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Crisis Management and the Media



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Wars, Terror attacks, natural disasters like floods and earthquakes, and violent uprisings are the staple diet of international journalism.

When the crisis strikes one thing is certain: you will be tackling that crisis in full glare of the media and their cameras. It's very important to know how the media operates and how it reacts to the crisis from their perspective so you can work with the media rather than against it.

In more than thirty years as a senior Editor for the BBC I've led teams covering numerous crises around the world from the Gulf Wars and Bosnia to the Middle East and conflicts in Africa.

I'm going to focus on three scenarios: the death of Nelson Mandela, a terror attack in Kenya, and the kidnapping of the schoolgirls in Nigeria. These three crises demonstrate how as journalists we operate when the big story breaks.

Preparations for Nelson Mandela's eventual demise took years of planning and negotiation with government, while the Al Shabab attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Kenya and the kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls in northern Nigeria were spontaneous breaking news events that occurred without warning.

Although each crisis was different they all shared one common characteristic – good planning which made the difference between successful crisis management and disaster.

In the Military they talk about the "Five Ps" – Pre-Planning Prevents Poor Performance- and I've seen the wisdom of that in teams I've led. When the crisis hits out the key is to have your emergency plans in place.

During Nelson Mandela's long final illness we had a plan that we would rehearse and refresh on a regular basis. Without warning I'd suddenly announce to my team that the crisis was upon us and they would have to swing into action. We rehearsed and rehearsed so that when it happened for real my team knew their roles precisely and what their duties were.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

For the media in a crisis the key is to get on air immediately and then to find ways to stay on air until the crisis is resolved. During the Mandela demise we were on air 24/7 for 10 days. Likewise the Westgate attack required round the clock staffing for five days until the shooting stopped and the Kenyan army secured the building.

To keep the reporters well informed while they are broadcasting they need a support team of producers working their contacts and networks, forged months in advance, to find out information, you need a logistics team organising transport and food, and, equally important, you need to organise a second wave of support to take over when the first wave needs to rest or to report from other locations as the crisis deepens.

The other vital lesson constant rehearsal teaches is that it's crucial to have a Plan B and Plan C because Plan A will almost certainly prove impractical as events on the ground change.

In the Westgate Shopping Mall attack in which more than sixty people were killed our first wave were on site within minutes. They provided excellent eye-witness reporting but it was confused and dangerous to be live on air as the bullets were flying everywhere.

We had to consider their safety and supported their effort with a second wave of reporters in the office to share the on-air updates and make contact with the police, the army and government officials to build up a wider picture of the crisis.

In this age of social media it's vitally important to validate the facts and not give way to ill-informed rumours and gossip. During the early hours of the Westgate attack some news outlets were quoting Twitter posts from Nigeria, thousands of miles away from the crisis.

I've found that people tend to overlook the crucial role the media plays in crisis management. All too often the media is seen by officials and government as an inconvenience or a pest to be kept at bay. The reality is the best managed crises I've seen have been those where the media is embraced as part of the solution not part of the problem.

The days of officials saying "No Comment" don't work anymore in the information age. It makes the officials look secretive or guilty with something to hide.

The media can squash rumour with fact and help demonstrate that everything that can be done is being done to tackle the crisis. The Media will also pass on travel and health alerts and this will help calm and reassure civilians who may be panicking, or may try to exploit the panic by rioting and looting.

The key is early communications. Hold a news conference as soon as possible. Even if you have little hard information it will demonstrate that you're on top of the crisis and your team is doing everything they can to tackle it. If you don't know something be honest and say so but give the promise that you will endeavour to find out more and will say so at future news conferences.

Never create a communications vacuum. During the Chibok kidnapping the Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan didn't speak for five days which created a vacuum from which he never really crawled out of.

Never embark on a running war of words with a pack of journalists. They will descend on the story anyway – and will report of it either with or without your input. They won't go away so you might as well embrace them and regard them as a valuable source for getting your messages across.

Never lie to the media – you will be found out and lose authority. I remember during the Chibok crisis the Army claimed they'd located the girls and returned them back to their families. A single call to their parents revealed this as a lie. As a result the Army was never trusted again as a credible source.

Stick to the facts at all times. Know your red lines. After all you are leading the crisis management and you are in charge of the information.

Show what you're doing. Bring frontline rescuers to the news conference. This will provide empathy, new eye-witness stories and will demonstrate that your team is working tirelessly to resolve the crisis.

Remember the crisis will pass eventually. At that point the story must be how well you and your team handled the crisis not how badly you handled the media.

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