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Journalists Are Not Your Friends!

But Are They Really the Enemy?

Over the years I've attended any number of media courses taught by emergency managers whose theme seems to be that journalists are the bad guys. They use phrases like, "You need to feed the sharks" and tell you horror stories about careers ruined by bad media stories. The upshot is that we teach media avoidance rather than providing the skills needed to effectively work with the media.

This is wrong for any number of reasons. Avoiding the media ultimately means that your side of the story isn't being told and that the media is getting their information from other sources rather than directly from you.

To a certain extent, it is true that journalists are not your friends. They are, by and large, professionals doing their job in as impartial a manner as they can. But that doesn't mean you can't develop relationships that allow you to work together. After all, they are looking for a story to tell and you have a story you want told.

Which Media?

We generally lump all journalists together under the term "media". But journalists are not monolithic and

there is a wide range of differences among them. You need to know with whom you are dealing.

One of the most notable differences is that between the local and national media. Local journalists have a vested interest in the community. You'll probably encounter frequently and get to know them. This makes it easier to develop relationships and to know who to trust and who to avoid.

National media, on the other hand, tend to focus on the story and are not overly concerned with ruffling feathers. They are normally "personalities" and have agendas. Once the story is done, they're gone.

I've found a difference between broadcast journalists and print journalists. Broadcast journalists tend to go where the story leads based on the interviews they record. They record a lot of background material that informs the story even if it not shown. My experience with print journalists is that sometimes the story is already written, and they are seeking either confirmation or a quote. This is, of course, a generalization and I've worked with many fine print journalists.

Which Journalist?

As in any profession, not all journalists exhibit the same standards, and some have clear biases of which you need to be aware. It doesn't hurt to do your homework.

I was once asked by my boss to work with a journalist on a major article about our level of preparedness. I went online and read some of the journalist's previous articles and noticed that they had a very anti-government slant. I recommended we not work with him. I was overruled and the resulting article was extremely negative and factually incorrect. I did write a letter to the editor correcting the incorrect facts. It was edited.

Early on in my career, I was doing an interview with a broadcast journalist and in the discussion prior to filming, I was asked a question that had some sensitive security implications. I explained this to the journalist. However, when the cameras were rolling, she asked the question anyway. I was so stunned that I blurted out the dread, "no comment". Guess what was included in the story?

By the way, there are any number of ways you can deal with such "ambush journalism". You can just stop talking and stare at the journalist, for example. You can also use a spoiler such as, "as we discussed earlier, answering that question might comprise the safety of our community and I am surprised you feel the need to raise it again."

Developing Relationships

How do you go about developing relationships with the media? The first step is to understand what they need to do their job. When we were developing our new emergency operations center, I invited several of media contacts to tour our intended media room and make

suggestions. It was eye-opening. Our proposed concept and layout made it extremely difficult for the media to do their job and we had to do some redesigning. We also worked out ways to share live feeds using our city-owned television and came up with an agreed upon pool system for B-roll during activation. (B-roll is the generic background shots in a broadcast during the voiceover by the newscaster.)

Accessibility is another issue. If a journalist feels like they can call you anytime (within reason) to fact check or request clarification and that they won't be put on hold or not have calls returned, the more inclined they are to come to you first. In several cases, I heard breaking news from a media colleague before I heard it through official channels.

Accessibility has other advantages and is not limited to just breaking stories. I had one colleague who would call me regularly on a slow news day looking for a story. This allowed us to get out a lot of preparedness information as a human-interest story.

The Payoff

Still not convinced that good relationships with the media is important? Our office got hit with a negative grand jury report emphasizing our shortfalls rather than our successes. The media covered the release and our response but the story never developed any real traction, surprising as it was could have been a major political hit on the mayor. I asked a media colleague why nobody seemed interested in turning it into a big story. His reply was, "we've worked with you for five years now and we know you. We believe you and don't think there's a story here." That's the power of good relationships with the media. They are not your enemy. 