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Crisis Journalism A guidance for government agencies

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SWEDISH EMERGENCY
MANAGEMENT AGENCY

Crisis Journalism

A guidance for government agencies

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Crisis Journalism – A guidance for government agencies

Media usually pay a great deal of attention to emergencies, disasters, crisis and wars. People's need for information also increases markedly during emergencies, and the media have an important part to play in meeting this need. The media can in addition to its role as a dedicated provider of information and news, provide background information and explain causal links. Media's information can also prevent rumours, reduce uncertainty and convey the group sense of sorrow. But it can also be the other way around - the media coverage of a crisis can make the situation worse for those affected

One of the challenges for the media during extreme situations is rumour control and finding reliable, impartial sources. At times of severe stress, even those who work within the media may be affected and influenced by the emergency. The purpose of this manual is to provide government agencies, such as local authorities, central and regional agencies etc. with a basic familiarity with the way the media work in emergencies and during crises. By increasing their knowledge of the media's methodology in emergency situations, officials and organisations can improve their ability to reach out to the public and individuals affected during crisis and emergency situations.

The manual is based on research in the field of crisis communication, on the knowledge-base built up by the Swedish Emergency Management Agency (SEMA), from various seminars, exercises, training courses in this sphere, and on exchanges with Swedish and foreign authorities and media representatives. No new research has been carried out in conjunction with the production of this manual.

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Evaluating emergencies' newsworthiness

When a man was arrested at Västerås airport in September 2002 on his way to London with a weapon in his luggage, suspected of planning an aircraft hijacking, forty or so British reporters flew over to Sweden. The police received a total of around 600 phone calls during the first 24 hours after the arrest¹, primarily from foreign media. It was a year since September 11th 2001 and the attacks on the United States, and the media atmosphere was nervous. Whether something becomes news depends both on the timing and on other events. The news-space is small, and a major event can push other news off the agenda. There are a few fundamental rules for what constitutes news, and what doesn't. They include:

1) proximity in time, something new 2) conflicts 3) extensive consequences for a lot of people 4) drama 5) personification 6) the subject's topicality².

Identification is a key concept in the world of news. An event close to the readers, listeners, viewers or surfers in terms of time, culture and geography, is more likely to become news than something remote. Disasters obviously often become the stuff of which news is made - a disaster happens suddenly, is often inherently dramatic, and is of considerable public interest. But not all disasters are equal. A dramatic event involving Swedes or "westerners" is more likely to become news in Sweden than an event with no Swedish or "western" perspective.

An example of how newsworthiness can vary from one event to another is provided by the SAS accident at the Linate airport in Milan in October 2001. With 200 dead, the event would probably have interested far more of the foreign media if it had not been for the fact that the day before, the USA had launched its military attack on the Al-Qaeda network in Afghanistan.

DN 9/10 2001



¹ Interview with Ulf Palm, Västmanland Police Authority Press Officer, 2002.

² "Ett andens tatarfölje", Hur medierna i Sverige tänker och arbetar, skribent Staffan Dopping, skrift av SPF, 2001. ("A ghoulis rabble", the Swedish media's attitudes and methodologies, by the journalist, Staffan Dopping, SPF publication, 2001.

In chaos, even journalists can suffer a crisis

After the ferry disaster 1994 when M/S Estonia sank, the Bergslagsposten newspaper in Lindsberg, Sweden, had problems finding a local reporter who wanted to write about it. The entire editorial staff in this municipality, which had been hit very hard, was effectively paralysed. In the end, a reporter from a neighbouring municipality had to write the articles instead. When the incident is really severe, even the media's personnel are affected. When a disaster strikes, journalists and photographers share the workplace with personnel from the emergency services, police, medical services, information officers and others who are involved. Many journalists and photographers experienced their assignments in connection with the fire in a Gothenburg disco in 1998 as extremely provocative. The emergency personnel were trying to help people and save lives, at the same time as the media personnel were tasked with witnessing and depicting what was happening. Several journalists and photographers tried to help in the rescue work instead.

– "Every time you took a photo, you almost wanted to say 'Sorry'. You almost had to swallow hard every time you pressed the shutter," remembers a photographer from Göteborgs Posten in the brochure entitled "Medier på Olycksplatsen" (The Media at the Scene of the Accident) produced by the Swedish Rescue Services Agency (SRSA)³.

When the media's on-site personnel are affected by the event, the reporter experiences the same stress reactions as the police and emergency services personnel, and reacting is the norm - not the reverse.

– "Is it a good fire?" asked the Night Editor of an evening paper when the reporter called in from the fire in Gothenburg.
– "Yes, there are several people injured," answered the shaken reporter.
– "Are there any dead?"
– "Yes, there are bound to be," answered the reporter, as if in a trance.

This conversation shows clearly just how vulnerable and exposed the individual reporter can be and of how they can be overwhelmed by their feelings.⁴ Even journalists and photographers can suffer a personal crisis. Several feature pieces produced after the fire include descriptions by TV cameraman, Tommy Wiberg, from SVT Gothenburg, of how he became unable to function:

³ The Media at the Scene of the Accident, SRSA 2002

⁴ The Media at the Scene of the Accident, SRSA 2002

– “I’ve been involved with a great many dramatic events and managed to keep a distance from them, managed to keep my professional filter in place. But as soon as you came to this scene and heard the desperate cries and saw all the young people lying there... it was incredibly hard to work there. On the way back to the TV studios, I just couldn’t hold it back any more... everything just fell apart... my whole body started shaking,” he remembered in a TV documentary after the fire⁵.

Both the media and the operational emergency management team present at the fire agree that journalists, as a profession, generally lack familiarity with emergency psychology. Events such as the fire in Gothenburg and the M/S Estonia disaster in 1994 have, however, led to an increased interest in these issues within the profession, and several editorial departments now have debriefing and de-stressing session routines⁶.

GP, Oktober 1998. Fotograf Niklas Maupoix



⁵ *The Media at the Scene of the Accident, SRSA 2002*

⁶ *The Media at the Scene of the Accident, SRSA 2002*

Crisis journalism – three-phase news

The media’s actions move quickly through three phases during emergencies. In simple terms, these phases can be called the microphone-holding phase, the knowledge-building phase, and the investigative phase. This is, of course, a gross simplification, but the terms are designed to illustrate how the media often switches with lightning speed from chaos to control. The shift happens very quickly - one phase has barely ended before the next one begins.

The microphone-holding phase

The microphone-holding phase illustrates the chaos at the beginning of an emergency. The journalist knows that something has happened, but usually does not know what. The reporter literally hands over the microphone to someone who knows something. If the best-informed people have no time to provide information, the reporter has to ask someone else, because the report cannot wait. It is incredibly important during this first phase to ensure that an information provider is on hand quickly and that they are good at their job. The journalist’s normal routine of source-critical reporting has not always begun.

This is also the phase when the risk of rumours spreading is at its greatest. One of the most difficult challenges for both the local media and the authorities on September 11th 2001 lay in trying to gain control over the emergency and spread of rumours.

- “Everything was completely disorganised during the first few hours ,” Joel Goldberg, Assistant News Director at WNBC in New York remembers ⁷.

It is during the first phase that the risk associated with people in shock being allowed to speak is at its greatest, too. Shocked youngsters were allowed to speak very soon after the Gothenburg fire in 1998. In several instances, time pressure and an ignorance of the way people react in an emergency have been offered as excuses for the media acting as vehicles for the youngsters’ feelings of helplessness and aggression. Reporters interviewing people affected by an emergency may describe someone as “clearly being in shock”, and this allows them to be sneaked into the report. But while a description like this does, admittedly, make it easier for the reader or listener to evaluate what the shocked person says, problems can obviously result from allowing shocked people to express feelings and even critical opinions that they may not hold when they have begun to recover⁸.



⁷ *Meeting with Joel Goldberg, News Chief, WNBC, New York, April 2002*

⁸ *The Media at the Scene of the Accident, SRSA 2002*

The knowledge-building phase

When the Austrian town of Salzburg was hit by widespread flooding and declared a disaster zone in August 2002, the local radio stations had to provide so much information that they barely had the time to play any music. One of the strengths of journalists is their ability to obtain relevant facts and to explain complicated contexts in a simplified way. The second phase, the knowledge-building phase, symbolises the media's desire to give their readers, listeners, surfers and viewers important information from their own viewpoints. Media is skilled in giving people the details of what has happened. They produce statistics on recent similar events and provide concrete advice. At the same time, it can be extremely important that knowledgeable official personnel help them by providing as much underlying information as possible. This is one area in which the interests of journalists and authorities' information officers coincide, to some extent. The media can also link to the authorities' websites, read out phone numbers for emergency contacts etc. on TV.

The investigative phase

One of the media's most important tasks is obviously disseminating important information on the causes of the emergency. This is why the media's investigative function will always be up and running quickly. The journalists' questions may start coming before anyone has had the time to find out what happened. It is therefore important to be able to provide some sort of information without, however, speculating or commenting on matters outside one's own field of competence. Starting by commenting on the measures

being taken is always an option. Information on causes can alleviate grief and suppress rumours - and a shortage of information is a guaranteed catalyst for suspicion, doubt and anxiety. Scapegoats are also commonly designated by both the media and those affected by an emergency in an attempt to explain what happened.



Photo: Pressens Bild

Initial problems with the investigative role

It is often difficult for journalists to investigate in the midst of the initial chaos, so the role adopted by the media is usually an informative one, which is admittedly important. At the same time, it is vital that the editorial departments' source-critical role is up and running as soon as possible. And if dual messages are to be avoided even during the initial chaos of the emergency, it is just as vital that the media can handle source-critical reporting, as it is that the authority can coordinate its information. In practice, however, investigative journalism tends to lag behind informative reporting. Media's primary role during the initial phase of major events, accidents or disasters is usually that of information provider. Internet generates a high information speed, thereby exacerbating the problem of controlling the spread of rumours during a crisis or an emergency. The newspaper Göteborgs Posten's website editorial team had to combat a number of rumours during the riots at the EU summit meeting in Gothenburg in 2001, for example. When several different activists called in to report that a demonstrator had been shot dead, the editorial team were careful to check with the hospital management team to avoid publishing inaccurate information. But the editorial team had already omitted this kind of extra check when they reported that a couple of police horses had been shot - which was not true. And despite the newspaper's editorial team posting a correction on the homepage as soon as the truth became apparent, they were too late to prevent the "news" spreading to other media⁹.

⁹ Lecture by Eva Wieselgren, Head of the gp.se editorial team, 2001.



Aftonbladet 11/10 2001 Headline reads: Inferior signs, cause for the SAS accident at the Linate airport in Milan 2001.

The paradoxes of crisis communication

It is vital to have a realistic attitude towards journalists and photographers and to realise that the media will inform, analyse and investigate all at the same time during an emergency or crisis situation.

This can sometimes pose a dilemma for the media, and a few of the problems that they face in conjunction with emergency reporting were described in the report by the Government Commission on the Gothenburg Fire Disaster (sou 1999: 68):

- The role as an information channel vs. the role as the investigative fourth estate - at the same time
- Timely and correct information - at the same time
- Creating understanding and providing entertainment - at the same time
- Evaluation - newsworthiness

The duplicity of dealing with the media in connection with an accident or while an emergency is in progress is further described by Liselotte Englund, doctoral candidate in crisis journalism, in the following way:¹⁰

The media as an opportunity	The media as a problem
Follows events, describes and explains, and investigates circumstances and responsibility	Reporters' or photographers' own psychological reactions to the event can lead to irrational or unprofessional actions
Counteracts the spreading of rumours through quick, correct news	Deficient editorial readiness for working with accidents and emergency events
Best case scenario - provides early, correct information that eases concerns	Journalistic "news rush" can lead to deficient professional ethics
Can, in extreme cases, participate in the operational work	Deficient understanding hampers the emergency services' work

Good communication on the part of the authorities is a prerequisite of crisis journalism. Crisis journalism also has built-in paradoxes that every information officer must deal

¹⁰ The model is drawn from the report entitled "Medier på olycksplatsen" (The Media at the scene of the accident) by Liselotte Englund SRSA, 2002

with, both in relation to journalists and to other target groups. Stig-Arne Nohrstedt, Professor of Media and Communication Studies at Örebro University, describes these paradoxes in the following way:

The paradoxes of crisis communication	
The calming/warning paradox	Convince people that the risks are small while simultaneously preparing them for the worst
The target group adaptation paradox	The most efficient approach may be to adapt the information to different groups' needs. This may lead to credibility problems if different groups receive different information, despite their proximity
The information culture paradox	Problems can arise when an authoritarian organisational culture that emphasises secrecy has to cooperate and communicate with a decentralised and open culture
The information requirement paradox	The same people may, at one moment, be totally uninterested in information and at the next, demand lots of information
The body language paradox	Double messages, e.g. "The radiation level is falling in Sweden, but it is dangerous for cows." (Gefle Dagblad, 3rd May 1986)
The credibility/vigilance paradox	There is a risk that the public's readiness may be reduced if the public relies too much on the authorities responsible. Credibility levels will then have become "too high"
The reliability/justice paradox	Correct information is not enough if it is incomplete or uncertain

Otway and Wynne's paradoxes, applied by Professor Stig Arne Nohrstedt¹¹.

¹¹ The model is drawn from the report entitled "Medier på olycksplatsen" (The Media at the scene of the accident) by Liselotte Englund SRSA, 2002

At the news desk during crises and emergencies

It takes only one major news item and the media-space is full. The media are often alerted through their own services and channels, such as news agencies or a variety of news services that monitor all sorts of alarms. When something strikes suddenly, the various editorial departments mobilise rapidly. Layouts are reorganised and extra editions printed. The issues faced by the evening papers immediately after the first report of the fire in the Gothenburg disco were:

1. How do we need to redo the newspaper?
2. Which reporters do we have available?
3. Send a editorial team leader to Gothenburg.

Most of these issues are the same as those faced by all the daily papers - issues which also apply, in general terms, to radio and TV coverage as well, although here, running orders have to be changed and guests called into the studio. The media is also skilled in evaluating the level of general interest inherent in different events and usually send the number of reporters required to satisfy the public's interest in event-related information.

Emergency journalists have sometimes been compared to firemen - they respond to a call, produce a couple of quick reports, and then move on to the next emergency, disaster or war. The task of really explaining, analysing and placing the event in context can be neglected in favour of describing what is happening. This depends, of course, on the scale of the event and how close it feels to the target group: the bigger the event, the more likely it is that the TV channels' sofas will be filled with explaining experts.

Who goes? - age, experience and practice

The media often send their own reporters to major emergency scenes to get their own slant on what has happened, and the closer the event feels, the more important it is to send their own reporters. Another reason why the media send their own reporters is that they can describe the event from their audience's viewpoint. The media also prefer to get their own slant on the event in order to make their story exclusive.

Be prepared to meet all sorts of journalists. The media are not always able to select the personnel who monitor an emergency or a crisis when it happens suddenly: if they do have a choice, they will send the person best equipped to cover it - preferably an experienced journalist or photographer with previous experience of serious incidents, but if these are not available, they will send less experienced journalists¹².

¹²Liselotte Englund, *Medier på olycksplatsen (The Media at the scene of the accident)*, SRSA 2002

Time pressure

Any given journalist will obviously want to get their story out before the competition, but not only do they spur each other on, they are also under pressure from their editorial team to get the news out. It is not easy having to get back to the editorial team and tell them you don't have a statement from any of the parties involved. The Internet has also changed the way journalists work during major incidents - instant news goes out on the Net, while the more reflective feature articles and analyses are published in the printed newspaper, along with increasingly large pictures and graphics. Radio and TV channels often interrupt programmes for major incidents.

Extra preparation for war

War makes even tougher demands on editorial departments. Over and above the tangible safety risks involved for journalists and photographers, they also have to consider the question of active attempts to exert influence and spread propaganda. The Swedish Journalists' Association newspaper, *Journalisten*, wrote the following as part of a lively debate in its pages and elsewhere during the bombing of Iraq in 2003:

"It is often said that truth is the first casualty of war. The choice of pictures can affect the viewers subconsciously: pictures of cruise missiles and fighter aircraft taking off from aircraft carriers illustrate overwhelming force. Video footage from the so-called smart bombs that took out Iraqi targets during the first Gulf War created the perception that this was a clinical war without human victims. But showing pictures of casualties can also have a political objective. These are the considerations that the reporters must take into account when editing a piece under time pressure. Warring parties now not only have to win a war on the battlefield. It is just as important to win the public opinion battle at home."¹³ Media companies often have a policy of stating where their pictures come from, of emphasising the country from which the agency comes, and of attempting to be critical and aware of propaganda, although it can be difficult to guard against the latter.



Journalisten, Jan/Feb 2002

¹³Journalisten 25-03-2003 "När kriget kom" (When the war came)

Dramatizing emergency news

Emergencies and crises are usually complex. The task of the media is to make what is complex comprehensible and to explain to the general public what is happening.

One way is to dramatise it and to create hero stories, preferably seasoned with demons and princesses.

One way for journalists to make what has happened comprehensible is to describe it in a gripping way. Words are sometimes toned down in favour of pictures, and the reporter will sometimes describe the atmosphere at the scene empathetically to make the rest of us understand the incredible. This was the case with a news item on the Swedish radio news programme, Ekot, after the aircraft disaster in Germany in July 2002, when a reporter described how “dead children fell from the



The rescue operation of private Jessica Lynch in the Iraq war-03 became a media drama. Photo: Pressens Bild

skies into people’s gardens.” This description painted a picture of what happened that was both vivid and, at the same time, cannot even have come close to what it was like at the scene. Every report involves a balancing act between what is “reasonable” reporting and what is not. This aside, the journalistic approach, with accentuation and selection, applies during emergencies and disasters, just as it does to “ordinary” news.

Journalists want to meet eyewitnesses and to tell a story. Most journalists, however, do not want to interview people in a state of shock - although this does sometimes happen. This may be due to a lack of knowledge, to the pressure of a deadline or some other factor, but almost never to malevolence. Tipping the journalist off as to the right person to interview can, potentially, be an important task for local authority, police or health service officials, and journalists will sometimes contact an official representative for guidance on who is in a fit state to be interviewed. This must, of course, be resolved on a case-to-case basis.

¹³Journalisten 25-03-2003 "När kriget kom" (When the war came)

Ethical considerations

The press, radio and tv are governed by ethical rules. The Swedish Journalists’ Association summarises its view of professional ethics as follows:

“Individual journalists, editorial teams and publicists have a shared responsibility for developing their professional ethics with a view to maintaining and reinforcing public confidence in the media. The Journalists’ Association actively supports individual journalists who refuse to carry out humiliating assignments.”

A journalist is constantly making ethical considerations, from the time when they are given the assignment to the final editing of the report. Initially: “Is this an occasion when I should try to interview people? Should I wait until later?” In the field/during the interview: “Is the person in shock, can I write or broadcast everything he/she says? Can I help this person in some way?”

When writing/editing the report: “How should I depict what has happened, how should I quote the people interviewed, without anyone who was affected suffering afterwards?”¹⁴.

A huge media ethics debate was triggered in Sweden after a number of incidents such as the sinking of the M/S Estonia in 1994, the school bus tunnel accident in Norway in 1988, and the Gothenburg fire in 1998. This debate was also mirrored in other countries in conjunction with emergencies and disasters, both before and after these incidents: in Austria, for example, the ethics debate really came to life after the tunnel fire in the Kaprun ski resort in 2000¹⁵. It is worth remembering that attitudes towards media ethical considerations can differ from one country to another in connection with the publication of names and pictures, for example.

Ethical awareness challenged by increased competition

At the same time as the mass media in Sweden spend more and more time on ethical and moral discussions and are generally becoming more cautious with regard to showing pictures of those affected or approaching people in shock or caught up in the emergency,



Victims from the SAS accident at Linate Airport 2001 Svenska Dagbladet 10/10 2001

¹⁴From an essay on Emergency Psychology, Karlstad University, 2002

¹⁵Liselotte Englund, Medier på olycksplatsen (The Media at the Scene of the Accident), SRSA 2002.

press ethics are increasingly being questioned and the number of complaints to commissions and ethics councils is increasing¹⁶. Considerable progress has been made since the media invaded hospitals after the bus accident in Norway in 1988 and overstepped the mark time and time again after the sinking of M/S Estonia, as was apparent from the depiction of the fire in Gothenburg in 1998. It is also worth bearing in mind in this context that the public's attitude towards the publication of names is apparently more positive than before¹⁷. We often have access nowadays to news from channels whose press ethics differ from those at home. These channels show us material produced in accordance with standards of press ethics that differ from our own. The question of newsworthiness also plays a part. The Swedish media, for example, tend to be more wary of using pictures of relatives and victims when the incident affects someone in Sweden, and the same thing applies to the foreign press when the incident happens in their countries. The picture ethics applied in the context of September 11th 2001 are a clear example of these differences: the local media in New York deliberately refrained from showing pictures when people jumped from the World Trade Centre windows. These pictures were, however, shown in both the Swedish and European press, where the risk of a relative or friend recognising one of these people was, of course, reduced. It was also virtually impossible to distinguish anyone's face from the pictures published, at least in the Swedish press. The reports from New York did, however, include plenty of people suffering from shock.

Lively internal debate

The ethics of publication and the personal responsibility involved in approaching someone affected by an incident or taking a picture of them are the subject of an ongoing internal and critical debate in the industry. Extensive, internal critical debates take place after major emergencies such as those in Gothenburg in 1998 and the events in the United States in the autumn of 2001 but they also happen after tragic events such as the murder of children and similar incidents. An angry photographer rebuked an overly intrusive colleague at the funerals after the Gothenburg fire, for example. At the same time, some other relatives wondered why the media coverage of their children's funerals that took place at a later date was by no means as extensive as the first funerals. As a couple of parents wondered, "Were their children's lives worth less?"¹⁸. This is perhaps not an example of the media's positive effects, but it does show that relatives can have different perceptions of the media's presence/absence at occasions in connection with emergencies and disasters.

¹⁶ Liselotte Englund, *Medier på olycksplatsen (The Media at the Scene of the Accident)*, SRSA 2002.

¹⁷ *Scoop* 4:93

¹⁸ Lecture by Lars Fablén, former Photo Editor, *Göteborgs-Posten*, 2001.

Kevin and the press

As part of a course in crisis psychology for journalists and photographers at Karlstad University in the autumn of 2001, the students were asked to analyse the media's reporting from an emergency psychology viewpoint. One group wrote about the murder of Kevin, aged 4, on 16th August 1998 in Dottevik, Arvika. The perpetrators proved to be two boys, aged five and seven, and the murder was described as a game that got out of hand. The following is taken from the group's essay on the media's ethics in conjunction with the reporting of Kevin's murder. The original text has been shortened.

"The murder of Kevin affected virtually the whole society and every group within it. The information presented in the media was based on direct contact with the police, clergy, locals and those affected. Innumerable interviews were conducted, with comments from child psychologists, neighbours, schools, the social services, parents, relatives etc. Police officers who worked with the case felt it was extremely important to feed information to the media, and the information presented by the media was initially largely based on comments and statements by the local police officer, Rolf Sandberg. Substantial media interest was also expected because this was a case involving the murder of a child, and the police consequently attached considerable importance to holding daily press conferences and issuing information, in order to avoid damaging the rest of the investigation.

The parents' reactions are absent from the initial media coverage; Kevin's maternal grandfather spoke for the family instead. Stage two primarily involved media speculation on the potential identity of the perpetrators. Once the perpetrators were identified, the press stayed passive and avoided revealing their names to the public. The immediate family then began to appear extensively in the press coverage. The impression given is that they were still in the acute phase of the crisis and one could wonder whether they would have commented in a similar way in a later phase, once they had worked through the crisis and moved on. Media provided extensive coverage of the atmosphere in Dottevik and Arvika, producing some interesting depictions of collective, societal reactions. The silence spread throughout Arvika, people stopped talking to each other and were not out and about in the same way as before the murder. There are also elements of the media's reporting that strike a note of community feeling and support, an empathy aimed at helping the locals in Arvika work through their grief. The press material contains relatively few examples of the media attempting to



Aftonbladet 2001
Photo: Ulf Höjer

explain the societal and collective reactions; rather the media describes them. Over and above the reporting of the actual incident and the police investigation, the reports have to do with Arvika and Dottevik, and with the reactions, atmosphere and people there. Grief is put on display in the newspaper pages. Conflicting pictures dramatise the language; the contrasts between good and evil, before and after, sunny small-town idyll and the dark scene of the crime, innocent children and cold-blooded murderers recur throughout the reports and articles. The investigation's progress is reported in out-and-out news articles, while more societal, psychological and cultural aspects are reflected in features and on culture pages.

Kevin's death was not something that a professional journalist could avoid. No one could say that there was no public interest in this case or that this was not an interesting subject. A murder cannot be glossed over with silence. Even less so when it is the murder of a child. And when it eventually turns out that other children were the perpetrators, the issue becomes even clearer in one respect: it must be written. The readers must be told.

So, what about the consideration for the victims? Well, Kevin was the only name ever published in the printed media we examined. Kevin's relatives did, however, periodically comment regularly in the media. Confronting the relatives of a victim is not part of a journalist's everyday routine. Anyone who has even a passing acquaintance with the ethical rules lets their gut feeling decide when they should stay clear. Judging from the material we have read, there seems to be unanimous agreement among professional journalists that the media behaved well. It was felt that they observed reasonable consideration and that the judgements they made on publication were sustainable. But a more nuanced picture can also be discerned from speaking to individual journalists who were present. The newspaper Nya Wermlands-Tidningen's (nwt) reporter talks of verbal abuse when she walked around that part of town. She mentions acquaintances who cut her off, who did not dare to talk to her. nwt's reporter also describes the isolation and emptiness she felt when after having spent a whole day working in Dottevik, she returned to the paper's offices and no one asked her how her day had gone and how she was feeling.

The magazine Pressens tidning (published by the Swedish Newspaper Publishers' Association) believes it can detect three different presentation models: a British model in which the young perpetrators are presented as monsters, a Norwegian model where those involved are treated with respect, and finally, an American model in which the news is carried on the inside pages of the newspaper, rather than the front page, with a warning text on the front page. (Issue 13/98. Pressens tidning).¹⁹

¹⁹ From an essay in *Emergency Psychology*, Karlstad University, 2002

The Falun murders

A different essay from the same course discussed the media portrayal of the murders in Falun in 1994. The students have examined articles from the news bureau TT, the newspapers Aftonbladet, Expressen, Dagens Nyheter and Svenska Dagbladet. The information in the media examined is based on eye-witness reports from national servicemen and hospital staff who took care of the wounded, for example, the police (via press conferences and phone conversations with duty police officers and interviews), Mattias Flink's legal representatives, and on interviews with relatives and representatives of Falun local authority, the church, the regiment etc. The following extract has been shortened.



Foto: Pressens Bild

“On 11th June 1994, Second Lieutenant Mattias Flink shot seven people dead in Falun. Five members of the women’s voluntary defence services, one security guard and a cyclist were killed. Journalists’ ethical rules state that caution should be used in naming names, but in the case of Mattias Flink, there was no doubt as to who had committed the crime - the suspect/murderer was arrested within an hour of the shootings and confessed immediately - and the crime in question was an extremely unusual one in Sweden. Taken as a whole, these factors meant that there were no major problems in naming the guilty individual. It was also important, in this context, to ensure that public suspicion did not fall on any other Second Lieutenant from Falun.

Aftonbladet did not publish the Second Lieutenant’s name immediately, while Falu-Kuriren refrained from publishing his name in the first week after the shootings. The subsequent discussion on the subject of name publication primarily related to concern for relatives. Local newspapers are usually more restrictive when it comes to publishing names. One important difference noted in general terms is that journalists with tighter deadlines also have less time to check their material and hence may find it more difficult to stick to the rules governing the press, radio and TV news.

The tabloid press often send both news reporters, and a reporter who writes more emotional, comment-type pieces, to the scene of an incident. Writing about dramatic events is difficult. As a reporter, it is very easy to provide too much description, to write too strongly about what you have seen or experienced. Describing terrible things straightforwardly, and including feelings and developments, can often be highly effective, but at the same time, it is important that all of the developments and feelings involved in an event are described.

Journalists, particularly those from the “more serious” newspapers and stations, sometimes ask too few questions out of a fear of stepping on people’s toes, making grief worse etc. But human beings are psychological creatures - simply asking for factual details, rather than seeing the whole person, can mean overstepping the mark just as much as going too far in the opposite direction, e.g. “exploiting people’s grief”. The balancing act required of journalists interviewing people who have experienced something traumatic is a difficult one. How do you know that you are doing the right thing? On the one hand, you could hurt an interviewed victim who does not realise what it means to see themselves in the newspaper (or radio or TV) and who may subsequently regret having agreed to be interviewed. On the other hand, you mustn’t forget that there are relatives who want the chance to speak out and to tell their story.”²⁰

²⁰ From an essay in *Emergency Psychology*, Karlstad University, 2002

When does the emergency reporting end?

Journalists will continue to monitor an incident as long as it is of interest to the public. Articles will be produced, radio and TV pieces edited together, and web-based news will flow from the Internet. Every incident is different: some of them drag on in the media for several weeks, such as the flooding in the Swedish municipality Arvika in the autumn of 2000, which became a real long-runner in the Swedish media. Other events disappear from the Swedish agenda almost at once, such as the plane crash on 1st July 2002, when a Russian aircraft carrying 50 or so children collided with a freight aircraft over Germany.

The media revisit events on their anniversaries, in conjunction with trials, or if new and interesting reports emerge, providing additional clarification. They may also monitor events in connection with a variety of symbolic acts, such as memorial services, the setting up of monuments etc. Journalists also return to a story to find out what has happened since the original incident occurred, what improvements have been made in terms of safety issues, legal matters and collaboration, and to examine new incident-related reports. In some cases, such as the murder of the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, they carry out their own extensive investigations.

The fire on the passenger ferry Scandinavian Star off the west coast of Sweden was a news item that was unexpectedly revived, 12 years after it happened, in December 2002, when the rumour spread of a suspicion that the fire was caused by arson on the part of the ship’s personnel. As long as there are unanswered questions, journalists will always return to a story to ask them.

A learning profession

Evaluating, interpreting and depicting an incident in a short time is the core of journalistic news monitoring. When this has to be done under chaotic circumstances, the severity of the demands made on the journalists in question naturally increases. The risk of incorrect decisions increases. For every major incident, however, the profession can be said, collectively, to be refining their expertise. Events such as the Gulf Wars in 1991 and 2003, the NATO bombings during the Balkan conflict in 1999, and the “war on terrorism” that started on September 11th 2001, have all led to discussions of influence and propaganda in conjunction with conflicts. The ethics involved in contacting relatives and those affected are now completely different from those applied in the early 1990s. But the importance of learning notwithstanding, very few editorial departments have emergency plans in place.

Important preparations and contacts

There are several preparatory measures that you, as an emergency-or crisis aware official information officer can implement right now. This final chapter includes a few concrete suggestions as to the sort of advance preparations your organisation can make. These suggestions should, of course, be adapted in line with your own activities and capacity.

Internal training and discussions

People with media experience usually have a greater understanding of the journalists' and photographers' working conditions than those with less experience, you should work on attitudes towards media before you need to deal with them. Poor relationships and poor previous experiences affect how media relations function during an emergency or a crisis. This preparatory work can include basic training in the media's working conditions and duties during an emergency, newsworthiness and the media's approach, including angles, selection, accentuation and dramatisation. Engaging someone with previous experience of massive and sudden media pressure to join the emergency organisation in the capacity of mentor can provide a shortcut to know-how and contacts.

Meetings in advance

If you haven't already done so, contact the local media and ask them how they would like to receive information if a serious incident were to occur within the local authority. A meeting between media and official representatives can reduce misunderstandings and provide an insight into what journalists expect in connection with an extraordinary incident.



Combined training programmes

Involving local journalists in the local authorities' various emergency groups on the preventative work front, for example, or in combined emergency psychology or first-aid training programmes, can be another way of making contact.

Perform realistic exercises - massive and sudden media pressure

Organise media role-playing sessions when the authority's emergency management team is exposed to massive and sudden media pressure. You may like to include students from local media studies or a journalism course to avoid these exercises becoming too expensive.

Think big when sizing the information organisation

One experience common to several local authorities involved in extraordinary events is that you quickly run out of information personnel. Åsa Grip, for example, who is Head of Information in Sundsvall, and who worked with information management during a severe bus accident in 2001 in which several children died, had no what she calls "runner" between the emergency management team meetings she was attending and the people working with the operational information activities. Ronny Svensson, Head of Information in Orust local authority, which suffered from extensive flooding leading to a disaster



scenario in August 2002, received outside help with the press work from his colleague in the Västra Götaland County Council. He also lacked both a relief to stand in for him and what he calls "rapporteurs" out in the field who could have called in to him with updates.

Prepare your web site

Preparation can sometimes involve something as simple as setting up links to various media's web sites in advance. This allows anyone visiting the web site to start by finding out where they can go for information. Most local media are very quick to post basic information on major events. Make sure that the links are updated and relevant. The authority's own web site should, of course, also be quick to display important information on what has happened.



Find a method of monitoring the media

A functioning media monitoring system that has been thought out in advance is invaluable when a major event affects the local authority area. Without one, it is all too easy to lose one's grip on the overall picture of what is happening and on what has - and has not - been said. Orust local authority provides one example of how to resolve this issue: they solved the problem of media monitoring during the August 2002 floods by having the local authority's webmaster work from home, checking that the information on the media's web sites and on Text-TV corresponded to the local authority's own information. He also discovered numerous instances of inaccurate information on both homepages and Text-TV, largely because things were happening so fast. The media were always quick to correct the information, once the errors were drawn to their attention.

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