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Media Crisis Management in Traditional and Digital Newsrooms

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Abstract / By comparing two newsrooms’ responses, one with a traditional mode of production and one with a digital, to the terror attacks of 9/11, this article demonstrates that newsrooms, in contrast to what previous research tells us, differ in their ability to cover crisis events. Drawing upon findings from previous research on how news organizations cope with extraordinary – and crisis – events, the study explains news desks’ ability to cope with the disruptions of everyday deadlines caused by ‘disaster marathon modes’ of reporting, based on organizational everyday structures and previous experiences. The study concludes that a digital newsroom designed to handle 24 hour reporting does not necessarily nor automatically have a suitable structure to deal with a crisis event. Rather, in this particular case the structure used for 24/7 coverage, based on journalists’ independence and decentralization, was directly counterproductive when dealing with a crisis event.

Key Words / crisis / management / news production / routines / 11 September 2001 (9/11)

Newsroom Responses to Crisis Events: The Role of Organizational Everyday Structure and Previous Experiences

In today’s media-driven world, news organizations face enormous challenges in reporting disasters and crisis events in a high-speed and professional manner. The quantity of incoming material, as well as the pressure to report the news, is vast. In terms of program scheduling, news organizations can cope with these challenges in essentially two ways: by holding on to their everyday news broadcast schedule or by remaking their coverage into extended live open-broadcasts, so called ‘disaster marathons’, which appears to be the preferred mode of reporting crises today (Liebes, 1998; Katz and Liebes, 2007). The disaster marathon mode of reporting not only has implications for the appliance of journalistic norms, but it also very much confronts newsroom managers with profound organizational challenges since they tear apart the existing structures which are centered
around clear pre-set deadlines (Berkowitz, 1992). These changes force news desks to reorganize in order to cope with the new conditions. Given the demanding circumstances put upon a news desk in the wake of big crisis events, it is worth questioning how different types of desks manage to cope with the task of both restructuring their organizations and reporting the news, often simultaneously.

This question is addressed in this study. The study is based on a comparative study of two Swedish public service newsrooms and their response to the challenges posed by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. According to the self-evaluations conducted by the news desks of the two participating organizations – the Swedish Radio (SR) and the Swedish Television (SVT) – the response by the SR’s news desk Ekot was perceived as a success whereas the response of the SVT digital news desk SVT 24 was perceived as less successful. The performance of SVT and its news program SVT 24 during the 9/11 news coverage was also publicly criticized, for example, by journalism professor Stig Hadenius. On the most influential debate forum in Sweden, Hadenius’ article questioned why SVT let its youngest news desk (SVT 24) conduct reporting in the first critical hours after the attack – a task for which, according to Hadenius, it did not have the capacity (Hadenius, DN-Debatt, 14 Sep. 2001). 2 The starting point for this article has been Hadenius’ rather simple and straightforward question: How come that some news desks do a better job than others when it comes to crisis reporting?

However, previous research on news production falls short in explaining the variations between news desks because of the tendency to assume that all news organizations work according to universal journalistic routines, leaving little (or no) room for variations between organizations (see for example: Epstein, 1973; Schlesinger, 1978; Golding and Elliot, 1979; Fishman, 1980; Soloski, 1989; Gans, 2004 [1979]). To date, the limited research on news production during crisis events can be divided into two fields of research: the news sociologists who argue that journalists manage to cope with extraordinary events through learned routine responses (Tuchman, 1973; Berkowitz, 1992); and the sociological disaster scholars who point to the role of organizational restructuring, but without providing theoretical explanations for how to understand news organizations’ flexibility (Quarantelli, 2002). Further, even though scholars in the field have acknowledged the challenge that new digital technologies and 24-hour environments pose to news practices (Cottle and Ashton, 1999; García Avilés and León, 2002; Aldridge and Evetts, 2003; UrSELL, 2003; Erdal, 2007), research comparing digital newsrooms with traditional ones has been limited. As a result, we still know very little about how different production modes affect operational news work. As a way of bridging this gap, this article aims to examine how traditional and digital modes of news production impact upon news organizations’ ability to reorganize and report during crises based on their previous experiences and their everyday organizational structure.

Organizational Structure

As noted earlier, the notion of universal routines shared by all journalists has been central to previous research on news work, where behavior has been explained by institutional and structural aspects (see for example, Burns, 1969; Janowitz, 1975; Tunstall, 1977; Schlesinger, 1978; Soloski, 1989). Ryfe (2006) argues that the tendency for journalism scholars to rely upon universal routines in explaining news work has resulted in
descriptions of news organizations as ‘remarkably uniform’, where study after study has shown news to be ‘extraordinarily homogenous’ across news outlets. The uniformity in news production can be explained by the tendency in previous research to understand journalism as based on ‘a shared set of organizational routines and practices’. Ryfe concludes by stating, ‘The idea is so irresistible that it is easy to forget that it is a theory and not a fact’ (2006: 135). As such, it does not come as a surprise that the focus on common practices and routines has overshadowed the importance of individual journalists’ actions and perceptions. The tendency to view news organizations as a homogenous set of organizations is another prevailing view in previous research dealing with extraordinary or disaster events (Tuchman, 1973; Berkowitz, 1992; Quarantelli, 1996; 2002). As a result, comparisons between news organizations, in terms of their response to crises, have been sparse.4

Disaster sociologists have demonstrated that disaster news often requires news organizations to restructure in order to provide extensive coverage of the event, including changes in structures, mandates and organizational processes (Quarantelli, 1996: 6, 2002). For example, previous research shows that news organizations quickly reallocate personnel and focus all resources on the event in order to facilitate information collection (Scanlon and Aldred, 1982). One effect of news organizations restructuring is often a change of power relations within the organizations, which tends to make some parts of the organization more important than others, and routine tasks often lose priority (Sood et al., 1987). One of the effects of news organizations restructuring referred to most often, is organizational decentralization (Sood et al., 1987; Quarantelli, 1996, 1989, 2002). Decentralization takes place as the demands for flexibility and speed increase, and accordingly the need for independent actions from the journalists grows because of the uncertainty of the situation. Moreover, in catastrophic disasters it is often difficult for journalists to communicate with their home desk. This results in an even higher degree of autonomy (Sood et al., 1987; Quarantelli, 2002: 12).

In contrast to previous research on news organizations in disasters (which is often centered around individual reporters working on the field), this article focuses on managerial newsroom responses – a subject largely overlooked in research on crisis and disaster reporting. It should thus be noted, that the study at hand is based on a larger research project examining how the three Swedish broadcasting organizations, Swedish Radio (SR), Swedish Television (SVT) and TV4 handled the 9/11 terror attacks from an organizational perspective. Within this larger project, a case-study of these organization’s top-managers’ decision making during 9/11 showed how organizational structure, culture and previous experiences affected the crisis response (Olsson, forthcoming, 2009). Of particular significance to this article is the finding that previous crisis experiences (in this case, failures) can influence news organizations to change their everyday structure in order to cope (in this instance, from a bureaucratic structure to what Mintzberg [1983] would call a ‘crisis organization’5). This finding then further underlines the intriguing interplay between the everyday organizational structure and news organizations’ previous experiences responding to crisis events – a relationship that will be further explored in this article.

Even though previous research on disaster and media acknowledge the role of news organizational restructuring, they provide few theoretical approaches on how to understand the process. One way of understanding how organizations in general respond in the wake of a crisis (namely, whether they centralize or decentralize) is by looking at their
The Role of Experience in Crisis Decision Making

To date, few journalism researchers have concerned themselves with explaining how journalists cope with extraordinary events. Possibly because of the lack of research (or to the catchiness of the phrase) Tuchman's (1973) notion of 'routinizing the unexpected' is still the main source of inspiration in studies of how journalists deal with unexpected events (see for example, Berkowitz, 1992). For Tuchman the most unexpected news events come under the ‘what-a-story’ category, referring back to the announcement of President Lyndon B. Johnson not to run for re-election (1973: 126). An important aspect of how journalists manage to cover a ‘what-a-story’ is by referring to previous similar events as a way of determining the appropriate response. The journalists Tuchman studied thereby relied upon history in reporting their ‘what-a-story’, in so far as ‘rules governing the coverage of a “what-a-story” were invoked by citing another “what-a-story”’ (1973: 128). Nevertheless, the notion of experiences and historical analogies have been understood as a routine, rather than as a subjective act of interpretation, conducted by individual journalists. According to Cottle (2000), research on news work has traditionally relied upon a notion of organizational functionalism, which ‘theoretically position[s] journalists as mere supporters or bearers of the organizational system, rather than as active and thinking agents who purposefully produce news through their professional practices’ (2000: 22).

The lack of research on journalists as agents in news organizational settings has, not surprisingly, further resulted in a lack of studies on how individual journalists influence decision making in a news organizational setting (Berkowitz, 1992; Donsbach, 2004). This means that, even though historical analogies and memories have been studied (mainly in terms of influences on news coverage; see for example: Edy, 1999; Winfield et al, 2002; Barnhurst, 2003; Ryan, 2004; Edy and Daradanova, 2006), we still know very little about the mechanisms through which journalists draw upon history when restructuring news organizations in order to report on extraordinary events.

In contrast, the role of historical analogies in decision making has been elaborated on in disciplines such as political science, crisis management and incident studies (May, 1973; Khong, 1992; Flin, 1996). Learning can be divided into basically two aspects:
learning in crises, often discussed in terms of the role of historical analogies in crises decision making; and learning after crises, which focuses on learning as an opportunity for policy change (Brändström et al., 2004: 191–2). One school of research that has focused on how actors learn in crisis is naturalistic decision making, which was initially developed by cognitive psychologist Gary Klein (1993) in his research on fire fighters. Research within the naturalistic traditions has demonstrated that decision makers recognize and respond to unstructured decision-making situations by developing certain ‘scripts’ which function as a way of conserving experiences and thereby shortening their reaction time (Klein, 1993; Flin, 1996; Beach, 1997; Pruitt et al., 1997). Historical analogies can, in cases like these, be understood as ‘teachers’ that provide decision makers with guidelines on how to act in a crisis situation (Brändström et al., 2004).6

It is reasonable to compare journalists to emergency personnel, in so far as they work in stressful environments and ‘are constantly in undetermined, uncertain situations’ (Donsbach, 2004: 139). Yet, research on how psychological factors influence journalistic perception and decision making is nearly non-existent (2004). Based on the foregoing discussion, it can be expected for historical analogies to function as teachers, and as such provide journalists with knowledge on how to restructure their organizations. Previous experiences might then help to explain news organizations’ capacity to cope with crisis events, despite their general lack of contingency planning (Quarantelli, 1996: 5, 2002: 5). Previous experiences can shape crisis responses in two ways; as a way of repeating former routines or experiences (Roux-Dufort and Vidaillet, 2003: 103) or as a precondition for improvisation (Weick, 1993). The question addressed in this article is whether or not previous experiences can out rule the effects of the everyday organizational structure in newsroom responses to crisis events. If previous experiences function as preconditions for improvisation, as proposed by Weick (1993), they might well be able to compensate for the effects of the organizations everyday structure (as proposed by ’t Hart et al., 1993).

Context and Method
This article is primarily concerned with two cases, and should be understood as a heuristic case study with the purpose to ‘identify new variables, hypothesis, casual mechanisms, and casual paths’ (George and Bennett, 2004: 75). According to George and Bennett, heuristic case studies rely upon ‘deviant’ or ‘outlier’ cases when outcomes cannot be explained by traditional theories. As such, the cases in this article have been selected on the basis that they question the notion of homogeneity in news organizations’ actions, which has dominated previous research on news work. In accordance with this, the study aims to develop new variables that can contribute to further knowledge on how news desks handle disruptions of everyday deadlines in the wake of crisis events. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the study is based on limited empirical material and therefore aims to make a modest contribution in identifying current gaps in the field of research.

The cases have been selected in accordance with the everyday organizational structures, based on whether they have a mechanistic or pragmatic structure. A more in-depth description of the two newsrooms’ everyday structure will be provided in the empirical section. The newsrooms selected for the study belonged to the two major Swedish public service stations Swedish Radio (SR) and Swedish Television (SVT). The first newsroom was an established traditional radio news desk (Ekot), which during 11 September 2001,
produced an eight-hour live broadcast. The second newsroom was a digital TV-news channel (SVT 24) that was set up to broadcast news 24 hours a day, and during the first critical hours of 9/11, provided the main bulk of the reporting in the largest Swedish TV-station. It should be noted that radio and TV differ because of their modes of production, and it can be argued that it is easier for a radio station to adapt quickly to changing circumstances since the technique is less complicated than at a TV station. Bearing that in mind, I do not consider the different media formats being a major drawback in relation to the study at hand since its focus on the impacts of organizational everyday structures and access to previous experiences is not in itself directly linked to media types.

The empirical material for this study is based upon interviews with editors and Heads of news in the two newsrooms (five individuals from the traditional newsroom and four from the digital newsroom). The interviewees were selected because they had the overall responsibility for the performance of each newsroom, and accordingly, the individuals responsible for the overarching organizational decisions. Each interview (lasting approximately an hour, and conducted in the interviewee's office) was focused around the way in which the interviewees perceived the event and how they acted in order to handle it. As already mentioned, the case study has been part of a broader study on these news organizations' decision making during 9/11. The statements provided by the interviewees were also cross checked with statements from other organizational members, in regards to how the news desks coped with the event in questions as well as their organizational cultures and structures (44 interviews at SR, and 31 at SVT). Supplementary empirical material was obtained from listening to, and viewing the relevant newscasts produced by each news desk on 11 September. While acknowledging the problems associated with relying almost solely upon interviews for empirical material, it proved the most effective method to conduct this particular study, as there were no written accounts of what occurred that day. This is not an uncommon research challenge, and it has been noted that when studying decision-making processes as they happen, researchers are often left with retrospective interviews as the only option (Mintzberg, 1973; Hickson et al., 1986; Schwenk, 1986).

11 September 2001

Moving back to the day in question, 11 September 2001, the two news organizations chose different responses in terms of scheduling. The first airplane crashed into the World Trade Center at 2.46 p.m. Central European Time, the second at 3.03 p.m., and the third into the Pentagon at 3.37 p.m. At SR, the managerial group made an ad-hoc decision just before 4 p.m., to break up the pre-planned scheduling. It is worth noting that a similar decision had never before been made at SR, nor had SR ever before had a comparable ad-hoc decision group, which was composed of the two Directors of program and effectively centralized all power into their hands. Their main decision was to produce a joint live broadcast from 4 p.m. until midnight, using the news program and one of the current affairs programs. This meant that even though the traditional newsroom had a long experience of broadcasting news every hour, they had never produced a similar long open live program.

At SVT, the digital news program SVT 24 (which broadcasts analogue newscasts on the hour throughout the day) had the formal responsibility to broadcast extra newscasts
in the established analogue channels if something happened that demanded extra coverage. On the day in question SVT 24 was in the midst of broadcasting its hourly newscast when the news desk received information of a second airplane crashing into the World Trade Center. In response, the Head of news at SVT 24 made a request to the SVT's central planning department to broadcast an extra analogue newscast at 3.25 p.m. Following this the managerial group at SVT decided that SVT 24 should broadcast between 4.15 p.m. and 6 p.m., and return at 10 p.m. after the ordinary news programs had been broadcast. All organizational resources were thus focused on the regular news programs aired at their ordinary scheduled times of 7.30 p.m. and 9 p.m. This action was part of SVT's organizational policy for extraordinary events.

The rescheduling program decisions taken by the two managerial groups at SR and SVT meant that the two newsrooms had to abolish their hourly newscasts, and instead broadcast continuously. The disappearance of ordinary deadlines (since everything that was produced went directly out live) was the aspect that all interviewees said differed most from their everyday activity. The absence of deadlines tore the ordinary structures apart, which made organizational restructuring necessary. In all of the interviews, the perception of how well the newsrooms managed to cope with the event was connected to their ability to restructure the organizations in order to meet the demands of the situation. The following two subsections are concerned primarily with the everyday structures of the newsrooms, as well as their previous experiences from similar events, and how they restructured their organizations to cope with reporting the terror attacks.

**Newsrooms' Responses and Rationales**

**The Traditional Newsroom (SR)**

**The Everyday Organization**

The respondents describe the everyday organization of the news desk as based on clear hierarchies, roles and rules. The organization was clearly structured alongside various desks, such as the national and foreign news desk. Furthermore, one producer was in charge of each of the broadcasts. The respondents stressed that during 9/11 they were able to use everyday procedures, and that the everyday organization provided a solid base for the response. The only difference was that it was extended with new functions. According to one of the Heads of news:

*We had a functioning group structure since there are a lot of decisions to be made every day . . . It is pretty much the same apparatus – the only difference is the scale. People in the organization know that the producers make decisions related to their broadcasts and if something extraordinary occurs, the Head of news get involved, and after that the Head of the news program.*

The Head of the news program describes the everyday organization as being run by a ‘strict delegation’, meaning that the operational responsibility lay with producers and the news managers. The Head of the news program had thus delegated all operational responsibility to the organization. Based on the description just given, the news desk is characterized as an example of a mechanistic organization.
The Role of Experience

SR had never produced a similar long live broadcast. As such, the newsroom had no directly similar or analogous previous experience. The interviewees, despite never having made exactly the same type of program before, were confident that they had a good deal of experience to draw upon.

It is in situations like this that news desks are at their best. Ideally, if they are not hindered by bureaucracy, a good news desk functions automatically. It transforms itself into a crisis machine instantly. There might be initial confusion before you have established who should do what because you have to re-structure the organization. But that is also done ad-hoc. It has been a trained organization for decades. So it is prepared.

For example, the Head of foreign news said that the SR news desk was characterized by a constant preparedness, which functions best in stressful situations. All of the interviewees referred to previous situations, from which experiences were drawn: ‘It has been shown at every crisis news event, like the Gothenburg fire [where 68 teenagers were killed in an illegal discotheque in 1986] and the sinking of the passenger ferry Estonia [in 1994], where we had the news desk on its feet’. These experiences were portrayed as ‘the most important asset the news desk has’ and it was mirrored in ‘competence, presence and the ability to make fast decisions – that is what saves us’. It was also stated that plans and policies were not written down but ‘it is the natural instinct of a news organization, and it starts to function automatically if it is not hindered by bureaucracy’.

For example, the decision made by the Head of the news program to move out to the news floor was based upon previous experiences.

The interviewees describe the newsroom as a trained organization that is at its best when its capacity is being tested and was compared to a military organization: ‘It is like the military that has been training in order to go on a UN mission; you get a chance to do what you are trained for. And this is actually what people here are trained to do.’ It was further stated that the training takes place in everyday procedures, and through smaller crises events.

The newsroom, and that goes for the correspondents as well, is a professional organization, which works best when really big events occur. Then all parts come together. Everybody comes in. Everything is working. The stress level reaches its top but there is also a great willingness. It might sound a bit cynical, but it is the right adrenalin that kicks in.

Of the two newsrooms, the traditional newsroom was depicted in far more positive terms, and it was also the organization in which the interviewees mostly referred to previous experiences.

Restructuring

The biggest change in the decision-making structure was that the newsroom was centralized. The Head of the news program moved out to the news desk in order to directly lead the work after the second plane hit the World Trade Center. Centralization, in the form of the Head of the news program taking part in the operational work – or at least closely monitoring – was a clear deviation from everyday procedures. The Head of the
news program stated that his role normally changes when an extraordinary event occurs, since these kinds of events put other demands on the organization: ‘In times like this I have to take an active part and make sure it actually works’. His decision to take on an operational role was not based upon an impression that the newsroom had a hard time coping with the event; rather, ‘everything ran as usually perfect, the whole news machinery was running’. Instead, the decision was based on a perceived need to make the overarching decisions related to the broadcasting schedule. He described his role during these kinds of events as keeping bureaucratic tasks away from the operational work.

Then I sit out there at the news desk and lead everything. Well, not the operational work but the organization as a whole and make sure that the people working with operational issues are not disturbed by bureaucratic hinder. I keep everything away from them and I make all the decisions needed for the different news programs.

According to the two Heads of news, the Head of the news program’s decision to take the main responsibility was appreciated since it provided them with the opportunity to focus on operational issues. The decision to centralize was, according to the Head of the news program, a consequence of the disappearance of deadlines as a result of the joint broadcast.

You can summarize it like this; since the scheduling was not normal, neither was the decision making structure. This had to do with the fact that there was a short notice when it came to broadcast news programs, which resulted in different decision making structures.

Further, the overall centralization at the Swedish Radio by the top-managerial group was perceived in very positive terms, notably because it took away the newsroom’s everyday bureaucracy in terms of dealing with the independent channels of when to broadcast news.7

Other changes to the everyday organization included a substantial increase in the number of reporters and the creation of additional functions. For example, twice as many producers were put on duty, reporters were told to listen to American National Public Radio, and others were placed to feed the website with material. The extra producers were used in order to make it easier to broadcast continuously; work could now be divided so that while one producer worked on the actual newscast, the other took on a planning and forward looking perspective. Furthermore, the two Heads of news divided work between them so that one of them could concentrate on supervising the reporters and on arranging domestic guests for the program, while the other took on a more operational role by trying to get hold of voices in New York. One of the Heads of news also took on a strategic perspective and prepared for the next day’s broadcasts.

Even though all interviewees were of the opinion that the newsroom managed to cope with the event on an overall level, they also pointed out the difficulties the organization had in swallowing all the extra reporters. Even though the Heads of news divided the labor between them, it took some time for the new organization to function properly. Adding to the difficulty, all reporters were working on the same news event, which blurred the distinction between the foreign and the domestic desks. This also caused some difficulties when attempting to hold on to the everyday organizational and decision-making structures.
Nonetheless, despite the problems discussed here, the overall assessment made by the interviewees was that the newsroom managed to set up a working structure based on existing clear roles and mandates, even though the structure became even more centralized than in the everyday organization.

The Digital Newsroom (SVT)

The Everyday Organization

According to one of the editors, since the digital newsroom was designed to broadcast continuously it was very different from a traditional news desk. ‘It is very special to broadcast continuously and to make extra newscasts very, very fast’. As a result, the attitude towards the division of labor and roles was characterized by a high degree of flexibility. ‘I won’t say more slack, because it gives the wrong signal, but a much softer attitude to each other’s roles. Everybody jumps in and does everything . . . It is always open for individual initiatives.’ The organization was characterized by a far-reaching delegated responsibility.

According to the interviewees, the high degree of individual responsibility and non-hierarchical structure was part of the organizational culture. The origin of the organizational culture was attributed to the establishment of the program; the more traditional news programs looked upon this newer format news program as a ‘cuckoo’s nest’, stealing resources from the two established news programs. Based on a shared feeling of belonging to an outsider-group, a strong inner friendship was fostered among the newsroom staff.

We were more like a group of friends, which is normally seen as a very big advantage but in this case it became a disadvantage. In this situation, we really needed a more hierarchical structure.

Because of a shortage of time and constant deadlines in everyday work, time for discussions was normally limited and resulted in reporters having to act independently. ‘The reporters had to think very much for themselves and to act independently, there was no time for discussion’. In line with how the newsroom was described in the foregoing extracts, its everyday structure can be categorized as pragmatic.

The Role of Experience

One of the main causes of the chaos described was attributed to the overall lack of experience from similar situations. None of the interviewees could find any similarities to anything they had encountered before. According to the editors, the situation differed enormously from other events, through time pressure and the amount of feeds coming in.

We are unaccustomed to working in a situation like this. All of us had previous experience working as reporters and producers, but we had never before worked in this format – having a big world news event crash into a live newscast. All of us had some previous experience of making a running order and managing things in that sense, but with reasonable time margins. In this situation there were no time margins at all. It was rather about putting out live pictures from New York and to come up with something to say about them.
The normal routines were described as altogether absent, and the working methods as being completely ad-hoc. The editors tried to solve the problem by broadcasting footage from international news agencies while at the same time reading incoming telegrams. One of the editors described the situation as the organization trying to do everything simultaneously: ‘We were driven by an over ambition by trying to broadcast everything as it happened, complete with sound and pictures. We produced and broadcast at the very same time, and we could not handle that.’ They had an ambition level that was over-the-top for this particular event, which according to the editors could be ascribed to a lack of experience from similar situations. The situation was made worse by the lack of assistance or material from the main news desk at SVT, since they were focused on their own news programs.

We would have needed a clear policy on what they expected from us. It would have been better to know explicitly: you got nothing, you have to manage with this and we expect you to do like this. I think that one of the explanations for why we became overly ambitious and tried to do more than we could handle was that we did not know what was expected from us. Did they expect us to do 30 complete minutes, with sound and pictures, or were the expectations something different? It would have helped if we had received clear guidelines, for example: produce a good newscast every fifteen minutes and in between find time to produce material.

According to Berkowitz (1992), one of the key purposes for work routines during extraordinary events is to provide a standard on how to evaluate the journalistic product. ‘If news workers knew the approximate product that should result from a particular routine, then the actual product they created could be compared to those expectations’ (1992: 93). It thus seems that in order to compensate for lack of experience, a standard in terms of policy or statement from the management group would have been needed as a way of finding the appropriate level of ambition. A clear policy that provided a standard for reporting could then, to some extent, have compensated for the lack of leadership at newsroom level.

The Head of newsroom attributed the overwhelming pressure to a number of factors: ‘The staff, as well as the editors, were inexperienced. Everyone that worked here was young and still learning the ropes. Besides that there was a lot of technical blundering . . . and finally the irritation that we did not get any material’. The editors pointed to the lack of experience as the main reason for the newsroom’s inability to handle the event, as one expressed: ‘It was total chaos; we were far too inexperienced for this kind of event. We would have needed all the support in the world. One of the greenest news desks at SVT had one of the biggest events in history shoved down its throat’.

Restructuring

Interestingly, despite the fact that the newsroom at SVT had a standard routine for continuous broadcasting, the pressure was perceived as much more severe than at the other newsroom in this study. The SVT interviewees described how the organization was unable to cope with a news event of this magnitude and to broadcast it in real time. The perception of the newsroom’s ability to cope, and the situation in general, was described as being ‘chaotic’. In contrast to the traditional newsroom, the digital newsroom further decentralized the organization, and accordingly, there was no centralization in terms of
the Head of the news program taking on a more operational role. Similar to the traditional newsroom, the Head of the digital news program did not have an operational role in the everyday organization. In contrast to the former, he continued to perform his more strategic role in keeping the contacts with SVT’s managerial group as well as other programs. According to the editors, a strong leadership might have helped in bringing more structure to the situation, and they argued for the Head of news program to take on that role since he was the one with the most experience from previous crisis events.

He was the co-worker with the most routine; he had worked during the first Gulf War . . . We did not manage to cope with the event, and what would have been needed was someone who had been around, who had done something like this before, with the experience that comes with that.

The editors claimed that they would not have been disturbed if the Head of news program had taken on an operational management role. On the contrary, the editors urgently felt the need for strong leadership that was based on experience from previous similar situations. As mentioned, the reporters were normally independent and used to taking on their own responsibilities. In everyday work this was an asset, but it became a problem in this case since ‘it adds to the problems when the organization is poor’. The lack of management and structure created uncertainty among the reporters, which they tried to compensate for by acting even more independently.

In contrast to the traditional newsroom, leadership became even weaker than normal since the editors got caught up in work, and did not find time to direct the reporters or control incoming material. There was simply insufficient time for the two editors to do everything they felt was needed, which resulted in stress and confusion.

That was the problem the whole time – what shall I do? And there were not only two assignments, it was actually even more; should I sit and read incoming telegrams; am I supposed to keep track of the latest development; . . . or am I supposed to delegate work assignments; to assemble the forces, talk to the reporters and the hosts? There was too much to think of and I tried to do a little of everything.

Instead of becoming more active when the workload increased, the editors said they acted more passively than normal. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the two editors, who normally work with separate programs, now worked together. It made it even more confusing and difficult to get an overview of the situation.

Eventually, a few hours after the attack, the organization was reorganized based on an out-put and an in-take function. The restructuring was not born out of previous experience, but as a result of the situation becoming unbearable. One of the planners took responsibility for managing the in-take and to take care of the reporters, while the two editors took on broadcast responsibility for one hour each. The in-take function made it possible to get an overview of incoming material.

All the items now had a name, even though they were not fully completed, and they were in a running order. You received the information and could broadcast it when it was prepared, and you just put it into the program.

The reorganization allowed for the organization to plan half an hour at a time. After 5 p.m. the structure began to function effectively, which facilitated the work enormously.
Conclusion

Possible explanations as to why the newsrooms differed in their responses to the event will be discussed here, and several conclusions can be drawn. The first explanation is concerned with how the organizational pre-structure formed the response and secondly, the significance of previous experiences.

Before discussing potential explanations, a short recapitulation of the responses will be provided. Firstly, even though the traditional newsroom encountered some initial problems, the general perception was that they managed to cope with the situation, in contrast to the digital newsroom where the situation was described as ‘chaotic’. The interviewees’ assessment of how well they managed to cope with the event was closely connected to whether or not they managed to restructure their organization. In this process it was clear that a centralized response (the traditional newsroom) was preferable to a decentralized response (the digital newsroom). Why then did the two newsrooms ‘choose’ different responses?

The empirical study supports the hypothesis proposed by ‘t Hart et al. (1993), stating that organizations respond differently to crises based on their everyday structure. The traditional newsroom (which had a mechanistic everyday organization) centralized even further when responding to the events, whereas the digital newsroom (which had a pragmatic everyday organization) further decentralized in response to the event. In response to Freeman et al. (2004), crisis management researcher Arjen Boin (2006) has asked the intriguing question of whether the organizational features that contribute to organizational success in everyday life might actually be the very same features that contribute to organizational failures when crises are at hand (2006: 94). This claim does not hold true for the traditional newsroom, where the pre-structure supported the crisis response, but has salience in connection to the digital newsroom, in which the successful everyday structure became an obstacle to an effective crisis response. It can therefore be argued that a digital newsroom designed to handle 24-hour reporting does not necessarily nor automatically have a suitable structure to deal with a crisis event. Rather, this study indicates that the structure used for 24/7 coverage, based on journalists’ independence and decentralization, was directly counterproductive when dealing with a crisis event. Based on the findings in this article one task for further research will be to explore, based on more systematic studies, differences in organizational structures between traditional and digital newsrooms and how these impact on their abilities to respond to crisis events.

The study further demonstrates that reorganization was closely linked to the role of experience, or non-experience, from previous extraordinary events. As proposed by Brändström et al. (2004), historical analogies can, among other things, function as ‘teachers’ in crisis decision making. The respondents from the traditional newsroom gave numerous examples from previous events that could be drawn upon, to the extent that the newsroom was portrayed as having ‘natural instincts’ on how to behave in situations such as this. Every interviewee mentioned a variety of previous situations that had bearing on how the organization behaved during 9/11. Additionally, they stressed that the successful handling of the event should be understood as a result of the constant preparedness in the everyday organization. Based on this, one can argue that the newsroom had developed a ‘safety culture’, defined as ‘the product of individual and group values, attitudes,
perceptions, competencies, and patterns of behavior that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organization's health and safety management (HSC 1993: 238 in Cox and Flin, 1998: 191). This is especially relevant in relation to Pidgeon's (1998) argument, that one aspect of a safety culture is the capacity to modify previous arrangements in the face of unforeseen hazards (Pidgeon, 1998: 208). In other words, the ‘teacher’ had become institutionalized. In contrast to the traditional newsroom, journalists working in the digital newsroom stated that they could not draw upon everyday routines in order to handle the event, nor did they have any experience from similar situations.

These findings underline that journalism is very much a learned profession where experience plays a pivotal role for newsrooms’ abilities to act when ordinary structures and routines fall short. Thus, cognitive aspects, such as learning, are likely to be more context bound than organizational structures. Yet, some potential generalizing propositions for further research can be made. Firstly, given the fact that digital newsrooms, in general, function as springboards for newcomers entering the journalism profession, these newsrooms are likely to lack extensive previous experiences. This potential ‘newcomer effect’ is thus likely to be ruled out with time, especially since the trend is moving towards the introduction of digital technologies in news production at large. However, considering the impact the introduction of digital production modes have on journalists’ traditional professional roles and news organizational structures, the transformation of news production techniques might result in a general loss of institutional memory within newsrooms. Consequently, newsrooms will be more vulnerable when non-routine events, such as a crisis, occur.

Notes

1 In the ‘newsletter’ sent to everybody at SVT on 14 September, the Director of News and Current Affairs stated that SVT would change its policy for big news events: SVT 24 should only do one initial extra newscast and then the crisis news coverage would be the responsibility of the regular news program, Rapport.

2 It should be noted that Hadenius compared the coverage of the terror attacks between TV4 and SVT in an article titled ‘TV4 did their job better than SVT’ (Hadenius, 2001).

3 Although, news sociologists tend to apply the term ‘extraordinary events’ in referring to news events that are non-routine.

4 One example of a comparative outlook from a crisis perspective is a study by Hellman and Riegert (forthcoming), in which the authors demonstrate how the news cultures of CNN and the Swedish TV station TV4 had an impact on how they reported the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami.

5 Mintzberg (1983) describes the ‘crisis organization’ as an organizational form that might emerge when an extreme threat ‘forces an organization to centralize, no matter its usual structure’ (1983: 160). The organization type is created by the centralization of power within the hands of the chief executives as a way of reducing bureaucratization and to make room for fast and coordinated responses.

6 The other functions of historical analogies in crisis decision making referred to by the authors are the following: ‘filter’, ‘prison’, ‘blind spot’, ‘weapon’ and ‘trauma’ (Brändström et al., 2004: 207).

7 The news program did not have its own station but broadcast their newscasts in the four channels that made up the Swedish Radio.

8 As proposed by the Human Factors Working Group of the Advisory Committee on Safety in Nuclear Installations (ACSN).
References


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