POLICY ANALYSIS

The Australian media and terrorism
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11

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In any terrorist attack on Australian soil, it will be the media that defines the experience for the Australian public. The media will cover what happened and why, who did it, and will analyse whether anything could have been done to prevent the incident. Over time the media might look for someone to be held accountable. Political leaders, government officials and first responders would find themselves under siege by the media in any terrorism incident here.

Television, radio, online and print journalism will inform the public during a terrorism crisis. The tone and content of the coverage influences how the public will react. In an event as disturbing as a terrorist attack, even people who normally pay scant regard to news broadcasts may suddenly become anxiously dependent on such information.

As we saw in the London bombings of July 2005 and the recent failed incendiary bomb attacks in London and Glasgow, there is the rise of 'citizen journalism'—the use of mobile phone digital cameras and text messaging, and internet 'blogging' by members of the public to capture events in the raw. News now spreads at extraordinary speed. Images of the burning Jeep in Glasgow were published within minutes. Within hours of the car bombing attempts in London, police were appealing for people to send their pictures to Scotland Yard.

In order to influence others, terrorists require media coverage to propagate a strong message of intimidation. On the other hand, terrorists give the media a huge drama that involves a gripping story. Any terrorist incident here would receive saturation media coverage. This would directly impact on how most Australians perceive the ongoing risks of terrorism. The media also influence the national security policy agenda through its coverage and hold government accountable by identifying gaps in domestic security arrangements.

Governance and law

In the event of a terrorist incident the government would seek to prevent an information vacuum which would encourage speculation and misinformation. The federal, state and territory governments have a coordinated information sharing and public information network that is governed by the National

Counter-Terrorism Committee's *National Security Public Information Guidelines*.

Each state/territory has the prime responsibility for dealing with the media following a terrorist incident within that jurisdiction. The site of a terrorist attack is initially a crime scene, where the normal restrictions relating to media reporting apply and are governed by the local jurisdiction. State and territory police will liaise with the media according to their standing arrangements. If a terrorist attack took place in Sydney, for example, the New South Wales Police Service would operate a Public Information Centre that also incorporates officials from other key government agencies. This police-led media liaison and public information activity is supported in each jurisdiction by a State/Territory Crisis Centre (S/TCC).

The S/TCC is activated following an incident or a significant threat in a particular jurisdiction in order to centralise information, support ministerial and state/territory government policy making and coordinate inter-jurisdictional assistance. The S/TCC will also coordinate public information arrangements with other states/territories and the Australian Government.

The Attorney-General's Department public affairs unit has overall responsibility for coordinating all Australian Government public information and media activity in relation to a heightened counter-terrorism alert level or in the event of terrorist incident, and will liaise with the relevant agencies in the states and territories.

Should a terrorist incident take place on Australian territory, the Australian Government, in consultation and agreement with the states and territories, will consider whether a National Terrorist Situation (NTS) is declared. The circumstances of a terrorist incident will determine the declaration of an NTS according to a range of prescribed factors. The overall responsibility for policy and broad strategy in relation to the NTS will transfer to the Australian Government.

The Australian Government's role does not, however, cut across the operational management and deployment of emergency services, which remains the responsibility of the affected state or territory. This also includes media liaison.

A national public alert and other precautionary national security messages may be issued by the Australian Government. Similarly alerts may also be issued by state and territory governments that are specific to their responsibilities. The Prime Minister and the Attorney-General will be the primary source of media comment from the Australian Government. Premiers and Chief Ministers or their designated spokespersons will perform this role for the states and territories.

The National Emergency Protocol describes the communication arrangements between the Prime Minister, Premiers, Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association during a national emergency. This 'all-hazards' protocol also ensures that the leaders coordinate key messages to the public during a national emergency that includes terrorist incidents.

Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, the Australian Government has enacted a range of new anti-terrorism laws and has created new categories of terrorism offences. Some of the new laws and amendments to existing laws have the potential to affect journalists and media organisations engaged in the reporting of terrorism-related stories. This includes issues such as detention and questioning powers, surveillance powers, the seizure of journalists' notes and other material, exposure of confidential sources, the closure of certain court proceedings, suppression of certain material related to terrorism, restricting movement in certain areas, offences related to associating with some sources and sedition charges for reporting certain material.

A powerful coalition of concerned media organisations was recently convened to challenge the perceived attack upon free speech that the new anti-terrorism laws represent, among a raft of other issues that have the potential to restrict the media. Dubbed 'Australia's Right to Know', the campaign includes News Limited, Fairfax, the ABC, Commercial Radio Australia, SBS, Australian Associated Press and Sky News. It's unclear whether there have been any incidents where a media organisation has decided not to publish because of the anti-terrorism laws. It's hardly surprising that the media prefer as few restrictions as possible and argue that they can be trusted to not act against the public interest during a national terrorist incident.

Coverage of a terrorist attack

Journalists would be among the first responders to the scene of a terrorist incident. The site of the attack would, as noted above, be a crime scene and standard restrictions on the movement of reporters would apply. Initially, there may also be some restrictions on media personnel to assist emergency responders.

In any terrorist incident in Australia the media could make the difference between whether or not a difficult situation evolves into a disaster. Clear, rapid and accurate information provided by the media can save lives by contributing to sensible responses in telling people what to do and what not to do. Indeed, journalists will be able to provide more rapid information to the public than official emergency centres. Disseminating information through the media could be the best way to prevent panic from spreading. Inaccurate information through media coverage of a terrorism attack could, however, have the reverse effect. This risk may be increased as a result of a lack of subject matter expertise among journalists covering a terrorist incident, particularly if it were a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) incident.

In the aftermath of a terrorist attack, both the ABC and SBS would be invaluable channels for public safety communication. Emergency Management Australia and state/territory emergency management organisations have memoranda of understanding with the ABC for emergency broadcasting. SBS radio could broadcast emergency advice in a range of languages. Wire services such as the Australian Associated Press (AAP) would also be very important in this context: AAP supplies news to virtually all of Australia's metropolitan and regional daily newspapers, radio and television stations and online services.

While the authorities will also source helpful information from media coverage, inaccurate or speculative reporting would be a distraction for authorities managing the consequences of any attack. Police media liaison personnel would be constantly monitoring the media around the clock in order to correct inaccurate reporting. Correcting factual mistakes is particularly challenging when there is tremendous pressure on the media to publish or broadcast developments in a situation where the public would have a thirst for rapid information. The use of mobile phones and the internet would only serve to increase the public's expectation of an even quicker news response.

Editors will also need to weigh up matters of public taste and the public interest in deciding what images to show. Thousands of images of the dead were taken after the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, but only the least confronting of those images were ever published. American TV stations quickly made the decision not to repeatedly screen film of people jumping to their deaths from the World Trade Centre. They did the same with the images sent by the Virginia Tech shooter before his death.

Nevertheless, the usual care in image selection may dissipate when the media scramble to cover a terrorist attack. Such coverage may produce adverse psychological impacts on sections of the population that view these confronting images. 'Point-of-death' imagery on the internet, however, now undermines media organisations' ability to protect the public from extreme images. Nevertheless, there may of course be occasions when publication of an extreme image might be the best way to keep the public informed.

A terrorism reporting code and accreditation?

The Australian media operates largely according to a regime of self-regulation, but there are codes of conduct that govern the media industry, including guidelines on the coverage of challenging issues such as suicide and mental illness. However, the concern for copycat and privacy don't hold as strongly for terrorist incidents because there is a public safety issue implicit in this type of event.

There is no specific media code that covers the ethical issues of reporting terrorism. Some codes do, however, offer practical tips that are relevant in reporting a terrorist attack on Australian soil. Citizen journalists or bloggers will file directly to new media, such as YouTube. Most of them will not be aware of professional codes.

There will effectively be two different levels at which the media will self-regulate following a terrorist attack. First, in the immediate response at the site it must be instinctive. Later, back at the desk, more considered reference to codes of conduct will occur, such as in choosing imagery and how emotionally loaded the coverage should be. It's important to differentiate here between professional editors and 'shock jock' types—a code won't do anything for the latter. Regardless, journalists would undertake visits to victims' homes or hospitals: the media have always regarded 'death knocks' as a valid story. That won't change in the event of a terrorist attack in Australia.

Is there any practical utility in developing a specific media code for terrorist incidents? Probably not. Conditions in a terrorist incident wouldn't be

sufficiently different from other situations such as mass shootings and natural disasters that they couldn't be included under exisiting codes. Codes of conduct already in place in the industry would be sufficient guides for editors making decisions on what material to publish in the aftermath of a terrorist incident.

If there were restrictions on professional journalists through a terrorism reporting code, then this might encourage citizen journalists to fill the gap, creating more problems in terms of responsible and accurate reporting. The media would certainly resist being coerced into following further 'voluntary' codes. Media-reporting guidelines impose an orthodoxy that many journalists consider oppressive. Guidelines in the end are only as good as the people who are supposed to adhere to them. Educating journalists in national security structures and laws surrounding terrorism might be a more useful step (see below).

An associated question relates to accrediting journalists for reporting a terrorist attack in Australia. Journalists dislike accreditation because they equate it with control and spin. A national accreditation system currently only applies to special events where there are valid security reasons for limiting access to journalists, such as the 2007 APEC forum in Sydney. Wider accreditation for terrorism reporting, however, is not practical due to the high staff turnover of journalists in most large media organisations. In any case, media organisations would simply respond by accrediting all their journalists. A terrorist attack would be covered, initially at least, by all available reporters, whether they are specialist national security reporters or not.

Following a terrorist attack

In almost all terrorist emergencies censorship won't be an option. There would be huge pressure to air eyewitness accounts as soon as possible and the media would self-regulate on fact-checking. In deciding what to publish in the earliest phase of an attack, journalists and their editors will consider two main criteria: Does the public need, or have a right to, this information? Will anyone be endangered by its publication?

The coverage of criminal investigations will be a strong focus of media activity following a terrorist attack. Media coverage during this period may have a bearing on any subsequent terrorism trials of apprehended suspects. Terrorism suspects in the failed London and Glasgow car bombings had their photos displayed on the front pages of newspapers across the globe for weeks following the incidents. Similarly, the case of the Gold Coast-based Indian doctor, Mohammed Haneef, received blanket media coverage locally.

Media organisations will self-regulate on publishing images of a terrorism suspect. They balance an individual's right to privacy with the public interest in that individual's actions. The media organisation will seek legal advice to anticipate whether the publication of identifying images may prejudice the administration of justice. This is particularly so if the issue of an individual's identity will be a factor in a subsequent trial. It is lawful to name a person or publish their image up until the point that an arrest warrant has been issued or they have been charged with a criminal offence.

The public interest, however, can't override specific judicial direction where a suppression order of a defendant's identity has been issued by a court. A media organisation will itself be subject to prosecution, and may be found to be in contempt of court, if it violates a suppression order by publishing identifying images of an individual who is the subject of a suppression order. It's now the case, however, that these orders are often rather pointless, as such images appear on the internet anyway.

Business continuity

Because TV and radio stations are high-profile institutions, they may be the targets of a terrorist attack. During Hurricane Katrina electricity and communications systems went down across entire regions. With electricity cut off, transmitters go down, effectively forcing broadcasters off the air and preventing newspapers from being printed. Denial of service attacks by terrorists may have similar consequences and must also be considered by media organisations in their business continuity planning. Government must consider the priority given to the media when power is restored.

Communications may be a problem following a terrorist attack. Mobile phone networks (that are built below full-use capacity) may become congested as was the case following the 2005 London bombings. In most media organisations satellite phones are scarce. Media organisations in Australia have taken some steps in recent years to enhance their disaster recovery plans; although it's not clear to what extent they have conducted drills that simulate a terrorist attack to test the reach and redundancy of communications equipment. If a media organisation has not rehearsed its plan, it doesn't have plan.

Key media staff might be killed or incapacitated in a catastrophic terrorist attack. Many media organisations are now paying more attention to personal safety training for journalists. Led by News Ltd and Fairfax, major media organisations now run programs that train editors and journalists to assess the risks of events they are covering and to take steps to reduce those risks. Since September 2005, about 450 print and broadcast staff have been trained in how to work safely in hostile situations in Australia. A second level of training for hostile environments overseas was introduced in December 2006

The longer term mental health issue of journalists being exposed to trauma is also being addressed by media organisations. The threat of litigation will, to some extent, prompt development of these processes.

The way forward

The mainstream news media will play a vital role in a terrorist emergency in Australia. They are the primary means of communication with the public. There are four measures that should be undertaken to improve the preparedness of the media to cover a terrorist attack here and assist in bolstering our national security.

1. Media Emergency Forum

The best way to ensure that important information is disseminated to the public in a crisis situation is to establish relationships between media professionals and government officials. The Australian Government should establish a forum to bring together emergency management and security officials with representatives of the media organisations. The forum would generate confidence in Australia's ability to respond to any terrorism threat and create public trust that national security agencies will release all information possible in the event of a terrorist attack here within the confines of operational security considerations. Such a forum would assist in providing government officers with a better understanding of the way media organisations operate.

The forum would bring together on a regular basis senior media editors, government officials and local government emergency planners, police and private industry to consider media issues arising from emergencies that include terrorist incidents. Peak media bodies, media organisations and working journalists would provide useful input into such a forum.

The forum would increase confidence-building between government and the media through developing awareness of each others' responsibilities and by identifying ways to improve communication. It might sponsor training seminars designed to increase technical skills and enhance mutual understanding as well as consider new anti-terrorism legislation that impacts on media activity. The Attorney-General's Department, in partnership with major media organisations, is best placed to take the lead here. The Attorney-General's Department is already responsible for coordinating national security public information.

2. Public safety protocol

Australia should develop a protocol at the national level for releasing public safety messages through the media in the event of exceptional circumstances, such as a terrorist release of CBRN material or mass casualty terrorist attacks. Such a public safety protocol would be in addition to existing arrangements between emergency management agencies and the ABC.

Media organisations would agree to broadcast or publish government announcements about the specific danger, safety advice and instructions or requests intended to assist emergency responders in their work without delay. Media parties to such a protocol would, however, retain full editorial control. Such a protocol would facilitate effective communication of vital information to the public in the event of a major terrorist incident taking place. A mechanism that gives the media access to accurate and timely information for the benefit of the public is likely to be well received by media organisations.

3. Counter-terrorism exercises

Currently professional journalists don't participate in counter-terrorism exercises: their role is generally played by media officers from government agencies. There are official concerns that real journalists' participation may affect the way officials behave, with the added concern that journalists may report on the activity following the hypothetical incident.

Real media participation should, however, be the norm in counter-terrorism exercises. This is critical in order to build trust with crisis managers and first responders, particularly, for example, in testing the establishment of media centres during a crisis. The integration of media representatives into domestic security exercises will improve the preparedness of both journalists and first responders.

The omission of media professionals from exercises risks failing to anticipate circumstances likely to arise in the event of a real terrorist incident. In addition to journalists and photographers, it may be appropriate to include editors who have a crucial role in filtering and assembling news stories prior to publication.

4. Academic journalism programs

Journalism and communications programs at Australian universities might assist in preparing students to cover terrorism in their future careers. Most Australian journalism schools don't devote much concentrated attention to terrorism. The topic is really only addressed in media law subjects or the coverage of interviewing victims of tragedy or trauma. It would be useful for our journalism schools to examine how they might best prepare students with the practical training and knowledge to cover terrorist acts in an ethical and informed manner. In order for any training to be useful and valuable it is essential that curricula be designed in cooperation with newspaper editors and other media professionals.

One useful resource to assist training journalism students in terrorism reporting is the DART Centre. This global organisation with an Australasian chapter advocates ethical reporting of trauma, professional treatment of victims and survivors by journalists and greater awareness by media organisations of the impact of trauma coverage on both news professionals and news consumers.

Acknowledgment

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