

## Lucasville: What a 20-Year-Old Prison Riot Can Teach Us Today About Crisis Communication

**Katherine R. Fleck**  
*Ohio Northern University*

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### Abstract

When a prison disturbance turns into an 11-day standoff and hostage lives are at stake, ineffective crisis communication can threaten a successful outcome. In this case, readers are provided examples of what can go wrong in a crisis (even when following a crisis plan), how to prevent and address errors while still protecting sensitive information, and how to effectively evaluate an organization's approach to an emergency in the aftermath. By analyzing what went wrong (and right), others can better understand how to prepare for a crisis.

**Keywords:** crisis communication; media relations; crisis management; media; public information; crisis communication planning

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### Introduction

April 1993 was a tragic month. A 51-day standoff at the Branch Davidians compound near Waco, Texas, ended with a fire that killed 76 men, women and children, including David Koresh, the sect's infamous leader. Also, in April 1993, 450 prisoners at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility (SOCF) in Lucasville, Ohio rioted and took over the facility for 11 days resulting in one of the longest prison riots in the nation's history. In the end, nine inmates and one corrections officer were murdered.

These two tragedies are linked by time, in fact Waco's fiery climax occurred at a crucial point during negotiations in Ohio. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was involved in both crises and the media played different but key roles, and may have contributed to the eventual outcomes in both cases. While there are many comparisons to be made

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between the two, this analysis will focus primarily on the communications strategies, missteps, and unique follow up in the case of the SOCF riot in Ohio.

This case revolves around a number of key players, not unlike other crises such as environmental spills, airline disasters, and product recalls. The Governor of the State of Ohio is ultimately responsible for overseeing the functions of the state's operations. In this case, his designee, the Director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) served in the lead role since its primary mission is housing convicted men and women in more than 26 different institutions throughout the state, including SOCF. ("Frequently," 2014) Other state agencies also played important roles including the Ohio Highway Patrol, the Ohio Department of Safety, and the Ohio National Guard. Given the size, nature, and severity of the crisis, additional governmental organizations were necessarily involved in the drama including the FBI, local law enforcement, the Ohio House of Representatives, and the Ohio Senate. Outside groups with keen interest in the riot included the public employees union (Ohio Civil Services Employee Association), the media, the families of hostages, the ODRC employees who continued to work in the prison during the riot, and a host of others. The number of entities involved added complexity to an already complicated and difficult situation.

This case will tackle the actions and reactions of only a few key players in this event. They were chosen because of their importance to the unfolding and resolution of the actual event and their role in the aftermath. The ODRC, Ohio Governor George V. Voinovich, and the media will be examined in that order to provide the clearest insight possible into a complicated crisis with multiple moving parts. It will focus primarily on the media relation strategies of ODRC, the Voinovich administration, and the media's coverage of and personal involvement in the resolution of the crisis itself.

The prison riot in Ohio highlights the wide range of considerations multifaceted organizations must make, from pre-crisis planning and relationship building to post-event follow up, when developing their approach to crisis management. To that end, the following analysis will serve as a useful guide to help practitioners sharpen crisis plans to include

a broader scope of possible decision points and build a knowledge base to successfully shepherd an organization's response when lives are at stake.

### **Background**

The Southern Ohio Correctional Facility (SOCF) opened in 1972 as a maximum-security prison in Lucasville (population appx. 1,600) located in the heart of rural southeastern Ohio. George S. Voinovich, a Cleveland architect, helped design the prison but had reservations about its location (Lane & Suddes, 1993). Later, his concerns would become a reality when his son, Governor George V. Voinovich would be charged with resolving a bloody prison battle resulting, in part, from overcrowding and racial tension caused by an imbalance of largely African-American inmates from urban locations (more than 60% of the total prison population) and white guards (90%) who grew up and lived in rural southern Ohio (Nichols, 1993).

The facility became a hotbed of cultural, religious, and racial conflict, which brewed and simmered until April 1994, when it exploded. According to Ohio Supreme Court Justice Paul Pfeifer (2005), the specific impetus for the riot began with a mandate from Ohio Department of Health for all prison inmates be tested for tuberculosis. The test required an injection, but Muslim inmates objected to that form of testing on religious grounds (para. 4).

Muslim inmates found out a lockdown was planned for the day after Easter, to facilitate the tuberculosis testing. The leaders of the Muslims met with members of the Aryan Brotherhood, a white supremacist gang in the prison, to plan the eventual riot. Easter weekend was chosen because many prison guards would be off work and the ratio of prison guards to inmates would be low. The two groups disliked one another, but they found common cause in plotting a riot (Pfeifer, 2005).

George V. Voinovich, former mayor of Cleveland, was early in his first term as Ohio's 65th Governor. During the riot, Governor Voinovich consulted his brother Paul, an architect, and his mother, who reminded him of his father's warning (Johnson, 1993b). She said,

Your father always said, George, that they shouldn't build it in Lucasville. They should build it in Northeastern Ohio where the

people are located and families can get to visit and where the opportunity for a variety of employees is more available. (Lane & Suddes, 1993, para. 12)

The prison's location was credited in part for the uprising, and later became an issue for hundreds of journalists who moved in and swarmed the tiny town for 11 days during a rainy April spring.

Prior to the uprising, media in the larger markets surrounding SOCF including Columbus and Cincinnati, reported on the occasional news generated by the prison. At the time however, a corrections or prison beat was not an established position in any of the statehouse news bureaus and therefore, relationships with the lead public information officers at the ODRC were tangential (B. Orr, personal communication, October 10, 2013).

Further, while ODRC public information staff had some reporting experience, a crisis plan, and routine media relations experience, they had not been trained in hostage negotiations. Additionally, while the crisis plan considered the case of a riot, due to staff turnover at the beginning of a new administration and less than optimal staffing levels in the public information office, the public information officers were not prepared to serve in the role of primary spokespersons during an event of this magnitude. But, the department's crisis plan called for public information officers to take the lead with the media so they were designated as primary media spokespersons on scene during the course of the negotiations. This decision affected the quality and quantity of the information conveyed to the media (M. Dawson, personal communication, October, 14, 2013).

## **Research**

Research for this case study included a qualitative archival analysis of media coverage and documents gathered from the Voinovich Collections at Ohio University. News coverage was gathered through LexisNexis and NewsBank database searches and through copying print articles preserved in the Voinovich Collections. More than 500 documents were collected and analyzed.

Television coverage from multiple stations was also preserved in the Voinovich Collection. A sampling of coverage was reviewed for context and additional insight. Approximately 15 hours of the hundreds of hours preserved was reviewed for this study. Segments were chosen to review coverage during key developments in the riot. Video coverage from three Columbus channels and one Cleveland channel was preserved in the archives. Clips from all four stations were reviewed for context.

Personal interviews were conducted with Mike Dawson, consultant and former press secretary to Senator and Governor George V. Voinovich, and Bob Orr, Justice and Homeland Security correspondent for CBS News and former anchor at WBNS TV, the CBS affiliate in Columbus, Ohio.

Mr. Orr covered the riot at SOCF for WBNS TV and was himself an inadvertent participant in the resolution of the riot. A telephone interview was conducted to gather his recollections of the riot 20 years prior and to gain an understanding of his impressions of the media coverage and public information strategies over the course of time.

Mr. Dawson was the press secretary to the Governor and held a unique position as a policy adviser for emergency management. He served in both capacities before, during and after the riot. An in-person interview was conducted to gather his recollections of the riot 20 years prior and to gain an understanding of his impressions of the media coverage and public information strategies over the course of time.

## **Strategies**

### **ODRC Crisis Plan**

Crisis planning is an essential component of any organization's communication strategy. In the case of a prison system, it is critical. ODRC developed and adopted a variety of communications policies, including a key piece titled, "Guidelines for Media Management during Emergencies."

The policy was replete with traditional crisis communication tactics such as including designating an area of the institution for the media; limiting comments to the media to only a warden or public information officer; providing regular timely and factual updates for the media; including the

spokesperson in all discussions of the emergency so that he/she can respond confidently; and being prepared to answer tough questions (“Guidelines,” 1991).

When prison officials learned about the riot, the crisis plan was engaged. The team on the scene during the riot included ODRC staff, the FBI, Ohio State Highway Patrol and the Ohio National Guard. ODRC public information staff was chosen to conduct the majority of media briefings during the crisis as was called for in the written policy. However, once public information officers arrived on the scene many of those best practices were not implemented at all or implementation failed.

### **Crisis Plan Implementation**

One key component of the department’s guidelines included “reading factual statements on a regular basis, even if there are no new developments” (“Guidelines,” 1991, p. 3). But, the department chose not to do regular briefings, leaving the media to speculate to fill the void. In fact, the media was not formally briefed by anyone in leadership until late on the second day of the siege (“11 Days,” 1993). This unfortunate decision led in part, to inaccurate coverage and fostered an atmosphere of “conflict and distrust” between the department and the media (“11 Days,” 1993, p. 3).

*Dayton Daily News* reporter, Jonathon Brinkman, wrote about the media’s frustration with the ODRC media relations, describing an encounter with an ODRC public information officer this way,

after scolding the media for ‘speculation,’ a state spokesman walked out of a muddy press tent without taking any questions. ‘The speculation from the media will continue if you don’t answer our questions,’ one reporter shouted to the department figure. The incident reflected the tension and distrust between journalists at Lucasville and prison authorities. (Brinkman, 1993, para. 4-6)

Reginald Wilkinson, director of ODRC, admitted afterward the department was not prepared to handle the magnitude of the media onslaught during the riot. Wilkinson said, “There was no book to tell us how to deal with the media at Lucasville, we knew people wanted information ‘yesterday’”

("Media," 1993, para. 3). Wilkinson said the department fielded more than 2,000 media inquiries during the course of the crisis ("Media," 1993).

Bob Orr, Justice and Homeland Security correspondent for CBS News and former anchor at WBNS TV, the CBS affiliate in Columbus, Ohio who covered the riot in Lucasville attributed part of the conflict and distrust to a lack of established relationships between the media and the prison system public information officers prior to the riot. "We met them at their worst moment, and they met us in the middle of a crisis" (B. Orr, personal communication, October 10, 2013).

Another key provision of the crisis policy specifically called on spokespersons to provide timely and accurate information ("Guidelines," 1991). However, prison negotiators knew inmates had access to radio coverage, and even though electricity had been cut to the cellblock, some speculated battery operated televisions remained accessible. These facts combined to create an environment where ODRC spokespersons deliberately ignored or withheld information from the media to avoid coverage that might enflame the prisoners and cause potential harm to the prison guard hostages.

Chief ODRC spokesperson, Sharon Kornegay, admitted after the riot that she had deliberately remained ignorant of certain key facts so she wouldn't directly lie to reporters (Kaufman, 1994a). Kornegay responded to criticism of the department's handling of the media relations after the event saying, "We continually said we could not confirm or deny rumors. Hindsight is always 20/20. We have learned a lot about being more responsive" ("Task Force Working," 1993, para.12).

Reporters accused ODRC's public information officers of withholding information, effectively helping to perpetuate rumors that could have been dispelled but instead ended up in news coverage (Kaufman, 1994a, para. 10). Mike Dawson, consultant and former press secretary to Senator and Governor George V. Voinovich, determined that public information officers didn't get enough information, therefore, "they didn't give the media enough information, and what was provided wasn't clear" (personal communication, October, 14, 2013).

Dawson noted, "In retrospect high-level officials with knowledge and training in hostage negotiations should have done daily briefings. They would have had more confidence in the kinds of information they could provide to the media without jeopardizing security or the negotiations" (personal communication, October, 14, 2013).

### **Tragedy Strikes**

From the beginning, rioting inmates threatened to kill a guard if their list of over 19 demands weren't met. On day four of the riot (April 14) they hung a sheet out of a window with the message: "if we don't have something in 3 1/2 hours, we're going to kill a hostage" ("11 Days," 1993, p. 5).

When asked about the demand during a briefing, ODRC spokesperson Tessa Unwin told reporters, "They have been threatening something like this from the beginning. It's part of the language of the negotiations" ("11 Days," 1993, p. 5). When asked to reveal the nature of the prisoner's demands, Unwin said only that they were "self-serving and petty" (Nichols, 1993, para. 15).

At 12:20 p.m. the next day (April 15), the body of one of the guard hostages was found in the prison yard, wrapped in a sheet. The coroner confirmed later the guard died about 9:15 a.m. on April 15 (Reed & Beyerlein, 1993).

Prisoners, and previously released hostages, blamed Unwin's comments for the murder claiming it was evidence the state was not taking them seriously (Nichols, 1993). Some in the small town also blamed Unwin and lashed out telling reporters, "they ought to hang her," (Pakulski & Roe, 1993, para. 3) and "the only reason (the guard died) was because of what that lady said" (Pakulski & Roe, 1993, para. 10).

Unwin was devastated by accusations that her comments may have led to the guard's death. She was relieved from briefing the media, and was re-assigned to briefing the families of the hostages ("11 Days," 1993).

The parents of the murdered guard did not hold her responsible. The guard's father told the media, "She was just doing her job. We don't hold



her responsible for our son's death. Please let her know that. She must be feeling terrible" (Pakulski & Roe, 1993, para. 14).

While technically spokespersons are not considered negotiators, in this case, prisoners were monitoring the media as a check against deceptive negotiation practices by the state. Jim Little, chair of Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)'s ethics and professional responsibility committee, at the time said, "Public relations people are not exempt from responsibility...but the bottom line is that the person responsible is the inmate or inmates who killed the guard" (Pakulski & Roe, 1993, para. 14).

Orr agreed, and characterized the blaming of Unwin for the murder as "Way over the line...I never believed she was responsible...the prisoners killed him in cold blood, period. She was another victim of Lucasville" (personal communication, October 10, 2013). Dawson also agreed stating emphatically, "The inmates were looking for an excuse and they latched onto her, if not her they would've found another excuse" (personal communication, October, 14, 2013).

### **Voinovich Administration Strategy**

Voinovich was scheduled to travel to Eastern Europe for a 17-day trade mission when the riot broke out. He immediately canceled the trip, and remained out of public view but in close contact with the experts he put in charge.

"We had one press event already planned before we left for Europe. When the riot broke out we decided to go on with that event as planned," noted Mike Dawson. "We did our event and then the Governor read a brief statement about the situation in Lucasville. That was the last time the Governor held a public briefing until the end of the riot" (M. Dawson, personal communication, October, 14, 2013).

Further, hostage negotiators asked him not to issue any statements or speak publicly about the crisis to avoid becoming part of the problem (Johnson, 1993a). In fact, the public only heard directly from the Governor three times during the course of the riot: at the beginning, when he activated the Ohio National Guard to assist those on the scene, and after the murder of the prison guard.

While he stayed out of the public eye, he was integrally involved in the deliberations. Indeed, a memo dictated to his personal file early in the riot noted,

I made it very clear to them (the experts) that the bottom line on this operation MUST be human life. The option I wanted to pursue was the option of preserving as much life as possible and limiting our casualties. (Voinovich, 1993, emphasis original)

The Governor later noted his confidence in negotiation leadership saying, “The bottom line is – the operation is in the hands of professionals. Decision making seems to be reasonable” (Voinovich, 1993).

Even though he was early in his career as Governor, Voinovich was not new to Ohio politics or to media relations. Having served in a variety of elected positions including Mayor of Cleveland, he enjoyed solid working relationships with most reporters, editors and publishers of the daily newspapers and televisions stations across the state. As did his press secretary, Mike Dawson. These relationships proved beneficial during the siege.

Dawson developed a strategy of having the Governor call newspaper publishers and editorial page editors personally to keep them in the loop in ‘off-the-record’ conversations. This strategy helped maintain important relationships and served as an effective method to provide media leadership with information outside the view of prisoners who would remain unaware of his involvement.

The Governor’s silence was not without controversy. More than 300 people marched in Lucasville, demanding more leadership from the Governor and asking him to come down to personally witness and fix what was (or wasn’t) happening at SOCF (Schwartz, 1993). While reporters on the scene covered the marches and local discontent, the editorial pages were largely silent. That is until the riot was over, and then editorial pages throughout the state were largely complimentary of his reserved approach.

## **Dramatic News Coverage**

From the beginning of the uprising, inmates demanded direct access to the media. By day three, frustrated in the pace of negotiations, prisoners hung sheets out the window with the messages: “We want the media,” “We want to talk to the FBI,” and “The state is not negotiating” (“11 Days,” 1993, p. 4).

Negotiators knew inmates were sensitive to their portrayal in the media. SOCF Warden Art Tate, Jr., later admitted, “we were trying to manipulate the emotional pitch of the inmates based on what information they were receiving. We wanted the inmates to get good information” (Kaufman, 1994a, para. 3). However, media coverage in some instances turned out to be overly dramatic and patently false in others (see Figure 1).

Over the course of 11 days, hundreds of reporters lived in the cold, and mud outside of a town unable to accommodate them. They used a variety of controversial methods to collect information and wrote a series of stories using anonymous sources, and based largely on rumors floating through the devastated community.

Writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Bruce Porter summarized the reporting from Lucasville as “...an epic case in point of just why the reputation of journalists has sunk so low” (Porter, 1994, p. 39). Porter (1994) castigated the coverage, writing,

Glaring mistakes went reported as fact, and were never corrected. Reporters intruded upon the privacy of townspeople, trampling on the grief of families whose relatives had been murdered or held hostage. They vied for atrocity stories. They ran scary tales—totally false, it was later found—that spread panic and paranoia throughout the region. And in its general aggressiveness and error, the press ended up greatly hampering the effort to end the disorder peacefully, even in some instances posing a threat to the lives of the hostages. (p. 39)

One of the most egregious errors involved reports about the number of deaths inside the prison. Porter (1994) detailed several of these errors, noting,



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## Looking back: Lucasville prison riot

Twenty years ago, one prison guard and 9 inmates were killed during a riot at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville, Ohio.

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FILE PHOTO

The Ohio National Guard, at the order of Gov. George V. Voinovich, sent hundreds of soldiers to Lucasville.

**Figure 1.** The *Columbus Dispatch* ran [a photo slideshow](#) in 2013 to mark the 20th anniversary of the riot. Click the image to [view on the Columbus Dispatch website](#).

Six days into the riot, a front-page story in *The Plain Dealer*, citing anonymous sources, reported that along with seven inmate deaths 19 other people had been killed in the prison, including some 'pretty barbarous mutilations of the dead.' Earlier in the week, the *Daily Times of Portsmouth* reported 'anywhere from 50 to 100 bodies were in the prison gymnasium,' and a day or two later, a reporter for Channel 4 told viewers that as many as 172 bodies were piled up in the prison. (p. 40)

Niki Schwartz, a Cleveland lawyer brought in by the state to represent the inmates and help negotiate an end to the crisis, commented that prisoners believed state officials released inaccurate information to make them look bad ("Task Force Working," 1993, para.1). He added, "They (the prisoners) regarded the media coverage as a protection for them...they were very media-savvy" (para. 2).

After inmates killed one of their guard hostages, speculation about the method of the murder and the condition of the body made its way into print. In a notorious example, the *Akron Beacon Journal* reported the murdered guard was

brutally tortured and mutilated by inmates...bones in his ribs, back, arms and legs had been broken. The inmates also gouged his eyes and cut his tongue off...additionally the source believes that inmates forced him to drink urine. (Umrigar, 1993, para. 1-3)

State officials did not confirm a cause of death until an official autopsy was completed. When it was done, they released the report to the media. While the guard had sustained a dislocated shoulder and broken ribs during the initial stages of the riot, his death was the result of strangulation - still brutal, but he was not mutilated or tortured ("11 Days," 1993, p. 5).

These rumors caused a series of crises within the negotiations and outside in the general public. For example, inmates were convinced the stories were being planted to lay the political groundwork for an armed attack (Porter, 1994, p. 40). And, citizens throughout Ohio overwhelmed the phones at the Governor's Office demanding they storm the prison in response to the heinousness they were reading about in newspapers and hearing on television. At the time, Dawson told the media, the governor's

mail was running 100 to 1 to use force to end the crisis (Porter, 1994, p. 41).

ODRC repeatedly tried to correct the errors, however, Dawson conceded their efforts may have been too timid to squash the rumors (M. Dawson, personal communication, October, 14, 2013). Orr agreed, “the state couldn’t shut down the rumors, and without enough information the news vacuum took on a life of its own” (personal communication, October 10, 2013).

### **Media Become Part of the Crisis**

Rioting inmates desperately wanted their side of the story to reach the public. They were so desperate, the inmates agreed to release a hostage if given direct access to the media. The state eventually, and reluctantly, complied.

In the first attempt, inmates promised to release a hostage if they could speak to a reporter. The state agreed and selected a reporter from *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland reporter to serve as a pool reporter. The reporter entered the prison, connected with the inmates via telephone and listened to their demands directly and then prison leadership cut the line. Even though the state technically complied with inmate demands, inmates only tossed another murdered inmate out a door, not one of the hostages as promised (“11 Days,” 1993, p. 3).

Days later, after inmates killed one of their guard hostages, ODRC spokesperson Sharon Kornegay asked a local radio station, WPAY in Portsmouth, Ohio, if they would set up a feed and allow a prisoner to broadcast live. If the radio station complied, a hostage would be released (“11 Days,” 1993). WPAY General Manager Frank Lewis was frustrated with ODRC’s handling of the media, but was a long-time friend of the murdered guard and reluctantly agreed to the broadcast.

On day five of the crisis, Lewis entered the prison set up a remote broadcast, and listened while one of the inmate negotiators spent 15 minutes reading their demands (see Figure 2). When it was over, the inmates set a guard free (“11 Days,” 1993).



**Figure 2.** A Channel 10 television broadcast reporting the first radio broadcast with an inmate. Click the screen shot to [view the video on YouTube](#) (Source: YouTube user cropperfilms’s channel).

Later, WPAY’s news director Frank Hufferd told media the reaction to the broadcast was mixed – some felt they had given in to the prisoners, but most were glad about the result. “It was a gut-wrenching decision. But if I can get another guy out, I’ll do it again,” Hufferd said (Roe & Pakulski, 1993, para. 5).

Bob Orr was an anchor on WBNS, Channel 10, a CBS affiliate in Columbus, Ohio. The channel sent Orr down with several reporters, cameramen, producers and a satellite truck to cover the ongoing siege. After covering a ‘static story’ for days, he walked back to the station’s truck when ODRC spokesperson Sharon Kornegay rushed up to him and demanded he follow her and get into a car with state troopers (B. Orr, personal communication, October 10, 2013).

All she said was, “we need you to meet with officials.” It was then Orr learned for the first time prisoners had been asking specifically to talk to him as part of their demands (B. Orr, personal communication, October

10, 2013). Orr concluded later because of his station's signal reach, he was requested because he was better known than other news anchors and that inmates were more familiar with Channel 10. "I didn't ask to get involved...but I was told that if I didn't help people could die" (B. Orr, personal communication, October 10, 2013). Orr conferred with his general manager, news director, and legal team. The Channel 10 team agreed to the state's request and allowed an unfettered live broadcast.

Even though it was technically difficult and essentially precluded WBNS from covering the event itself, Orr and his team figured out how to make it work. The only concession ODRC would allow was Orr could identify himself and the station during the broadcast. But, this was to placate prisoners' concerns about a hoax and not to accommodate the station's commercial needs to cover the event (B. Orr, personal communication, October 10, 2013).

After a series of fits and starts, the broadcast eventually happened. One inmate aired the group's grievances and then demanded live television coverage of any surrender because they feared reprisal by the state (B. Orr, personal communication, October 10, 2013). At the end of the broadcast, a hostage was released as promised (Rowland, 1993).

At the time, Orr told reporters, "I feel shaky about the press being used to spring hostages free, but if we can help, we should. We would be hard pressed to say no" (Roe & Pakulski, 1993, para. 3). Twenty years later, Orr hadn't changed his mind. "To this day, I still believe it's wrong for reporters to become part of the story under most circumstances. But given a bad set of circumstances we ended up in an okay place" (B. Orr, personal communication, October 10, 2013).

The prisoners gave the state hope they would surrender after the initial Channel 10 broadcast, but they reneged, leaving Channel 10 tied up onsite with no ability to cover the news. When state officials asked WBNS to return later and broadcast the entire surrender live, they declined, as did many other stations. Only WLWT, Channel 5 in Cincinnati, finally agreed to the broadcast mainly because they had two satellite trucks, allowing them to cover the surrender live while also being able to cover the news ("11 Days," 1993, p. 8).



WLWT news director, Rob Allman said at the time they were cooperating with prison officials for a “peaceful end to the situation” (Feran, 1993, para. 22). Channel 5 reporter Marty Pierlat said, “we decided to abandon our journalistic concerns and get this over with” (Allen & Curry, 1993, para. 15). WLWT didn’t only give up their journalistic concerns; the station later disclosed the seven-hour live broadcast cost between \$50,000 and \$60,000 in lost advertising revenue alone (Paeth, 1993). And, the extra satellite truck cost the station \$400,000 to rent (Kaufman, 1993).

Five days later, WLWT, WPAY, an Associated Press photographer, and the original Cleveland *Plain Dealer* reporter, were allowed onto the grounds to cover the surrender. At 3:45 p.m. on the 11th day of the riot the surrender began. After midnight the remaining five guard hostages and inmate leadership emerged from the cellblock and the ordeal was over (“11 Days,” 1993, p. 10).

Newspapers covered their own involvement in the uprising. Headlines such as “Media’s role in siege questioned, criticized by officials, families” (Rowland, 1993); “Media are part of the story” (Allen & Curry, 1993); and “TV crews become part of drama” (Calhoun & Kiesewetter, 1993). Dayton police sergeant and prison negotiator Frank Navarre, conceded the heavy reliance on media was unusual. “This has never been done, that I’m aware of, ever before” (Calhoun & Kiesewetter, 1993, para. 9). ODRC spokesperson Tessa Unwin acknowledged involving the media was not for news purposes, “We do not want the TV in there for news coverage. We want them there as part of the negotiating process” (Wilkinson & Moores, 1993, para. 21).

Using the media for negotiating purposes, allowing inmates unfettered access to media and live air time, were all risks the state was willing to take to end the siege peacefully. In the case of Lucasville, it worked. However, the unorthodox methodology was not without controversy as both journalists and scholars criticized the practice.

WBNS news director Paul Dughi admitted he agonized over the decision to air the inmate’s demands saying, “We worried about setting some kind of journalistic precedent. What’s to stop some guy in a prison somewhere from grabbing a guard to get on television? I don’t know” (“Lucasville: Are News Media,” 1993, para. 13-14). Other Ohio television news directors

were also concerned. WEWS, Cleveland Channel 5 news director said, “We’re not in the business of handing over blocks of air time to convicted criminals when there is no pressing public safety reason to do so” (Dyer, 1993, para. 9). Columbia University journalism professor Stephen Isaacs was even more emphatic, “It is not your place to save humanity. It is your place to report the news” (“Lucasville: Are News Media,” 1993, para. 7).

### **Evaluation**

When the riot was over, a host of inquiries were launched – legislative reviews, legal reviews, prison policy reviews, and important to this study, public relations reviews. Governor Voinovich, at the suggestion of his press secretary, took an unusual and important step and asked Brad Tillson, publisher of the *Dayton Daily News*, to convene and chair an official inquiry to review the state’s handling of the crisis from a public information/media relations standpoint and recommend improvements to the state’s policies and practices for handling media relations during crises. “We needed a blueprint going forward,” said Dawson (personal communication, October, 14, 2013).

The Governor did not dictate any component of the inquiry including who to include on the committee or how to conduct the investigation. The resulting inquiry became known as the Lucasville Media Task Force. At the time, Tillson noted the task force was a “positive act and something of a risk, because he (the governor) exercised no control over what we said” (McCarty, 1994, para. 6).

The task force was made up of nine members representing Ohio print, wire service, television journalists and the director of the E. W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University (Rowland, 1994). They took testimony from a wide range of stakeholders including the parents of the murdered guard, ODRC officials, journalists who covered the event, and journalism ethics scholars.

Behind the scenes, Dawson and a team of public information officers from ODRC and the Ohio Highway Patrol helped support the inquiry process but injected no opinion on the conclusions and recommendations made by the task force.

When completed, more than 64 recommendations were sent to the Governor. Recommendations included numerous changes aimed at addressing actual and perceived inadequacies in the state's response to the Lucasville crisis. Highlights of the recommendations include:

- The state should not enlist media as participants in resolving crises or make other requests of the media that would compromise the independence or credibility of their coverage;
- The governor should send a strong message throughout state government to release public information in a complete and timely manner during an emergency;
- Policy should preclude state employees from lying to the media and prohibit a "no comment" response;
- The state should conduct training for public information officers and others who release information in an emergency; and
- Ranking state officials and key decision-makers should be made available to the media during a crisis ("Lucasville," 1994, pp. 1-2).

Press secretary Dawson commenting on the recommendations said, "We learned some valuable lessons. The state will do a better job the next time." He further applauded the task force's actions, "We think it can be of great benefit to the state and its citizens. The task force made a valuable contribution to the state" (Rowland, 1994, para. 6-8). Dawson also predicted "this report will serve as a living, breathing document that will outlast this administration. The principles can be used in all emergency response plans" (McCarty, 1994, para. 2).

The administration didn't stop there, the governor immediately announced the formation of an internal committee made up of press secretary Dawson and public information leadership from ODRC, the Ohio Highway Patrol, the Ohio Department of Public Safety and the Ohio Adjutant General's office to evaluate and respond to the recommendations.

Six months later, the internal committee publicly released its response to the task force recommendations agreeing with nearly all of its recommendations. A key agreement included leaving it strictly up to on-site reporters to determine who would serve as pool reporters and designated the media groups from which reporters would be chosen including at a minimum: one television videographer, one television reporter, one still photographer, one newspaper reporter, and one radio reporter (“Task Force Recommendations,” 1994). Further, the state developed a written “pool participant agreement” to be signed by media outlets when participating as a pool reporter or a “media release form” that would outline specific requirements for participation (“Lucasville,” 1994, p. 18).

One recommendation the state did not implement was outlawing media involvement in resolving a crisis. ODRC director Wilkinson told the task force under the same circumstances he would ask them again to help. “We are going to ask it. It is up to you whether you do it” (“Media,” 1993, para. 10). Superintendent of the Ohio Highway Patrol Tom Rice told the task force “the press played a vital role in saving lives” (“Media,” 1993, para. 12).

While the state conceded the Task Force’s concerns about the involvement of media, they committed to developing a formal agreement. However,

part of the agreement between the state and the media would most certainly include strict adherence to ground rules set by the state. This factor, in and of itself, would be interpreted as news content control and should be considered by the media before accepting a role in resolving any crisis. (“Task Force Recommendations,” 1994, p. 10)

Ultimately, the decision will still be left up to individual reporters and media outlets to choose whether or not to assist during a crisis event.

Task force member reaction to the state’s response was generally positive. Task force chair Tillson said the state had “made a good-faith response. For the most part, they dealt with it just as we’d hoped” (“Be Truthful,” 1994, pp. 13-14). Lawrence Beaupre, vice president/editor of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and task force member, also praised the state’s response “(the state) is making a good faith effort to meet the public’s

legitimate need for credible information during future emergencies. I am pleased they have responded so positively to the lapses that occurred during Lucasville” (Kaufman, 1994b, p. B3).

Dawson noted the state eventually overhauled crisis plans statewide and implemented needed crisis training for the state’s entire contingent of public information staff. The committee found most of the recommendations already existed in department policies, but a lack of training in emergency communications contributed to the problems onsite. Additional training and more public information personnel were eventually assigned to ODRC to help support the department and the media’s need for information (M. Dawson, personal communication, October, 14, 2013).

### **Analysis & Discussion**

The lessons learned during the riot in Lucasville, provide an interesting window into the complicated process of crisis communication. How to effectively ‘plan’ for a crisis, how to work within a crisis plan while still exercising good judgment based on a situation’s changing needs, and how to do a serious assessment of an organization’s efforts when the emergency is over are just a few of the questions this case study raises.

#### **Choosing a Spokesperson**

As noted earlier, the state’s crisis communication plans called for the public information officer to be named by default as the lead spokesperson. However, based on the communication staff’s lack of crisis expertise, valid concerns about hostage negotiation and the volatile nature of the situation, having a public information spokesperson wasn’t what the situation demanded. So why was the state so late in figuring this out? The most informed experts were focused on solving the crisis and not on handling the media. But as this case shows, part of being in a leadership position also demands being able speak with authority to the media, which serves as the public in absentia during a crisis.

Over time, Dawson has come to believe that in the case of life and death, or any other extreme and unusual crisis, those in leadership need to be out front as the spokesperson (M. Dawson, personal communication, October,

14, 2013). However, not everyone in leadership has the temperament, training or sensitivity to serve as a spokesperson. There are several recent examples where unfortunately the leadership approach added to the problem. So how do you know what to do?

Dawson suggests this test. “A good spokesperson has the ability to absorb all the information and remain cognizant of the way in which to divulge sensitive information. You either have the right instincts or you don’t – it can’t be taught easily” (M. Dawson, personal communication, October, 14, 2013). This requires communicators to make decisions in advance of crises. It isn’t enough to write up a plan, distribute it, update the contact information now and again and then activate it when an emergency strikes. A good communications expert is constantly watching the field of internal leaders, noting who communicates effectively and can handle themselves under pressure. Then, they help guide leadership into choosing wisely when the time comes to do media briefings.

### **Media Relations**

Organizations cannot wait until an emergency strikes to develop relationships with the media. While not all firms have large communication staffs, or even any in house communications specialists, they cannot avoid this necessity. Organizations must develop at least some familiarity with the media and offer opportunities for the media to get to know them, well in advance of an emergency. As Bob Orr cautioned earlier, you do not want to meet the media for the first time during a crisis.

But who is the media? In today’s environment it can mean a wide range of people from influential bloggers to an industry expert on Twitter, and it will always mean traditional media. Therefore, simply engaging on social media without building relationships with traditional media is not effective media relations. Indeed, Orr believes solid, working relationships between legacy media and organizational communication professionals is crucial. “As reporters, we spend time building relationships on all sides, this means we’re constantly building and maintaining trust” (B. Orr, personal communication, October 10, 2013). And, as we see in this case, trust is essential to success.

The lack of trust between the media and ODRC spokespersons added to the stress on scene and contributed to inaccurate reporting. While, solid relationships between the Governor, his press secretary and the media helped protect administration leadership from a potential onslaught of negative coverage. Once a crisis plan is completed, it's time to implement it. Communicators cannot wait until an outside event forces your organization to effectively manage media relationships.

### **Media Errors and Regular Briefings**

Correcting errors, dispelling myths and rumors is an essential component of successful crisis management. As Orr puts it, "TV abhors a vacuum and in a crisis where a great amount of resources are tied up with nothing to report...after a period of time this leaves only rumors as a source of information" (B. Orr, personal communication, October 10, 2013). However, Orr conceded the media lost its discipline at Lucasville.

When that happens it is a failure of reporters and editors. In the Lucasville case, the State cannot be blamed for some of the reckless reporting. It is a fair observation that the State should have been more proactive in trying to rebut and short-circuit the bad information. But the real blame belongs on the broadcasters and print reporters who played fast and loose with the facts. (B. Orr, personal communication, October 10, 2013)

You may not be able to fill the vacuum with fresh news at every briefing, but you can knock down rumors, which may even be more important than providing new information. In this case, irregular briefings done by inexperienced and fearful spokespersons contributed to the poor coverage, which, in turn escalated the crisis.

Dawson added a cautionary note for crisis communicators,

Whenever you have a catastrophic event that lasts that long and involves dozens and dozens of reporters, there is bound to be inaccurate reporting. I'm not assigning blame, it's just the way it is...they're (the media) under a lot of pressure to put out a lot of news stories each day. A lack of senior staff doing media briefings contributed to whatever inaccurate reporting there was. It was mostly our fault. (M. Dawson, personal communication, October, 14, 2013)

This is a dilemma for communicators, but not one without resolution. Anticipating the needs of the media, public and other key stakeholders in advance, having material available to answer some of those questions makes common sense. Keeping materials updated, and reviewing them regularly makes even more sense.

Watching how others handle crises and regularly tweaking your organizational plans based on what you learn is a hallmark of a successful crisis manager. As an example, during the winter of 2004 two inmates held two guards hostage for 15 days until surrendering peacefully in Arizona. In this case, the State chose not to involve the media at all, instead opting to request the media self-impose a blackout on coverage (Tolan, 2006).

Arizona authorities asked the media to refrain from printing the inmate's names and other specific details because they believed media coverage might "damage negotiations with the inmates and ultimately lead to the death of the guards" (Tolan, p. 356). To prove their point, state prison authorities passed out articles critical of the media's behavior in the Lucasville riot. The articles reminded Arizona reporters that inmates cited egregious media reporting errors in Ohio as a reason for killing one of their prison guard hostages. The media in Arizona complied with the State's request and the guards were eventually released.

### **Training is Key**

While the prison system trained guards and other officials to handle emergencies, the crucial communications component was only considered tangentially. As the director of ODRC told the media task force, no one conceived of the role media would play in a crisis.

This assumption may also be true in many companies. If a chemical spill happens, staff is trained how to clean it up and report it government entities, but what if the media finds out? If an employee is relieved of duty for stealing funds, an organization may have an established process for dismissal, but what if the amount is critical and must be reported to the police who then report it to the media? And maybe an employee commits



a crime after work that impacts not only their employment, but the entire company's reputation.

Coombs (2007) points out that in a crisis, "most of the information stakeholders collect about organizations is derived from the news media. That is why media coverage is an important feature of reputation management" (p. 164). Therefore, understanding how crises affect an organization's reputation and under what conditions should responses to media inquiry change direction is critical.

Training for communications professionals can start with basic media training. But true crisis management skills can only be built with additional insight and strategy. For example, Situational Crisis Communication Theory provides a decision-making framework for communicators. This theory helps to define the foundational elements of a crisis situation, which then allows the crisis manager to better determine which response strategy or strategies to use in order to maximize reputational protection (Coombs, 2007). If done correctly, crisis communication strategy becomes an ongoing discussion between a professional communicator and the leadership in the organization they are employed to both represent and protect.

Conversely, when a crisis hits, the communications professional must be an integral part of discussions on the company's response. As the senior communication official admitted in this case, she chose to remain ignorant so she didn't inadvertently disclose information or lie to the media. While anyone's initial instinct is to protect, we know from the many examples since Lucasville, information will eventually come out and limiting reputational damage is far easier when information is provided honestly, directly and timely.

Remaining ignorant by choice, or by organizational practice, places a communicator at a disadvantage when responding to the media. Further, as noted earlier, it reduces an organization's ability to limit reputation damage by shutting out a key voice steeped in knowledge about media reaction to crisis responses and decisions.

## **Evaluation**

When a crisis is over, it isn't really over. As Orr notes, "it may be a public safety issue in the moment, but it's a public relations issue in the aftermath" (personal communication, October 10, 2013). This realization means communicators cannot be complacent once the emergency ends. And, it may not be enough to simply do an internal review.

In this case, the media's negative reaction to their treatment during the crisis threatened to impact the ongoing relationship with the entire administration. Without genuinely seeking input from their harshest critics, the Voinovich administration would not have done itself any favors. This case would suggest by seeking honest feedback you can better identify where errors, if any, occurred and fix them before another crisis hits. Further, if you handled the crisis appropriately, you gain stronger confirmation of your approach for next time.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. If the riot in Lucasville happened today, what elements of the communication approach would need to change? For example, how would social media change the demands on the communications professional? How could it be used to help?
2. If you were chosen as the primary spokesperson for the state, and you knew the inmates were listening how would you approach briefing the media? How would you prepare?
3. Rumor control was an on-going challenge during the Lucasville riot. If confronted with this situation, how would you address the rumors? Who would you need to communicate with, and what would you need to do to keep it under control?
4. Considering more recent crises, how could those individuals/organizations have benefited from the evaluation approach used by the Voinovich administration? Why should anyone use this approach?

5. When you join a new organization, should your first step be to understand the crisis plan? What do you do if they don't have a plan or it is inadequate? What should your role be in providing guidance to avoid the mistakes made in this case?

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**Dr. KATHERINE R. FLECK, APR**, is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication & Media Studies at Ohio Northern University. Email: k-fleck[at]onu.edu. LinkedIn: krfleck. Twitter: @drkathierfleck.

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