

Op-ed

Media and Government: Can There Be a Partnership?

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Almost every day we hear news reports of terrorist attacks occurring somewhere in the world. Until the attacks of September 11th our national conscious did not fully fathom that America's homeland is also susceptible to being a terrorist's target. In retrospect it is very clear that the lessons of the first World Trade Center and Oklahoma City bombings had not been learned. On 9-11 we collectively felt that the moats of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans had been crossed and suddenly and unexpectedly we woke up as a nation with terrorism not only at our doorstep, but also inside castle America.

Today in our nation we are spending billions of dollars on Homeland defense and building up our capabilities to prevent and respond to acts of terrorism that include the possible use of weapons of mass destruction. To that end we are equipping and training emergency responders across the land in preparation for possible future attacks.

As we go on this spending spree of buying equipment and security devices I think that it is most important that we as a community understand two truths: First, that Terrorism is not about killing people or blowing up buildings. The terrorist's real goal is to influence public opinion and in turn, public policy. Secondly, that all forms of the media are now considered "Emergency Responders" just like firefighters and police. This new battlefield is not going to be fought in the streets, but on the pages of newspapers, the Internet, radio waves and the screens of television sets. The choice our popular media and local, state and federal governments have is, "which side are they on?" Will they continue to be instruments of terror playing into the hands of the terrorists grand plan to strike fear into people, so that we change our direction as a nation? Or, will they join together with other public and private sector professionals in providing accurate information that balances reporting the situation in terms that informs without sensationalizing.

Would you want an "Emergency Responder" coming to your aid if they had never participated in joint planning, had never trained as a team, and never practiced with the agencies with whom they must interact when all the chips are on the table? Clearly, the answer is no, yet this is the situation that exists here in our regional community and across this great nation of ours. Citing a need for independence and editorial freedom the media is reluctant and suspicious of any such collaboration with public and private agencies that they cover as "stories" on a regular basis.

In this country we have developed a culture of mistrust in institutions in general and a perception that government and the media should not be trusted because each has their special interests to be served. For the media there is a suspicion of any effort that would cause them to collaborate with other public and private organizations. In the media purist's opinion there is no reason for collaboration between the media and any other discipline. They are in search of truth and only truth, wherever the quest will take

them. On the other hand, the public sector and private companies eye the media with a jaundiced eye. There is concern that any miss-step on their part will be pounced on by

a reporter looking to put another notch in their “gotcha” portfolio of investigative exposés. No one wants to bet their stock price or career on the goodwill of the media by opening up and becoming vulnerable only to be a victim of a “Sweeps” mentality that sends them to the trash bin of opportunistic journalism.

It is time for a new day in which the roles and responsibilities of both the media and the rest of us are respected. If we are to “fight” terrorism in the homeland it must start with a bold move by all parties to commit now to sitting down at the table to figure out how we can better serve our mutual citizens and customers/viewers. Some have viewed the media as the enemy. You fight them off with press releases, news conferences and “spin doctors.” The reformation in behavior I’m calling for is revolutionary in what it can mean for our effectiveness in responding to acts of terror. Yes, the media can be on our side and still report the news objectively!

I repeatedly see snippets in books, professional publications, Federal Communications Commission (FCC) documents and other Homeland Security best practices publications that a new relationship between government and the media is needed and must be fostered at the local level. Yet, I know of no one who is attempting this daunting task of spending time “up front” with potential media partners to forge the relationships need to fight terrorism. No one has the time, or willing to spend the time to break out of their operational mold that they have become accustomed to. Change perhaps is our greatest enemy in this fight on terrorism! Who will make the first move? Will you be willing to work through the difficulties to see a new and different future for our homeland?

Governments must be prepared to sit down with their local media to facilitate a discussion that ensures that we understand our various roles and takes our collective relationships to a new level of cooperation. One that includes joint planning, training and exercising for possible terrorist attacks. Some are already laughing about this idea. I can hear it all now, “It will never work. Why would you do that? You will only end up getting burned, and on and on.” To these “Nay Sayers” and those who support the status quo, I say, “Fine, stay stuck in the rut in which you exist.” For others who do not wish to repeat the mistakes of the past and are willing to risk little, but gain much, come join us and become a positive force for a change in relationships that can only benefit our nation.

May I remind you once again, that one lesson from previous events is that this reformation in thinking is needed now if we are going to protect the institutions we love and cherish, not to mention our families and businesses. Can we, will we find a way to counter the terrorist’s end game and become partners with a new paradigm of mutual respect and cooperation?