Dimensions of Emergency Messages as Perceived By Journalists and Sources

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The paper posits a set of dimensions along which emergency communication message construction between journalists and official sources differs from other message interaction. The coorientation model is used to assess both groups' views about three features of emergency news and to evaluate their expectations about each others' views on the topic. Journalists and official sources exhibit somewhat similar attitudes and beliefs with regard to accuracy, timeliness, and audience panic but vary widely with regard to their understanding of the other's views. Findings indicating such divergence are a concern because they could become a barrier to the provision of high-quality emergency news, a source of important guidance to the public during times of crisis.

A THEORY OF EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION

Recent events continue to underscore the importance of communication during emergencies. In an intense emergency like September 11, 2001, the country and the world looked to the news media and official sources for emergency messages that literally could mean life or death for some (Pollard, 2003). There is no question the United States is a different place psychologically, socially, even physically because of the terrorist attacks and their aftermath. Official sources who provide much of the information for news stories on terrorist attacks and journalists who disseminate that information have both been affected, as has their relationship. The current study is concerned with three, inter-related concepts. The first is the effect of "role" as perceived by journalists and official sources, the second, the expectations each brings to the emergency interaction, and the third the viewpoints each has regarding appropriate emergency messages that should result. In other words, it is about emergency communication, the roles of journalists and official sources, and the interaction between them in an emergency.

In the pages ahead, this paper will do five things.
1) It will argue that emergency interactions differ from other journalist-official source exchanges.
2) It will distinguish emergency communications from related concepts such as crisis communications.
3) It will discuss three particularly important dimensions of emergency messages.
4) It will argue for the use of coorientation as a means of assessing misunderstanding and misperception between journalists and official sources, and

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5) it will test several hypotheses concerning journalists' and official sources' beliefs about emergency news based on their reactions to a hypothetical anthrax attack in urban Kentucky.

What Defines an Emergency

At least nine factors make communications during emergency situations unique. Emergencies include all manner of human-created and natural disaster. Many times significant numbers of human casualties accompany such events. In addition, in many emergencies there is often a continuing danger of additional casualties or at least the fear of them.

During emergencies, the public demand for information increases exponentially. Some wish to determine whether they or their friends and family are in danger. Others want to know whether loved ones have been hurt or killed. Still others simply want to understand the event and its implications for their own lives. They turn to the news for that information, and news media look to official sources to supply the information they need to provide the public (Pollard, 2003). The demand for information and the many difficulties that accompany the emergency situation present tremendous challenges for journalists and official sources. Besides the normal pressures journalists and sources face in producing news, emergencies increase the level of some challenging factors while introducing others that are not a normal concern in more routine news production.

First, emergencies involve *sudden onset.* Tornadoes and terror attacks usually give little or no warning. People trying to plan for these or communicate about them distinguish between sudden onset events and threats that are known and either grow or diminish with time. Sudden onset means a triggering event turns "situation normal" to "situation critical" in a matter of moments (O'Hair, 2004; Sandman, 2003).

Second, emergencies involve *danger*, possibly grave danger, to some or many. Missing a prescribed medication or falling asleep alone with a lit cigarette is a serious emergency to the affected party. However, these limited impact personal events do not meet the obvious criteria of a broad emergency. There is no set cut-off for the number of people who need to be in danger before something qualifies as an emergency, but we can certainly agree that when dozens or more are in danger, the criterion has been met (Covello, 2003; Sandman, 2003).

Third, emergencies involve *unpredictability.* No one knows where or when a terrorist will strike or a dam will break. Both natural disasters and manmade interventions like terror attacks are impossible to predict with certainty. As an example, armored convoys leave the Iraqi capital of Baghdad daily unsure whether the mound of dirt on the roadside is an improvised explosive device or a mound of dirt. The element of deadly surprise, then, represents a critical distinction between emergencies and many other newsworthy events (O'Hair, 2004).

Fourth, emergencies involve real or perceived *inability to control outcomes* (at least initially if not altogether). A heightened sense of helplessness accompanies

emergencies and contributes to a lost sense of control. In a sudden onset event, everyone involved—from those affected to those responding and covering the event—are likely to feel inadequate to the task or powerless to stop the forces that drive the situation.

Fifth, emergencies involve *exacerbated problems/pressing challenges*. It is not uncommon for a natural disaster or terror event to overwhelm responders even when they react efficiently. Issues that could be managed if they stood alone may be difficult or impossible in an emergency. The triage for four people in an emergency room could easily become overwhelming when it is needed for a mass casualty event, just as shutting off the natural gas to one home is different from stopping a hundred line breaks after an earthquake.

Sixth, emergencies involve a *compressed time frame/time constraints.* For both journalists and official sources things happen so quickly that some responses may become inappropriate, useless, or even dangerous (Freimuth, 2006). The adrenal rush and the situation may preclude the double checks possible under normal circumstances. Decisions made with lives on the line must come faster than responders might prefer. Time in an emergency can be the worst kind of enemy.

Seventh, emergencies typically involve *fear.* This emotion is a natural response to a threatening situation or a reaction to lost control. No one knows real fear better than a dazed bus bomb victim or earthquake survivor worried about aftershocks. Fear should be distinguished from panic, which Sandman (2003) argues rarely occurs. Fear may be more akin to the primal fight or flight response while panic carries fear to a hysterical level.

Eighth, emergencies usually involve some *unexpected cost* on the part of some government and/or other entity. This variable is rarely considered *during* an event, but it becomes important soon after. Major snowstorms, for example, summon salt trucks and plows, drivers and workers for all night appointments with the highways. The objective is to get transportation moving again. At the end of the day, however, communities often apply for disaster relief because the cost of clearing the highways has broken their budgets.

Finally, emergencies typically involve varying *information unreliability.* Here, multiple sources have to deal with changing and even conflicting information and somehow process it for a message. Managing information in a state of flux is much more challenging than information management in calmer or more certain circumstances (Freimuth, 2006). Something official sources or journalists consider "nailed down" one moment shifts the very next. Something thought rock solid before suddenly becomes dated, even inaccurate.

Information Control/The Politics of an Emergency
Information control that is already so critical in "situation normal" becomes more hotly contested in an emergency. The two groups in the current study face and/or create

inhospitable conditions as they try to negotiate message content. Journalists probably perceive themselves as having to pry critical pieces of information from reluctant official sources. At the same time, official sources may perceive media pressure as misguided or misprioritized. It may be that official sources face internal and external pressures of their own, independent of journalists. The protection of life and property combined with the potentially competing objectives of message negotiators may create a politically charged climate. If messages to audiences are impacted by such a climate it cannot be helpful to audiences in need, as the public clearly looks to experts and the news media for direction in troubled times (Pollard, 2003).

While many use the term crisis communication to discuss this phenomenon, the current study suggests *emergency communication* is more conceptually appropriate. Crisis communicators such as Covello (2003) and Sandman (2003) offer salient advice for official sources. However, much of the public relations literature on crises devotes its efforts to corporate clients who, in addition to prioritizing life and property, must also concern themselves with the impact on profitability and image. Public officials and appointed official sources must answer to their own taskmasters when helping the public in an emergency. And many in both the corporate and governmental sectors mistakenly perceive the news media as an enemy in that effort rather than an ally (Covello, 2003).

Emergency Communication and the Journalist-Official Source Dispute
A number of scholars have shown how the disagreement present in the routine journalist-official source exchange carries over to emergency interactions. With SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome (Ricchiardi, 2003), anthrax (Mebane, Temin, & Parvanta, 2003; Whelan & Ross, 2003), general public health emergencies (Payne & Shulte, 2003), and bioterrorism and governmental preparation for it (Mitka, 2003), researchers find evidence of a disconnect that hints at deeper perceptual differences. The distrust and continuing suspicion between journalists and officials are also well-established in the works of Aronoff (1975) and historically. (Fedler & DeLorme, 2002).

The literature suggests journalists and official sources disagree over news values and appropriate content for stories (Sallot, Steinfatt, & Salwen, 1998). This sometimes leads to accusations of real or imagined inaccuracies. The two groups also seem to argue about priority. *When* information gets dispensed and *how fast* have long been serious points of contention between journalists and official sources (Freimuth, 2006). Journalists typically want it now, while official sources may feel that they need more time or that they need confirmation before releasing information to the public. Finally, many public officials seem especially concerned about audience panic in a serious emergency, whether such concern is merited or not.

Coorientation
To understand conflict or cooperation between journalists and officials concerning emergency news it is necessary not only to determine what each group thinks is appropriate but also what each perceives the other group to believe. That is, knowing that a journalist places a very high value on accuracy does not explain her interaction

with an official unless we also know to what extent she feels that the official values accuracy, as well.

Newcomb asserted that our communication is based not only on our own views about an object or person, but also on what we *think* about our communication partner's perceptions of the object or person (Newcomb, 1953). People, Newcomb suggests, are always "coorienting." They rarely communicate without some consideration of what the "other" thinks. Such is the case in message negotiation during the journalist-official source interaction. Each group holds beliefs about the other and takes them into account before and during the exchange. It may be that to the extent one or the other group is "off" in those viewpoints, the news story may be "off," as well. Chaffee and McLeod's model, based on Newcomb's work, gave researchers the ability to operationalize the ideas Newcomb forwarded 15 years earlier (1968). The framework is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Coorientation Model (Chaffee & McLeod,1968)
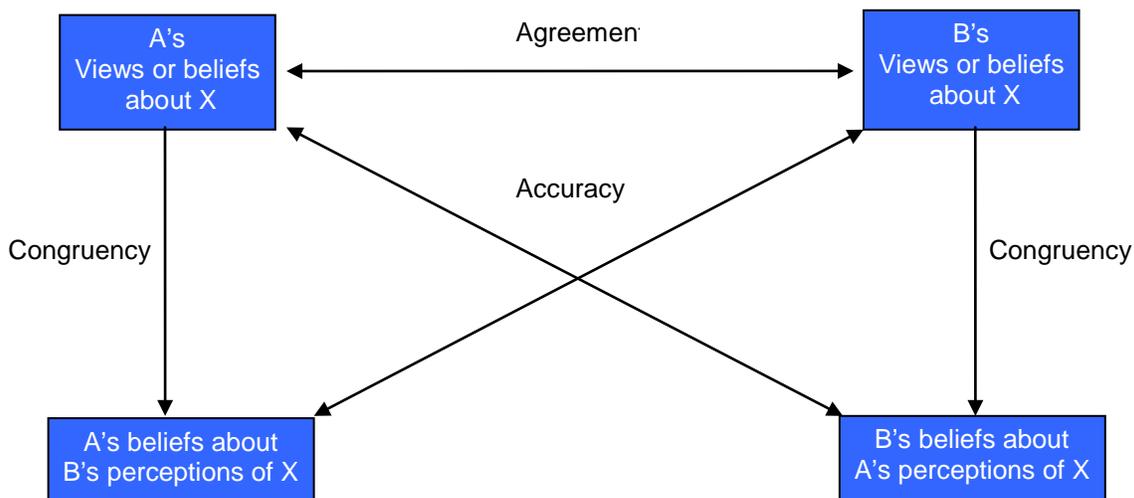
Chaffee and McLeod (1968) developed a method for studying three relationships derived from Newcomb's model of dyadic communication. The figure above outlines Chaffee and McLeod's approach. In their model, persons A and B have some set of beliefs about an issue, object, or person, X, and, in addition, have some ideas about what the other individual thinks regarding X. When studying the dyad, five comparisons are generated. Agreement is the match between A's beliefs about X and B's beliefs about X. It is simply the stated views each holds about the object, represented by the horizontal line between them. Congruency for A is the match between A's views about X and A's beliefs about B's views concerning X. It is a guess and is represented by the

vertical line on the left of the model. Congruency for B means the match between B's views about X and B's beliefs about A's views. In like fashion it is a guess and is represented by the vertical line on the right. Accuracy for A is the match between B's actual views of X and A's beliefs about B's views concerning X. Accuracy for B is the reverse--A's actual views about X compared to B's beliefs concerning A's views. These are the diagonal lines that cross. Changes in coorientation along the dimensions are likely to affect both parties' attitudes toward X and/or whatever parties A and B deem as successful communication (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973).

Three Elements of Emergency Messages
 While many features of messages are salient and will receive attention, long journalistic experience coupled with scores of interviews with information providers identifies three worthy of immediate study--accuracy, timeliness, and panic. Westerstahl (1983), Sandman (2003), Freimuth (2006), add scholarly support to journalistic standard practice in identifying accuracy as a leading concern in both journalistic and public relations practice. Accuracy involves reasonably perfect factual alignment, the supposed gold standard of journalists everywhere. Official sources want to get their facts straight in an emergency for their own reasons and because they know journalists will be asking who, what, where, when, why, how, how many, and what next. Westerstahl (1983) calls factuality a function of truth, informativeness, and relevance.

Facts in an emergency typically involve trying to get to the heart of what occurred in the middle of the chaos that followed. This is challenging because emergency responders are sometimes charged with the dual role of providing aid and comfort *and* keeping track of unfolding events. "How many people were exposed?" "What biologic agent is to blame?" "How contagious is it?" All such questions must be answered satisfactorily not because journalists are asking but because an anxious public wants information rather than reassurance (Sandman, 2003) or silence.

Freimuth, Duhé (2005), and Covello (2003) make consistent references to time and the friction it can cause. Timeliness means speed (Freimuth, 2006), and speed means the frequency of updates and pace of information flow. Unfortunately, timeliness leaves little room for contemplation. Time, or the lack of it, pressurizes an already tense situation, and it is part of what makes an emergency stand apart from other news events. Most of the pressure is the result of deadline, which is a function of the instantaneous transmission of information. Duhé (2005) suggests crisis communicators be available within hours of an emergency, "sooner" in some cases. The reality is, sooner is always the case. Hours may be acceptable if a flight to the scene is involved. Otherwise, the continuous news cycle demands that official sources be available as soon as the phone rings, wherever they are and at whatever the hour.

Sandman, Covello, and Duhé lend insight into the most unusual element of emergency communication--panic. Panic is the sole dimension that is context specific. That is, a preoccupation with panic appears to manifest only in extreme emergencies. A blunt message that asks readers, viewers, and listeners not to panic is frequently part of the "script" in the aftermath of an emergency. It appears to be a natural official reaction to

catastrophic events that invites the public to keep its collective head and wits (Freimuth, 2006). It remains unclear why official sources offer calming messages without empirical evidence of its need. But, as Sandman has documented, audiences do not appreciate the sentiment (Sandman, 2003). A discussion of panic belongs in any emergency communication perception analysis because reassuring messages are *not typically* present in any other communication resulting from the journalist-official source interaction.

The current study offers the partial results of a web survey wherein journalists and official sources responded to a hypothetical terror attack on an urbanized area of Kentucky. The manipulation and an explanation of methods follows in the next section. Based on findings from previous research that indicate significantly different views about news held by journalists and public relations practitioners, the following hypotheses were generated:.

> **H1: In a hypothetical anthrax attack, journalists and official sources will value news accuracy very differently (disagree), and they will be incongruent and inaccurate concerning accuracy.**

> **H2: In a hypothetical anthrax attack, journalists and official sources will disagree regarding the dimension timeliness, that is, they will value the dimension differently. They will also be incongruent and inaccurate concerning timeliness.**

> **H3: In a hypothetical anthrax attack, journalists and official sources will disagree, be incongruent, and be inaccurate concerning panic as a function of audience messages**.

METHODS

To test the hypotheses journalists and official sources were asked to respond to a web survey that measured beliefs about news values related to coverage of a hypothetical anthrax attack. To provide an example for the respondents to focus upon, the primary author developed a narrative about a hypothetical anthrax attack on Kentucky's Golden Triangle (an area bounded by Louisville, Lexington and Covington, a city just south of Cincinnati). In the scenario, workers at several postal facilities were exposed to inhalation anthrax. Many were sickened, and three died. The survey sample included 455 people who would either cover the hypothetical anthrax attack as journalists or act as official sources in news concerning such an attack. The sample was drawn from Louisville, Frankfort, Lexington, Georgetown, and Covington/Newport, the region targeted in the fictional outbreak. Participants were solicited from each news outlets' homepage. To qualify, all potential journalist respondents had to be television, radio, or newspaper reporters who covered news rather than other content. Many official sources were identified by searching for appropriate job titles in the *Kentucky Gold Book*, a compendium of office holders—appointed and elected—who fill the ranks of Kentucky's public service, emergency preparedness, military, and public safety sectors.

Official sources were included in the sample if their job title in the *Gold Book* indicated that they may supervise an emergency or otherwise be involved in responding to it. These included public health officials and medical personnel, elected leaders, military personnel, disaster planners, and media liaisons associated with both groups.

Ultimately, 151 people responded between January and March, 2006, a response rate of approximately 33%. Due to the nature of e-mail sampling, it is not possible to know whether a significant number of the e-mails were out of date, incorrect, etc. Respondents were asked their gender, age, job classification, and years of experience.

Table 1: Frequency table of gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**male**	89	63.6	65.4	65.4
	female	47	33.6	34.6	100.0
	Total	136	97.1	100.0	
Missing	**System**	4	2.9		
Total		140	100.0		

Table 2: Frequency table of age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**20-25**	14	10.0	10.2	10.2
	26-35	30	21.4	21.9	32.1
	36-45	36	25.7	26.3	58.4
	46 and over	57	40.7	41.6	100.0
	Total	137	97.9	100.0	
Missing	**System**	3	2.1		
Total		140	100.0		

Table 3: *Frequency table of groups*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**source**	72	51.4	51.4	51.4
	journalist	68	48.6	48.6	100.0
	Total	140	100.0	100.0	

Table 4: *Frequency table of job sector*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		1	.7	.7	.7
	TV	34	24.3	24.3	25.0
	Radio	4	2.9	2.9	27.9
	News paper	30	21.4	21.4	49.3
	Emergency prep.	36	25.7	25.7	75.0
	Public Service	16	11.4	11.4	86.4
	Medical	18	12.9	12.9	99.3
	Military	1	.7	.7	100.0
	Total	140	100.0	100.0	

Table 5: *Frequency table of years of experience*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		1	.7	.7	.7
	Journalist0-1 yr.	2	1.4	1.4	2.1
	13m-5 yrs.	12	8.6	8.6	10.7
	5-14 yrs.	20	14.3	14.3	25.0
	>15 yrs.	34	24.3	24.3	49.3
	Source 0-1 yr.	11	7.9	7.9	57.1
	13m-5 yrs.	14	10.0	10.0	67.1
	5-14 yrs.	14	10.0	10.0	77.1
	>15 yrs.	32	22.9	22.9	100.0
	Total	140	100.0	100.0	

Table 6: Frequency table of education level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		2	1.4	1.4	1.4
	Journalist-H.S.	3	2.1	2.1	3.6
	B.S.	47	33.6	33.6	37.1
	Grad. work	7	5.0	5.0	42.1
	Grad. degree	11	7.9	7.9	50.0
	Source -H.S.	8	5.7	5.7	55.7
	B.S.	25	17.9	17.9	73.6
	Grad. work	13	9.3	9.3	82.9
	Grad. degree	24	17.1	17.1	100.0
	Total	140	100.0	100.0	

The two groups were offered the fictional emergency and asked to participate mentally. Then, they were asked to rank the importance of the three dimensions of emergency communication—accuracy, timeliness, and panic—in audience message construction. On a 6-point Likert-type scale they were asked to rate 18 statements relating to several features of news. The statements covered other dimensions not discussed in the current study and are included in Appendix A, which also includes the scenario.

After ranking the statements on the scales according to their own beliefs about the news values, they were asked to complete the exercise again, this time acting as though they were a member of the other group. That is, a journalist was asked to answer the questions as though she was an official source. The reverse would be true for an official source responding to the questionnaire.

Three questions related to the three elements of emergency messages were analyzed using coorientation as a framework. Mean differences between and within groups were measured using independent (t) and paired sample (t) t-tests (Paired sample tests account for the within subject variance associated with the "self vs. other" element of coorientation much as such tests are used for same subject time series analysis).

RESULTS

The hypothesis testing associated with coorientation produces voluminous data, especially in the current study. Means, standard deviations, and effects sizes are offered for both groups *only* for each dimension in the current paper and only for the statements which attempted to measure it. The hypotheses in the current study are

aggregate evaluations of agreement, congruence, and accuracy as stated in the coorientation model.

Hypothesis 1. Of the 5 *p*-values generated with each hypothesis, only three were statistically significant. Concerning information accuracy, the two groups were *not* significantly different in their self assessments. The data indicate that journalists and official sources placed a similar value on accuracy (indicating substantial agreement rather than disagreement) but both were substantially incongruent (that is, they perceived disagreement between themselves and the other group). Both groups indicated that sources would value accuracy somewhat more highly than journalists, though each saw journalists as valuing accuracy at more than 4 on a 6-point scale. In general terms, neither group was aware of their shared valuation of accuracy as a news value during an emergency of the sort identified in the scenario. Journalists were accurate in their projection that official sources would highly value accuracy, while official sources significantly underestimated journalists' beliefs about the importance of accuracy in the scenario. Hypothesis 1 received moderate support.

Hypothesis 2. Partial support is provided for Hypothesis 2. Nearly identical levels of support for timeliness as a news value are provided by the two groups, indicating again a high level of agreement. Moreover, official sources appear to be aware of this agreement, accurately projecting levels of support among journalists for timeliness as a news value that are close to the officials' own level of support for it. This accurate reading of journalists' beliefs as close to their own leads to substantial accuracy and congruency on the part of official sources.

The situation is quite different for journalists, though, as they project a level of support for timeliness among official sources that is substantially *below* the level sources indicate they feel. As a result, journalists are both inaccurate toward, and incongruent with, official sources with regard to timeliness.

Hypothesis 3. Partial support is also found for Hypothesis 3. Once again, substantial agreement over the importance of panic reduction as a news value is present while journalists perceive significant variance between themselves and official sources. In this case, journalists project significantly greater support among official sources for the inclusion of anti-panic messages than sources themselves say they have. The discrepancy leads to significant inaccuracy toward, and incongruency with, officials on the part of journalists. Again, official sources are fairly accurate in projecting that journalists hold similar levels of support to the sources' own for anti-panic messages. This leads, once again, to fairly high accuracy and congruity levels for officials. Table 1 includes the results of *t*-tests, significance, effects, and the pooled variance used to calculate Cohen's *d* in each case.

Table 1: Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for the Three Dimensions (Accuracy, Panic, Timeliness) of Emergency Communicatio

		Journalists **		Official Sources **			Co-orientation Analysis			
		$\bar{x}$	s.d		$\bar{x}$	s.d		t ***	df	p	d
Accuracy											
	Self	4.830	1.267	Self	5.100	1.080	Agreement	1.462	137	0.146	0.246
	Other	5.270	0.980	Other	4.320	1.510	JS Congruency	2.285	63	0.026	0.386
							SJ Congruency	3.937	70	0.001	0.589
							JS Accuracy	0.934	135	0.352	0.160
							SJ Accuracy	2.024	136	0.045	0.346
Panic											
	Self	3.600	1.351	Self	4.030	1.639	Agreement	1.350	136	0.179	0.231
	Other	5.220	1.099	Other	3.940	1.689	JS Congruency	8.846	62	0.001	1.315
							SJ Congruency	0.469	70	0.641	0.051
							JS Accuracy	4.986	135	0.001	0.862
							SJ Accuracy	1.173	135	0.243	0.201
Timeliness											
	Self	4.770	1.529	Self	4.760	1.221	Agreement	0.296	138	0.768	0.050
	Other	3.630	1.464	Other	4.960	1.429	JS Congruency	4.646	64	0.001	0.761
							SJ Congruency	1.170	69	0.246	0.150
							JS Accuracy	4.529	135	0.001	0.772
							SJ Accuracy	0.767	136	0.444	0.131

** indicates varying *n* for journalists and official source:
*** indicates independent or paired sample *t-test*

DISCUSSION

This study presents evidence that there is reason to be concerned over the perceptions journalists and officials have concerning their views on the news. In times of emergency, some shared values of journalists and officials on basic news values would indicate greater ease in working together to produce high-quality information, a goal they both claim to share. The production and dissemination of high-quality news is especially valuable to the public in times when people's health and welfare are at stake. Accurate and timely news could potentially save lives. It could also reduce speculation that could lead to inappropriate blame which could then trigger hasty and tragic action, as we saw with the Oklahoma City bombing, or the terrorist attack in Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park in 1996.

As has been the case in earlier studies, journalists appear to be less accurate in their evaluations of sources' views on news values than sources are in projecting journalists' views. This is interesting given the roles played by the two groups. It is the journalist who gains information from the source, asking questions and evaluating and writing a story based on such information. Less self-revelation is likely on the part of the journalist. Yet it is the sources who were more accurate overall than the journalists in this research.

A second finding of note is that the differences between sources' and journalists' views on news values were relatively small while the perceived differences were a good deal greater. In each significant case of inaccuracy the source of the discrepancy was an overestimation of the difference between own and other's position.

The implication is that were the two groups aware of their substantial agreement on the importance of varied news values, their ability to produce better emergency news might well be enhanced. That is, it is the *perception* of disagreement over basic principles of

news rather than actual disagreement that leads to the oft-observed misunderstanding, frustration and even hostility exhibited by the groups in their interactions.

That is not to say that some friction between the groups, often based on their different goals and constraints, is unhealthy. It may be that some conflict, verbal jousting, limited trust, etc., is healthy for the relationship and for the public welfare. Such conflicts and lack of mutual trust are probably least wanted during emergencies, though. With the high level of contextual tension, the extreme importance of rapid and accurate information dissemination and the many demands upon the sources and journalistic personnel, adding distrust and misunderstanding to the mix is likely to harm rather than help. Since harm is far more likely in emergency situations, limiting any source of communication distortion during emergencies would be in the best interest of the wider public. In short, in a real emergency (something which appears to be happening with increasing frequency), it may prove helpful to audiences desperate for correct messages if both groups have a clearer view of the other.

It is likely that both have similar ideas about the big picture, but what gets in the way are the political ramifications discussed briefly under information control. For journalists, the pressure of the deadline in a 24/7 news cycle heightens extant tensions, which may cause the group to *believe* official sources are slow or sloppy. The data support only a more limited interpretation, however.

COORIENTATION CONGRUENCE

Regarding the data, journalists guessed wrong about official sources for all three message elements. They projected a difference between themselves and their counterparts for accuracy, timeliness, and panic. Here, misperception may create problems. If journalists think official sources value accuracy less, timeliness less, and audience panic more than they (journalists), it is very likely that those ideas will affect the exchange. Such misgivings, as evidenced in the congruence measure of coorientation, can be damaging to the relationship. Yet, many journalists confidently offer that many sources in their experience are uninformed, slow, and overly concerned with reassurance … while they themselves are paragons of accuracy, speed and evenness.

On two of the three elements, official sources were actually better evaluators of their journalistic counterparts. Official sources said journalists' views and their own (official sources) were similar regarding speed and panic. That suggests that not only do official sources claim to value speed, they understand that journalists value it even more. Remembering that journalists often berate official sources for failing to respond in a timely fashion, this is an astounding finding. The very sources journalists grumble about claim to respect deadline and appreciate speed. Clearly, something is not connecting.

On reflection, the projected similarity in panic views is not cause for celebration. It may be that official sources who think journalists are equally concerned about audience panic (and they are not) are likely to carry official messages about same with little

filtering. This could result in a misplaced confidence and resultant confusion or anger with a follow up. It should be noted again that any official source worry about audience panic—delivered faithfully by reporters or not--is not based on evidence. Taken together, these statistically significant findings may translate to inhospitable conditions for message creation.

Fueling the suspicion and mistrust is the finding that official sources said journalists valued accuracy much less than they (official sources). Information providers in an emergency claim the reporters with whom they are interacting care *less* about getting it right than information providers do. This, as journalists claim to espouse accuracy above every other element of news gathering, including speed. It is not only difficult to fathom but readily appreciated as a serious point of contention. Such different views on such a sensitive matter are likely to surface and contribute to a working environment that deteriorates under pressure. Unfortunately, pressure is inherent in emergencies.

COORIENTATION ACCURACY

Accuracy, the final and often the most intriguing part of coorientation, revealed two findings worthy of mention. First, official sources seem to think very highly of themselves regarding factual adherence, ranking it nearly as high as the scale permitted. While it was not enough of a difference to trigger a *p* < .05, it was different enough from journalists to matter. Worse, official sources appear to give less credence to the journalistic mantra about getting it right than journalists actually do. That difference of opinion concerning something so fundamental to all message creation cannot be good for journalist-official source relations.

The final point lays blame squarely with journalists. The group seems to think official sources are only moderately concerned with speed. By contrast, official sources offer that they are, in fact, plenty worried about getting information out quickly. On timeliness, journalists and official sources agree to the point their mean scores are nearly identical. Yet, the view journalists have of the group behind the microphone appears so jaded it is nowhere near the place official sources actually give the element. It is possible that the numbers reflect legitimate experience or isolated cases that have grown to swallow even those who are not guilty. It is also possible that official sources may think they appreciate deadline but fall short of actually understanding it.

In sum, the two groups audiences depend upon in an emergency appear to know a lot less about each other's views than they think. Incongruence from both groups, and in several cases congruence, as well, proves genuinely troublesome as a depiction of differing viewpoints. Accuracy, which is the researcher's contribution to coorientation (the first two being respondent driven), demonstrates the breadth of possible misunderstanding. One can only speculate how such a set of misgivings drives the relationship, the questioning line, and, possibly, the messages that turn into news stories for audience consumption. Good policy and practice cannot result if it does.

LIMITATIONS

Clearly, the sample is limited to a particular geographic area at a particular historic moment and caution should be used in trying to generalize to other times and places. As we move further from the traumatic events of September 11, 2001, the impact of that event on emergency communications and the relations between journalists and official sources will likely decline. Certainly, north central Kentucky is not a model for the whole country or even the region, but it is hard to see any reason to consider the area as especially unusual. An attempt was made to include all journalists and official sources likely to be involved in news coverage of a terrorist incident of the sort found in the scenario. Because of the method used to recruit respondents, significant levels of distortion based in sample self-selection are possible. Having received usable data from about 1/3 of the targeted population, we believe the findings are reasonably reflective of the population of journalists and official sources we intended to study.

The attitude scales suffer from the limitations of this form of measurement. To be comparable among multiple respondents, it is necessary to standardize such measures and, by necessity, reduce the ability to capture much of the nuance and subtlety in individual differences that a more qualitative measure might capture. Certainly, no single statement can ever measure a concept such as 'timeliness' perfectly. We note that these statements were pretested to see if they were meaningful to respondents and were successful in generating statistically significant differences—an indicator that they reflect some real phenomena in play in the research.

The main concern over the use of the statements and Likert-scale responses concerns whether the journalists and official sources, who both were able to apply the scales, applied them in the same manner. That is, if journalists and sources systematically differed in their interpretations of what "accuracy" means or what "somewhat agree" means in terms of accuracy, then the findings could well have been skewed. A more complete review of this potential distortion should be carried out as a part of the coorientational approach to the study of journalist-source perceptions, which we believe to be a valuable undertaking.

While there are other natural and predictable problems with the study, one must be revisited. The data provide evidence for perceptions between and within the groups. They do not allow evaluation of a forthcoming theory which suggests that high or low coorientation actually affects message construction or message outcomes.

WHAT NEXT?

Scholars should assess whether the preliminary message dimensions offered in the current study are relevant. After a set of generally accepted message dimensions are agreed to, it would be helpful to know the impact of those views on emergency messages. Next, journalists and official sources must be confronted at two levels with the misunderstanding the literature so clearly depicts. The first area where some of the

misperception can be arrested if not altered is school. Undergraduate education, not just in journalism but in emergency preparedness, administration, business management, public relations, and several other disciplines, must include a discussion of the tension and some of the overblown notions that cause it. Second, journalists and official sources already out of school must be advised in their continuing education of the misunderstanding to which they are inclined. Such information should be transmitted in a way that reminds the groups of their independence and the proper adversarial role of the news media. What must be made clear is the difference between healthy skepticism and a conviction that other group is populated with incompetents, liars, or miscreants. The Fourth Estate is losing ground in an era where governmental secrecy is expanding and accountability is shrinking. But, in an emergency, it may be in both groups' best interest to lay aside some differences for the audience's sake and work (to some extent) together, at least until the emergency no longer threatens life and property.

APPENDIX A

Note, the survey below includes several dimensions not included in the presented study. It is offered here in its entirety for the sake of transparency. Again, only the dimensions of accuracy, timeliness, and panic potential were assessed and then only with individual message statements rather than any grouping of statements.

Anthrax & Kentucky—An emergency involving you
First, thanks for visiting the website and considering the questionnaire. I'm Chris Swindell. I'm a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Kentucky, and I'm fascinated by communication in an emergency. I'm interested in your views as a journalist about messages in such situations. I've created a hypothetical terror attack on the Louisville, Lexington, Cincinnati "Triangle" … and I'm asking you to "participate" by imagining yourself covering the scenario. I used to be both a reporter and a public information officer, so I have a sense of what it's like. Still, nothing substitutes for real numbers, and that's where you come in.

Everything but the results will be kept confidential. There will be no way to trace the information back to you on the secure server hosting this site. If you have any questions, you can reach me at 859/273-1332, or 351-8358. Remember, your participation is voluntary and welcomed! You may opt out at any time. Finally, there are no known risks associated with this project or your responses.

Anthrax Hits Golden Triangle Postal Facilities
Without warning, scores of postal workers in Lexington, Louisville, Frankfort, and Covington/Newport suddenly fall ill and report to hospitals. When hospitalized nearly all are diagnosed with inhalation anthrax. Hospital officials and the U.S. Postal Service alert the local and state emergency response apparatus, which then immediately alerts the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta and the F.B.I. They also call emergency teams together, consisting of the various officials and emergency responders in and out of government. You or your colleagues gather at four Emergency Operations Centers that open around the "Golden Triangle." Many sources attend, even as others battle the situation elsewhere. Producers and editors await word and/or tune in to live programming to catch briefings themselves. *It appears more than 40 people have confirmed anthrax, and three have died.* In addition, a half dozen people in the same area have reported to the Postal Service and the F.B.I. the receipt of suspicious packages containing a white powder. The F.B.I. considers the anthrax outbreak a terror attack, and appeals to Kentuckians and border residents for caution, calm, and collective assistance.

I'm interested in what you think about the messages that might come out of this emergency. So, I'm going to ask what you think about some statements that deal with messages you might be handling.

Let's begin with some demographic information.
A) Gender
__ male   __ female

B) Age Grouping
__20-25   __ 26-35   __36-45   __46 and over

C) Job description
__ *journalist (includes reporters, managers, and writers)*

D) Job sector
__ television   ___ radio   ___ newspaper

E) Years of Professional Journalistic Experience
__ 0-1 yr   __ 13 mths.-5 yrs.   __ 5-14 yrs.   __ more than 15 years

F) Highest Level of Schooling
__high school   __bachelor's degree   __graduate work   __graduate degree(s)

Now, please respond to the brief set of statements on the next page.

Strongly agree is to the far **left.** Strongly disagree is to the far **right.** "Somewhat" are the two on the inside.

Scale is **6 to 1**   **6 =** Strongly Agree (SA)   **5 =** Agree (A)   **4 =** Somewhat Agree (~SA)
                3 = Somewhat (~SA)   **2 =** Disagree (D)   **1 =** Strongly Disagree (SD)

Thinking about the messages that would come from this anthrax attack.

		SA	A	~SA	~SD	D	SD
1.	The message should include "just the facts."	6	5	4	3	2	1
2.	The public/audience message should be told the authorities have things under control	6	5	4	3	2	1
3.	The message should include the phrase "Don't Panic."	6	5	4	3	2	1
4.	The message should be opinion free	6	5	4	3	2	1
5.	Getting the message out fast is paramount	6	5	4	3	2	1
6.	Details which can't be verified DON'T belong in the message	6	5	4	3	2	1
7.	Messages should be withheld until EVERY element is certain	6	5	4	3	2	1
8.	The message should be updated often	6	5	4	3	2	1
9.	"I don't know" is OK as a message.	6	5	4	3	2	1
10.	"No comment" is NOT okay as a message	6	5	4	3	2	1
11.	Figures/numbers should be included	6	5	4	3	2	1
12.	Getting the message out accurately is paramount	6	5	4	3	2	1
13.	Speculation can be part of the message	6	5	4	3	2	1
14.	The message should contain all known information only.	6	5	4	3	2	1
15.	Admissions of mistakes belong in the message.	6	5	4	3	2	1
16.	The message should appeal for public calm.	6	5	4	3	2	1
17.	Getting the message out quickly is paramount.	6	5	4	3	2	1
18.	The message should reflect ALL viewpoints.	6	5	4	3	2	1
19.	Balance is less important in emergency messages	6	5	4	3	2	1

Please rank the following words in the order you think important, from 1 being most to 6 being least. Use each number only once, please.

__ reassurance   __ objectivity   __ disclosure (reveal/not reveal)
__ certainty (being sure) __ accuracy   __ timeliness

Now, I'd like you to **take on the role of the "official source/journalist"** and answer as they would to the best of your ability. The questions are the same.

Thinking about the messages that would come from this anthrax attack...

		SA	A	~SA	~SD	D	SD
1.	The message should include "just the facts."	6	5	4	3	2	1
2.	The public/audience message should be told the authorities have things under control	6	5	4	3	2	1
3.	The message should include the phrase "Don't Panic."	6	5	4	3	2	1
4.	The message should be opinion free	6	5	4	3	2	1
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19.	Balance is less important in emergency messages	6	5	4	3	2	1

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