

How National Security Reporters Make Meaning of Terrorism Information Disseminated by the U.S. Government: An Extension of Mass Communication and Terrorism Theory

Heather Epkins
Department of Communication, University of Maryland, College Park

BACKGROUND

Arguably one of most important issues of our time: Terrorism

- U.S. government disseminates terrorism-related information (DC origin) to media
- Public receives terrorism-related information via media
- News media, then, provide intersection of contact among terrorists, states and the citizenry
- Crucial public to study when seeking best practices for preparedness, response, communications and interoperability
- Few have sought to understand the process of garnering and communicating terrorism-related information from the national security reporter viewpoint

PURPOSE

Understanding the reporter's role in terrorism response and communications to public at large.

- This study seeks to better understand how members of the Washington, DC-based news media covering national security issues, including terrorism, understand the concept of terrorism, how the government disseminates this information, and then how this public utilizes this information to perform their jobs.
- This project also explores how these journalists understand the Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS), as introduced in March of 2002 by the first *U.S. Homeland Security Secretary, Gov. Tom Ridge*.
- Results offer practical contributions to government communications professionals and journalists as they develop, disseminate, consume, and utilize terrorism-related information with a presumed shared goal of communication to the American public.
- Findings extend the body of public relations, mass communications and terrorism scholarship.

METHOD

Rich Quotes from Confidential, Personal Interviews

- Qualitative, in-depth, face-to-face, interviews with ten national security journalists
- Washington, DC-based reporters
- Convenience, snowball and purposive sample
- Six males, four females
- Age range 25-55
- Array of national and international outlets
- Two broadcast, eight print outlets
- Interviews taped, transcribed and coded; Extensive field notes
- IRB Approval

RESULTS

RQ1: How do national security reporter in Washington, DC define the concept of "terrorism information?"

- Theme One: Contextualizing Information—9/11 Front and Center
 - Defined broadly and only as it related to their job
 - "Where does the information garnered sit along the continuum of what I cover?"
 - "How does it compare to 9/11?"
 - "I always tie the story back to 9/11"
 - "If it weren't for 9/11, I might not have a job."
 - "Journalists are like idiots, we just parachute into a story and write on something we might know nothing about."
- Theme Two: Cry Wolf Factor
 - "Now, there is a security lens for everything."
 - Reporters seek increasingly sensational stories
 - Finding a "defiant" government veil of secrecy in the "name" of security
- Theme Three: Conceptualized Via Similar Job Functions
 - Three most referenced professions: Intelligence Analyst (information-seekers); Scientist (verifying validity and reliability); and First Responder (Turn yourself "off and get the job done—must "step away" from the story; Audience does not understand sacrifice made)
 - Additional "burden" requiring extra "doggedness" than other beats

RQ2: How do national security reporters in Washington, DC utilize terrorism information given to them by US government to do their jobs? (STP)

- Problem Recognition: High
 - Job dictates information seeking on behalf of public
 - Irony: Many do not see terrorism as problem personally; insider perspective
- Personal Involvement: High
 - "I use a *detachment mechanism* to define 'terrorism information' or not"
 - Each participant recalled their 9/11 with great emotion
 - Some spoke of relaxing their "journalistic guard" to allow their humanity to prevail for a time for a "better story"
 - "Not many journalists will admit this, but I'm haunted by 9/11. Truly. 9/11 infuses everything I write about, everything I do. It's a subject matter, but it's also a mindset."

RESULTS (Continued)

- Constraint Recognition: Low
 - Eight perceived constraints: Time, Editors, Competition among outlets and for audience attention, Individual outlet nuances, Administration culture issues (including secrecy, access and agenda-setting function), Interagency competition, Reporters themselves, and Government communicators.
 - Working the System

RQ3: How do national security reporters from varying media outlets in Washington, DC understand the homeland security advisory system?

- Theme One: Muddy Understanding
 - Confusing; Nebulous
 - Government should ascribe meaning for public/action items for responders
 - Caused "Cry Wolf Factor" on several occasions and missed story
- Theme Two: Reporter Peer Pressure
 - Laughing stock of international press; "Rainbow Colors" of yet another "American branding" campaign
- Theme Three: Politicization of HSAS
 - "Obvious timing undercut credibility" (i.e. just before and after election)
 - Interagency competition and confusion (classic, defining moment)
- Theme Four: Globalization
 - "Had reporters identified interdependence pre-9/11, might that have prevented it? 9/11 was a wake up call for America on our need to think more globally."
 - "Our failure to grasp that reality was part of the reason we were attacked."
 - Another disagreed: "U.S. has become isolationist—our interdependence and globalization has decreased since 9/11."

CONCLUSIONS

Results Indicated Following Discussion Areas

- Identifying this public as activists using situational theory—"Journalism with purpose"
- Power structures, including para-social phenomenon
- Use of symmetrical and asymmetrical communications by both parties
- Tools to countervail the government "PR machine"
- Newly recognized paradigm shift in government from "PIO" to "PR" (Perceived in function, not name, and therefore considered "underhanded")
- Strategies for uncovering the government "whistleblower"
- Government use of hedging technique (disarms journalists, promotes security)
- Organizational dynamism and hostility vs. stability
- Irony of contagion theory
- Audience-Demanded Format vs. Watchdog vs. Secure American Future
- The effect of 9/11 on journalists themselves; impact on framework, approach

FUTURE RESEARCH

Expanding Communication and Terrorism Scholarship

- Interviews with government communicators of national security information
- Application of activism literature, including situational theory of publics
- Further exploration of power and organizational literature, including the symmetrical, asymmetrical communications process
- Expanding agenda-setting, priming, framing and para-social literature
- Exploring the martyr-esque mindset of journalists as "first responders"
- Expansion of terrorism contagion theory
- Content analysis of world news on best practices and interdependence acknowledgement

REFERENCES

- A Partial List**
- Altheide, D. L. (2006). Terrorism and the politics of fear. *Cultural Studies & Critical Methodologies*, 6, 413-439.
- Brosius, H., & Weimann, G. (1991). The contagiousness of mass-mediated terrorism. *European Journal of Communication*, 6, 63-75.
- Charles, D. (August 10, 2006). Reuters. *Chronology-Terror alert changes since 2002*.
- Grunig, J. E. (1997). A situational theory of publics: Conceptual history, recent challenges and new research. In D. Moss, T. MacManus, & D. Vercic (Eds.), *Public relations research: An international perspective* (pp. 3-48). London: International Thomson Business Press.
- Nacos, B. L. (2007). *Mass-mediated terrorism*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Rojecki, A. (2005). Media discourse on globalization and terror. *Political Communication*, 22, 63-81.
- Weimann, G., & Winn, C. (1994). *The theater of terror: Mass media and international terrorism*. New York: Longman.

Acknowledgements

This project was funded through the START Center of Excellence by a grant from the Department of Homeland Security, Science and Technology Directorate, Office of University Programs.