Video clip transcripts for “Facing The Media”

LYNN: Let me give you some risk communication principles, and it’s very important when you think about messaging and you think about having to deliver a message as a spokesperson to be aware that in times of crisis these are the principles you need to draw on.

LYNN: The first is don’t over-reassure. Um, don’t over-reassure. A high estimate of harm modified downward is more acceptable than a low estimate of harm modified up. Now what that means is if we were to say something like it’s possible than tens of thousands could be afflicted before this is over, but right now only 100 are sick. What have I done? [trans] I’ve prepared people for what the outside of the envelope could be - - the highest estimate. And then I’ve brought them back to let’s face reality; here’s where we are today. So if in the event that high estimate becomes true I’ve laid that out early.

LYNN: You want to continue to state your continued concern before stating your reassurances. Okay? And what this might mean in a statement is although we’re not out of the woods yet we’ve seen a declining number of cases this week. So the first thing we’ve said is we’re not out of the woods. There could be more, but it’s getting better. So we’ve stated the concern. Another one is we need to be - - we all need to still be vigilant out there, but we think we’ve caught the sniper. Okay? Everybody following?

LYNN: Confidence versus uncertainty. You want to express the uncertainty of the situation and your confidence in the process to fix the problem. And how this might look in a statement is it must be awful to hear that we can’t answer your questions now, but here’s what we’re doing to find out.

LYNN: Give people things to do. Anxiety is reduced by action and gives us a restored sense of control. Why do you think that is?
MALE SPEAKER: [...] things could be affecting [...] .
LYNN: Okay. When you’re actively doing something your mind is focused on what you have to do rather than focusing on all the things that could go wrong.

LYNN: One is through symbolic behaviors. What did we do after 9/11?

FEMALE SPEAKER: We quit flying.
LYNN: [Laughs] We quit flying. Yes, that was symbolic. That was very real actually.
MALE SPEAKER: Flags went up everywhere.
LYNN: Flags went up everywhere. That's right. Flags went up - -
MALE SPEAKER: [...] .
LYNN: We also said okay let's all say a prayer. Let's say a prayer for the victims' families. Symbolic behaviors. Let's all give blood. Symbolic behaviors.

LYNN: Preparatory behaviors. What are some preparatory behaviors?
MALE SPEAKER: Be vigilant. Be on alert.
LYNN: Be vigilant. Be on alert. Boil your water.
FEMALE SPEAKER: Prepare go-packs.
LYNN: Prepare go-packs. Have a family escape route.
MALE SPEAKER: Update your Will.
LYNN: Update your will. [Laughs]

LYNN: You also could give contingent "if then" behaviors. If the water supply becomes contaminated, then you just need to boil your water. If in the case botchulism, contamination of salad, then you need to move to cooked vegetables - - "if then" behaviors.

LYNN: ...you can do a three-part action plan. You must do this; you should do this; you can do this. What's an example?
MALE SPEAKER: You must evacuate. You should go shower. You can protect yourself further by closing all windows [...] .
LYNN: Okay. You must evacuate. You should go shower. You can protect yourself further by closing all your doors and staying outside until we know that there is no radiation.
FEMALE SPEAKER: You know another way of looking at that is in a single behavior you must not drink the water. You can boil your water - - or you should boil your water, or you can use bottled water. So you're giving people options to meet that must.
LYNN: Again it goes back to the principle to allow them - - to provide them with information to make the best possible choices during a very short time span and to accept the imperfect nature of that choice. So, by giving people actions that they can do you're allowing them to take part in the decision.

LYNN: Allow people the right to feel the fear. You're going to hear us talk a lot more today about the fact that we as

scientists when we stand up even and talk even as spokespeople we have to remember that we are human beings first. We feel the same thing other people feel. You cannot tell me not to be afraid as a member of the general public. Even if you stand behind all the statistics in the world and know that the chance that I could get cancer because I have been exposed to this type of radiation is so remote that you don't even want to talk to me about it. If I'm scared to death you must acknowledge that fear. You can't tell me there's nothing to be afraid of. You can say I understand people are frightened by this, but here's what we know. I understand that we all have concerns about the long-term effects, but here's what we know today. So you have to allow people to fear the fear, and by acknowledging that fear what you do is you clear the way for me to hear your message.

LYNN: You want to ask more of people. You ask people to bear the risk and to work towards the resolution with you. So they are not being told by you what is going to be done. They know that they're a participant in it as well, and the truth is is that people will bear that risk for you. We don't know if this is the last case, but right now it's important to all of us to continue on with our lives. We've heard that in Anthrax. We don't know if this is the last case of Anthrax, but it's important for all of us to continue on with our lives.

LYNN: And many times as spokespeople, especially as scientists, we know when we go to talk to people to the media and we look at the media as a conduit to talking to your constituents, your public out there, and we know that when we go to talk to them we're a scientist and we put the mantle up. I'm a scientist; I'm going to give you the facts; you're going to know the facts and you're going to know that it's okay.

Well the reality of it is is what we're telling you under the principles of risk communication is you have to do some things that are counterintuitive because you have to remember how people hear and accept risk during emergencies. So what we're saying is it's okay to say everybody's going to have to pitch into this. You may not want to get vaccinated, but you know in order to obtain the disease and not spread it outside the affected area everybody in the neighborhood has to get vaccinated. You're going to have - - we all need to share the risk. So that may be a little counterintuitive to us as

scientists, but it is required of us as spokespeople during emergency communication situations.

LYNN: There's some myths that we'd like to bust here today about media during a crisis, and the first one is this. That experienced reporters will be assigned to give a balanced coverage. The truth of the matter is is that news does not set up everyday for crisis situations. It sets up for normal news situations, and the newsroom is going to send out whoever's around when a crisis hits. They'll get their experts on it later. So a sensational story will rarely stop for balance.

TOM: Plus there is just - - because it is something sensational, something that's happening right now, there's a lot less time for synthesis for the reporter to do the normal - - the traditional job of interpretating - - interpreting the event and giving some context to it. So less synthesis puts more responsibility on you.

LYNN: The media will take the time to understand what we're going through. How many of you believe that? Well the deadline pressure means that they will believe and go with almost anything they know at the time because their job is to beat the competition and now there's the pressure of the 24 hour news cycle, which we are all familiar with. What happens in that case is they are going to go with what they know today and the facts are going to get sorted out later.
TOM: And a major event - - if I may, in a major even though like a health crisis or something like that, the major concern isn't to get something somebody else doesn't have, but to make sure you have the same thing everybody else does.

LYNN: The story will be better if we avoid talking to the media until we have all the facts together. [trans] Well, the truth of the matter is that the media won't wait. They'll use what they get and they'll put it on - - they will be there again when you have updated information so you shouldn't wait. You should give them what you know now. You can come back later and tell them what the update is.

LYNN: Reporters verify facts and work the same way they do during regular assignments only faster. Well, reporters go with what they have at the moment. Let's come back later when you have something new that's breaking, and they move on to the next aspect of the crisis. So if there is something that

may be inaccurate you have an opportunity to correct it but you have to correct it as you talk about the next aspect of the crisis since there's not a lot of look backs until the crisis is over.

LYNN: News will play it exactly as I say it. Truth is, no matter how factual your statements are they're going to filtered through a reporters understanding. And in a crisis deadline, as Tom was saying, reporters do not have a whole lot of time to comb through 600 pages of background on botchulism. I don't have the time to do that. I'm looking for good sound bytes and quotes, and I need the information I needed so that I can synthesize it very quickly and turn it into a story.

LINDA: The elements of effective presentation are preparation - - you've all figured out just from this morning how critical preparation really is; practice, because these are not natural skills - - these are muscles that need to be exercised; and then preparing for your performance and delivering. And as we said, today is really just your first step on that journey, but we're going to talk a lot now about all the different aspects of how you actually prepare all of the different elements of preparation.

LINDA: We're going to talk about how you prepare your messages. [trans]... message preparation is essential. Preparing on the environment, understanding the environment, the media environment, in which you'll be giving your interview; preparing for your audiences and making sure you realize that the reporter is not your audience. The reporter is the lens or the prism or the medium through which you will be communicating to a much larger audience, the public. And then tailoring the presentation for a variety of formats and different situations.

LINDA:... let's talk first about the message. When we talk about key message points we talked about having three key message points. You can have sub messages, more details underneath them, but basically think to yourself if I get out nothing more than these three points, if my audience remembers nothing more than these three points what are those three things?

Now some people have heard the term SOCO. Has anybody heard the term SOCO before? It stands for Single Overriding Communication Objective. Yes?

FEMALE SPEAKER: Yes.

LINDA: Okay. Making sure. It's just a little pithy little way of talking about the idea of if they remember nothing else what are those things. There is a big difference between your message, your sound byte, and the idea of memorizing and parroting a line. Okay. When we talk about messages, we're looking for the natural ways to weave them in to answering questions or having a discussion with a reporter. Okay.

We are not looking for - - these are my three messages points. I'm going to write them on the palm of my hand and I'm going to either read them or memorize them and deliver them in a monotone. Okay. You do nothing for the trustworthiness of that message, the trustworthiness of you as a messenger, or the credibility of you as a messenger when you do that.

LYNN: ...the average sound byte today is about seven to nine seconds. Seven to nine seconds is 30 words or less. Some people like to say it's 20 words or less, depends on how fast you talk.
TOM: That's going to be about two sentences. But you can communicate a lot in two sentences. But this is why I mean like when you write something, you write a scientific presentation, for example, where you start off with 60 pages and you know you've got to synthesize that and you've got to digest that down to 20 pages. Well you do the same thing in crafting a message only now you're talking about sentences.

One way I explain to people sometimes is that you're crossing the street at an intersection; you're rushing back to work and you run into a friend crossing that intersection and you want to tell them something briefly. It just takes 15 seconds to tell them the salient point on something that happened to you this morning [...] ten minutes ago.

LINDA: The party's at Joe's at 7:00 o'clock. Be there; bring beer.

LINDA: Setting ground rules serves both the media and the spokesperson, okay, but particularly from your perspective you want to make sure that you set the parameters for how much time you have to give. You do not have to give unlimited amounts of time for an interview. Okay. If you have ten minutes you give ten minutes; if you've got five, give five.

Okay.

BOB: In radio, for example, there are things that you can do to make it more real since you're talking to somebody on the end of the phone line. Stand up, don't sit down. You can have - - because if you stand up it seems like you're really being interviewed by somebody instead of just - -
LINDA: And it reminds you that you're on the record, right?

BOB: It reminds you that you're on the record. You can use queue cards because nobody's going to see whether you have that or not, so something to remind you [...] . So take advantage of the possibilities that you have.

LINDA: ...it's perfectly reasonable to set time limits based on the amount of time that you have and the amount of information that you have with the reporter. Sometimes they will push you for longer and longer and, you know, it's a negotiation. You've got to negotiate it. Again, you have a press office, as Bob knows, that is very skilled in negotiating ground rules, so you, you know, you don't have to worry about doing it yourself.

LINDA: But other kinds of ground rules that more commonly set are location; where will the information be held. You know, sometimes, you know, it's okay to say you've got to come here. I cannot take the time to go to your studio. You've got to come here. Or, you know, no I will not do it in so-and-so's office or in a laboratory or in a hospital, you know, whatever it is you all need to decide with your press office and your management team what's going to serve you best as the CDC spokesperson for location.

LINDA: And to establish the topics and subjects that you're able to talk about. This is about setting the parameters around your expertise. It enables the reporter to understand before he goes in what's possible to talk about in this interview and it keeps you in a safe ground because you've already said, you know, I am a, you know, medical epidemiologist and this is about this issue, these are the things I can talk about. If you need to talk about other kinds of things, we'll find you another spokesperson who can talk about those kinds of things. So that's part of the ground rules as well.

LINDA: Another is to never, ever, ever under any circumstances accept a photograph, a report, a document on the set and ask to respond to it. Okay. We just found out that this happened and here's the report and what do you have to say about that? What do you do if that happens?

LYNN: I haven't seen that report and I can't comment on it.

LINDA: Yeah. Put it down and you say I'd be happy to look at that later and we can talk about that, but right now we can talk about launch into your core message. Okay, just put it down. But even more importantly set a ground rule that no new documents or reports will be provided to you on set. It's appropriate to say, you know, we need 24 hours; we need six hours; we need, you know, whatever.

And then also it's perfectly reasonable to ask who else will be interviewed for the story; who else are you talking to. It kind of gives you a sense of where they're going for other aspects of the story. If you know for instance that a certain activist or advocate who had a known perspective on an issue is going to be part of a story you know that now so that's good. That can help you put things into context more efficiently.

LINDA: We talked a little bit about understanding the interviewer's style. If you understand the interviewer's style you're much more likely to come into that situation much better prepared to handle yourself. You know, you won't be taken off guard.
Now, there's different ways to become familiar with interview styles. Okay, one is to watch the show if you have an opportunity to do that. In an emergency you know that you're going to be on, you know, some show in an hour you can't go and watch back tapes. But what can you do? What else can you do to become familiar with an interviewer's style if you can't watch - -

FEMALE SPEAKER: Ask somebody he's talked to before.

LINDA: You guys have a press office. The office of communications knows most of the reporters out there; they know all the shows; they are experts in communications and media. So use them as resources that if you're going to be interviewed by somebody that you don't know and you're

concerned at all about it, or even if you're not concerned at all about it...

LINDA: The program format, okay. There's a big difference between an in-studio news magazine, and every network now has news magazines, versus the CNN Headline News versus Larry King versus a debate style or an on the street. Okay. Lots of different program formats. So we prepare for them differently because, you know, if you know you've got 30 seconds, you've got 30 seconds. If you've got 30 minutes, that's a whole other story. Okay. How would you prepare differently for 30 minutes and 30 seconds?

MALE SPEAKER: More information.

LINDA: More information. How else?

FEMALE SPEAKER: Examples.

LINDA: Some illustrative examples. Some ability to tell some story. Um, if you are in a 30 minute show whether it's Larry King or actually on for 30 minutes, or it's Dateline and you're given a 30 minute interview that will be edited, then you have to be well prepared to have a conversation about the issue and not just answer some questions. Big difference between being conversational and weaving your messages through your conversation versus being prepared to answer a couple of questions.

LINDA: ...And also if it's going to be, you know, live or taped. You should know that before hand. There's big differences between live and taped. What are some of the differences between live and taped?

FEMALE SPEAKER: Taped you get more than one opportunity perhaps.

FEMALE SPEAKER: And editing.

LINDA: Editing, right. You get more than one opportunity, so if you goof what do you do?

FEMALE SPEAKER: Say stop and [...] .

LINDA: You know, I've misspoken. Let me get that right.

There’s a bid difference between saying I’ve misspoken, let me restate that, than you can’t use that. Okay. These are sort of the rules of attribution. You cannot give an interview and then after you’re done giving the interview say you can’t use these pieces of the interview. Okay.

TOM: Or that was off the record.

LINDA: Or that was off the record. Or you can’t attribute that to me. Okay. It’s the ground rules when you’re negotiating the ground rules where you can start to set those things up. It’s okay for your press office to negotiate, you know, we can get someone to talk to you about that, but you won’t be able to attribute it to anyone in particular. [trans] That is something that gets negotiated and agreed upon in advance in writing that you don’t do. You let your press office do. So if that’s pre-negotiated that’s okay. After the fact, it’s never okay. Okay.

And, again, just a big difference between correcting yourself, which you can do - - in fact, you can do it all the time even if you’re live and you’ve misspoken take a moment to say let me rephrase that so that everyone who’s watching understands what is true. Okay. Do not let a mistake that you have - - if you have misspoken go ahead and correct yourself. Okay.

LINDA: And then physical layout, you know, where you’re going to be in your office and their office and a studio, on the street. Physical layout makes a big difference too just in getting your mind mentally prepared for how you’re going to present.

LINDA: ...in terms of preparation understanding the audience and, again, this is in terms of your audience, the general public audience, and being mindful that this is not a scientific audience. And remembering that the media that you are talking to, the reporter, has his own audience and he’s creating a story and tailoring a story for his audience.

So there’s a little bit of work to be done to try to bring those two things together. And remember that some of the most important audiences may be subsets of the larger media audience. Sort of like what we were talking about before. There are the people who live in the affected area, and then there are the family members of the people who live in the affected area who might be in other places, and then there’s

people who have no relationship to the issue. They are all part of the media audience, especially when it's national, okay, and everything gets fed.

You know, so you have to be careful about creating and communicating about what's important to people in the affected area; what's important for their families, you know. That's just an example, but to remember that there are layers and rings within the audience that you're reaching.

LINDA: ...in terms of tailoring your presentation, there are big differences between TV, radio and print and the Internet. How might we prepare differently? What do those different mediums for us as spokespeople? Let's just sort of do a little compare and contraction, if you will. What's the difference between preparing for TV versus radio?

TOM: Radio automatically [...] listen to. I can get more [...] story. TV's quick sound bytes.

LINDA: Now, interestingly, when you think about NPR, those are sort of talk shows where there's a guest in the studio and it's an hour long or a half an hour long program and it's discussion. Yeah. So that's sort of like what you might think of in a TV news magazine or a Larry King Live. Right? That's sort of the similarity.

LINDA: And what about print? How do we prepare differently for print?

MALE SPEAKER: Well I would consider print and the television most familiar because [...] if I'm thinking about an event I'm thinking I want maps; I want - -

FEMALE SPEAKER: Visuals.

MALE SPEAKER: Visuals.

LYNN: Right.

TOM: So I think you've got a lot more to say in a picture.

LINDA: So it's a print, Internet, and television give you more - - give you visual opportunities and radio only really gives you audio.

Print has somewhat longer lead times, although now that most newspapers have Internet sites they're actually shortening that deadline window considerably for the journalists. They need to file for their Internet version faster than they need to file for the press.

So it's still, you know, it's more and more pressure all the time newspaper reporters. But there's an opportunity for you to give more information and to have longer quotes in print because there's more space. Okay. So, you might find yourself sprinkled throughout a story if you do a good job of delivering your messages within the context with a print reporter.

Anything else you want to say about different mediums?

TOM: I do. I mean television you exude confidence in what you're saying. You're saying something so there's a little act going on. I would do something - - when I would stand in front of the camera as a reporter for 15 seconds out of a two minute story it would be called a standout. I'm standing there looking into the camera. And, you know, if you're in a real hurry or something like that you can just recite the lines then you get back and you say well your eyes are nice and dead, and you did memorize it but you didn't mean it. There is a big difference. Take a little bit more time and think, [...] what you're saying it's not just 15 words. Meaning those 15 words makes a difference with the eye contact, the way your eyes look alive, or whatever.

LINDA: So in some ways television is much more challenging.

TOM: Television is I think much more challenging because if you're not prepared, if you appear like you're saying something but you're [...] and not confident, that's going to come through. But for that 15 seconds you're going to have something to say, you know, kind of spruce yourself up a little bit and be confident.

LINDA: Get that energy out.

TOM: You're exuding yourself and your confidence in what you're saying, and also some other little asides on scientists I think I've noticed, in particular, if you have on a tie, you know, I've spoken to somebody who always had - - was dressed in a suit but always had a mustard stain on his tie, you know,

scientists often times will have their tie over like this or their hair is disheveled or something like that. I mean television is cosmetic medium. It will take away from your credibility if you don't look the best you can look.

LINDA: Right. And like I said we've got tips in the book on that. We're not going to spend too much time today on your, you know, cosmetic presentation.

TOM: But things like eye contact.
LINDA: But eye contact is critical. And interestingly on radio, as you appropriately said, it all is - - it's a purely audio medium and that means that the tone of your voice, the level of enthusiasm, the level of confidence, the level of passion in our voices has to come through. If you are parroting a memorized line, oh my God, that's all you've got. That's your whole image on the radio. So equally as important, you know, different mediums require different skills.
LINDA: Sit down with colleagues and practice message development; to practice in front of the mirror to see what you look like; if you've got a video camera at home set up your video camera so that you can actually see it on TV; and if you don't have that do it with a friend.

When you do it with a colleague, which is great because they can coach you message, what they can't do is coach on you on the level of your language because they're at your level. They won't be able to hear the jargon. They're jargon too. But your friends who do something else or your family members can start to tell you where some of the jargon is. They can start to say by the way, um, your face is all wrinkled up. I know you and that is your earnest look, but it's not looking so good, you know, to the outside then can you try to relax.

And so you can practice with that kind of feedback - - you know, you can practice alone in front of a mirror, but practicing with a camera and with friends and colleagues, all of it combined gives you different insights and I would say do it as much as you can. And practice, you know, bridging from questions to your answers; remembering that you're speaking to the general public; and just stripping out the jargon, the acronyms, the statistics. No risk comparisons.

LINDA: Now let me offer to you an answer formula to help you with those bridges. Okay. Somebody asks you a question - -

succinct, a couple of word conclusion oriented answer. Okay. Not the long answer, but the end of the answer. Okay. Then you use the transition and then your core message. Okay. If you use that formula and you practice, you know, developing it and doing it in response to questions I think you'll find that most of the time it will serve you very well. Okay.

Be prepared to say I don't know. As I said before, there are many different ways to say I don't know. What you don't want to do is make it up. Because even if you think that you're making it up and you're kind of close it will come back to bite you very, very bad, and you don't want to waffle because of course that looks like you're being evasive, okay, and damages your credibility. Preparing to say I don't know, which I know is hard for scientists, actually builds your credibility more than anything.

LINDA: ...this is just a couple of things [...] presentation style to be brief. The more long winded you are the more opportunity there is to be taken out of context, and the more opportunity there is for you to be left out of the story. Okay. If your message isn't clear and obvious to the reporter, you probably will be left out of the story.

Eye contact is with the reporter that's doing the interview with you. You don't need to look at the camera. Just remember the cameraman's job is to get the pictures. They know how to do it better than anybody. You just have that one on one with your reporter.

No notes on television and - - and posture is very important. It goes back to how you look. Okay. So you want to be comfortable, but you don't want to be so comfortable, you know.

The other thing is the chairs. There's a lot of things that people do when they're nervous, okay, and everybody's nervous when they're on TV. Don't let anyone tell you that, you know, they're not nervous. Swivel chairs the tendency is to swivel. A couple of people did it this morning. Swivel, swivel, swivel - - it doesn't look good.

The other thing that people do when they're giving interviews is, you know, they kind of dance around; they do this; earlier I was doing this. Any of those little things are very distracting and they don't go over well on television. So

just find a nice comfortable stationary chair, put your hands in your lap, and sit up straight.