

# Dealing with the Media

**M**EDIA director of the Victoria Police, Jane Munday, addressed the issues of "Dealing with the Media" at the Counter-Terrorist Conference held in Canberra late last year. Ms Munday opened her address by presenting some of the Australian Journalists' Association Code of Ethics, which includes:

**"They shall report and interpret the news with scrupulous honesty, strive to disclose all essential facts, not suppressing relevant, available facts or distort by wrong or improper emphasis;**

**"They shall use fair and honest means to obtain news, pictures, films, tapes and documents; and**

**" They shall respect private grief and personal privacy and shall have the right to resist compulsion to intrude on them."**

Ms Munday said also that former Prime Minister, John Gorton, had once described journalists as "slimy white things that crawl out of sewers".

However, she added that whatever you may think of the media, they are not going to go away. What is important is how you handle them. "Left to their own devices, journalists can be like unguided missiles - and you never know where they will land," she said.

"The media will run their stories with or without your co-operation. You may be surprised to find however, that they usually prefer to work with you. Not only does it make the job easier, but most journalists are human and, given the chance, are just as interested as you are to bring about the successful resolution of a terrorist incident."

"The media can become integral players in a hostage or terrorist incident and the lever terrorists use to exert pressure on governments. They can become the terrorists' vehicle by which to communicate their cause to the world.

## **Media Manipulation**

"Terrorists generally are very skilled



*Briefing the press can seem a daunting experience.*

in their use of the media and may even arrive at their siege with a list of media contact numbers so they can ring journalists to announce their demands."

Media manipulation was also used by lobby groups such as the 'greenies' and Ms Munday had seen this first-hand during the logging dispute in East Gippsland in 1989. It was only when the loggers started to imitate their headline-grabbing tactics that both sides of the debate got equal [media] space.

There were 'arrest days' and 'non-arrest days', with different and colourful tactics each day to ensure the media had some new theatre. Ms Munday said she had even overheard a television crew arranging to have a demonstration brought forward to make the morning newsbreak.

There were several factors to be aware of in media response to a crisis, such as a terrorist incident. The first was the sheer numbers likely to descend on the scene without waiting for an invitation. At the Iranian Embassy siege in London, it was estimated that 600 to 1,000 journalists arrived to cover the event.

The media finds out about such incidents through calls from the public, being at the scene when the incident occurs, calls from terrorists, or, most frequently, by monitoring police radio channels.

Since the Victoria Police took over the policing of Tullamarine Airport, media attendance at airport bomb scares had increased markedly - not because there was an upsurge in incidents, but because formerly they didn't monitor the Federal Police radio channels.

"The key to effective control of the media is co-operation, and you should be using the media as a tool, because successful resolution of the incident may well depend on which side uses best the tool of media coverage.

"Uncontrolled, the media will be a wild-card, its role made more crucial because in many hostage situations, the terrorists will be monitoring closely the media coverage, picking up information and reacting to it."

A report from the Victoria Police agreed that the National Anti-Terrorist Plan recognises the need to balance the public's right to know with responsible media coverage.

It also recognises that the media: may be directly involved in a terrorist incident;

will have an intense interest in any incident, and that the authorities will be best served by co-operating with the media;

is the best conduit for information to the public.

In turn, members of the media need to acknowledge that they are not neutral players during a terrorist incident, the report said. Media coverage could unwittingly change the course of events, lead to loss of lives, or become a platform for hostage-takers to broadcast their demands.

Terrorism was politically-motivated violence designed to create fear and disruption in the community. Terrorists generally had a strong moral commitment to their cause, which transcended concerns for their own safety.

The threat of terrorism in Australia is low in comparison with overseas countries. However the Hilton bombing in 1978 led to a review by Justice Hope and the up-grading of counter-terrorist capabilities in Australia.

Australia's policy during a terrorist incident is one of no concessions to terrorist demands, except on minor tactical points. It is policy to try to resolve incidents by negotiation, with resolution by force only as a last resort.

During a terrorist incident, there will usually be media liaison officers attached to four separate areas - the forward command post; police operations centre; State crisis centre; and the crisis policy centre. To ensure a co-ordinated approach, the media liaison officers at each centre should be in constant communication.

The media should also appreciate that disasters and terrorist incidents occur without warning and it may be a while before the response will appear co-ordinated.

"The first thing the media needs, however brief, is a story," Ms Munday said. "They are sent out by their editors to fill a spot on the page. . . If you won't talk to them they will hang around and get in your way. If you give them a story, you have satisfied their thirst."

If you refuse to talk, the media will simply go elsewhere, you have lost your control and they have a variety of alternative sources. These

sources may not have your interests at heart and may tell the media about things you want suppressed.

During a protracted story, criticism usually starts when the media run out of 'new angles'. As an example, after days of positive coverage of the Nyngan floods, the media suddenly came up with criticism from the National Movement Against Smoking, about cigarettes being distributed as part of the relief effort - it was the only new angle around. Essential ingredients of a story are pictures - action shots - not some taken five hours later when it is quiet again. You will overcome many potential problems if you come up with pictorial opportunities rather than forcing the media to become devious in the quest for pictures. For example, after the Russell Street bombing, controlled 'tours' with pooled crews were conducted to ensure the media got footage with minimum contamination of the crime scene.

The media have deadlines and enormous pressures to come up with the goods. Journalists are competitive and the adrenalin will be pumping, but don't forget that they are doing a job too.

They go for 'colour' and 'human-interest' stories. A million dollar fraud will never attract as much interest as lost ducks and children, piglets in police cells, and police caught dancing on tables.

Interest in a story will often depend on what other news is about and even on whether or not the story is an 'exclusive'.

Used properly, the media are a valuable resource, so don't waste it. The media are your pipeline to the public, so don't think of yourself as talking to an individual journalist, but to the audience they represent. The demand for public information during a major crisis, for example an air disaster, puts great pressure on police communications, which can be relieved by using the media to broadcast the information being sought.

The media can explain your role, giving the public an insight into difficulties you face and will usually agree to not publish information which could jeopardise negotiations.

It is important to use your media liaison officers effectively. Never make the mistake of thinking they are the media. They should be used

as policy advisers and kept fully-briefed on everything that is happening, not just what you want the media to know. Informed media liaison officers will be able to alert you to potential problems, advise you on strategy, and develop stories for the media on peripheral matters you may not think significant.

In a major incident, media liaison officers should be used to provide briefings regularly to the media while you are busy. This keeps faith with the media and satisfies the need to inform the public and establishes two-way communication. All States' media liaison officers meet annually to ensure a co-ordinated approach to media liaison.

Credibility is fundamental when dealing with the media. Never lie - you will be found out - and if you have made a mistake, say so. Not only will you defuse the story, but you will appear human by admitting a mistake and saying sorry.

Don't try and censor the media, it is not our role to determine what is in good taste for public consumption. Don't ever hang up and refuse to talk to a journalist - they will still write the story and you have lost your right of reply. You can tell them you will ring back. You then have time to gather your thoughts or seek the advice of your media liaison officer.

Avoid confrontation with journalists. Not only do you lose their goodwill, but your anger is likely to become the story.

If you want the media to move, explain why. It will often enlist their co-operation.

Don't wait for a disaster to learn how the media operate. Making an effort to understand interview techniques, deadlines, how stories are processed, and the pressures and limitations involved will enhance your ability to handle the media, particularly during a crisis situation.

Also, educate the media about your role so that when an incident occurs, journalists have a greater appreciation of the pressures of resolving it.

"Our challenge is to learn how to use the media better. Given that terrorists use the media to disseminate propaganda and exert control over negotiators, we should be learning to play them at their own game," Ms Munday said.