



Project Distributes Guide to Newsrooms on Responsible Reporting of Terrorism Threats

Studying the media's response to terrorism and bioterrorism

SUMMARY

In 2002–03, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#), Philadelphia, analyzed media coverage of terrorism threats.

Many press reports in the months following the September 11th attacks on New York and the Pentagon in Arlington, Va., magnified fears by describing horrific but highly unlikely scenarios against which there is no reasonable defense, according to Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the director of the Annenberg Center.

Key Results

The project produced the following results:

- On July 12, 2002, the Annenberg Center, the American Society of Newspapers Editors and the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation held a closed-door meeting in Washington with 20 editors and producers to discuss the complexities of covering terrorism, security risks and preparedness.
- Researchers compiled a set of examples of troublesome stories in "Reporting on Terrorism: Case Studies." The case studies provided background for the July 2002 meeting.
- The Annenberg Center commissioned a white paper, "Sensitive Homeland Security Information: Appropriate Protection or Overreaction," by former CIA general counsel Jeffrey Smith and former Washington Post reporter Scott Armstrong that examines how legislation about homeland security may affect the ability of government agencies to share security information with the media.

Researchers held a closed-door meeting for government officials and media representatives on June 11, 2003, in Washington and a public conference the next day to discuss the issue.

- The center published *Reporting on Terrorism: A Newsroom Guide*, which discusses, among other issues:
 - The appropriate level of detail about threats, both to help readers understand them and to hold government accountable to address them.
 - The responsible use of hypothetical cases in reporting on terrorism.
 - How to raise the level of awareness of a threat without causing panic.
 - How to determine whether a story may contain information useful to terrorists.
- The center also published a brochure, "Six Rules for Government and Press on Terrorism," which offers rules of thumb for reporters covering terrorism issues.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) provided \$224,654 to finance this project between April 2002 and September 2003.

THE PROBLEM

Many press reports in the months following the September 11th attacks on New York and the Pentagon in Arlington, Va., magnified fears by describing horrific but highly unlikely scenarios against which there is no reasonable defense, according to Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the director of the Annenberg Center.

At the same time, some press reports provided specific directions on how terrorist threats might be carried out—in the process providing a laundry list of vulnerabilities and possibly even inviting attacks that terrorists might not have considered. Such coverage raises two difficult questions: How can journalists balance the public's right to know against the risk of creating fears about possible attacks for which there is no practical protection? And how can the media hold government accountable for preparedness without increasing the nation's vulnerability?

CONTEXT

RWJF has financed a number of the Annenberg School's efforts to improve the quality of health-related journalism. In previous projects, Annenberg researchers have:

- Conducted media monitoring to improve public understanding of health care.
- Assessed the influence of news coverage and advertising campaigns on the national debate about health-care reform, and produced their own prime-time television program on the issue (ID#s 024790, 023678 and 022974 [see [Program Results Report](#)], and ID# 026814 [part of the Health Care Reform Media Tracking Project] and 024437 [the television production]).

- Developed guidelines designed to ensure that media coverage of suicide wouldn't inadvertently lead to more suicides (ID#s 039573 and 042328).
- Sought to improve use of the Internet to provide consumer health information (ID# 028943).
- Promoted quality television programming for elementary-school children (see [Program Results Report](#) on ID# 030349).
- Explored whether adolescents understand the health risks of smoking (see [Program Results Report](#) on ID# 037045).
- Helped medical students and doctors understand how television programs shape their patients' perceptions of the medical system (see [Program Results Report](#) on ID# 046110).

THE PROJECT

The Annenberg researchers set out to analyze media coverage of terrorism threats and to use their findings as a basis for raising journalists' sensitivity to the risks involved in such reporting. First, they used Lexis-Nexis to collect an estimated 600,000 articles and transcripts published or aired by 28 major newspapers and six major broadcast news networks between September 12, 2001, and May 1, 2002. About twice a week during this period, they contacted specific journalists by e-mail, fax and telephone to discuss stories the researchers found problematic.

On July 12, 2002, the Annenberg Center, the American Society of Newspapers Editors and the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation held a closed-door meeting in Washington with 20 editors and producers to discuss the complexities of covering terrorism, security risks and preparedness. Participants reviewed case studies of terrorism coverage and made recommendations to the journalists about how to present these issues. While Annenberg originally expected the project to lead to development of formal guidelines for media coverage of terrorist threats, that idea was dropped in favor of publishing an informal discussion guide after journalists explained that media outlets are reluctant to establish written guidelines for fear of exposing themselves to law suits.

RESULTS

The project produced the following results:

- **Researchers compiled a set of examples of troublesome stories in "Reporting on Terrorism: Case Studies," a report that was made available to journalists on a password-protected website but was not released to the public in order not to further spread the kind of disturbing reporting they were seeking to discourage.**

(The website is no longer active.) The case studies provided background for the July 2002 meeting.

- **The Annenberg Center commissioned a white paper, "Sensitive Homeland Security Information: Appropriate Protection or Overreaction," by former CIA general counsel Jeffrey Smith and former *Washington Post* reporter Scott Armstrong that examines how legislation about homeland security may affect the ability of government agencies to share security information with the media.** It held a closed-door meeting for government officials and media representatives on June 11, 2003, in Washington and a public conference the next day to discuss the issue.
- **The center published *Reporting on Terrorism: A Newsroom Guide*, which discusses, among other issues: the appropriate level of detail about threats, both to help readers understand them and to hold government accountable to address them; the responsible use of hypothetical cases in reporting on terrorism; how to raise the level of awareness of a threat without causing panic; and how to determine whether a story may contain information useful to terrorists.**
- **The center also published a brochure, "Six Rules for Government and Press on Terrorism," which offers rules of thumb for reporters covering terrorism issues. Recommendations included: help reduce a sense of helplessness by telling citizens what actions they can take; make sure stories are kept in perspective so people do not exaggerate the threat; tell stories of survival and triumph; and provide "safety signals" like all-clear sirens to avert anxiety.**

LESSONS LEARNED

The project generated the following lessons:

1. **Newspapers are resistant to formal, written guidelines because of the legal liability they present.** Efforts to affect journalists' behavior are better focused on informal approaches, such as discussion guides, rather than prescriptive guidelines. (Project Director)
2. **A communications project can reach unexpected audiences.** Although this project was aimed at working journalists, it attracted widespread interest from government agencies that were shaping their own strategies for informing the public about terrorism threats. (Project Director)

Communications

The center distributed more than 5,000 copies of *Reporting on Terrorism: A Newsroom Guide* to reporters and editors throughout the country in the fall of 2002. In 2003, the researchers described the project for the scholarly community in an article in the *Journal*

of Health Communication. They also mailed the "Six Rules for Government and Press on Terrorism" brochure to news directors and managing editors.

A transcript of the June 12, 2003, discussion was distributed to Bush administration officials who were considering regulations concerning public information and terrorism. Both the transcript and the Guide can be downloaded [online](#). Finally, the center produced a segment for its nationally aired radio program, "Justice Talking," on "Terrorism and the Media." See the [Bibliography](#) for details about grant products.

AFTERWARD

Jamieson plans to include the discussion guide in the forthcoming sixth edition of her basic journalism text, *The Interplay of Influence*, written with Karlyn Kohrs Campbell. Researchers are also working on a book chapter, a revised set of case studies, and an article on why journalists sometimes fail to follow up stories about terrorist threats.

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Reports

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Sponsored Conferences

"Coverage of Security Risks Meeting," July 12, 2002, National Press Club, Washington. Hosted by the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation, the Annenberg Public Policy Center, and the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Attended by 20 members of the media and 13 members of the convening organizations.

"Sharing and Protecting Homeland Security Information—Avoiding Conflict Between the Media and the Government," June 11–12, 2003, National Press Club, Washington. Hosted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center. Attended by 20 Capitol Hill staff, members of the media, Bush administration staff and advocacy organization staff.