

# Public Communications: Vital Link to Maintaining the Public's Trust During Crisis

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## Scene Setter

Pick up a daily newspaper; turn to any national news broadcast; type in the web address for your favorite Internet search engine. What you find from these sources is a smorgasbord of crises du jour.

Several recent examples:

- *A website claims that seven National Football League gridiron stadiums will be attacked with radiological dirty bombs. NFL stadiums in New York, Miami, Atlanta, Seattle, Houston, Oakland and Cleveland.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, only a hoax, the FBI states.<sup>2</sup>*
- *What was initially thought to be another 9/11 attack over New York City turned out to be a tragic aircraft accident taking the life of New York Yankee pitcher, Cory Lidle, who crashed into a 50-story apartment building on Manhattan's Upper East Side.<sup>3</sup>*
- *Within moments of the Space Shuttle Discovery, STS-121, taking off the pad in Florida, on July fourth<sup>4</sup> North Korea was making their own holiday fireworks launching seven missiles, one a long-*

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1. Lara Jakes Jordan, Government doubts threat on NFL stadiums, AP, [www.chron.com](http://www.chron.com), Washington D.C., Internet accessed October 19, 2006
  2. Milwaukee (AP), Football Stadium threat is a hoax, FBI says after interviewing Milwaukee man, STRATCOM FMA News Desk, October 19, 2006
  3. Chris Dolmetsch and Peter Young, Plane With Yankee's Lidle on Board Crashes in NYC (Update 3), [www.bloomberg.com](http://www.bloomberg.com). Internet accessed October 19, 2006.
  4. Spaceflight Now, STS-121 Mission Archive Discovery is home, Available at [www.spaceflightnow.com/shuttle/sts121/](http://www.spaceflightnow.com/shuttle/sts121/), Internet accessed October 20, 2006.

*range type.*<sup>5</sup> *For several frightening moments their final impact points were unknown. Was the United States a target?*

Daily, at local, state and federal levels, there are situations that cause the public affairs (PA) community to rapidly decide to engage or to not engage in public communications. The instant information age in which we work and live with Internet access nearly everywhere from homes to offices, from airports and coffee shops to mobile devices now hanging from ears of driver—is jammed with components that bring news and information rapidly to our citizens. The potential downside for the PA practitioner is there is little time to execute crisis strategic communication plans and be responsive to an onslaught of public inquiry.

In the future, the speed and flow of information will continue to increase requiring organizations to use all the tools of a 21<sup>st</sup> century society when addressing, affecting and assessing public opinion.

The global war on terrorism adds another dimension in public communications for the Department of Defense (DoD) and federal agencies at large. We operate in a dangerous, changing and uncertain security environment. Today, threats are diverse, adaptive and real. Terrorists do not operate on conventional battlefields but thrive in the “gray area” where notions of crime and armed conflict overlap. These circumstances make the work of the PA professional more challenging than ever.

Furthermore, the terrorists have an interest in influencing public opinion. A document recently posted on extremist websites describes a plan to “invade the U.S. media.”<sup>6</sup> The document, written by the Global Islamic Media Front, the communications arm of Al Qaeda, states its priorities as translating Al Qaeda speeches, interviews and other messages into English and disseminating them to American newspapers, forums, television channels, prominent opinion makers and research groups.<sup>7</sup> “People of the Jihad have to create a media war that goes parallel to the military war.”<sup>8</sup>

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5. AP, West Coast Missiles on Alert After Test, USSNORTHCOM & NORAD News Clips, Colorado Springs, July 6 2006.

6. OSD Writers Group Office of Public Affairs, The Nature of the Enemy, 17 October 2006, Pentagon, Vol 1, Issue 2.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

The American government has failed to match the enemy's sophistication.<sup>9</sup> "Our enemies have skillfully adapted to fighting wars in today's media age, but for the most part we—our country, our government—has not adapted," conceded Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in February, 2006.<sup>10</sup>

The circumstances of a crisis, from a homeland defense mission to disaster response, may differ in particulars but there are common threads regardless of the incident. A crisis:

- Does not occur at a time or place of your choosing
- Has potential to threaten the future of your organization, CEO or domain
- Creates victims (self-identified)
- Allows little to no reaction time to research, plan, execute and evaluate
- Requires strong leadership by the senior public affairs counselor

### **Bridging the Gap: NORAD and USNORTHCOM**

Some aspects of all three examples cited in the first section have touched the commands of North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM).

NORAD has been engaged in crisis management for nearly 50 years. NORAD was established in 1958, headquartered in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The organization was envisioned as a bi-national command, centralizing operational control of continental air defenses against the threat of long-range Soviet bombers and ICBMs. NORAD contributed to winning the Cold War by maintaining its deterrence posture.<sup>11</sup>

The events of September 11, 2001, demonstrated NORAD's continued relevance to North American security with a new focus against threats within NORAD's area of operations. Some of NORAD's post 9/11

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9. Douglas B. Sosnik, Matthew J. Dowd and Ron Fournier, *Applebee's America*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2006, 142-143.

10. *Ibid.*

11. NORAD-USNORTHCOM Directorate of Public Affairs, NORAD 101 Brief version 6, NORAD-USNORTHCOM, Colorado Springs, August 15, 2006.

missions have included supporting National Special Security Events such as space shuttle launches, G-8 Summits, national political conventions, and the Reagan funeral. NORAD conducts irregular air patrols within the United States and Canada and is always prepared to scramble and divert aircraft in response to suspected air incidents.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 made it very clear that the strategic environment we operate in has changed significantly since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War.

USNORTHCOM, created in the wake of 9/11 is charged with conducting operations to deter, prevent, and defeat threats and aggression aimed at the United States, its territories, and interests.

USNORTHCOM partners and shares information with other agencies to protect our people, national power and freedom of action. The command also provides defense support of civil authorities (DSCA), including consequence management operations, as directed by the President and Secretary of Defense.

The importance of the unity of command provided by USNORTHCOM cannot be overstated. USNORTHCOM is a combatant command, with a headquarters staff of 1,200 located in Colorado Springs that includes active duty, reserve and National Guard members, from the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard. It also includes civilian employees, contractors and some 60 liaisons from various federal agencies.

As a regional combatant command, within DoD, USNORTHCOM can work with federal agencies at a tactical and operational level, but policies are set at the DoD level.

USNORTHCOM operates in a specific Area of Responsibility (AOR) in accordance with the Unified Command Plan of May 2006. What makes USNORTHCOM's AOR unique is that our homeland falls within it.<sup>12</sup>

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12. NORAD-USNORTHCOM Directorate of Public Affairs, USNORTHCOM 101 Brief version 6, NORAD-USNORTHCOM, Colorado Springs, August 15, 2006.

Examples of USNORTHCOM's missions:

- Missile Defense operations
- Supporting National Special Security Events such as the national political conventions, the G-8 Summit, and the United Nations General Assemblies
- Shuttle launch support
- Helping federal agencies when they ask for military assistance in the fight against wild land fires
- Hurricane aftermath assistance and other natural disaster support

We also conduct or participate in exercises. Some, like TOPOFF (Top Officials), a national-level, multi-jurisdictional, “real-time,” limited-notice response exercise are opportunities for several state and federal agencies, including the DoD, to practice working together.

Having one commander for two commands facilitates a top down direction for a public affairs policy that allows for the timely and accurate release of public information. The “Principles of Information,” signed in 2001, by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, outline the Department’s obligation to provide the public with information so that they “...may assess and understand the facts about national security and defense strategy.”<sup>13</sup>

The commander’s focus for public communication—accurate, available, and aggressive—drives activities, programs and events for the dual-hatted NORAD and USNORTHCOM Public Affairs Directorate, ensuring that public communications occur during both the homeland defense and disaster response missions.

### **Crafting a Public Affairs Strategy**

*“Our institutional reputation depends on our ability to create and foster a positive image...”*

—Charting Our Future, Air Force PA Strategic Plan, March 1995 <sup>14</sup>

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13. Donald Rumsfeld, “Principles of Information,” OSD PA, November 2001.

14. U.S. Air Force Office of Public Affairs, Charting Our Future, U.S. Air Force, Washington, D.C., March 2005.

This may be a statement of the obvious, but when published more than a decade ago it was one of the first efforts to recognize the strong link between an institution's ability to retain and sustain faith with the public and with those within the U.S. military organization.

Having a positive image begins with a concept called "positioning."<sup>15</sup> Positioning, first introduced in the '80's, can start with a product, a service and yes, an organization. "Positioning is not what you do to a product....Positioning is what you do to the mind of the prospect.... That is, you position the product in the mind of the prospect," say Al Ries and Jack Trout, marketing and advertising experts.

Positioning has had a difficult time in gaining traction in the U.S. military. However, positioning is essential as an integral part of the public communications strategy as organizations within the U.S. military come to grips with the difficult problem of getting heard in an over communicated society. Having a strong positive position with the public adds credibility when communicating to the public during a crisis or disaster response.

In order to position to maintain the link between an institution and the public, PAs must draft and obtain approval for contingency, action step strategies. Each strategy must be backed by a thorough strategic communication plan. Building a plan will drive successful outcome, during a "brush fire." Elements of the plan should include:

*Foreword, Contents, Executive Summary, Purpose, Vision, Overview, Situation, Objectives, Issues, Audiences, Themes, Messages, Strategies and Tactics, Responsibilities, Core Values, Communication Goals and Metrics, Execution Timelines, Communication Tools, Audiences and Stakeholders, Measurement and Assessment Tools, and Operating Principles.*<sup>16</sup>

One area often overlooked in crafting a PA strategy is the development of an exit plan. As the DoD response to Katrina was winding down,

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15. Al Ries and Jack Trout, *Positioning: The battle for your mind*; Warner Books, Inc., New York, 1986: 2.

16. Gen Ed Eberhart and Michael Perini, *Public Affairs Roadmap 2003-2004 United States Northern Command, NORAD-USNORTHCOM*, Colorado Springs, 2003.

we faced a new challenge: how to *tell the public the DoD mission was finished*. Fortunately, we had gathered a good deal of information from our previous efforts and were able to develop a transition strategy to match the departure of DoD personnel. Our transition strategy was:

- Adapt PA activities to help manage public expectation as DoD presence declines
- Work hard to replace “soldier” with “civil authority” in images
- Refocus the public on our “deter and defend” missions
- Remain engaged regarding examination of the DoD response effort

### **The Interagency piece: Katrina Lessons Learned**

Let’s review the facts for Hurricane Katrina:

- Over 1 million people displaced; with 270,000 to emergency shelters
- 1,700 children separated from families
- Second deadliest storm in the nation’s history; over 1,200 dead
- Cost as much as \$200 billion
- Largest domestic humanitarian military operation in U.S. history
- 70,000 military personnel deployed for Katrina – 30,000 for Hurricane Andrew, the previous U.S. natural disaster benchmark
- During height of mission, more helicopters supported this operations than currently in Iraq and Afghanistan combined
- More than 18,000 flight sorties
- 49,773 people rescued
- 3,800 animals rescued
- 25,000 DoD personnel involved<sup>17</sup>

Every disaster is local. The state with their respective National Guard forces provides the initial backup to the local first-responders. The governor can always ask for federal assistance. That assistance first comes from a variety of federal agencies. If those agencies can’t provide the support, they can turn to DoD and USNORTHCOM.

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17. Michael Perini, Hurricane Katrina a Department of Defense Perspective, NORAD-USNORTHCOM, Colorado Springs, 2005, v 1.0.

By any public affairs standard of measurement the devastating aftermath of Katrina made disaster response public communications a Herculean task at all levels. Local and state officials are responsible for directly communicating with the people in their jurisdictions. Public officials had to convey the scope and urgency of the emergency—and that included issuing evacuation orders. The hurricane destroyed much of the communications infrastructure, making public communications difficult. Only one radio station was left on the air. USNORTHCOM provided 10,000 radios for Katrina evacuees.

One of the capabilities DoD provided was loudspeaker-equipped trucks—a capability normally used only for psychological operations overseas. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provided the messages; DoD operated the equipment. Another capability, the Digital Video and Imagery Distribution System, or DVIDS, is a system that allows both military and civilian journalists to transmit media products via satellite from remote locations for use by civilian media outlets.<sup>18</sup> The availability of a DVIDS type system at all levels would have helped alleviate the gap in public information.

Keeping the responders informed was a major challenge. Not everyone had access to FOX or CNN. For the military, we relied heavily on our “chain of command” communications, but for others the structure was less concrete.

Images are powerful. Playing over and over were Superdome scenes, buses in the water and desperate people on roof tops. The U.S. military released positive images, both photos and video, of personnel saving lives and restoring infrastructure. We had a specific strategy, but unfortunately it took a while to get resources positioned. By the end hundreds of photos and hours of video were available to the media and public.

### **Finger Pointing Unfortunate**

The Federal Response to Katrina, Lessons Learned, Chapter 5,<sup>19</sup> cites the Federal government’s dissemination of essential public information

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18. DVIDS, Available at <http://www.dvidshub.net/index.php>, Internet accessed November 1, 2006.

19. Frances F. Townsend, The Federal Response to Katrina, Lessons Learned, White House, Washington D.C., February 2006, Chapter 5.

prior to landfall as one of the most positive lessons learned. “The many professionals at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the National Hurricane Center worked with diligence and determination in disseminating weather reports and hurricane track predictions...”<sup>20</sup>

However, the report states the federal public communications and public affairs response proved inadequate and ineffective. More could have been done by officials at all levels of government, the report stated. “Without timely, accurate information or the ability to communicate, public affairs officers at all levels could not provide updates to the media and to the public,” according to the report. It took several weeks before public affairs structures, such as the Joint Information Centers, were adequately resourced and operating at full capacity.<sup>21</sup> Federal, state and local officials gave contradictory messages to the public, creating confusion and feeding the perception that government sources lacked credibility, according to the report.

### **DoD Response a Success**

Despite all the discussion and finger pointing at the federal response to public communications, we consider the active duty DoD response one of the successes of Katrina.

Communications—clear, accurate, and often—is an invaluable weapon in the U.S. military’s efforts in homeland defense and disaster response. Only as a result of an informed work force and public can USNORTHCOM wage a war or manage the peace. This is not a new concept. Clausewitz cited public opinion as a center of gravity in warfighting.<sup>22</sup> Abraham Lincoln said, “Public sentiment is everything. With it, nothing can fail. Without it nothing can succeed.”<sup>23</sup>

The DoD’s active duty support was lead by USNORTHCOM, Directorate of Public Affairs. The office was recognized with the 2006

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20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by M. Howard and P. Paret, Princeton University, NJ, 1984: 88.

23. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Roy P. Basher, ed., Vol. III, Lincoln-Douglas Debate at Ottaway (Aug. 21, 1858): 27.

Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Silver Anvil Award in the crisis communications category. USNORTHCOM coordinated the active duty public affairs efforts for the largest military deployment and humanitarian mission in the United States since the Civil War.<sup>24</sup> “We congratulate U.S. Northern Command for the public relations program that incorporated measurable and sound research, planning, execution and evaluation.... This program contributes to the best practices of our industry,” said David M. Imre, 2006 Silver Anvil Chair and president of Imre Communications, LLC.<sup>25</sup>

With the largest DoD response ever to a domestic disaster, we had to quickly deploy a team of Public Affairs Officers (PAO). The collective effort of nearly 100 DoD public affairs specialists, many of whom deployed to more than a dozen locations in the region, affected an environment where public opinion and media coverage were already negative toward the initial failed federal response.

As with any military organization, we established clear lines of authority. Additionally, we provided officers to help staff the Federal Joint Information Centers.

Once DoD was engaged in the operation, our challenge became one of coordinating and communicating with other federal agencies and the National Guard Bureau who had state status PAOs on the ground. Although there was a daily conference call among all agencies, a physical Federal Joint Information Center was not established until 10 days after the hurricane hit.

We relied on that daily conference call and established our own conference calls with our deployed military PAOs. Additionally we relied on email to provide written guidance and background materials throughout the DoD.

People felt reassured once Lieutenant General Russ Honoré started to appear on TV. General Honoré understood that public communications was an important element to his job. He was brash, earthy and

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24. U.S. Northern Command, “U.S. Northern Command wins PRSA Silver Anvil award,” news release, June 12, 2006.

25. *Ibid.*

frank—not normally traits you would look for in a media spokesman. He was also from Louisiana, a proven leader, and accessible. He fit the situation. A USA Poll of 1,200 Americans voted him the most effective leader of the relief operation.<sup>26</sup>

The Katrina challenge and the challenge still today is that USNORTHCOM will not be the only organization attempting public communications in disaster response. Local, state and federal levels, plus the private sector, will have their spokespeople, press releases and news conferences. The airwaves will be crowded. A clear pathway must be built to sustain faith by the public in organizations involved. Integration, fusion and timely dissemination of information will be the greatest challenges faced by the federal government.

### **The National Response Plan**

The National Response Plan (NRP) published in December 2004, clearly outlines the federal government's role and delineates the responsibilities of all federal agencies including DoD. The NRP places the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as the lead for Emergency Support Function (ESF) 15 and the conduct of public communications.

Note that this is a “National” response plan, not a “Federal” response plan. This recognizes that the response to any disaster is a national effort, drawing together the collective efforts of local, state, federal, and private sector responders.

As specified in the NRP, ESF15 integrates at the national level public affairs, Congressional affairs, state, territorial, local and tribal affairs coordination, community relations, international affairs, and the private sector under the coordinating auspices of external affairs.<sup>27</sup>

Upon activation of ESF15 by the DHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, federal external affairs personnel are employed to conduct operations during an incident of national significance or incident requiring a coordinated federal response in order to provide accurate,

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26. Ibid.

27. Department of Homeland Security, Emergency Support Function 15, Standard Operating Procedures (SOP 2006), DHS, Washington D.C., May 2006.

coordinated, and timely information to affected audiences, including governments, media, the private sector and the local populace.

Standard operating procedures, or SOP, for ESF15 were developed with the benefit of first-hand experience and lessons learned from Katrina. “The catastrophic incident was the first real-world employment of ESF-15, and it identified a range of issues that required more detailed guidance,” according to Brian Besanceney, Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, Homeland Defense Agency.<sup>28</sup>

USNORTHCOM provides Defense Support to Civil Authorities within the general framework of the NRP.<sup>29</sup>

During the Katrina response a message flow plan for public communications was put into place within DoD. We were keenly aware that audiences—domestic, international and adversary—were watching developments. Staying on message helped focus the media on what was important. “National messages” were distributed to the public in a timely manner. Bear in mind that the basic message could be modified to reflect each agencies roles and responsibilities at each stem.

There were bumps in the road in that DoD was very early in message distribution compared to other agencies. Lanes intersected but DoD stayed the course and did not publicly criticize other agencies. As long as each agency “stayed in its own lane,” the system worked well. The old axiom “That’s my story and I’m stickin’ to it” applied.<sup>30</sup> Leading from the rear was a challenge for DoD, but it is likely the position we will find ourselves. So, developing relationships before we exchange business cards at the scene is key for partnering for success.

USNORTHCOM’s Key Messages:

- *Saving Lives*
- *Partner with other agencies*
- *Provide the right response*
- *Continue to Defend the Homeland*

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28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Don Miles, interview by Author, Colorado Springs, Co, 22 October 2006.

Below are examples of USNORTHCOM messages getting to the public.

*“Our commitment is unequivocal,” said Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul McHale at a Washington news conference with officials from the Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies. “We stand in a supporting role, and we are not only willing, we are eager in a time of national crisis to provide whatever relief we can.”*

—Knight-Ridder Newspapers, August 31, 2005

*“NORTHCOM does not provide any military relief independently, but responds to requests by FEMA, which directs the nation’s disaster relief...”*

—Rocky Mountain News, Sept. 1, 2005

*“Officials said disaster relief work won’t affect NORTHCOM’s military preparedness.”*

—The Associated Press, August 31, 2005

Less than 2% of the reports USNORTHCOM analyzed were negative giving an idea of the reach and tenor of the reporting.<sup>31</sup>

A great asset to USNORTHCOM’s success is that co-located at the headquarters are approximately 60 different agency representatives including the NSA, FBI, NASA, DIA, DISA, DTRA, NRO, FAA, NIMA, USGS, USA Corps of Engineers, and Joint Theater Air Missile Defense Organization. This critical factor gives us a head start in developing that clear pathway if we are to build the relationships *now* with fellow senior level and field activity public affairs practitioners rather than during a crisis or disaster response.

Even with all the public affairs success from Katrina, DoD did have lessons learned.<sup>32</sup>

- PA support must be near instantaneous and cannot be encumbered by RFF (Request for Forces) or IA (Individual Augmentee) process. Service and Joint Public Affairs Support Element (JPASE) augmentees fill mission gaps. Flexibility is critical.

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31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

- Flyaway communications packages for forward-deployed PAs are vital. DVIDS and satellite phone availability are a “must.”
- Message alignment between DoD and interagencies are vital. Dissemination must be synchronized. Conference calls are critical.
- PA preparation during crisis communications is dramatically reduced. PA can't wait to media train primary spokespeople.
- Informing the commander and senior staff about PA activities and results is critical for building confidence and managing expectations.
- There is a need within DoD for trained/experienced PAs for interagency work.

Probably the biggest DoD issue to come out of the Hurricane Katrina response was a comment by the President. Because of the leadership and logistical response provided by DoD, people are now looking at how DoD might play a role in the future.

*“...I do think [the bipartisan commission set up by Congress] ought to seriously consider the fact that there are – a storm, for example, of a certain category, which will require an overwhelming response by government that can only be provided by, say, the United States military through USNORTHCOM, because of its ability to muster logistical -- logistics and supplies so quickly. And that's what I want Congress to consider. And I think it's very important that Congress consider this.”*

—President George W. Bush, Sept 16, 2005

### **Balancing the Public's Right to Know**

DoD has defined four basic audiences with specific goals for public communications:

- American Public: To enhance morale and readiness and increase public trust and support. The goals are to disseminate information concerning U.S. military power and capabilities, preparations, and results; to gain and maintain public support for military operations; and communicate resolve in a manner that increases public awareness and understanding of the Armed Forces.

- International: To communicate U.S. resolve in a manner that enhances global influence and deterrence. Modern military operations are often conducted as part of a coalition force and DoD should keep host nations informed much as they do the American public.
- Internal: To communicate with military members and their families. Military members include active-duty and retired, officer and enlisted, Guard and Reserve.
- Adversary Forces: Credible information regarding U.S. intentions and conduct can undermine adversary propaganda, potentially causing dissent within adversary ranks.<sup>33</sup>
- Joint Publication 3-61: “Public Affairs” does preface this description with a caution: *The ubiquitous nature of today’s environment makes it difficult, if not impossible, to specifically target any one of these audiences through the mass media.*<sup>34</sup>

A major flashpoint between the military and the media is over the issue of information security, OPSEC—safeguarding operational information from enemies. The media wants as much information as possible on topics and events. On the other hand information security is an essential part of the military’s responsibilities. Advance knowledge by the enemy of an attack plan could be detrimental to a soldier’s safety.

The handling of information during peacetime disaster response, though not likely to be “classified” under the rules of the National Security Classification System,<sup>35</sup> can still be a point of contention between news organizations and the military. The tendency of some military commanders is to hand the media a complete package of information well into the crisis. This approach will not work in a 24/7/365 world of instant information that demands even the smallest detail be released in a timely manner. Deliberations with news organizations prior to a disaster can help chart a course.

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33. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-61 Public Affairs, Pentagon, Washington D.C., May 9, 2005.

34. Ibid.

35. Frank Aukofer and William Lawrence, *America’s Team The Odd Couple*, The Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, 1995: 23.

The military has a long history of assisting civil authorities. We are very sensitive at USNORTHCOM about protecting civil liberties of our citizens. USNORTHCOM can accomplish its mission within the framework of existing laws.

Conducting exercises or table tops to work through the “gaps and seams” of likely security, safety and privacy issues is a prudent measure before a crisis occurs.

### **Keep Your People Informed**

Often lost in an organization’s response is keeping employees informed. With the relentless pressure to respond to the media and other agency officials our own people can be forgotten. Internal communications must be a priority.

Many of the public communications tools can be “force multiplied.” For example, press updates, fact sheets, responses to queries can be posted on the organization’s intranet. Photos and videos of spokespeople and organizational activities can also be copied and disseminated via electronic means. Copies of public affairs guidance can be distributed via email and discussed at townhall meetings.

During Katrina we provided all USNORTHCOM personnel with “wallet cards” that contained key messages, facts, figures and tips for neighborhood discussions and unscheduled, random media interviews. Where possible, a crisis plan should be created and practiced by family members.

### **Checklist for Success**

*Developing excellent communication skills is absolutely essential to effective leadership. The leader must be able to share knowledge and ideas to transmit a sense of urgency and enthusiasm to others. If a leader can't get a message across clearly and motivate others to act on it, then having a message doesn't even matter.*

—Gilbert Amelio, President and CEO of National Semiconductor<sup>36</sup>

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36. John C Maxwell, *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader*, p. 23, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1999.

There is a critical path to success when managing public communications during a disaster/crisis response. Here is my “keeper list”:

- *Early engagement.* If time permits begin public communication prior to the crisis using available public affairs tools, i.e. news releases, townhall meetings, discussions with public officials, and develop a short list of reporters to embed.
- *Develop and maintain relationships.* Established early relationships give you a voice to correct bad information/reporting. Also, it allows the flexibility to provide background information to trusted reporters that put stories in proper context. Relationships also ensure journalists have the complete picture of the operation and not just a “soda-straw” view based on one observation or experience.
- *Have a plan – synchronize messages within the organization, at all levels and throughout the interagency.* Know what you have. Identify what you may need. Understand the process. Don’t just react to media reports, look at the entire domain of public communication channels to review and evaluate results and make improvements as required.

*Be involved in the decision cycle.* As a public affairs practitioner you should assume the role of the “CRO”—Corporate Reputation Officer.<sup>37</sup>

- *Surge resources at the beginning.* Crisis events are most newsworthy at the beginning. It is important to have information/communications resources at all critical nodes (federal, state and local). Employ resources ensuring the right things, at the right places and at the right time. DVIDS provides another level of access for media as well as global reach at the critical time and place.<sup>38</sup>
- *Provide media access.* Provide access to activities and updates to facilitate understanding rather than waiting for “wrapped packages” of information. Understand the pressure to be first with a story and the ever present deadline.
- *Transparency provides a full picture.* In other words, instead of being criticized for doing something too slow, you will be applauded for accomplishing the task as fast as you did because of the obstacles

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37. David J Shea and John F Gulick, *Media Isn't a four letter word*, Aerospace Industries Association of America, Washington D.C., 2002: vii.

38. Ibid.

overcome. During Katrina, we found that embedding media with our senior leaders, while invasive, was a highly productive process. We were able to provide the in-depth background information that helped the media get the story right.

- *Monitor the media.* Make it a priority. Use digital recorders for network newscasts to ease dissemination and analysis. Hit the web hard and review print coverage. Distribute daily news clips.
- *When false information gets out, correct it immediately.* It makes the difference between a story being a blip on the radar and a full-scale crisis. The Internet provides a venue where even a false story from an obscure source has global potential. Most journalists want to get it right. The written historical record will outlive the event; corrections are important when the event is judged later.
- *Communicate with victims, first responders, and the public-at-large using every available tool for communication.* The use of a public access website can be extremely crucial. Normally, the USNORTHCOM website (www.northcom.mil) gets about 180 thousand hits, mainly from North America, over a ten day period. During Katrina it got over 1.3 million hits from around the world.
- *Choose the audience/venue carefully.* During Katrina we engaged the African American media. Avoid politically charged talk shows. Make time for the historical and internal media.
- *Be consistent.* Develop your story and tell it over and over again. Repetition ensures message receipt and ensures you stay “on message.”<sup>39</sup>
- *Do the right thing for the right reasons.* It might not be in the job description but lending a helping hand can mushroom into public communications opportunities. Having compassion for the victims will go a long way to balancing an adversarial relationship with the media. According to Mike McCurry, White House Press Secretary to President Bill Clinton, “Listening carefully to the questions, understanding and being polite to critics and naysayers, and avoiding snarls at the persistent interviewer all help make a difficult job easier to handle...”<sup>40</sup>

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39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

## **Summary**

Crises are with us.

Local, state and Federal organizations will likely be impacted and must craft a PA strategy that is synchronized between all. This effort should include an exit strategy (getting off the front pages) and include activities that address both domestic and international audiences.

The interagency piece is critical. Having built relationships and developed a public affairs infrastructure early will go a long way in ensuring synchronization of message.

A key element that can't be overlooked is keeping our own people informed. Employees can often be the best ambassadors during a crisis.

Balancing the public's right to know with security, safety and privacy issues should be sorted out during exercises and not during the crisis.

Seize opportunities to take lessons observed and make them into lessons learned. Various public relations organizations have case studies on file that are excellent resources for handling the next crisis.<sup>41</sup>

The Instant Information Age is having a huge impact on the nation's faith in government institutions. If we don't work the public communication challenges now, we will not retain and sustain the support of the nation's citizens during future conflicts or disaster response.

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41. International Association of Communicators (IABC) and Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) websites. [www.Prsa.org](http://www.Prsa.org); [www.iabc.com](http://www.iabc.com), Internet accessed October 21, 2006.

