

Media and Secrecy

01/22/07 79 W - + 13 - 11

From the ten codes discussion, here's a placeholder to discuss media and secrecy. Is it better when they know everything, nothing, or a little in-between? Pros of media coverage: Keeps everybody honest. Great for public relations and community education. Great for information dissemination during disasters. Cons of media coverage: Inaccurate or inflated representations of issues or incidents. Crews or individuals that place themselves in harm's way. Ton of phone calls during or after incidents. For starters.

I think what they say is based more on what you let them know rather than what they deduct from a given situation. You will rarely find a media outlet that will report "speculation". When we had a line of duty death in Wake County in 2005, you will remember that the news media did an excellent job of portraying more of the impact of Todd's death than the means by which he died. When we have an EMS unit involved in an accident, we proactively engage the media to ensure the message they convey is factual and concise. If we handled these incidents in a shroud of secrecy, they would report something – usually something basic that leaves the interpretation of what really happened to the viewer. And if the media is placing themselves in harms way, it's because we have failed to command adequate security of a scene, either directly or with assistance of law enforcement.

Olson - 01/22/07 - 19:33

February, 1902. Resolution introduced by city Alderman to provide badges to active fire department members and reporters, which would allow them to ride to fires in hacks at 10 cents each. After discussion, resolution withdrawn.

Legeros - 01/22/07 - 19:43

I would have to agree with Olson on this. The media IS going to report something, weather it is right or not. I think it's a great idea to get them involved from the beginning so that they report the facts. I wish that was case more often.

firedriver - 01/22/07 - 21:10

Here is my opinion on the media.. being it only MY opinon..

The media is what you make of it. You can use the media to assist with your cause (such as listed above, during a disaster, getting important information out, etc.) or the media can work against you if you (as an agency) do not take full advantage of using them to your advantage and/or manipulating what information you tell them.

An emergency unit being involved in a wreck could go one of two ways with the media. Either A.) the unit was driving wrecklessly and too fast, OR B.) your agency could take the time to emphasize the importance of pulling over when you see an emergency vehicle responding to a call, you could show the media what an average unit encounters while responding to a call (traffic, hazards, etc), and you can emphasize what type of training the personnel receive before they are allowed to get behind the wheel. Afterall, every situation is what WE make of it. It is important that we give the media accurate information as soon as possible to prevent them (the media) from seeking out information on their own. Whether that be from an "eye witness" (that ALWAYS says the tornado sounded like a freight train!!) or any other source the media deems "credible."

Having gone from being in the field as a firefighter to now a dispatcher for a major city, I have been exposed to the non-stop calls from the media regarding incidents that we JUST dispatched. Yes, they do monitor our radios 24/7 and often just call us when it is slow to make sure they haven't missed anything. However, I still think that there are certain calls which they need not know about initially (bomb threats, anthrax scares, etc). The good thing about these calls (mainly the bomb threats) is that after the initial dispatch there is very little radio traffic from the units on scene to us. All of the communication is supposed to take place via a land line. I think that everyone here would agree that during one of these incidents, scene safety is of utmost importance and a media presence is certainly not necessary on most of these calls. Heck, when was the last time you heard of a bomb threat on the news?

On that same token, during slow news days and media sweeps, the news seems to be hungry for ANY type of story. They often call us wanting information about medical calls that sound like they could have been suspicious (overdoses, DOA of a young patient, etc).

I can see it now... if we start announcing 'rape', 'psychiatric', or 'suicide attempt' at any local school, mall, or public place, the media will run with one of those stories. Why increase the number of media inquiries on the PIO (and medical calls at that!!), like he doesn't already have enough to deal with?

There are some very obvious cases where the less the media knows, the better; but, for the most part I will agree that during a fire incident it is better they know the facts than report what they think are the "facts."

Hope that makes sense... that my .03 worth.

Luke - 01/22/07 - 21:43

All the more reasons for folks to take the time to read the alpha-numeric pagers, rather than just asking RWCC for more information on the (monitored) radio channel. Otherwise, we'll find out how good the response times are for those trucks with satellite dishes on top!

Skip

EMS100 ([Email](#)) ([Web Site](#)) - 01/22/07 - 22:07

Unfortunately though Skip, the alpha numeric and rip & run sometimes doesn't give any info, so you gotta ask!!

Guest - 01/22/07 - 23:22

I thought i heard locution dispatch a "psychiatric" call on Ral. H.Q. the other day.

firedriver - 01/23/07 - 00:26

I have to agree, there are sometimes that we only get partial or garbled messages on the alpha pagers. But, like I said on another thread, I personally think the media should have access to what it is I am doing- I do not have anything to hide. I doubt they are going to report on the full arrest at the local nursing home, but I DO wish they would report on the traffic headaches and the system abusers. Or maybe if they heard the 'red' diversions all the time, maybe we could get their attention to that as well. I don't know, maybe it is wishful thinking on my part...I guess too much fun in the 70s did that to me...

DJ - 01/23/07 - 12:39

Unfortunately, at least here in Meck County, we do not use the Alpha paging system. All of our trucks have MSTs which we can send messages to. Our BCs have been testing out the new laptops for some time, and it should not be too long before the rest of the units have those laptops as well (so I'm told). That will also be a great resource for sending confidential information to units responding. That way we could send a unit to a "hazardous condition" and give them the rest of the information via their laptop.

How does everyone feel about giving gate codes (or any access codes) over the radio? Is that not something that should be kept confidential? We never know just who might be listening to our radio traffic.

We discussed this topic today at work. We are all very curious to see what will happen to our codes that involve personal information (suicide, rape, etc). As one of my superiors put it, dispatching a "rape" is dispatching in pure speculation. How many times have we been dispatched to a "house fire" and arrive to find nothing at all? We would all be very interested to see the document that states that we are exempt from the HIPPA laws when dispatching a call, especially since we do not dispatch MEDIC and we are not EMDs.

We all accept the fact that (obviously) our job is no secret. Obviously the media probably has access to our 10 codes, BUT are they trained to know what each code is? Evidently they are not. The desk that handles assignments is attempting to monitor Fire, Police, and MEDIC radios as well as traffic and a ton of other local scanners. Drop a 10 code here and there and they will more than likely miss it (as has been proven), but say anything that remotely sounds of interest (to them) and they will not hesitate to pick up the phone.

It would be the equivalent to the media walking up to the incident commander/anyone else operating on the scene and constantly tapping them on the shoulder to ask what they are doing. Would that be allowed on the scene? No. Is there any way we can prevent them from calling? No. Anything above asking for an address of a fire is directed to our PIO.

Maybe I'm the only one (on here) that feels that the media knowing EVERYTHING we respond to every minute of every day could be a bad thing.

Luke - 01/23/07 - 19:01

Fire, police, and dispatch reports are public record, no? Any media agency that wanted to could presumably obtain the details of each and

every incident on any given day. Thus compels the question to those that favor more secrecy... is it a perceived problem if the media knows period, or just at the time or around the time of the incident?

Legeros - 01/23/07 - 19:32

Yeah the only thing they can't get is stuff covered under HIPPA. Just remember they have a job to do just as we have a job to do. I have always found and heard that the more you treat them with respect the more they'll do the same for you. Don't just give a "no comment" or "I don't have time" or a "I don't know". Set a briefing time and stick to it, give the same story to all reporters, report only the facts and no speculation. A good working relationship with the media can come back to help you when it's time to get your message out, especially when dealing with public education items or passing on information about dangers or places to avoid. It's a two way street with these guys and the more we try to hide the more they'll report what they want, right or wrong.

CFP 7021 - 01/23/07 - 21:05

Mike-

It isn't a problem of the media knowing, it is a problem at the time of the incident. More specifically, BEFORE we have units on scene! Unlike on the scene where you can tell the media to "go stand over there, away from the incident", it is rather difficult (impossible) to know if the media is calling in about something we just dispatched.

I honestly (believe it or not!) have no problem with the media what-so-ever and support their job; however, when THEIR job begins to prohibit OUR job, it is time to draw the line. Unlike their job, human's lives are actually depending on ours. If we answer the phone and a member of the media starts asking us questions, that takes away time that could have been used to complete a task specifically related to the incident which they are questioning. Again, anything more than the type/location of the incident is generally deferred to our PIO. Here is the killer... they know that, yet they still call us to ask us questions. The media has an excellent working relationship with our PIO and they know him very well, but they also attempt to call us and get information from us; thus preventing us from performing our job (to a degree).

Not to get me wrong, we very rarely have any issue with the media NOW, but if we start announcing everything in "plain text" I can easily see it getting out of hand.

Another agency in our county has a rule with the media, "The media may not call until 20 minutes after the incident has been dispatched." So I was told, if the media calls 17 minutes after the dispatch this agency has been known to say, "It has not been 20 minutes yet, call back when it has been 20 minutes." To me, that is not the best way to handle it.. but it works for them.

Luke - 01/23/07 - 21:29

Gate codes- If they do not want them broadcast, they should be provided to every potentially responding unit. I have personally dealt with gate codes, and a dispatch center's reluctance to give codes over the radio. The person that moved in there may like the 'security' until there are all manner of emergency vehicles trying to get to THEIR emergency. If the property owners or property managers don't want them given out over the radio, then provide every vehicle (EMS, fire, police) the codes.

I have never been dispatched to a 'rape' in 31 years. It is always 'assault' or 'injured person'. As to 'suicide', 'overdose', or 'psychiatric', I've been dispatched to those calls for years, even over the old VHF channels, so that is not a big deal. The radio code was a useful tool way back when, but in this day of interagency operability, along with a transient work force, the codes cause way more problems than they are worth.

Yes, I have been dispatched to many "house fires" that were nothing more than a burned dinner, or even "difficulty breathing" calls that were nothing more than "runny noses". I have not seen the documentation as to HIPPA, but I am sure there are others here that can point you in the right direction.

If you know the code, you probably know what it is. I remember in the 80s when RDU was revising the Emergency Plan (complete with radio codes). Included in the distribution list was The News & Observer, The Raleigh Times, The Durham Morning Herald, WRAL, WTVD, etc. We GAVE them the information. As long as the media thinks you wre being straight with them, they can be your greatest asset to get a message out.

If you have a working ICS system and plan in place, AND you include the media in the process (which should happen), then you will not have the reporter tapping the IC on the shoulder. They will know how the system works, and how the information is dissiminated, and they know you are being straight up with them. You have to keep them included, else we are the ones that will suffer. If they perceive us in a bad light, what slant will their reporting take?

DJ - 01/23/07 - 21:29

Also, I don't have any problem with the media requesting any and every report that is entered during the year. That report won't be available until well after the incident is over; again, it comes back to when (during the incident) they are bombarding us with their inquiries. It kills me!! It is not like they are about to interrupt your television show to have "Breaking News" about your average house fire. They would be interrupting your shows too often.

Luke - 01/23/07 - 21:34

Apparently I'm coming across wrong. We are not talking about leaving the media out of anything, we have an EXCELLENT working relationship with them (as a Department). Our PIO is extremely active in the media community and has an excellent personal relationship with them as well. He knows his job, and he does it well.

-We do not leave the media out.

-We are not rude to them when they call us.

-I do not have a problem with them knowing our job or knowing what we do.

I DO think that there should be a line between incidents that they should know about initially and incidents which they should know about only after it has been confirmed. Maybe I am able to see this from a different angle because I recently moved from being in Operations to Communications. I honestly never realized exactly how many times the media will call in a single day to ask about random incidents. THAT takes away from doing my job. Obviously, during an active working incident (working fire, major accident, etc) there is a lot going on in the Comm Center with many phone calls needing to be made and/or make proper notifications to support agencies. Having to take the time to answer questions from the media prevents us from getting our job done. The biggest killer is that we are not on the scene!! How would we know if the fire is arson??

Generally they will call and say, "What was the address of the possible working fire?" Then.. "Is that a house, duplex, apartment?" Then.. "Does it seem suspicious?" As you can see... I could only answer the first question accurately, but yet I'm still asked the other ones. Even though they will get ALL the information from our PIO as soon as HE gets the information from the IC. Heck.. what's the point of a PIO if the media just continues to call Communications??????

Luke - 01/23/07 - 21:50

I feel like it is beating a dead horse... if anyone wishes to contact me directly about the media feel free to e-mail me. I highly doubt that we will get rid of ALL of our codes, we'll probably keep some like Garner PD has done.

Luke ([Email](#)) - 01/23/07 - 21:54

Good perspectives, all. Certainly not a dead horse, as there's a demonstrated different perspective from the comm center versus, say, front-line responders. That 20 minute rule is pretty cool, too.

Legeros - 01/23/07 - 22:29

Hey Luke, how is it in Alarm so far? I'm all for the laptops in the rig, but if it doesn't work any better than those God awful MST's, then I don't want them. All the hardware and wiring for the MST on my rig has been replaced twice, and it still hardly ever works. I think the media calling alarm for info needs to stop. The dispatchers are already busy enough and don't need the added job of talking to the press. That's what Brisley is for, call him. Ya'll stay safe out there.

Rides A Truck ([Email](#)) - 01/24/07 - 00:19

[Please use e-mail for personal conversations... Cleaning-up thread.]

Legeros - 01/25/07 - 06:51

Name: (real name
preferred)

E-mail: (optional)

Web Site: (optional)

Comment:

Remember personal info?

Yes

No

/ [Textile](#)

Comment moderation is enabled on this site. This means that your comment will not be visible on this site until it has been approved by an editor.

To prevent spam we require you to answer this silly question

What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?

[\(Register your username / Log in\)](#)

Notify: Yes, send me email when someone replies.

Hide email: Yes, hide my email address.

Small print: All html tags except and <i> will be removed from your comment. You can make links by just typing the url or mail-address.