

Defining Crisis News Events

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Abstract

Research on news organizations' handling of 'what-a-story's proposes that journalists find routines for handling these events based on their previous experiences of similar situations. Still, conceptual discussions on how to define extraordinary events or 'what-a-story's have thus far attracted limited interest. In response, the present article proposes a definition of 'what-a-story's in order to provide an understanding of what events become a part of news organizations' historical case banks. Accordingly, the aim of the article is to present a definition of crisis news events from an organizational perspective, which can help distinguish critical news events of importance to news organizations' learning and preparedness. The article argues that crisis news are to be understood as surprise events that challenge key organizational values and demand a swift response. Based on interviews with Swedish broadcasting media managers, the article illustrates how the September 11th terror attacks can be defined as a crisis event.

Keywords: crisis, journalistic practices, media, attacks, September 11th, organizational learning, decision-making

Introduction

When two fully-fueled Boeing 767s crashed into New York City's World Trade Center twin towers, there was little doubt that the world was witnessing one of the most spectacular terrorist attacks in modern times. Interviews with media managers from the main Swedish broadcasting organizations revealed that, despite the unique and astonishing character of 9/11, the terrorist attacks were placed in a certain category of previous extraordinary news events.¹ The categorization was important for Swedish media managers in so far as they recognized the event as a very special kind of news, with the potential to challenge everyday routines and practices. In doing so, the 9/11 attacks were placed in a category with a few, mainly Swedish, news events, such as the assassination of Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986, the sinking of the passenger ferry *MS Estonia* in 1994, and the Gothenburg disco fire in 1998 where 63 young people died – events that at a cursory glance seem quite different from each other. The question tackled here is: *What made the events similar to one another in the minds of Swedish media managers, e.g., which characteristics define really big news events and what made them fall into a special category of news events?*

How the terrorist attacks were reported on has been studied by several scholars, both in a Swedish (see, e.g., Nord and Strömbäck 2006; 2003; 2002, Nordström 2002) as well as in an international context (see, e.g., Aufderheide 2002; Coleman and Wu 2006;

Zelizer and Allan 2002; Mogensen 2008; Bouvier 2005; Hoskin 2004; Reynolds and Barnett 2003). The role of history in journalism reporting has further been addressed in relation to how journalists cover news events (Edy 1999; Houchin Winfield et al. 2002; Lang and Lang 1989; Robinson 2006; Edy and Daradanova 2006; Ryan 2004). Thus, what have not been examined thus far are the mechanisms behind media managers' organizational decision-making during large-scale unexpected news events – for example, how do media managers decide upon 'disaster marathons' (Liebes 1992, 1998; Liebes and Blondheim 2002) and how do they restructure their organizations to meet the challenges posed by such a decision? The present article argues that in order to answer questions concerning how media managers draw upon previous experiences in their decision-making, and to build up more systematic knowledge about organizational preparedness in the media, there is a need for clear definitions that distinguish this very special category of news from everyday reporting. In order to do so, a crisis definition is proposed based on media managers' perception of the event in terms of surprise, threat to organizational values, and limited decision time (Seeger, Sellnow and Umer 1998).

Lack of Concepts and Definitions

In the literature on 'extraordinary events', there are several different concepts in circulation, such as 'what-a-story' (Tuchman 1973; Berkowitz 1992)², 'holy-shit story' (Romano 1986), 'gee-whiz story' (Gans 2004: 156-157), 'crisis' (Nohrstedt 2000), and 'disaster' (Scanlon 2007; Quarentelli 2005). The pluralism of concepts is a problem in that it hampers efforts to build up more systematic knowledge about how news media cope with these non-routine events. Gunilla Jarlbro (2004: 18), who made an overview of media research on disasters, crises and extraordinary events, argues that the variety of concepts and definitions flourishing in the field makes it exceedingly difficult to interpret and compare research results. The difficulties in building up more systematic knowledge in the field of media and crises, due to the multitude of theoretical frameworks and concepts, have further been emphasized by Nohrstedt (2000). According to disaster researcher Joseph Scanlon (2007), research on media and crises/disasters can be said to be divided into two main strands: sociological disaster research on media and research on media and journalism dealing with news work practices. According to Scanlon, cross-referencing between the two traditions is rare, and they generally seem to be unaware of one another's existence (p. 75).

I would argue that the two research traditions described above differ in how they define their object of study in so far as researchers focused on news work apply what I refer to as an *inside-the-media* perspective, and researchers focused on disasters and crises apply an *outside-the-media* perspective. This is the case because the reasons for examining news media in connection with extraordinary events differ. The literature on disasters/crises deals with how the media report on situations characterized as crisis events from a socio-political perspective (see, e.g., Nohrstedt 2000; Quarantelli 1996; 1989; 2002). However, these events might well be routine reporting for the media.³ The inside-the-media perspective, on the other hand, makes the distinction based on whether the event is a routine or non-routine event from the perspective of the journalists involved in news production. According to previous research on news work, the notion of categorization explains how journalists are able to cope with what from

an outside perspective appears as the unpredictability and uncertainty of news events (Bantz 1990; Molotch and Lester 1974; Tuchman 1973; Schlesinger 1977; Berkowitz 1992). The concept of ‘what-a-story’ is then understood as a deviant concept, which differs from routine news owing to its surprise nature.

As a way of overcoming the divide in definitions between the two research traditions, I apply a definition taken from an organizational crisis management perspective in order to incorporate both the journalists perception of an event (the *inside-the-media* perspective) with the societal demands on media reporting during crises (the *outside-the-media* perspective). According to Boin et al. (2005), it is vital to take into account the decision-makers’ own perceptions of the above criteria when trying to understand what made a certain event a crisis for the organization in question. Accordingly, in the present article, I argue that media managers’ perceptions of an event in terms of surprise, threat to organizational values, and limited decision time provide one fruitful way of defining crisis events for media organizations (Seeger, Sellnow and Umer 1998). The definition combines the inside perspective with the outside perspective by emphasizing that the societal magnitude of the event is what makes it a challenge for news organizations and what prompts speedy crisis coverage. On the other hand, the notion of surprise is closely related to previous research on news work that emphasizes journalists’ interpretations of news events. Further, the notion of journalists’ categorization of events into certain categories is closely connected to the role of previous experiences of similar events, which will be briefly discussed in the next section.

The Role of History in News Organizations’ Response to Big News Events

The importance of correctly categorizing news events is stressed by Berkowitz (1992), who argues that typifying news events presents one of the biggest challenges a news organization can confront, as that classification determines what resources and working processes the coverage will demand. According to Tuchman (1973) and Berkowitz (1992), previous experiences play an important role in journalists’ responses to ‘what-a-story’s. In this vein, one of the findings from Tuchman’s (1973) study on newsroom practices was that “rules governing the coverage of ‘what-a-story’ were invoked by citing another ‘what-a-story’” (p. 128). Similarly, Nord and Strömbäck (2006) argue that the possibility for news organizations to do a good job increases if the organizations have previously confronted similar news events. This is the case because, “[i]f an event can be anticipated, news departments can change their priorities, time schedules and working procedures in order to improve coverage of the forthcoming event” (ibid.: 88-89). Notwithstanding, the authors call attention to the fact that there is a lack of empirical research concerning how news organizations manage truly unexpected events. Likewise, and they also stress that ‘normal’ crises rarely expose news organizations to severe constraints and that such knowledge can only be gained in connection with big news events such as 9/11 (Nord and Strömbäck 2002: 167).

Zelizer (1993a; 1993b) applies a somewhat different perspective regarding the role of history in connection to the development of journalistic norms, practices, and values. From her point of view journalists are an interpretative community, which is in contrast to the idea of solely understanding journalism as a ‘profession’. One central feature of interpretative communities is the telling of common stories centered on certain key news

events, in which experiences and stories related to journalistic attitudes and work routines are developed. These stories eventually become common journalistic norms whereby “journalists become involved in an ongoing process by which they create a repertoire of past events that is used as standards for judging contemporary action. By relying on shared interpretations, they build authority for practices not emphasized by traditional views of journalism” (Zelizer 1993a: 224). Further, journalists are depicted as being caught in ‘double time’, oscillating between the ‘local mode of interpretation’, which consists of lessons learned from a particular news work context, and the ‘durational mode of interpretation’, in which particular incidents become part of a broader history of journalism.

As can be seen from the discussion above, both Zelizer and Tuchman acknowledge the role of history and previous experience in connection with big news events. Yet they differ in their understanding of journalistic routines; Tuchman’s notion of typification is more static than Zelizer’s notion of journalists as ‘interpretative communities’, as the latter is more open to change and the development of routines in connection with big news events. In contrast to previous research that focuses on journalistic practices for reporting news events, the present article contributes to knowledge in the field by examining how top media managers, with responsibility for overarching organizational responses, categorize crisis events. Here I argue, in a manner somewhat similar to Zelizer’s (1993a; 1993b), that crisis events form a special category of events that have the potential to challenge existing routines. As already mentioned, Zelizer understands the change of practices as a learning process, alternating between the two modes of interpretation described above. The following section is a short summary of how Swedish media managers linked the September 11th events to previous similar crisis events, which consequently had significant implications for change and development of their news practices. Accordingly, this can be read as an illustration of a learning process.

Crisis Events and Their Importance for Organizational Learning

This section briefly illustrates how the Swedish media managers referred to previous crisis events and the role of these events in organizational learning. Frequent referencing, and the similarities within and across the managerial groups in terms of which events they refer to, strengthens the notion of crisis events as an important category of events for development of news organizational practices.

Starting with the managerial group at Swedish Radio (SR), the 9/11 terror attacks were placed in the same category of previous events as the murder of Olof Palme, the sinking of the passenger ferry *MS Estonia*, the Gothenburg disco fire, and the Gothenburg riots. According to the Director of Programs “National” at SR, the events were similar in that they all placed high demands on the organization and, in the end, risked jeopardizing organizational legitimacy. “You realize that it is important to reflect upon these kinds of events in the correct way. These events are also the types of events that demand the most from us professionally. It is vital that we do our best”. According to the Director of Programs “Local/National”, SR has no set contingency plans for coping with crisis events. However, previous experiences have played an important role in developing mental preparedness and in modifying practices. Thus, he stresses that SR’s response to the terror attacks was an exceptionally successful example compared to the management of previous similar events: “Unfortunately, we have had the opportunity to

practice dealing with these kinds of events at frequent intervals – everything from the Palme murder to the sinking of the *Estonia*. [...] Even though we have not managed all of them well, we have tried to evaluate and learn from all of these events” (Director of Programs “Local/National” at SR).

In a similar manner the managerial group at Swedish Television (SVT) also referred to previous events in terms of their impact on organizational preparedness. Similar to SR, references were made to events such as the sinking of the *Estonia*, the Palme murder and the Gothenburg riots. Further, in relation to the amount of coverage broadcasted, events such as the death of Princess Diana⁴ and the Stockholm murders at Stureplan were also mentioned. Just as the managerial group at SR did, the managers interviewed at SVT mentioned the importance of these big news events to organizational learning. “All of these big news events have been followed up internally by enormous amounts of discussions and evaluations. We did this after *Estonia*, and in connection with the murder of Olof Palme [...] the riots in Gothenburg and the murders at Stureplan [...] and we revised our internal procedures every time” (the Head of News, SVT). Even if certain events contain similar features, the Head of News nonetheless stressed the fact that one defining characteristic is that such events are never identical. This means that every crisis news event tends to make its own specific contribution to the development of the overall organizational preparedness of news enterprises. For example, the main lesson learned from the shootings at Stureplan in 1994⁵ was that the newcomer TV4⁶ was much better than SVT at reporting news quickly, which made SVT work harder on developing its capacity for quick coverage.

In relation to Zelizer’s notion of durational mode of interpretation, the Head of News at SVT emphasized that some news events affect the entire media sector’s perception of media preparedness. The murder of Olof Palme in 1986 is a good example of such a wake-up call in relation to quick coverage. “The Palme murder played a very important role in moving us onto a new level of news preparedness in Sweden. It was an awakening, and it posed new demands on us concerning how fast we can supply the news. These demands were quite low before.” According to the Head of News, the terrorist attack on 11 September 2001 can be compared to the murder of Olof Palme in that both were very special types of events.

You could follow the event [9/11] completely. There was something special about it that shook us up. This contributed to the fact that what happened on September 11th is not really applicable to big news events in general, I think. Even though there are enormous amounts of lessons to be learned from this event. It is similar in many ways to the Palme murder, since it also aroused all of the news desks and made them reassess their level of preparedness. I mean, at the newspapers they just turned off the lights and went home [...] but Swedish Radio had problems with their switchboard and... There are a lot of these kinds of events that have an effect on how news organizations are designed (Head of News SVT/Anna Lindh interview).

Also the CEO at TV4 refers to the murder of Olof Palme as a vital moment for the overall preparedness of Swedish news organizations. “The Palme murder was a disaster from a media perspective, where people at the [Swedish] radio and [Swedish] TV simply went back to bed again. [...] That was a real wake-up call for the big city media.”

In relation to their own organization, the managers at TV4 stressed the significance of big news events for organizational preparedness. According to the Director of Current Affairs, every big news event evokes new practices. “Every big news event is different, but every time routines get strengthened, and accordingly we get better and better at making sure that we have alarm lists and procedures”. In relation to learning, he emphasized the importance of not taking for granted that the last way of covering an event can automatically be applied to the next situation. Therefore, it is important not to stick to a fixed routine but rather to have “a high preparedness consisting of people who can cope with these kinds of situations, which look different every time. The only thing you can do is to make sure you can have good deliberation procedures so you can make good decisions”. According to the Director of Programs at TV4, there are certain key events that have played a vital role in building up TV4’s decision-making procedures in connection with big news events. These were summed up as follows: “there is always this discussion on what constitutes a big news event and it cannot be defined exactly with millimeter precision, but in connection with the sinking of the *Estonia*, the terror attacks, and other events such as these, like the Gothenburg fire”.⁷

In more general terms, the CEO of TV4 emphasized that big news events have certain characteristics that make them special events for the news media – even though they are difficult to describe with precision. “You follow an impulse, a reflex; you receive training on how to act when it comes to a crisis. I must say that it is quite special.” He pointed out that it might be hard to learn specific lessons from these occurrences; rather one learns the special character of the news work required by these events:

When it really goes off, everyone is there and there is a very special kind of teamwork. I still remember the night when Palme was murdered, and the way we worked back then, and the change of government in 1976. [...] It works in a different way; you tear down the walls and go with the flow. And it works in a way that is hard to describe if one has not been there. And it works, because everyone becomes a soldier and wants to pitch in.

To summarize, the managerial groups in all three media organizations primarily referred to the same historical events when linking the terrorist attacks to previous events. Further, the discussion above points to the somewhat paradoxical nature of these types of events. It is obvious that big news events form a special category of events, yet at the same time, one of the defining characteristics is that they differ from one another. In the following section, I will illustrate how these two, at first glance contradictory characteristics, become less contradictory when we look at big news events from a crisis perspective. The crisis definition will be applied to media managers’ own accounts of how they perceived the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Surprise, Challenge to Organizational Values, and Short Decision Time – Defining Crisis Events

Surprise

The perception of surprise and uncertainty is salient when speaking to Swedish media managers about their experience of the September 11th terrorist attacks. They all referred to how extraordinary and unexpected the event was. For example, the Director of Plan-

ning at SVT stated, “It became almost a bit supernatural in a way. I mean when the two towers collapsed; it was such an unlikely and illogical event. It almost became like one of those computer games”. A strikingly similar opinion was expressed by the Head of News at SVT, “Of all the big events that we have handled, this one was beyond everything else. The event was so shocking that the normal standards were no longer valid.” Still, the Head of News at SVT compared the terrorist attacks to the murder of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986, due to their surprise effects.

I think that both the Palme murder and the terror attacks of September 11th were events that no one could foresee; where reality in some way surpassed fiction. Not even a group of journalists, having a brainstorm session, could have speculated about such an event. You cannot make up these sorts of things. Two planes crashing into a tower; it is simply too much. I remember escorting Prime Minister Göran Persson to an interview that day and how he was referring to some kind of a movie with the same theme.

Further, the Head of News compared the terrorist attacks to the murder of Foreign Minister Anna Lindh two years later, which according to him was not perceived as being an equally big news event even though it still demanded a special kind of coverage. Yet the murder of Anna Lindh did not evoke the same amount of surprise as the assassination of Olof Palme in 1986, despite the fact that there were quite similar events. “We have already had a Prime Minister who was murdered. [...] It has happened before. It is already discounted in the minds of the journalists; I mean the news event as such, and how to work with it. September 11th did not have that character, it deviated so much from anything we had seen before.” The Head of News at TV4 made the same comparison: “It [the terrorist attack] was a news event, never seen before, that was the big difference [between the two]”. Besides the murder of Olof Palme, the Head of News at SVT also compared the terrorist attacks to the sinking of the passenger ferry *Estonia* in terms of the surprise effect:

The surprise effect had many similarities to *Estonia*, when no one understood the magnitude of the event. I remember when the alarm came [...] I thought it was some sort of ship that was empty when it happened. It was impossible to imagine 900 passengers onboard. It did not emerge from the information we had, and it was hard to imagine such a thing. The information available said that a ship had sunk and that some life vests had been seen. At least, it made me think that it was an accident with a couple of dead people. Then it grew like an avalanche...

According to the Head of News, what makes these kinds of events paradoxically similar to one another – the surprise effect – is also the thing that makes them unique. The Head of Current Affairs at TV4 said that one of the essential characteristics of these events is the fact that none of them are equivalent to another. “Even if it actually happens to be an exactly identical event, our perception of that event would be totally different when it repeats itself, which means it has to be handled in a different way. It is impossible to say that this is the second time I experience this for the first time”. The uniqueness of these events is also the reason why it is difficult to prepare for them. “All of them have elements of previous news events. But at the same time, what is characteristic of really big news events is that they are never the same, and that is why they always lead to the

remaking of contingency plans". After every big news event, new elements emerge that need to be fixed, meaning that yet another part of the enterprise's organizational preparedness has to be reworked (this will be elaborated on in the following section).

Based on the above discussion, it is evident that surprise is an important aspect of extraordinary events. Even if the event is new, managers recognize the surprise factor witnessed in previous events. It is both the newness and the historical references that cause managers to recognize these events as a special category.

Challenge to Organizational Values

This section illustrates how these kinds of highly significant events present an opportunity for success or failure for the organizations. This is also closely connected to organizational legitimacy, as these are the moments when news organizations' actions are under close scrutiny by the public, media critics, and other news organizations.

According to the interviews, it is clear that crises entail both risks and opportunities, since these really put news organizations to the test. The interviews also revealed the importance of not only internal but also external assessment of organizations' performance in connection with a crisis news event. For example, the general perception within the SR managerial group was that the organization performed well during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Interestingly enough, this opinion was not only based on internal assessments, but primarily on evaluations from external media critics, as expressed by one member of the managerial group:

The first thing is the subjective perception, even though that is quite difficult [...]; what are we missing out on, and what can we do better? That is a sort of continuous evaluation. But that is subjective. It is not until some days later when external critics start making their own evaluations that you know whether your subjective assessment was right or wrong. [After 9/11] we received good reviews from both radio and media critics quite quickly.

The quote illustrates the weight external critique carried, and that personal subjective perception of the organization's performance is subordinated. It also reinforces the notion that successful handling of these kinds of events is essential to the legitimacy of news organizations. Given that news organizations regard crisis news events as the ultimate test, a failure is devastating for an organization's self-image and self-confidence, as expressed by the Head of the program *Ekot* at SR.

That a news desk is confronted by a challenge like this and is able to concentrate all its resources on doing this kind of very well-defined work makes everyone realize that this is the reason we exist. To have the opportunity to do this and to get the acknowledgement when we have succeeded – that is very positive, and a news desk can live on that for a long time. On the other hand, a news desk that fails will have a hard time recovering. That happened for example to SVT, because they were quite unsuccessful. They made a lot of mistakes and have been having a hard time since then.

However, the managerial group at SVT did not perceive its coverage of the event as a major failure on the night of 9/11, as was the case with SR as well, but the prevailing judgment came from external media critics. The managerial group at SVT felt misjudged

by its critics, particularly because the criticism was solely focused on the first evening and on the fact that SVT did not tear apart their pre-planned schedule (compared to SR and TV4).

The critics cared about the first day, not endurance or continuity or anything like that, just the very first day of coverage. And we lost that fight. TV4 came off as more coherent, and they were, unfairly, perceived as being faster when they in reality were half an hour later. We learned a lot from that.

That SVT in hindsight considered their reporting on the terrorist attacks a failure is confirmed by talking to the media managers at SVT. The Head of News described the terrorist attacks as an event that had a profound impact on the organization's handling of other big news events. According to one member of the managerial group, "We have had great use of this when constructing contingency plans on how to act in connection with unexpected events [...] Our experiences of September 11th have been carved in our heads and we will always remember September 11th". The event became an important starting signal to restructure in order to be able to better cope with extraordinary news events. According to the Head of News at SVT, the terrorist attacks introduced a new way of thinking when it comes to continuous broadcasting.

One example of the importance of crises to news organizations is the weight the managers give to scheduling decisions in connection with these kinds of events. According to the Director of Planning at SVT, news events like September 11th confront organizations with one of the toughest kinds of decisions – to assess the impact of the event and to match the audience's perceptions of the event with the coverage.

The worst kind of stress for the planning department is how to assess the situation. [...] These kinds of situations are the most stressful because that is when the organization is put to the test – when trying to understand and to estimate the power or the importance of the event in connection with the audience assessment of what is reasonable coverage.

One reason for the stress is that there are no real guidelines; instead decisions have to be made based on intuition and previous experience.

It is the radar scanner: how big is this [...] how profound are the changes required? The author Astrid Lindgren dies, ok, how much should we do in connection with that; the two World Trade Center towers fall, how much will we do based on that? It has to do with the feeling of how radically we have to change our pre-planned schedule. And in that context, it is obvious that the terror attacks and the sinking of the passenger ferry Estonia are in some way a similar experience. It is obvious that it does not matter what was actually scheduled, to be broadcasted even if it would have been the Eurovision song contest. . .

The managerial group at SVT concluded in hindsight that the biggest failure during the terrorist attacks was the fact that SVT did not make enough changes in its format and broadcasted the news on one channel.

Members of the managerial group at TV4 also spoke of the stress involved in deciding how to cover the event. The Director of Programs at TV4 described a feeling of enormous uncertainty as the situation developed, and recounted a gnawing anxiety

over whether the managerial group discussion was flawed. “There was a growing feeling while watching these pictures [on CNN] of, ‘What is this? Is it the start of a war?’ It seems to be something gigantic happening out there, and it does not look good. We need to do more”. The feeling was that it simply would not be enough to handle the event by adding a few extra newscasts, and there was a growing sense of uneasiness that more had to be done:

Since the TVs were on in that room, the feeling of watching CNN’s pictures and our own broadcast, showing some nonsensical afternoon TV series, became pretty absurd in the end. But the whole discussion changed immediately when the towers fell. This is not enough anymore. It just won’t hold.

It thus did not become clear that the whole schedule needed to be changed until the two towers had collapsed.

Besides avoiding public criticism, decisions concerning how to handle these kinds of events are essential to attracting viewers. SVT’s self confidence was shaken by the fact that TV4, for the first time, received very high viewership figures during a crisis. The Director of News and Current Affairs at SVT explained that the terror attacks broke the normal viewership pattern during big news events. “Even though we were still the biggest, TV4 suddenly became unusually popular. Normally the audience by tradition turns to SVT during big news events, because it feels more reliable”. This view was reinforced by the Head of News at SVT. “The normal condition during big crisis event the audience turns to SVT, because they seek some sort of credibility and they feel they can find it here. But this news event was of such an enormous scale that no one initially cared about the sender. There was such an immense interest in following this [...], which meant that all senders in principle had an equally large audience.” While SVT expressed disappointment with their viewership rates, TV4 was very content with the situation. According to the Director of Broadcasting at TV4, it has been the case from the start of TV4 that SVT is the organization with the most credibility during crisis events, and following the 9/11 attacks, he and his channel felt proud about changing that pattern.

The only thing I felt proud about in a situation like this was that people were watching TV4 instead of SVT – during a type of occasion when people traditionally turn to SVT. That people chose TV4 was a confirmation that we could be taken seriously in a crisis situation. We knew that many perceived us as being fast and therefore always checked with us, but the moment it was time for the big report – SVT got the opportunity. It is like the fact that the Prime Minister always goes to SVT first after an election and only after that to TV4.

From the discussion above, it seems clear that crisis events have important implications for essential organizational values such as viewing figures and self-confidence – and ultimately for organizational legitimacy.

Short Decision-making Time

Broadcasting the news as quickly as possible lies at the core of news organizations and is a large part of what defines news work. Not surprisingly, the respondents in all three organizations mentioned the urgency of making decisions on how to broadcast events and of broadcasting them quickly. In analyzing the interviews, it is clear that even though

stress and time constraints are everyday phenomena in news organizations, the terrorist attacks of September 11th were still extraordinary in terms of these aspects. For all three of the organizations, the ability to start broadcasting on the event as soon as possible was the main objective of the activities undertaken. The Head of Ekot at SR for example stressed the fact that the most important thing he did on the day in question was to call on the Directors of Programs to make the overarching scheduling decisions. “The eight hour broadcast was decided within 10 minutes. Every second counts in situations like this, and it is extremely difficult”. For all three managerial groups, the limited time available called for speedy decision-making concerning which format to use in order to cover the event. The first meeting with the TV4 managerial group on how to respond to the event was described by the Director of Broadcasting at TV4 as “stressful, and there was no time for long deliberations. Rather it was like, ‘Let’s do it like this’.” The Head of Broadcasting at TV4 described the amount of tension at the first meeting, after finding out about the events, as follows:

At the first meeting everyone was in a state of chock. What do we do,? What has happened and how can anything like this even happen in the first place? It was obvious that we were all enormously affected, and the time to discuss and analyze was limited. The focus was rather on making *very* fast decisions – deciding what to do and then running off and doing it.

According to the Director of Programs at TV4, stress is particularly troublesome for strategic crisis decision-making (such as making overarching program scheduling decisions), as these kinds of decisions require time for reflection and discussion.

The most problematic thing when something like this happens is to calm down the group. ‘Stress creates situations where people get caught up in tunnel vision thinking and start acting on their own.’ Let’s do it like this, I demand it..’ But it was actually quite calm and sensible. I remember a few times when someone opened the door to enter the room, and I screamed, ‘Go away! I need to work in peace!’ It is important to create an environment where one can make decisions in a calm, sensible and logical manne; ‘we need to talk about this for five more minutes in order to turn over a few more stones because you will gain from that in the long run’.

He stated that one of the most difficult things in a situation where everyone is really stressed is to take the time to think through decisions, which implies that news organization’s decision-making risks being affected by time shortages.

This section illustrates the importance of making swift decisions in order to be able to start reporting on the news. Because crisis events require another format compared to everyday reporting, organizations need to be able to make decisions on how to reorganize and reschedule within a limited time frame.

Concluding Discussion

As stated at the beginning of the article, if we want to understand news organizations’ actions and their ability to cope with extraordinary events, a clear definition of such events is necessary. In describing and explaining the mechanisms that distinguish the

management of extraordinary events from everyday reporting, it is essential to consider the insider perspective and look at how events are perceived by the media managers and journalists themselves. Based on an abductive approach, a definition was proposed that takes into consideration the conditions of surprise, the challenges to organizational values, and the short time frames for decision-making. The criteria match the way the managers themselves understand such situations; that is, that certain types of crisis news clearly stand out from everyday reporting.

The definition further stresses the link between the *inside-the-media* perspective and the *outside-the-media* perspective, where organizations risk losing legitimacy if their actions do not correspond to what is seen as appropriate organizational behavior based on the general social norms and values (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer 2003: 231; Suchman 1995). One of the main challenges to media managers' sense making is then to be able to comprehend the event in accordance with the audience's understanding of it. If the media managers are not successful in making this match, the organization risks losing its legitimacy. As losing or jeopardizing legitimacy is disastrous for organizations, crises make organizational history: organizational glory or embarrassment.

The present article demonstrates how crisis events become important historical analogies for media managers with the potential to challenge previous assumptions and eventually give rise to new standards in news organizations' program scheduling and organizational preparedness. Whereas previous research demonstrates the importance of history in terms of journalists' typification of news events (that is, categorizing and finding the appropriate mode of reporting the news, for example in Tuchman 1973 and in Berkowitz 1992), the present article shows that historical analogies are used in different ways by the media managers who have to make the decisions on how to cover extraordinary events. There does not seem to be any resemblance regarding the type of news (for example, natural disasters, terror attacks, fires, etc.) Rather, the determining factors seemed to be whether an event came as a surprise, posed a challenge to organizational values, and required quick decision-making.

Notes

1. The main part of the interviews studied here focus on the handling of the September 11th terrorist attacks at Swedish Public Radio (SR), Swedish Public Television (SVT) and TV4. The semi-structured interviews, which were conducted within a year and a half after the crisis, have been part of a larger project on crisis management at SR, SVT and TV4 (altogether comprising: 44 interviews at SR, 31 at SVT, and 6 at TV4). The interviews lasted for around one and a half hours and have all been transcribed. The interviews selected for the present article consisted of the top managerial groups at each news organization – i.e. *those responsible for the overarching program planning decisions on how to cover the event*. The interviews focused on how the managers understood the situation at hand and how they dealt with it. The interviews used here include: six members of the managerial group at SVT (the Director of Planning, the Head of News, the Director of News and Current Affairs, the two Heads of the evening news programs *Rapport* and *Aktuellt*); five members of the TV4 managerial group (the Director of Programs, the Director of News, the Director of Planning, the Director of Current Affairs and the Director of Broadcasting); and three members of the SR managerial group (the Director of Programs 'National,' the Director of Programs 'Local/National,' and the Head of the news program *Ekot*).

Additional interviews were conducted following the murder of Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh in 2003, and in connection with those follow-up questions were posed regarding the impact 9/11 had on organizational preparedness. The empirical material in the Anna Lindh case was more limited and consisted of five interviews with SVT managers (the Director of News and Current Affairs, the Head of News, the Director of Planning, the Head of the extra broadcasting organization, and one editor

- from the extra broadcasting organization); one interview at TV4 with the Director of Current Affairs, and an interview with the Director of Programs National at SR. The study has been conducted using an abductive approach (i.e. an interactive theoretical and empirical process – see Alvesson and Sköldbberg 1994) based on close readings of the parts of the interviews in which the interviewees described big news events (in terms of their characteristics and their role for organizational learning) as well as on relevant literature in the field.
2. Tuchman (1973) argues that despite the fact that most news events can be placed in certain categories of news, some news events are so unique that they even become problematic for journalists to categorize. She refers to these events as “what-a-story” events, based on journalist’s reactions. Correspondingly, she describes journalists’ reactions to the announcement of US President Lyndon B. Johnson that he would not be running for re-election as the following: “Symbolically, the degree to which this typification is itself routine is captured by the almost stereotypical manner in which verbal and non-verbal gestures accompany the pronunciation of ‘*what a story!*’ ‘What’ is emphasized. The speaker provides additional emphasis by speaking more slowly than usual. The speaker adds yet more emphasis by nodding his [sic] head slowly, while smiling and rubbing his hands together” (p. 126).
 3. It should be noted that for example Tuchman (1973) categorizes disaster news events as a form of routine news, so-called ‘developing news’ (p. 121).
 4. It should be noted that both SVT and TV4 broadcasted more news on this event than did SR (percentage of total broadcasting time: Aktuellt, 26; Rapport, 28; TV4, 25; SR, 19) (Gherstet and Hvitfelt 2000: 51), which is one explanation as to why this event is not mentioned by interviewees at SR.
 5. The shootings took place in central Stockholm on December 4, 1994, when a doorman and three guests were killed at the entrance to the popular nightclub ‘Sturecompagniet’.
 6. TV4 began broadcasting by satellite and cable in 1990, and moved on to terrestrial broadcasting in 1992. The opening up of the public service media monopoly and the implications this had for the development of news practices in Sweden is an interesting area of study, but unfortunately beyond the scope of the present article.
 7. Unlike SR and SVT, the managerial group at TV4 also made reference to the police murder in Malexander in 1999, not due to the magnitude of the event but rather as an event where the managerial group had been caught off guard and had to quickly readjust its planning. The event disrupted the normal scheduling of TV4 and demanded swift action from the managerial group. TV4 had planned to broadcast its entertaining program ‘På rymmen’ (‘On the Run’), but the event made it both unethical to broadcast as well as practically impossible since it included helicopters taking off near the area of the crime scene which had been closed off. According to the Director of Programs, “All of the sudden an ordinary youth program had collided with reality, and that is not something you expect to happen [...] and then we have to handle this in 15 minutes with people on their way to the studio, when there was no program...”.

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