



Recommendations for Improving Communication with Journalists to Enhance Public Safety in the Event of a Nuclear or Radiological Emergency

Journalists play a key role in communicating information to the public in the aftermath of an emergency. Their role is especially important in radiation emergencies, including the loss or inadvertent spreading of radioactive material or an incident involving a radiological dispersal device (dirty bomb), a nuclear power plant accident, or a nuclear explosion—all of which present unique public safety challenges. In each of these instances, the public is told to “stay tuned” for announcements, instructions, and other information that will be delivered via news media sources. And yet members of the news media have traditionally been left out of the process of developing radiological emergency preparedness and response plans, even while their perspective and input could be invaluable to improving these plans.

The 2016 Rotterdam Nuclear Security Workshop for International Journalists, co-organized by Atomic Reporters and the Stanley Foundation, was designed to strengthen participants’ knowledge of nuclear security issues and, in turn, support more effective reporting on nuclear security in general and in the event of a nuclear or radiological incident. The workshop gave journalists an opportunity to voice their concerns about the challenges of reporting on such stories, particularly in an emergency situation when a crisis is exacerbated by a prevailing fear of radiation among the public, responders, and reporters themselves.

These challenges are further complicated by the evolving and fragmented nature of the contemporary media landscape, including social, mobile, and citizen reporting. It is in this context that journalists participating in the Rotterdam workshop drafted a set of recommendations for improving communication between the news media, authorities, and first responders in the event of a radiation emergency.



At the conclusion of the workshop, a group of participating representatives of news media drafted the following recommendations to international, national, and local authorities regarding improved communication with the media in the event of a nuclear or radiological emergency:

Recognizing that in the event of a radiological emergency, where there is risk to public safety from ionizing radiation, governments and journalists share the goal of minimizing harm to the public;

Recognizing that the availability of factual, reliable, timely information is indispensable to an appropriate public response to prevent avoidable panic and chaos;

Recognizing that ongoing fragmentation of the contemporary media landscape, including the ascendance of social media networks and the advent of citizen journalism, requires a corresponding multifaceted response;

Recognizing that tools by which authorities have traditionally communicated with media are insufficient today (for example, press releases may be issued long after journalists have received eyewitness photos and accounts);

Recognizing that in an emergency, without the most expeditious release of information, citizen journalists untrained in standard codes of practice for news gathering and factual reporting may unwittingly circulate rumors and unverified information;

Also recognizing that radiological emergency first responders may not have the capacity to give priority to informing journalists as a means of assuring the public;

And further recognizing that despite the need for robust scientific data, its compilation should not hinder the earliest release of basic facts and safety protocols to journalists;

We therefore recommend that local, national, and international authorities incorporate the following actions into radiological emergency preparedness response plans in order to keep the public informed and enhance public safety:

- Acknowledge journalists have an indispensable role to play in swiftly communicating factual information to the public about details of a radiological emergency as well as the protective behaviors the public should observe.
 - Provide emergency response managers and their teams the resources and authorization to ensure journalists are privy to the salient details of an event as soon as possible after an incident occurs.
 - Avoid the dangers of an information vacuum by keeping channels with journalists open and maintaining a steady stream of information.
 - Share with journalists, even when the precise nature, cause, or scope of an incident is not fully understood or verified, information about the incremental steps being taken in response to the incident and update frequently (for example, setting up evacuation zones, investigation and analysis, engagement of specialists, modeling, estimating levels of radiation, health/safety checks, and clean-up procedures). In other words, provide an unfolding road map that explains the emergency response for journalists to report back to the public.
 - Provide, or direct journalists to, a safety guide to protect themselves when reporting on significant radiation incidents. Journalists could also use this guide to convey basic safety information to the public to limit the risk of radiation exposure.
 - Acknowledge the need for plain speaking. In a radiological emergency, there will be journalists assigned to cover the story whose knowledge about the effects of ionizing radiation will be limited. Use common terms and integrate visual infographics to express technical details and provide information in all the languages represented in multicultural communities, as well as in English and other regional languages for uptake by international media.
 - Assume that journalists will pitch stories that speak to the dominant psychological and emotional concerns of the public. Offer direct and continuous advice regarding self-protection, the urge to unite with family members, the urge to flee, the anxiety related to immediate and delayed health effects, and fears that mass destruction may follow.
- In preparation for possible incidents:
- Engage credible experts and risk communication specialists to develop responses that can be delivered via multiple channels to news media in the immediate aftermath of a radiological emergency.
 - Develop ahead of time clear infographics and information checklists to assist journalists in more comprehensively and accurately covering an event.
 - Develop relationships with generalist and specialist reporters, for example, through periodic workshops, to ensure there is a cohort of informed journalists who understand, and can give feedback on, the emergency-response process.
 - Develop and continuously update a list of contacts and other resources for journalists to access quickly and easily in the event of an emergency.

Atomic Reporters and the Stanley Foundation will begin circulating these recommendations to emergency responders, nuclear regulators, safety organizations, and others in June 2016.