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The News Media Could Be Our Weakest Link

By Randy Atkins

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This country isn't ready to deal with a catastrophic terrorist attack, and government preparedness may not be the biggest problem. Indeed, one of the most critical parts of our infrastructure -- the nation's news media -- doesn't appear near the top of anyone's list of concerns. They should be of utmost concern to those responsible for homeland security.

I suspect, though, that most defense types simply regard journalists as pests at best, maybe even a threat to national security. They generally feel the media are to be avoided as much as possible and told as little as possible. But with the country's increased focus on security here at home, I think that the strength of the news media is more important than ever.

When we think of infrastructure, we usually think of tangible things that bind us together: our water supply, transportation networks, energy pipelines. The media, too, belong in this category. They are the main communication conduit to the public, carrying valuable information from one place to another. The interconnectedness of these modern infrastructure systems allows greater efficiency, but it also creates new vulnerabilities. And the news media may be the weakest link in this system.

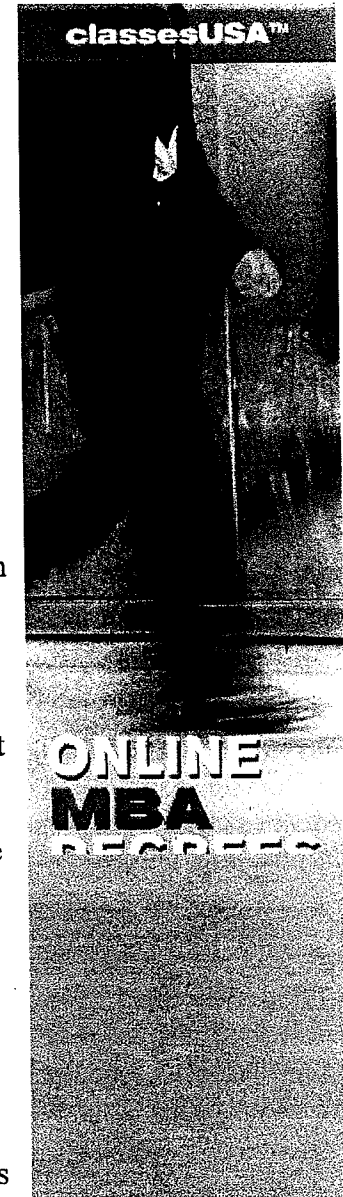
We need to protect the media as zealously as we protect the electric power grid and nuclear reactors, and not just their printing plants and broadcast towers. Their journalists also need to be armed to work effectively as part of the nation's response to terrorism. And to do that, they need the help of the engineering and science community.

A couple of months ago, I was on a panel at a meeting of the Associated Press Managing Editors, and I began by asking who knew anything about the place where I work -- the National Academy of Engineering (NAE). Not one editor in the room raised a hand, and this was a group interested in participating in a discussion about science and technology reporting. I bet I would get the same response from an audience of government policymakers.

Here's what scares me: Neither the media nor the government value the roles of science and technology as much as the terrorists do. While terrorists see Western civilization as bad, they have demonstrated both their adeptness and willingness to take from it what they need -- chemicals, computers, planes. In the same way, while calling us an entertainment-obsessed culture, they use our media, too, to full advantage -- counting on journalists to dramatically present the terrorists' ghastly handiwork.

Ignorance and misinformation can be as damaging to the information infrastructure of the United States as a break in an oil pipeline. It can cause paralysis among citizens, and confuse people trying to respond to a crisis. As a local police chief recently said, "You can't build a fence around a community, but you can arm your citizens with knowledge." American journalists have few precedents for these emerging terrorist threats -- it's different from traditional war reporting. Organizations like mine must work hard to get good information into the hands of the media quickly in the event of any cyber, nuclear, chemical or

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biological attack. Journalists need instant access to trusted experts who are good communicators.

I would go so far as to argue that getting good information to the public in the midst of a crisis can be more vital than the actions of first responders. In fact, journalists *are* first responders. Not only do they sometimes get to the scene first, but they are the only ones focused on and able to describe the level of risk to the public. They can save lives through the efficient delivery of good information.

With today's 24-hour coverage, journalists are under tremendous pressure to say something -- anything -- and to say it first. Of course, this can lead to speculation, which is not always harmless. In fact, sometimes it can cost lives. This isn't just the media's problem. It's the engineering and science communities' problem, too.

At the NAE, we have wrestled with the question of how to help the media become better informed and more conscious of their importance in the event of a terrorist attack. The media, after all, are a vigorously independent bunch, constitutionally protected and -- to the nation's benefit -- outside of government control. So the NAE has decided to conduct a war game exercise that, for the first time, would focus on the media. The goal is to develop new communication strategies for cutting through the chaos of a terrorist attack, as well as to develop better connections between the journalists and the scientists and engineers.

I mentioned our war game idea to a major news organization, and the executives there replied that they felt they had already been tested by 9/11. Well, yes, to a point. But next time -- which we are constantly warned will come -- could be worse. Accurate and efficient communication with the public during a catastrophic attack will require more technical expertise than was needed on 9/11.

Based on past experience, I know that I'm facing an uphill climb. Shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks, for example, the NAE held a daylong briefing for senior news executives from across the country on the technical aspects of various forms of terrorism. We were pleased that the TV networks sent a camera crew over for pool coverage. The crew got there early, but didn't turn on its cameras during any of the morning briefings -- and the briefers included some of the nation's premier experts. The cameras were only there to record the words of the luncheon speaker, Tom Ridge. Then they left.

Too often, journalists take the path they're most comfortable with -- which often means the political angle. Even during the anthrax attacks, journalists were turning to members of Congress and their staffs for technical answers.

I think that, in part, this is because politics is a form of theater, and entertainment trumps substance in the ratings. Let's face it, news is about people and personalities. I know the journalistic importance of storytelling and of doing it in compelling ways. The public, unfortunately, has been trained to have a limited and shallow attention span. If we want it to get information at all, that information must be "packaged" correctly.

The challenge -- for both scientists and journalists -- is to make science, technology and engineering more intriguing; to make it, whether in wartime or not, more a part of popular culture. The media don't take their role -- their responsibility -- seriously enough. They aren't just a business. They are part of this country's infrastructure and times have changed.

We need the media to keep challenging the government, because that friction makes us all stronger. But uninformed journalists can't effectively question authority. For example, well-meaning but misguided government efforts to classify too much information could harm national security by slowing the

delivery of research results beneficial to society. And unless the public is well-informed, it won't know how to analyze the issues and know how to assess the information being provided by its leaders.

Before 9/11, people like me chuckled as journalists churned out their usual ratings-grabbing fare, overlooking important stories while providing full details on the psychology behind the contestants on "Survivor." Just as terrorism was not at the forefront of many journalists' minds before 9/11, I think it's being slowly overshadowed again by today's trivial obsessions.

Randy Atkins is senior media relations officer for the National Academy of Engineering, one of several independent organizations created by Congress to advise the nation on issues involving science and technology.

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