Crisis Management and the Role of Communication:

Mass Media and Bio-terrorism

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(1) Introduction

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 marked the turning point in our perception of crisis management. With the anthrax scare in the United States following 9.11, the threat of bio-terrorism became a reality. These incidents increased the social unrest and uncertainty in our world.

I would like to examine how our crisis management should be in modern society with particular emphasis on bio-terrorism and the role of the mass media in the United States.

The idea that priority should be given to security over civil freedom has become more persuasive in recent days. The "Patriot Act" passed in October 2001 confirmed the American policy of ensuring security by restricting certain degrees of freedom. The act extended the rights of criminal investigation and provided authority to intercept communication among residents without American citizenship.

The Europeans, on the other hand, have shown skepticism towards

this policy. To the eyes of the European researchers and media, the terrorist attacks have plunged United States into panic. "The Economist" reminded the readers that the number of the people killed in 9. 11 was no more than the number of those killed during the Northern Ireland conflict of the past 30 years and questions the American policy that prioritize security at the cost of freedom.

Likewise, the director of SIPRI Biological and Chemical Warfare Project, Jean Pascal Zanders, calling himself a European, says as follows, "I'm a European and the perception in Europe regarding terrorism is perhaps somewhat different from that of the United States. In our societies, we have had much more exposure to terrorism. It's part of the political tradition, I would say, and I would even venture that most, if not all of the democracies in Europe were born in terrorism at some point. They were definitely born in blood."[1]

(2) History of Bio-terrorism

Except for during wartime, object of terrorists had been specific individuals or groups, not indiscriminate mass[2]. However, the targets of recent bio-chemical terrorism have been unspecified number of people.

The record of the oldest bio-terrorism is the use of ergot extracted from rye on the people of Assyria in 6th century, B. C. Much later in 1346, Mongolian soldiers threw bodies of those who died of epidemic into enemy's walled city to spread disease. In 1456, in trying to stop the Turkish army from entering Belgrade, poisonous gas was generated by burning carpets. In 1710, the Russian army allegedly used infected dead bodies against the Swedish army. Although germs were used as weapons through the 18th and 19th centuries, they were all during war.

Let us look briefly into the use of biological weapons in the 20th

century which is characterized by (1) exclusive use in wartime, particularly during the First and the Second World Wars, (2) use against dissidents after World War II, and (3) use by cult groups and extremists. Until cult groups and extremists started to use biological weapons, bio-terrorism was carried out with clear political intentions to cause casualty to a specific group of people.

According to the study conducted by Center for Nonproliferation Studies at Monterey Institute, 101 incidents of bio-chemical terrorism occurred between 1900 and 1990. Two thirds of the incidents occurred outside of the United States. The number of people killed amounted to 103, and the number of injured to 5554. Clearly, explosive weapons caused far greater damage than bio-chemical weapons. This is due mainly to the technical difficulty in the transformation of the biological weapons into effective forms. However, biological weapons heighten people's fear in that they affect human bodies without their knowing. Although biological weapons do not have immediate effects like chemical weapons, they allow perpetrators to escape precisely because the effects are not immediate. Moreover, it will be unclear whether biological weapons had really been used until much later when symptoms begin to appear.

(3) The World's Perception of Bio-terrorism

It was in 1996 when the Japanese cult group Aum used Sarin in the subways of Tokyo that discussions about bio-terrorism began in earnest. Since this incident, the Aum group has often been referred in the numerous reports on bio-terrorism in the world.

However, this attack was considered as an isolated incident, not as the beginning of a trend. According to the report by the State Department titled "Patterns of Terrorism" issued in April 2000, effective U. S. bio-terrorism is likely to be carried out not by groups such as Aum, but

by terrorist organizations with support and abundant funds provided by certain countries.

The articles on bio-terrorism and security up to 2001 focus on the state-supported terrorism and stress the need of preventing the germs (bacteria) from getting out of research laboratories. During the Cold War, the most feared perpetrator of bio-terrorism was the former Soviet Union, which actively produced biological weapons. With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the potential "enemy" was shifted to such nations as Iraq, North Korea, and Iran which were called by the United States to form the "Axis of Evil." The point that the United States was particularly concerned about the threat of Iraq was underlined in many of the recent articles on bio-terrorism such as that by Raymond A. Zilinskas. In the article called "Rethinking Bio-terrorism" issued in December 2001, he anticipated the possibilities of bio-terrorism by Iraq or "an unholy alliance" of Iraq and the terrorists.

Clearly, crisis management concerning bio-terrorism in the United States has profoundly reflected the dominant ideology of the contemporary world. But we have doubts whether it has reflected reality. Is it not possible that the emphasis on Iraqi threat emphasized by the mass media and academic circles was part of American effort to rally public support for attack on Iraq?

(4) Turning Point of American Crisis Management

Research of anthrax as a biological weapon began more than 80 years ago. But the treaty signed at the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) in 1972 prohibited production of any biological weapons. (The offensive bio-weapon program in the United States was halted by President Nixon in 1969 and 1970.) But despite the ratification of the BWC Treaty, bio-chemical weapons continue to be possessed by 13

nations in the world.

Although the United States signed the BWC treaty, the United States had been developing anthrax for military purposes as disclosed by the New York Times just before 9. 11. However, other media did not pay much attention to this report and it was forgotten in the turmoil of the terrorist attacks.

Triggered by these attacks, crisis management was transformed to shift emphasis to bio-terrorism. Until recently, the concept of "bio-security" has been understood in a narrow sense, as can be seen from the following definition: "the effective implementation of measures that aim to prevent would-be terrorists, criminals, and spies from gaining access to dangerous pathogens and toxins." (Barletta, 2002) Experts at Sandia National Laboratories refer to the following six categories of measures to be taken for bio-security; namely, physical protection, personal reliability, scientific and programmatic oversight, pathogen accountability, transportation security and information security[3]. It is evident that emphasis has been placed on regulation and control in order to prevent the spread of pathogens, technology, and information. However, this narrow understanding of bio-security cannot address the kind of bio-terrorism threat in recent years.

Let us look into how the U. S. government shifted its policy of crisis management with regard to terrorism after 2001. We can point out two major changes. Firstly, focus is no longer on catching and punishing terrorists after attacks but on preventing them. Secondly, terrorism was no longer considered primarily as threats from abroad[4]. Specifically, this shift legalizes extended surveillance which could lead to human rights violation, particularly among immigrants.

Evidently, preventive measures play a significant role in crisis management. However, too much emphasis on preventive measures, which incidentally is a universal tendency and not limited to the United

States, is undesirable in that it will not only sacrifice civil liberties, but it could be off the right track. Legal measures such as the "Patriot Act" and "Public Health Security and Bio-terrorism Preparedness and Response Act of 2002" are in fact unable to ensure bio-security in the modern world because they consist of regulations that attempt to manage through command and control[5]. These measures could have dealt with conventional type of crises such as nuclear threat, but they are not appropriate to deal with contemporary attacks whose target cannot be clearly identified. Bio-security cannot be achieved with any single law or program. It is necessary to consider bio-security in a more comprehensive manner. In other words, it is more important to establish a network of bio-security than to enforce laws or programs. The network will be made up not only of institutions and scientific experts, but also of a wide range of organizations and individuals.

Tooru Okumura who as a medical doctor played an active part after Sarin incident in Japan, as well as Joji Mogami who helped as a medical doctor in New York during 9. 11 made similar comments in their respective books on terrorism and the role of medical doctors. Namely, they pointed out that vertically divided bureaucracy hindered the swift response to the attack. While the division of labor and the maintenance of systems promote efficiency of day-to-day operations, as far as crisis management is concerned, such divisions and systems complicate coordination between various institutions. Therefore, it is important to share knowledge and information and at the same time it is essential to establish a cooperative system and a network that can hedge risk. In carrying this out, however, the issue of the balance between restriction and freedom must be addressed.

(5) Mass Media and Bio-terrorism

Now I will move on to explore the role of the mass media with regard to crisis management. It is said that after 9. 11, American people's contact with mass media increased conspicuously[6] because

people sought information about the terrorist attacks from the mass media. However, the coverage by the mass media was not without problems. Historically, terrorism and the mass media have had a close relationship. Thanks to new technology, the terrorists' messages are easily disseminated to the world via radio, television, copy machines, fax, and the internet. Printed media had been the mass media mostly used by terrorists up to the end of the 19th century, but from the 20th century onward, broadcasting media became the dominant means for the terrorists to disseminate their messages.

Until recently, the primary goal of terrorism had been an overthrow of a regime or giving a fatal blow to the enemy in war. However, in recent years, the aim of terrorism has changed from attacking a clear political target to destabilizing the society by giving psychological blow. In the modern world which can be characterized as information society, the mass media including the internet can play the unintentional role of mediating terrorist intentions. The terrorists' goal to create invisible threat and to bring about social unrest is closely related to the function of media.

Brigitte Nacos who wrote a book on terrorism and mass media makes an interesting comparison between American and British leaders' comments about terrorism. Whereas President Bush said immediately after 9. 11 that "Money is the life blood for terrorism," the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said "Publicity itself is the oxygen that keeps terrorism alive," referring to the terrorism by IRA. Nacos points out the insight of Thatcher, who recognized publicity as the principal "funding source" for terrorists[7]. Publicity can be effective weapon for terrorism in a highly networked information society like today. Indeed, it would be difficult for terrorists to attain their purpose without coverage by the mass media. Terrorists utilize and manipulate the mass media to make sure that their actions are publicized by them[8].

The anthrax attack in the United States in October 2001 put the American media in the unprecedented position of being the target of terrorism. There were numerous criticisms that the mass media exaggerated the incidents, thus aggravating fear and social unrest. Surely, there were problems in the way the mass media covered anthrax threat, but the mass media were not solely responsible for the confusion caused among the public. Terrorists were successful in obtaining publicity by targeting the mass media. The mass media could not have been unaware of the terrorists' strategy, but they did not have an option to refrain from reporting, since they believe to have a social responsibility to report.

After the anthrax scare, symposiums and workshops reviewing the coverage were actively carried out by universities, research organizations, and NGO's throughout the United States[9]. It was pointed out in these symposiums that the mass media were at a loss as how to report the incidents since the anthrax coverage was unprecedented experience for the mass media.

I believe it is important to review the anthrax coverage in order to identify potential problems of risk and crisis management and communication. What specific problems did the mass media face in covering bio-terrorism? I will point out those problems by referring to statements made by journalists and researchers.

[Coverage of bio-terrorism]

At the time of terrorist attacks or disasters, people become more dependent on information provided by the mass media so that the role of the mass media becomes inseparable from crisis management.

The anthrax attack in 2001 was unprecedented in that the mass media itself became one of the main targets. But coverage of bio-

terrorism was not without precedents. In February 1998, a member of a white right-wing organization, Larry Wayne Harris, who threatened to distribute anthrax was arrested by the FBI. Tucker says as follows: "Indeed, by exaggerating the threat of mass-casualty attack, United States policy makers and the news media have unwittingly played into the hands of terrorist and hoaxers by over sensitizing the American public."[10] It is obvious that the mass media unintentionally served the terrorists' will by unnecessarily scaring the public. I will now refer to the article by Gerry O'Sullivan, who raised the following issues concerning bio-terrorism and the mass media[11]. Although Harris's blackmail was rooted in his racial prejudice and mental disorder, this part was almost ignored and the bio-terrorism factor was exaggerated.

(1) The coverage gave the impression that anyone with modest facilities can produce these weapons.

(2) Some of the major media in the United States reported anthrax as virus instead of bacteria therefore causing confusion. Moreover, the fact that human beings and animals can be inoculated against anthrax, making anthrax relatively safe, was not reported.

(3) Much reporting on Iraq's bio-war capabilities were based on misinformation. For example, the press omitted mentioning that 95% or more of Iraq's biological weapons capability had been destroyed. The fact that during the Reagan administration, at least 40 shipments of weapons and specific biological agents were made to Iraq was also underreported. Francis Boyle[12] points out that "Government knew full well that Iraq was going to develop biological weapons for use against Iran. These shipments were in clear violation of the BWC treaty of 1972. By transmitting these disinformation, the news media gave justification for the war against Iraq.

It is evident that on the anthrax incident, there was biased reporting and misinformation even by such mainstream media as the New York Times. Most fatal was that the mass media confused bacteria with virus. Fortunately, the threat was never carried out by Harris, but in

2001, the letters containing anthrax were actually sent and caused considerable damage including deaths. Many factors of the attack caused social unrest. Firstly, the mass media became one of the targets. Secondly, it was unclear who would be the next target. And thirdly the duration of the attacks was relatively long. These factors all worked to create widespread unrest.

Because there were no precedents, the journalists were forced to deal with the event without proper preparation or clear strategy. Only those who had good contacts with medical and research institutions could report properly.

There was no adequate "pool" of specialists on bio-terrorism available for the mass media at the outbreak of the anthrax attack. While mainstream media with reporters specializing in health care and public health have access to specialists, small or middle-sized local media, particularly local television stations, faced serious problems. They had little idea of which specialist to contact.

There are three critical aspects, I believe, in the role of specialists in news making. Firstly, once someone is considered as a specialist, he or she is quoted and invited as a commentator to numerous media. As a result, his or her comments could be seen as fait accompli. Secondly, it has been pointed out that only "alarmist" type of commentators appears on mass media like television. Indeed, it is a structural problem of television to prefer "alarmist" commentators to "clinical" in order to obtain high rating. The audience also tends to prefer both consciously and unconsciously, to watch "alarmist" coverage when such incidents occur. In this instance, television and audience are accomplices. Thirdly, when relevant specialists, organizations, and public institutions give different views, the mass media are confused as to how to report the conflicting views.

Criticism over coverage of bio-terrorism rose not only from outside but also from inside the news organizations. There was a criticism that the mass media stirred up the incident unnecessarily, but there were also opinions that the mass media coverage was cool in spite of being such an unprecedented incident. Evaluation within the mass media was divided.

It seems wrong to see mass media as being monolithic or to conclude that they are the culprits. We should differentiate print media, broadcasting media, and the internet. We should also question the scale and the quality of the mass media. By and large, there was little problematic coverage by socially responsible national newspapers, while some television stations tended to exaggerate the threat. In such television stations, commentators who do not agree with the program's stance tend not to be invited.

Coverage of health issues always faces the difficulties of scientific uncertainties. Moreover, when the views and the information provided by medical experts differed from those by public officials, it becomes necessary to make compromises in order to present "scientific" facts. The mass media must face the dilemma of the "truth," scientific uncertainty, audience rating, and social responsibility of reporting. Susan Dentzer says, "I think the one clear lesson we all take away --- is that the press has a lot of trouble with scientific uncertainty."[13]

The mass media need to assess and process information swiftly. However, as we have seen, the mass media must probe in the dark, as it were, faced with unprecedented situations. As was pointed out, it is time to reach common understanding or to make a guideline for reporting bio-terrorism.

(4) Risk and Mass Communication
    In dealing with bio-terrorism, it is important to ensure "bio-secu-

rity" by preventing the spread of germs and information as well as the misuse of technology. However, it is known that the information flow and people's behavior in a panic situation differ from those in a normal situation. People interpret the situation based on the information given by the mass media. Reality of a "risk" is judged based on the many dimensions of information coming from the government, medical institutions, the mass media, the community, and the residents.

In crisis, information tends not only to include misinformation but the absence of information is often compensated with rumor or false information, and this may result in creating an illusion. There was such a case in Aichi Prefecture in 1973. An innocent utterance by school girls on a train that Toyokawa Shinkin Bank is about to be bankrupt spread widely. As a result, thousands of depositors thronged to a branch two days later trying to draw out their savings. The bank ended paying more than one billion yen. This case illustrates how a rumor can spread rapidly and widely, causing people to behave irrationally in a state of panic.

In a highly informatized society, dissemination of information is speedy. In the early 19th century in Massachusetts, it was said that a rumor of witch hunting took a month to spread throughout the state. Although we should not underestimate the power of personal communication, the range of information distribution was profoundly limited in the age before electronic media became widespread. It was after the spread of electronic media such as radio and television that mass mediated "panic" came into being.

The radio drama "The War of the Worlds" broadcasted by CBS in October 1938 is a prominent example. Although this was an entertainment program broadcasted the day before Halloween, the listeners mistook it for live coverage and panic occurred as they believed that the Martians were about to attack the earth. Although it is hard to imagine

such an attack occurring in the present day, in times of crisis such as terrorism, such panic could be created by the mass media. It is possible, in fact, that a "second hand terrorism"[14] could be created by the mass media or that the reporting itself becomes "media event" in the course of intensive coverage. Particularly in the early stages, there is much unconfirmed information which leaves room for all sorts of rumors. The mass media are in the position of controlling these rumors.

We must take into account the differences in the reporting style among countries with different journalistic traditions. Elaine Showalter, who has written about the mass media and terrorism, writes about the similarities and differences between American and British media. The mass media of both countries suppose that "Bioterrorism is psychological warfare designed to create fear and to destroy trust in the government." Yet there is a significant difference in respect to information sharing and enlisting the cooperation of the mass media.

Whereas American media's attitude is that the government should give full briefing to the mass media in a time of disaster, British media are generally skeptical about "media citizenship" in time of emergency. The tradition of the American media being "politically objective and socially responsible" was illustrated in the coverage of 9. 11, and in this regard, "accuracy, compassion, and civic pride" were emphasized in the reporting.

British media, on the other hand, have traditionally been suspicious of authority, so that cooperation between the mass media and the government is considered undesirable. The American epidemiologist, Thomas Glas[15] says as follows: "government planners make risk communication an essential part of homeland security programs, and understand that releasing timely, honest, clear and comprehensible information is as important as providing medicine." This shows how

the Americans see the role of media as being an important part of crisis management. In contrast, BBC World Service correspondent Nik Gowing stated that media could not be counted on to help reassure the public or to build confidence and that they might even aggravate social unrest. The difference in journalistic culture is reflected in the coverage of terrorism.

I would also like to say a few words about the balance between the freedom of the press and security. As I said earlier, "freedom" (or civil liberties) and "security" is not only an issue that must be faced by the mass media, but also by all the people since it affects the future orientation of society. The countries where the freedom of the press is practiced are more susceptible to mass-mediated terrorism than countries with less freedom of the press because in the latter, domestic media are controlled by censorship or national ownership of the mass media.

Let us recall the hostage crisis caused by Chechen rebels in a Moscow theater which resulted in more than 100 people being killed. After the incident, the Russian parliament passed a new law giving the government more power to restrict media coverage of anti-terrorist operations and terrorists' activities. Russian case is an example of a nation with little freedom of the press. It is anticipated that the Russian government will impose further restriction on news coverage of the military conflict in Chechnya.

In the modern world, the mass media and terrorism are in a paradoxical relationship. Tight grip on the mass media by the government may prevent dissemination of terrorists' message, but such restriction of the freedom of the press may lead to the restriction of civil liberties, which might in turn lead to terrorism.

Then what can we point out from the tradition and culture of

Japanese journalism? Current Japanese media culture has a starting point after the World War Second and the relationship of journalism and political power is not similar to the cases of above mentioned countries, such as the U. S., U. K. and Russia.

I am sure that Japanese public opinion is totally against restrictions and censorship on the ground of crisis control because of the reflection on what Japan experienced during the past wars. However, as the following remark indicates, press freedom without acknowledging responsibility for democracy is similarly undesirable. "The media is potentially culpable in spreading 'propaganda' and fostering fear when it invokes its freedoms with a blind eye, without responsibility to the democracy that secures those freedoms for them."[16]

In conclusion, I would emphasize the following points. When we set up a framework for crisis management, it is important to consider the role of communication and information as well as to assess the balance between security and civil liberties. What I am concerned most is that preventive discussions that have been prevalent since 9. 11 and anthrax attack can allow our society to be more restrictive in nature. We should be aware that prevention and limitation of civil liberties are inextricably linked.

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1) Zanders (1998)
2) Zanders (1998)
3) Cited originally by Barletta (2002)
4) *The Economist*, March 8, 2003, p. 36
5) Kwik, 2003
6) William McGrowan "Covering Terrorism: The Press and 9/11"
   http://www.nationalreview,com/comment/commnet - mcgowan-print110801.html
7) "Professor cites link between terrorism & mass media"
   http://newstranscript.gmnews.com/News/2002/0313/Fron_Page/037.html
8) Similar indication is made also by Brian Houghton and Neal A. Pollard.

Cf. note 9.

9) For instance, a symposium "Journalism and Bioterrorism" is held at the University of Minnesota School of Journalism and Mass Communication on Dec. 10, 2001.

10) Tucker, 2000, p. 152

11) O'Sullivan, 1998

12) Comment of Francis Boyle(University of Illinois) is cited from O'Sullivan (1998).

13) Brooking/ Harvard Forum. Susan Dentzer heads the ward-winning unit of the News Hour with Jim Lehrer, the health unit.

14) Brian K. Houghton and Neal A. Pollard (Directors at Terrorism Research Center) "The Media and Terrorism: Second Hand Terrorism" http://www.terrorism.com/terrorism/Media.shtml

15) Johns Hopkins University

16) see note 9.

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