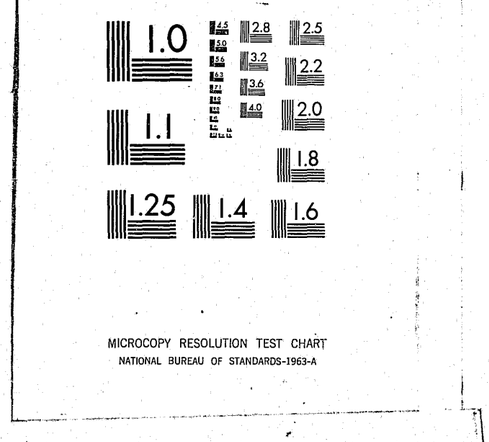

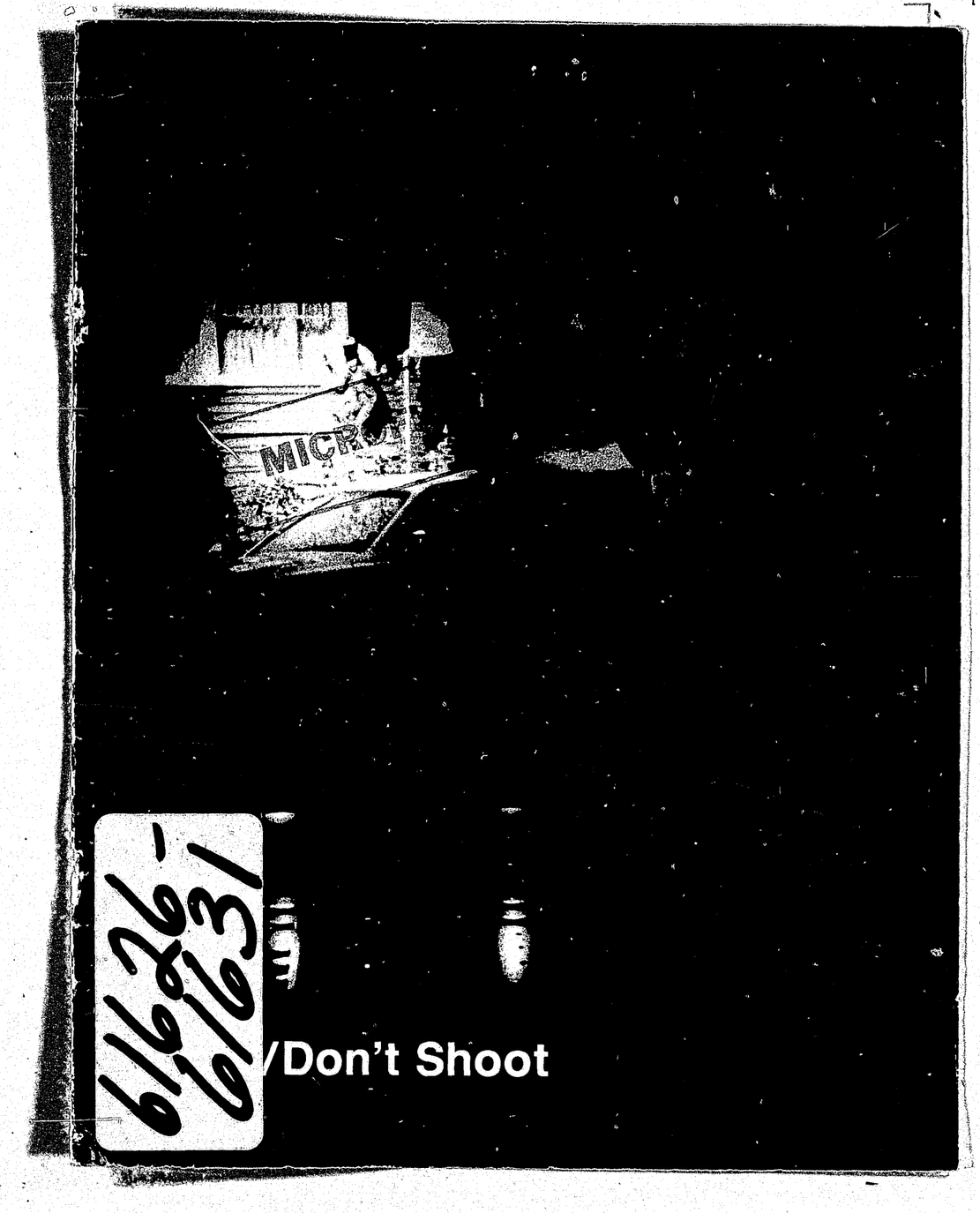

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The Cover: September's cover features a Seattle police officer training with the S.M.E. simulator. See story beginning on page 1.

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The Hostage/Terrorist Situation And the Media

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The lone hostage taker sat with his eyes riveted to a television set which he had demanded during tedious negotiations with police and the FBI. He was ready to surrender when the sight of police snipers moving into defensive positions flashed across the screen. Now feeling threatened, he balked at his previous offer to surrender, and negotiations continued for another day.

The conduct of the news media at hostage scenes has become a major concern for law enforcement. This concern has been heightened by the recent upsurge in world-wide terrorism. While the United States has only experienced a few terrorist situations, numerous hostage-taking incidents have filled the headlines of American newspapers.

Since the terrorist often takes a hostage to negotiate his demands, the terms "terrorism" and "hostage taking" are often used interchangeably. However, these terms are distinct, since many hostage situations are the results of a criminal caught in the act rather than a premeditated plan, and many terrorist activities do not involve hostages. The term "hostage/terrorist situation" can be used to describe hostage taking by terrorists and nonpolitical criminals.

The hostage taker, whether political or not, creates a dramatic forum for his demands: Life and death are in the balance; the outcome is suspenseful; there are victims, weapons, and emotions; and in many cases, there is a message for the world. All the elements are present for a lead story. Says one reporter about a hostage taker in Cleveland, "They paid attention to him because of his terrorism."[1] Dr. George Gebner, Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications, describes these acts as media events without which terrorists couldn't exist. He questions to what extent media wants to cooperate with terror.[2] Halina Czerniejewski wrote in *The Quill*,

"The act of covering a news event changes the character of that event. . . . This leaves news media in a curious and uncomfortable position—that of wanting to be observers, but inadvertently or advertently becoming participants—as victims or vehicles."[3]

Fierce competition for the story tends to draw more media personnel and intensifies the coverage which results. "It's often the local news competition that compels journalists, maneuvering for each minute-to-minute scoop, to get in the way of police,"[4] reports Robert Merey of the *National Observer*. In the scramble for news and the competition for scoops, the broadcast media can make mistakes.[5] This competition creates problems for law enforcement personnel at the scene. Such was the situation with one case in Cleveland, Ohio. A reporter for a local television station called the news producer and told him that the situation appeared to be ending. The producer, wanting to be first with the story, went live via "mini-cam" with pictures of police snipers readying their defensive positions on the surrounding rooftops. The hostage taker, who had access to a television, saw the positioning of snipers and balked. He shouted, "Everything is off, right now." In fact, negotiations went on for at least another day. The chief of police later said that the drama would have ended a day earlier had that mini-cam incident not occurred.[6]

(Photo credit Bernie Noble, Cleveland Press)

Advancements in technology, like the mini-cam, have posed problems for law enforcement and media alike. Truly an electronic marvel, the mini-cam or portable camera allows live broadcasts from almost anywhere; hence, it gets the story as it happens. Unfortunately, this can be dangerous in a hostage/terrorist situation. Virgil Dominic, news director of a Cleveland television station, stated, "The portable camera is a wonderful tool. But we are just learning how to use it." [7] The incident described prompted this news director to reconsider his station's coverage of such events. Dominic said it was his feeling that the competitiveness of attracting a larger audience caused the error in judgment of showing the snipers prematurely. The ultimate decision of that station was to not cover such events live in the future. Dominic entreated other local television news directors to follow suit, and where lives are at stake, defuse the competitive nature of these incidents.

Similar situations have generated much discussion between media and police. A recent study conducted by Dr. Michael Sommer at California State University at Northridge, entitled "Project on Media Coverage of Terrorism," surveyed police chiefs and media representatives from the 30 largest cities in the United States. The report contains some divergent opinions on the role of the media in hostage/terrorist situations, and though some of the responses are predictable, others are surprising. Television directors agreed that live coverage is not a good idea, although still holding that the decision should be based on the individual case. Concerning journalists' conversations with terrorists, a plurality of radio, television, and print medias agreed that prior police consent was the way to proceed. [8]

Some of the more sober comments have come from the media itself. Tom Becherer of Detroit's WWJ–TV stated, "There is a difference, I think, between the public's right to know and the public's right to know everything." [9] Says Wayne Vriesman of WGN–TV, Chicago, "I will never black out a story. That would lead the public to think we will black out other stories. I would draw the line, though, on passing on police plans to a terrorist. . . ." [10] This discussion within the media has caused it to take a closer look at itself and its actions during these events. As a result, network guidelines have been promulgated.

"The neglect of the media by law enforcement in its all-out efforts to save lives often creates additional problems."

CBS was the first network to draw up guidelines for its news staffs regarding hostage/terrorist situations. The guidelines, though they leave certain questions unanswered, do show a sensitivity for not only the hostage but also law enforcement. NBC likewise has written guidelines, as has United Press International whose guidelines put particular emphasis on establishing procedures at each local station for the coverage of such events. This raises the often-echoed complaint that network and headquarters-type edicts don't hold much water in the individual area stations. Local stations do not want to be locked into a formal set of rules established by network executives which may not allow any flexibility in individual cases.

Guidelines do have some drawbacks. An author for the *The Quill* comments,

"The problem will be to come up with guidelines which will be flexible enough so as not to encroach on news judgment, thoughtful enough to deal with the complexities of the situation and clear enough to help news people deal reasonably with fast breaking, tense life-and-death situations." [11]

Jim Warren, a reporter for KPHO–TV, Phoenix, believes one basic guideline is that the media work closely with the authorities. [12] Norman S. Hartman, news director of KOVR, Sacramento, says that guidelines "can serve a useful purpose to get news people thinking and talking about news coverage during such incidents." [13]

Ron Tindiglia of ABC News, New York, sees media's role, that of a disseminator of news, as a vital one demanding great responsibilities to reduce vulnerability against manipulations. [14] Dan Rather of "60 Minutes" says in support, "When violent people are playing to the camera, there's no question that the medium itself can become a kind of hostage, and the reporter has to dodge and struggle to keep from being captured and used." [15]

The police and media in such hostage/terrorist situations need not be antagonists. In fact, the news media at different times has helped resolve the hostage taker's demands. Such was the case in Cleveland when a police captain and a 17-year-old female employee of the police department were taken hostage in 1977. The hostage taker refused to talk to police negotiators and would only discuss his situation with a local black television reporter. Under the guidance of police, the reporter talked the hostage taker out of the situation, and no one was injured.

A danger arises, however, when media personnel decide to become "freelance" negotiators with the perpetrators, as in the Hanafi Muslim's hostage taking in Washington, D.C. Hamaas Khaalis, leader of the sect, was interviewed on the air concerning the question of whether or not he could trust the police. [16] This question obviously makes the job of negotiation—which is based on trust—a much more difficult one. In another interview, Khaalis was asked whether he had set any deadlines yet. The last thing a negotiator ever wants is a deadline. [17]

Law enforcement has had its problems adapting to the hostage/terrorist situation and its relationship to the press. The initial reaction to a hostage/terrorist crisis is to direct all manpower to the tactical and negotiating efforts to free hostages safely, to the exclusion of all else, even the media. The neglect of the media by law enforcement in its all-out efforts to save lives often creates additional problems. The New York City Police Department (NYPD) discovered this phenomenon in its first hostage negotiation case at a sporting goods store in Brooklyn. After the Munich Olympics, the NYPD formed a hostage negotiations team in 1972 under the direction of Dr. Harvey Schlossberg (recently retired) and Capt. Frank Bolz. When the Brooklyn incident broke, the police wanted a news blackout and went so far as to shut off the electric power to the entire area. The media countered by setting up portable generators and floodlights, which inadvertently served to silhouette the police and leave the perpetrators in the shadows. Having learned a lesson from this experience, the NYPD now spends time with the media, to the point of including them in its hostage training sessions.

Communication between media and law enforcement tends to strengthen the trust between the two. As one police chief stated in a nationwide survey, "On-scene liaison between police and media and a policy of department-wide openness promotes a climate of mutual trust and understanding wherein the police and the media can fulfill their respective obligation to the public." [19] The time for communication with the media, however, comes long before the crisis occurs. The chief of police in Warrensville Heights, Ohio, who was involved in a hostage/terrorist situation, says that until that crisis he had never really spent a whole lot of time with members of the media. Now he believes in establishing an on-going relationship with them. "The key is common sense and

FBI Agents rescue two children who were held hostage. (Photo credit Ronald F. Kuntz, UPI)

Warrensville Heights police chief briefs members of the news media. (Photo credit Bernie Noble, Cleveland Press)

cooperation between media and law enforcement," said the FBI Special Agent in Charge during the Warrensville Heights case.[20] Building a good rapport with the media—one based on forthrightness, openness, and trust—long before the hostage taker ever strikes is a necessity.

Essential to this trust relationship is a public information officer (PIO). Each police department should have some individual assigned the duty of liaison with the press, and that person should be someone other than the chief. The PIO gives the chief the latitude he needs to run the department and still be available for press conferences and media appearances, while the PIO has daily contact with the press to handle the usual inquiries common to most police departments. The PIO should disseminate public information to the media and remain sensitive to the needs of the press in day-to-day operations and especially during a crisis situation.

In the FBI, Special Agents have been appointed as media representatives in each of the FBI's 59 field offices. All the media representatives are trained in press relations at inservice training sessions held at the FBI Academy. Media representatives have served the FBI, the press, and the American public well, and they become particularly important during a hostage/terrorist situation.

Before a hostage/terrorist situation occurs, the PIO and the chief should take the initiative to meet with the video, radio, and print media, including the wire services. These meetings should involve a discussion with the news director, city editors, and supervisors of reporters concerning the nature of hostage negotiations and the problems associated with them. Several departments, notably the NYPD, have been very successful with this technique. As Captain Bolz puts it, "We try to take away the mystique." [21] The press must see that law enforcement is sincere in attempting to balance the people's right to know with the protection of lives. Often, a general presentation to the media by the department's hostage negotiator and the PIO helps to create an awareness and sensitivity to law enforcement's problems.

When the crisis situation comes, the PIO should be one of the first on the scene. His job at the scene is to ascertain immediately the facts and report to the media the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the situation in a general briefing, so that the entire press corps can get the truth from a reliable police official, hopefully eliminating the need for freelancing by the media.

During a recent hostage/terrorist situation, exhausted newsmen catch up on much-needed sleep. (Photo credit Timothy Culen, Cleveland Press)

After the initial press briefing, the PIO should establish a media command post. This post should serve as a centralized area from which press statements can be made, information released, and questions answered. The location depends on each situation. It may be 50 feet or 5,000 feet away from the incident; it may be outdoors or on another floor in the same building where the hostages are being held. Location of the media command post should be accessible, while not intruding or interfering with tactical police or negotiators. However, it should not be at such an unreasonable distance away from the scene so as to invite freelancing. The ideal media command post should have outside telephone lines for the press to call in their stories, toilet facilities, and if possible, a place to sit down or even lie down, as some cases go on for days.

During the hostage/terrorist situation, the PIO serves as a direct link between law enforcement and the media. His job is not only to keep the press informed, but also to buffer the command post from the pressures of the media, so that the chief or commanding officer can concentrate on the job at hand and not be tied up with external interruptions. Finally, the PIO should remain with the media at all times. Since many situations take days to resolve, consideration should be given to having an alternate PIO.

Proper handling of news media at a hostage/terrorist situation not only requires scheduling and coordination, but also a delicate balance between the duty of the press to inform and law enforcement to protect. This is not an easy task. However, the problems can be worked out with mutual effort on the part of both law enforcement and the media. **FBI**

Footnotes

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[4] Robert W. Merry, "On-the-Air Hindrance? Broadcasters Search Souls Over Coverage," *The National Observer*, April 22, 1977.

[5] John Weisman, "When Hostages' Lives are at Stake . . . Should a T.V. Reporter Push On or Pull Back?" *TV Guide Magazine*, August 26, 1978, p. 5.

[6] Abbott and Lalli, p. 32.

[7] Abbott and Lalli, p. 33.

[8] "Study Concludes There's Not Much Agreement Between Police and the Media Officials," *Variety*, (Hollywood, Calif.) August 17, 1978, p. 1.

[9] "T.V. Newsmen Split on Air Time for Terrorists." *More*, June 1977, p. 20.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ernie Schultz, "Censorship Is No Solution to Coverage of Terrorist-Hostage Situation," *RTNDX Communicator*, July 1977, p. 7.

[12] *Id., More*, p. 20.

[13] "Many Stations Enact Guidelines on Involvement with Terrorists," *Television/Radio Age*, October 21, 1977, p. 26.

[14] Ibid, p. 74.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Weisman, p. 5.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid, p. 6.

[19] "Police Chiefs Blame TV for Acts of Terrorism," *Editor and Publisher*, August 27, 1977, p. 12.

[20] Abbott and Lalli, p. 33.

[21] Weisman, p. 6.

END