threats to national security. The feeling is often that reporters should to be avoided as much as possible, and told as little as possible. I believe just the opposite is true.

A study by the New York Academy of Medicine said "far fewer people than needed would follow protective instructions" during terrorist attacks involving smallpox or a radiological bomb. People will not blindly do as the government tells them. They need to understand the reasons for actions being taken. In the midst of a terrorist attack involving weapons of mass destruction, effectively communicating potentially complex information will be a difficult challenge that will fall largely upon the news media.

I would go so far as to argue that getting good information to the public in the midst of a crisis can be even more vital than the actions of traditional first responders (police officers, fire fighters). In fact, journalists *are* first responders – not only do they often get to the scene first, but they are the only ones truly focused on and able to communicate risk to the public during a crisis – and they can save lives through efficient delivery of good information.

But I would argue that, for many reasons, the news media is, in general, unprepared. They are skilled at reporting what they see. Beyond breaking news, though, most journalists currently aren't engaged enough on the underlying issues…the substance and context behind that breaking news. The reason that I'm here today is that much of it involves science and technology. Getting journalists' interest – especially when news *isn't* breaking, when there isn't an immediate threat – is a challenge, but a vitally important one.

And journalists will need help – not only from the government – but the independent engineering, science, and medical communities too. That's where we come in.

[Briefly explain the National Academies: www.nationalacademies.org]

At the U.S. National Academy of Engineering, we wrestled with the question of how to help the media become better informed and more conscious of their importance in the event of a terrorist attack. U.S. journalists are, after all, both constitutionally protected and vigorously independent. No one can dictate what stories they choose to cover, or how they are reported.

Just a couple of months after the September 11 attacks, we held a day-long briefing for senior news executives from across the country on the technical aspects of various forms of terrorism – cyber, nuclear, chemical, biological. The media was invited to cover it…and we were pleased that television networks sent a crew over for pool coverage. They got there early to set up…but didn't even turn the camera on during any of the morning briefings…and these were some of the country's premier experts. They were only there for the luncheon speaker – the new Department of Homeland Security Secretary, Tom Ridge. Then they left.

Too often, journalists take the easiest path – the one most comfortable for them…which often means the political angle. Even during the U.S anthrax letter attacks journalists were turning to congresspeople for technical answers!

In part, this is because politics is a form of theater, and entertainment trumps substance in the ratings-driven media. The public, unfortunately, has been trained to have a limited and shallow attention span. And, therefore, so have journalists. If we want them to get information at all, it must be packaged correctly.

So we decided to conduct a "tabletop" terrorism scenario exercise that would, for the first time, focus on communication issues. (Government officials and first responders do such

"tabletop exercises" all the time – sometimes they even hold grander events, and actually blow things up. But they don't involve the media in any real way.) The goals of our exercise would include simply bringing together groups that don't often share experiences – journalists, scientists, government officials, the private sector – to meet and begin to understand each other's needs during the chaos of a terrorist attack. Situations can look much different when viewed from another perspective.

It's difficult to prepare for things that haven't happened before. Journalists have few precedents for this new type of warfare – it's different than traditional war reporting. Thinking through the information flow in a crisis, before it actually occurs, is especially vital in this information age.

With today's competitive 24-hour news coverage, journalists are under tremendous pressure to say something – anything – and to say it first! Of course, this can lead to speculation…and it's not always harmless. Sometimes it can cost lives. Journalists need a strategy to deal with these things, and instant access to a pool of trusted experts who are good communicators.

The public expects to be informed right away, and they will be (these days, information travels fast). The questions are: By whom and how well?

This isn't just the media's problem…it's all of ours, and we – the engineering and science communities as well as the government – should help solve it.

So our initial event – a 2½-hour terrorism scenario exercise involving a radiological attack – was held in Washington, D.C. in the summer of 2003. The feedback was so good, that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security asked us to do more across the country. We have done 18 so far. We work with both D-H-S and the Radio-Television News Directors Association on the effort. The results…

Government officials see the need to think about how to provide information more quickly.

Journalists better understand the reasons why there might be delays.

Scientists experience the difficulty – and the need to improve – communicating complex issues in simple ways…on the spot.

These aren't training exercises that state rules. They vividly <u>show</u> why responsible journalism is important.

Participants see how each group needs the other…and ways they might work better together. It is, if nothing else, a first step toward establishing relationships…and trust. It's a place where journalists can find the good spokespeople…and spokespeople can meet journalists.

Scenario exercises are powerful experiences…even bringing into play such things as how the priorities of participants might shift if, say, the President's daughter is near the site of an attack…or maybe a journalist's own child.

We provide, as "takeaways," a list of local subject matter experts…and fact sheets on IEDs/biological/ chemical/radiological/nuclear attacks – just enough information to get journalists "up to speed" enough to provide initial information to the public and ask the right questions of experts.

The scenario exercises (moderated by skilled national broadcast journalists) challenge judgments (especially when competitive juices are flowing…will journalists share important information with competitors?)…they create an understanding of how different professions work, and each groups unique concerns…they strengthen communications between groups and with the public.

Here is a taste of the scenarios:

Philadelphia and Portland: In a city park people are gasping for breath and vomiting. There is the smell of roasted almonds in the air (hydrogen cyanide).

Kansas City: A food processing plant is the target of a biological toxin called T-2. It has been introduced into the flour being processed. Workers are getting sick. At first it seems like a chemical event, but the word "biological" gets out into the public and things go to a whole new level.

Atlanta: In a downtown convention center – next to CNN – there is a large explosion killing some and it is later determined that there is something else…radioactivity. Some reporters are covered in dust.

Denver: A break-in is discovered at an outdoor ventilation system in Larimer Square. The equipment has been tampered with and containers are found that test positive for plague.

Austin: During a big college basketball game, people – mostly students – are pouring out of two bars with difficulty breathing and severe eye pain. Dozens inside are dead. It turns out to be chlorine gas.

Miami: Bioterrorism. A small pox attack at a convention center show…people had traveled as far away as Germany before the attack was fully recognized. Reporters themselves are exposed.

Boston: Sportscasters announcing a live Major League baseball game at Fenway Park notice groups of fans throughout the stadium collapsing. Cameras zoon in on people convulsing, vomiting, or not moving at all.

Baltimore: A scenario based upon the recent attacks in Mumbai, in which the terrorists orchestrated the events via a centralized command-and-control.

All dramatic. But will the media ratchet that up even further? TV pictures showing the most "panicked"/terrorized people probably play into the terrorists' hands. The rap with TV news has been, "if it bleeds, it leads." Now with each new crisis inspiring dramatic graphics and music as background for breathless TV anchors, a new mantra for journalists might be "if it scares, we care."

And, of course, terrorists understand that.

Especially when technologically sophisticated attacks take place, the media must figure out how to provide information that the public needs to know, without enhancing the terror. Armed with accurate information, presented well, the media can actually serve as a calming force. When the public understands the science related to a threat – and most threats to our critical infrastructure will heavily involve aspects of science and engineering – they will better follow their natural instincts to act rationally…instead of being drawn into fear-induced hype.

If journalists are going to report in sensational and inaccurate ways, then some might argue that journalists should simply be barred from reporting about terrorist incidents. That way, the terrorists would not have a stage. But fear of the unknown fuels terror too, and distrust in government stems from such withholding of information. People will get their news – if not from the media, than through rumors. When it works correctly, independent professional journalism is the best way to inform the public.

Even without direct government interference in news reporting, new technologies are now cutting out the journalistic "middle man." Of course, there's Twitter…and government officials themselves can send emergency instructions directly to personal devices like cell phones. But the public should not rely on such sources alone. Unless people are well-informed, through independent professional sources, they won't know how to analyze the issues and know how to assess the information being provided by their leaders.

As I said earlier, the public will not automatically follow orders from authorities. Citizens need to understand the reasons for actions they are being asked to take, and they can deal with bad news. Those who seek to calm for the sole sake of maintaining order will ultimately create the opposite effect, and the public will begin to lose trust in their government. This is the ultimate goal of terrorists.

The public must understand the truth about real dangers. People will respond well, if the conveyor of information is perceived as trustworthy. Unfortunately, right now, at least in the U.S., neither the government nor journalists are held in very high regard. A recent study (The Pew Research Center for People & the Press) concluded that "the public's assessment of the accuracy of news stories is now at its lowest level in more than two decades." We must work to change that.

Firefighters and police are not always (maybe not even usually) the most important first responders. Often that role falls on average citizens like school teachers or, again, the media. They all need to understand, and can handle, the truth. Authority figures shouldn't have an information monopoly. The more people are empowered to respond appropriately, the more secure we all will be.

As a local police chief once said, "you can't build a fence around a community, but you can arm your citizens with knowledge."

What we are trying to do with our "News & Terrorism" project is help journalists think about ways of packaging useful information in ways that help the general public react rationally. We hope to facilitate development of new communication strategies for efficiently cutting through the chaos in the midst of a terrorist incident…as well as to develop those connections between journalists and government officials and scientists and engineers.

Whether we like it or not, journalists are going to be at the cutting edge of any crisis. They will have to make split second decisions. They will have to rely on relationships…certainly government officials…and, from my perspective, scientists and engineers – because science and technology are both vital to the nation's infrastructure and a journalistic Achilles Heel. So we must work quickly to get good information into the hands of the media quickly in the event of any cyber, radiological, biological, chemical, or nuclear attack.

Sure, we at the U.S. National Academy of Engineering need to worry about hardening critical infrastructures. But the technical community should not think of its national security responsibility as simply creating the latest counter-terrorism technologies. They should also help empower the media, and thus the public, with knowledge. And so should government officials. Ignorance and misinformation can be as damaging to the information infrastructure of a nation as a break in an oil pipeline. It can cause paralysis among citizens who are often the best first responders, confuse professionals trying to respond to a crisis, and help generate the fear that is the terrorists' goal.

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