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## **WHEN ROUTINES ARE NOT ENOUGH**

### **Journalists' crisis management during the 22/7 domestic terror attack in Norway**

**Maria Konow Lund and Eva-Karin Olsson**

*Interest in crisis management among journalism scholars grew in the wake of the terror attacks of September 11, 2007. Yet, few studies explore journalists and their organizations from a newsroom and organizational crisis management perspective. In this study, we study journalists' ability to conduct news work when faced with a frame-breaking news event- in this case, the July 22, 2011 attacks in Norway. Dividing the journalistic response to these events into three stages, each with its own particular challenges, we have been able to unpack how these Norwegian journalists were capable of reporting on the events despite the chaos and uncertainty that followed in their wake, including the fact that the newsroom itself suffered severe damage from the bomb blast. This study shows that coping mechanisms in times of organizational stress will range from the expected (routine, habit) to the unexpected (improvisation, bricolage). The individual must pick up where the organization leaves off, relying upon experience and professionalism as well as face-to-face interaction and the assistance of whatever technology survives.*

**KEYWORDS** July 22, 2011; crisis; journalism; journalistic practices; newsroom; Norway; Utiiya

#### **Introduction**

Over the last decade, there has been an increasing interest in crisis journalism connected to acts of terror-such as the attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States and related episodes in cities such as Madrid and London. An important factor in the success of crisis journalism is the ability of news media to adhere to their journalistic norms and standards at such abnormal and demanding moments (Nord and Stromback 2006). The worst events- that is, those that are genuinely unprecedented and shocking - immediately undermine both preparations and routines. These "frame breakers," by their very nature, cannot be reasonably anticipated, and challenge even the most established journalistic practices (Olsson 2010; Boin et al. 2005). Weick (1993, 633) characterizes these events as "cosmic episodes," whereby "people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together." The terror attack of September 11, 2001 was one such event, during which a broadcaster had to improvise and to "'learn' 9/11 on screen" (Bouvier 2005, 25).

In this study, we will explore how journalists coped with another frame breaker, the terror attacks in Norway in 2011, while virtually under attack themselves. On July 22 of that year, a 32-year-old Norwegian right-wing extremist carried out two sequential lone wolf domestic terror attacks against the Norwegian government, the civilian population and, in particular, a Workers' Youth League (AUF) summer camp situated in the Oslo region, in the Buskerud counties. The attacks started when the terrorist abandoned a car containing a huge bomb near the office block housing the office of the Prime Minister of Norway. The explosion killed eight people and injured at least 209. Afterward, the terrorist drove to the Labor Party's youth summer camp, impersonating a policeman in order to facilitate his systematic, cold-blooded execution of over 60 people, most young and some even children, at the island of Utøya. The attack was the deadliest in Norway since World War II, claiming a total of 77 lives and wounding 319 people as well.

Several of Oslo's media houses evacuated their staff in the immediate aftermath of the bomb detonation. However, few were directly impacted to the extent of the newspaper offices of *Verdens Gang* (VG)<sup>1</sup>, where large windows facing the demolished government quarters were blown out, scattering glass both inside and outside and forcing the journalists to be evacuated immediately. After regrouping a safe distance away, the journalists soon divided into two groups. The majority, a mix of newspaper journalists and online reporters, followed the editors to another building and eventually ended up in suites at a nearby hotel. A few other online reporters, on the other hand, worked their way back into the newsroom of the closed VG building. In what follows, we will focus mostly upon this latter group, which most directly faced the challenges associated with the viable practice of crisis journalism during a frame-breaking event. We will ask the following questions:

**RQ1:** What were the key challenges-physical, organizational/structural, and intellectual/ sense making- facing the VG Nett online journalists who attempted to cover this event under such duress?

**RQ2:** How did these journalists meet those challenges?

Based on interviews with the journalists, we will track an organizational progression from chaos and granularity through the restoration of some limited newsroom functionality to a further, additional collapse at a later stage in the coverage, when a sudden relocation of the staff exposed, among other things, underlying organizational rivalries and competitiveness.

## **Routines, Improvisations, and Discourses of Professionalism**

Previous studies dealing with crisis and journalism have focused, among other things, on the role of media-related rituals (Durham 2008), the interaction between journalists and audiences (Robinson 2009), how journalistic standards and professional roles impact on crisis news coverage (Usher 2009; Olsson and Nord 2015), and the importance of new information technologies (Bruns, Highfield, and Burgess 2013; Lim 2013). To date, however, there are few studies on crisis reporting from an organizational news-production perspective. Still in thrall to the wave of sociological news-production research of the 1970s and 1980s, today's newsroom studies continue to regard news organizations as constrained by structural bureaucratic aspects that chain reporters to their routines (Ryfe 2006). According to Tuchman (1975, 150), *control* is the requisite basis of news production, and control is constantly at risk from "the amount of work to be done and the number of individuals who must participate in the task." In order to maintain control, journalists rely heavily on routines and standardized forms of production. In turn, Berkowitz (1992) observes, news work in non-routine conditions must be guided by improvisation and negotiation, much of which involves adapting existing routines to the new conditions. In following adapted versions of their everyday routines, journalists are able to devise procedures to handle surprises in which the rules governing the coverage of a "what-a-story" are invoked by citing a similar "what-a-story" (Tuchman 1973, 128).

Few studies engage with improvisation among journalists during severe crisis events from an organizational perspective, though Ottosen and Andenes Bull (2012) interviewed four editorial managers at two national Norwegian newspapers, *Dagbladet* and *Aftenposten*, about the organization of their work during the July 22 attack. Several of their conclusions resonate with this study in terms of how the chaotic situation influenced news coverage, particularly during the evacuation of the newspaper *Aftenposten*, as journalists sought to satisfy the audience's need for detailed information despite the obvious obstacles to their work. Kammer (2013) investigated how Norwegian and Danish newspapers covered the July 22 attack in real time and pointed to the impact of digital journalism on the success of the journalism. In a study concerning how Swedish news organizations handled the September 11, 2001 attacks, Olsson (2009) demonstrates that organizational sense making, history, and culture all determined the newsroom's ability to improvise, and that routines and improvisation are not entirely opposite poles but rather variously overlapping modes of journalistic practice .

The focus on routines in previous studies of news production is understandable since routines are in general understood as governing professional behavior and serve as a guiding light for journalists regarding what to do in a given situation (Larson 1977;

Friedson 1986). Generally speaking, routines serve as shortcuts for practices connected to underlying professional ideals and standards . The literature on journalistic ideals is vast but in general journalists are thought of as adhering to the following five ideals: public service (a "watchdog" mentality), objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethics and legitimacy (Deuze 2005, 447). Journalism as an institution can be divided into two main areas: social practices, which involve policies, routines, procedures, and relations, and cosmology, which relates to values, norms, perceptions, and culture. Together, these two areas give rise to common attitudes and behaviors and thereby reduce uncertainty by providing direction (Ekstrom 2002, 268). The full complexity of journalism as an institution can be uncovered in routines of production where "the combination of professional training and routinized practice corresponds to a high degree of consensus on story selection, reporting angles, and trends in the profession" (Lance, Gressett, and Haltom 1985, 55). Of great interest here, Aldridge and Evetts (2003, 547) also argue that professionalism can be mobilized by employers as a form of self-discipline. The question addressed in this study is whether journalists' notion of professionalism is so profound that it can provide them with guidance even during major crises. Also what is the connection between professionalism and routines and practices? Evetts (2006, 140) describes organizational professionalism as a rational-legal matrix of decision making, hierarchical structures of authority, and the standardization of work practices. She describes occupational professionalism, in turn, as dependent upon more discretionary decision making in more complex contexts in relation to collegial authority. For example, journalists "on the floor" at times consult one another and draw upon shared expertise, education, and training.

In this article, we are interested in news events in which journalists find **it** hard to apply routine responses to discretionary decision making and newsroom coordination and must instead improvise. Due to the lack of research on such events, we apply a theoretical framework on sense making and organizational resilience developed by organizational researcher Karl Weick. According to Weick (1993), four key resources facilitate organizational resilience and improvisation in situations of chaos: (1) improvisation and bricolage, (2) virtual role systems, (3) the attitude of wisdom, and (4) respectful interaction. Improvisation and bricolage can be cultivated to support creativity even under intense pressure. Virtual role systems refer to organizational member's ability to preserve the organizational role system in their minds when it falls apart in the physical world. The attitude of wisdom refers to the fact that people are aware that they do not fully understand what is going on, simply because they have never been in the exact situation before. Both extreme confidence and excessive caution "destroy what organizations most need in changing times, namely, curiosity, openness, and complex sensing" (641). Finally,

respectful interaction highlights the need for face-to-face interaction in facilitating social constructions under duress.

In the analysis that follows, we will explore the aspects of routine, improvisation, and professionalism in relation to the ways in which VG Nett journalists coped with the challenges of reporting the July 22 terror attacks in Norway.

## **Method**

This study is based on interviews conducted with managers, editors, and reporters at the Norwegian newspaper VG, with a particular focus on online journalists (VG Nett). We focus upon VG because the media house was literally hit during the terror attack and therefore stands out as a unique case of crisis journalism in practice. The study is part of larger research project that incorporates 25 semi-structured interviews with staff from the Norwegian Broadcast Corporation (NRK), TV2, and VG. The data gathering took place from the end of July 2011 until the middle of October 2011. Most of the informants worked as reporters on the day in question, and several editors were interviewed as well.

The newspaper VG was established a short time after World War II and quickly achieved nationwide distribution; it was later to be the first newspaper in Norway to change to a tabloid format (in 1963) (Konow-Lund and Puijk 2012). The Schibsted Group bought the newspaper on June 1, 1966 but chose to maintain it as a separate company (Eide 1995, 536). Over the last decade, the printed newspaper has seen a sharp drop in circulation, from a peak in 2002 of 390,510 to 211,588 in 2011 (H0st 2012). On the other hand, VG's digital platforms (online, mobile, iPad, video) have enjoyed a huge increase in audience numbers. In fact, VG Nett has always been the most popular news website in Norway, with more than 1,278,912 unique users (2014 TSN Gallup).

At VG, we conducted eight interviews, each lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. Our informants differed with regard to experience and competence. The main part of the interviews focused on actions taken and decisions made in the first hours after the terror attacks. The interviews were very open, and the overarching question was, "What did you do when you found out about the attack(s)?" The interviewees were then encouraged to tell their own stories as far as they could remember them. Follow-up questions focused on interesting perspectives introduced by the interviewees and on themes from previous research in the field. The interviews aimed to capture both the actual actions taken and the perceptions of the situation, and the open-ended questions made it possible for the interviewees to focus on what they themselves thought was important. It must be said, of course, that retrospective accounts like those related in interviews can be biased in different ways. The most obvious problem is the inability of respondents to remember

accurately the *event* in question. Moreover, respondents might also distort information for personal or organizational reasons. In order to compensate for this as best we could, we deliberately reviewed all of our responses for consistency.

Based on these data, we developed a narrative to describe the events of the day. Using the narrative as the basis for our analysis, we then singled out important decisions, actions, and attitudes related to routines, improvisation, and professionalism, all in order to better understand how journalists handle a situation where their daily routines and practices are no longer applicable.

## **Empirical Analysis**

### *Phase I: What is This Story?*

During the initial phase immediately following the July 22 terror attacks, the overarching VG organization dissolved (or appeared to), leaving its staff members without the benefits of oversight or strategic guidance from above. Like other media houses, the traditional newspaper VG was completely taken by surprise by the event. It appears that there was no fallback plan for such an attack, and this forced the organization to depend on managers' and individual journalists' *ad hoc* improvisational measures. This sudden vacuum lasted for approximately one hour, from 3:25 to 4:20 pm.

People's initial reactions to the event included both excitement and shock. Many respondents recalled that their colleagues rose and ran toward the explosion, rather than away from it, which they saw as consistent with the journalistic instinct of wanting to know what was happening. The severe damage to the VG building could not be seen from the fifth floor, though some of the journalists noticed that windows had been blown out. Although the situation was chaotic, no one actually panicked. In spite of a howling fire alarm, for example, people walked rather than ran down staircases. Even the explosion itself was not so much heard as felt, as suction in the midsection. In the first moments after the bomb exploded, people felt disbelief, sometimes coupled with a sense of absurdity. The situation was impossible to understand, and, as had been the case on September 11, 2001, VG journalists had a hard time making sense of what was unfolding on the ground and had to rely on colleagues with better access to information, just like the general public did.

As it all began to sink in, the journalists reacted like everyone else and started to worry about friends and family. Phones were mainly used at first to check on the whereabouts of loved ones rather than to follow up on journalistic leads as such (though some journalists also tried to call the police, without getting through). Informants explained that the whole VG media house was promptly evacuated, and that between

50 and 100 journalists ended up simply milling about on the streets outside. While some chose to leave the scene, other remained to see what would happen, and still others began to "document" the damage they saw. A very experienced journalist recalled being scared that there might be another bomb, but once he checked on his family, he was ready to go to work. He was not in the VG building when the bomb exploded but came from elsewhere:

Me personally, well I suppose I was afraid that there would be another explosion. But I wasn't *that* scared. If I had been really scared I would have run far away [from the VG building]. Many of my colleagues did, ran far away, and I fully understand that. But somehow, I wasn't quite there either. It kind of felt ok to stay. And when the police said, "Get out of here!" I understood why they were saying that, but I wasn't terrified. After all, I did go back into VG [VG building and the VG Nett News desk] afterwards I knew that everyone at VG had to evacuate. I figured that they had probably not been able to bring the equipment with them, and that, since I had a camera, I should take some pictures. (informant, interview, September 30, 2011)

The desire to check on one's own family first, however understandable, reflects a breakdown of newsroom procedure and organizational hierarchy in the moments just after the attack. No one, for example, reacted first by seeking instruction from a supervisor. Instead, all of the informants reported making their initial choices for themselves. One experienced reporter later lamented the fact that he did not walk around the government building to see the bomb crater firsthand, even though a VG main principle during breaking news is to confirm the facts as quickly as possible. Afterward, he noted that if he had seen the crater with his own eyes, his analyses of what it was all about would probably have been less speculative .

In fact, few experienced breaking-news journalists headed right over to Grubbegaten, the demolished street behind the government quarters where the car with the bomb had been parked. One reporter said that this was because the destruction was so immense - though he had a lot of experience with breaking news, he had not previously covered either war or terrorism and therefore had little experience upon which to draw. According to Berkowitz (1992) and Tuchman (1973), journalists manage to cope with even genuinely surprising events by drawing upon their experiences with other surprising events. However, at this stage no such analogies were available to most of the VG Nett journalists, except for one who had experienced the terror attack in London in 2005. He said that he had waited for something similar to occur in Norway ever since, and likely due to his prior experience and mental preparedness, he was the one who took charge of the situation and reminded



everyone else to remember equipment such as mobile phones, chargers, and the like as they left the VG building . Experience with regular breaking news was relevant as well, but not until later, during the second phase of the event, when the informants had returned to the news desk and begun to cover the story by following their familiar routines and practices.

While some of the journalists moved as far away from the VG building as they could, others chose to wait for instructions just outside the doors, and five online reporters followed a very different instinct indeed, choosing to return to their main online newsroom in the VG building (see e.g. the map of the area, with videos, at <http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/22-juli/slik-skjedde-angrepene.php>). In the entry foyer, a female security guard barred their entry, despite appearing to be in a state of shock herself. Some of them made their way back to their newsroom regardless, though they were conflicted about it:

I was pretty scared as I ran, particularly when I was running up the stairs here, I thought that this was a bit crazy . . . Because by that time we had started to understand the situation a bit more, and seen the people and the chaos outside on the street. We knew there was [broken] glass ... and we realized that it was probably a bomb . (informant, interview, August 23, 2011)

Few other journalists from VG and VG Nett followed them, but they pressed ahead, simply hoping to get back to the location where they felt they were most in control. They seem to have concluded that routines, practices, and professional decision making would be restored quickest to those who regained their familiar workspaces. Still, there was a risk involved, in that nobody could say for certain that there was not a second bomb .

The one managing editor who had entered with the group said repeatedly that no one had to remain in the newsroom. Each person had to be responsible for his or her own choice to stay:

He [the managing editor] said, " . . . You have to be here of your own free will. In other words, you are here voluntarily. I can't vouch for your security if you stay here," so in that sense the topic was discussed. (informant, interview, September 30, 2011)

This illustrates how difficult it is for managers, like journalists, to balance between effective routines and risk-taking departures from them in situations that are new. On the one hand, the editorial manager had to place responsibility for personal security on the individual in question, though no one could say what was safe at that time. On the other hand, of course, it benefited the organization as a whole to have representatives at the news desk in the VG building. The entire group of journalists decided to stay. The fact that these journalists did not seek instructions from a supervisor should be understood against

the backdrop of the everyday organizational culture at VG, which emphasized freedom and responsibility. The newspaper tried to foster a culture where individual journalists would be able to take responsibility for themselves and their work, though direction was always available from above as well (Konow-Lund 2013). However, during the crisis journalism phase of the July 22 attack coverage, this latent individualism went even further in several cases.

Despite their decision to stay, some of the informants invoked the series of attacks on September 11, 2001 in the United States to underline that the current event might not be over. Still, the informants stressed that they felt at that time that they ought to return to their responsibilities. One journalist stated that, given his experience with breaking news, he would be expected to return to his work. Importantly, most of the informants emphasized that, though they did not understand what had happened, they felt compelled to communicate with their audience as best they could. It thus seems as though the journalists managed to adhere to their professional roles by picturing the audience members and their need for information. In so doing, the journalists made use of the strategy of virtual role systems, whereby they managed to keep their journalistic roles, and various specific tasks, intact in their minds even though the physical structure around them was falling apart. The journalists agreed that the news desk was the most effective place from which to work, and it was also the number that sources knew to call. It thus seems as though the physical structure of the newsroom facilitated the journalists' desire to stay together and maintain face-to-face contact, which, according to Weick's (1993) theories of organizational resilience, helps such groups to improvise under tough conditions.

#### *Phase II: Organizational and Professional Reconstruction*

In the second phase, the journalists sought to reestablish routines and practices even though they faced both technological and communication challenges. This phase took place from about 4:20 pm until the journalists had to leave the VG building again at 7:30 pm. Gradually the organization restored a proper newsroom. For one thing, the reporters who had returned to the online desk set up a temporary hierarchy that allocated specific tasks to each staff member. As it turned out, those who found their way back filled different and complementary roles at the news desk anyway—there were three online reporters, two front editors, and an editorial manager. This particular group composition proved very useful. Informants noted, among other things, that the editorial manager was very detailed and specific when he handed out tasks, which helped to enable the necessary reconstruction of the organization and the restoration of everyday practices as

well as any further improvisation .

When VG Nett was up and running, the journalists started to organize their work. Key challenges included obtaining an overview of the situation and getting in touch with the most important sources. When the journalists finally managed to get hold of sources, however, the loud fire alarm made it nearly impossible to hear what they said . Moreover, no one could get to all of the tips on an overloaded tip line:

We sat there, with the fire alarm howling for about two hours more or less. I was so fed up with that fire alarm. In addition, *all* the telephones were ringing *all* the time. And we couldn't possibly answer them. And we were swamped with e-mails; in addition we had some technical problems due to heavy [online] traffic. (informant, interview, September 30, 2011)

Staff improvisation during this phase involved finding solutions to the structural disruption-for example, using Facebook and Twitter as a way to confirm or test one's facts. When it proved impossible to reach official sources, one of the reporters used his own direct observations from outside the government building as a way to write one of the earliest stories about the attacks. Several informants pointed out that, because family and friends would try to contact them and disturb their work, they wrote messages on Facebook saying that they were fine and "Don't contact me." As we can see, the journalists' reactions had changed considerably from the first phase of the event. Now, knowing that their families were safe, their professional identities took over. Furthermore, this professionalism facilitated improvisation and the ability to contextualize details in new ways. When, for example, the reporters were given Post-It notes from the operators with phone numbers of callers but no other information, they needed to decide on the spot whether they were going to use valuable time to check them out. One reporter found a note saying "shooting" with a phone number but never thought to connect it to the explosion at the government building:

Among the Post -It notes, there was one that said "Shooting," and there was also a phone number . . . Someone said . . . there had been some kind of shooting in Northern Buskerud. Just like everyone else, I thought "Ok, so what?" A bomb has exploded in Oslo

... We thought it [the shooting) was just someone who had shot somebody. Like domestic violence or something. That's what people thought. We didn't think that there was a connection when we heard "Shooting in Northern Bus kerud."<sup>2</sup> (informant, interview, September 30, 2011)

As it turned out, of course, the Norway terror attack had two parts : the car bomb that detonated at the government building opposite the VG offices , and the shooting assault less

than two hours later at a summer camp on the island of Utøya that was organized by the youth division of the Norwegian Labor Party (AUF). The challenge for both the functioning VG Nett team and their colleagues around the world was to keep up with these events both effectively and compellingly, and initially, as well, to make and deepen the link between the two.

During this work at the online news desk, a policeman and a representative from the fire brigade turned up at the VG offices and tried to force the journalists to move. They insisted on staying, and the officials eventually accepted their need to do so. The serendipitous visit from the police officer and firefighter would produce a breakthrough for the journalists' understanding of the sequential nature of the attacks. While the officials were in the newsroom, the policeman received a message on his radio that alerted the VG Nett reporters to the possibility that something was going on at Utøya, which they eventually linked to the shooting announced on the Post-It:

While they [the police and the fire department] are there, *they* receive a report about a shooting in Northern Buskerud on their radios. And they tell us: "We have to go. We have a shooting in Northern Buskerud." It was something like that they said. And we thought; "OK, now *they* are leaving too. What's going on here?" And then we quite quickly realize that this has to do with Utøya. (informant, interview, September 30, 2011)

The policeman said little, but the reporter with the Post-It decided to check it out. The phone number on the note turned out to belong to a source who had escaped from Utøya. This episode indicates that journalistic experience, coupled with an ability to improvise, generates coverage even under unfamiliar and stressful circumstances, especially when everyone was able to work together.

During the event social media played an important role. Informants explained that many social media users knew somebody who had been affected by the terror attacks at the government building or on Utøya. Because important sources were generally inaccessible during much of the event, social media could be exploited as an alternative means of confirmation of the accuracy of one's story. According to the front editor, social media was used to facilitate a two-way dialogue between content being continuously published online and the revision of the facts in light of user feedback, which helped them to ultimately understand the full scope of the terror events (front editor, interview, August 23, 2011).

At the same time, many foreign journalists were trying to get through to the VG Nett reporters in order to acquire information. Everyone wanted to know who was behind the attack, and several of the informants recalled the intensity of this professional pressure. VG

Nett professionalism was put to the test as speculation went wild and the *New York Times* published a story stating that Islamists were behind the attack. It was strict VG policy that reporters should not speculate (Konow-Lund 2013). Also, one of the online reporters who was helping out from home knew Arabic and checked a number of Al-Qaida websites, where he found *several* groups claiming responsibility for the attack. This made the online reporters even more skeptical about the rampant speculation. According to Ottosen and Bull (2014), VG Nett did refer to Al Qaida in their reports during the first hour after the attack in the context of Islamist-inspired terror, but VG Nett never quoted the *New York Times* or make this connection unequivocally:

For example, we did not quote the *New York Times*, which reported that an Islamic group had accepted responsibility. Even though ... the *New York Times* is normally a pretty reliable source for quite a lot of information. But I chose not to publish it ... and did not spend a lot of time on the matter. It didn't quite fit the picture of what we ... of the information we were receiving. (managing editor online, interview, September 16, 2011)

In the end, it did not make sense to these journalists that it was an Al Qaida attack. They asked themselves whether Al Qaida could possibly have gathered so much information about this Norwegian county and the time and place of a summer camp for the youth division of the Norwegian Labor Party. This skepticism was facilitated by the interaction that was made possible at the news desk *even* in the midst of the *event*, and by the organizational maxim "When in doubt, leave it out".<sup>3</sup> This vignette demonstrates that *even* when technology was not available as such, the journalists clung to their professional practices and routines rather than look to other media sources to supplement their coverage for them.

In this second phase of the coverage, VG Nett journalists clearly restored their professional outlook and practices. As Weick (1993) emphasized in his analysis of the Mann Gulch fire disaster, improvisation and creativity are equally vital when one must perform under intense pressure, but, as he demonstrates in his article, it is easier to improvise when one's surroundings are familiar and there is room for personal interaction. The VG Nett journalists must have grasped this instinctively when they decided to return to the newsroom, despite the restrictions, to carry on with their work.

### *Phase III: Disintegration and Competition*

At around 7:30 pm on the night of the attack, the editorial manager phoned in a message from the editor-in-chief, who was insisting that the remaining journalists at the VG building should evacuate as soon as possible. The reporters carried what equipment they

could from the VG building into the deserted streets of Oslo and went to the Hotel Bristol, where several hotel rooms and suites had been rented by VG. Settled into a suite at the Bristol, they could finally concentrate on producing and updating their website. Some of the study informants later observed that it would have helped this effort if the staff had been allocated a large conference room rather than a number of suites and individual rooms.

With hindsight, of course, the transition from the VG building to the Bristol appeared smoother and less chaotic than it actually was. First of all, when the group arrived at the Bristol, all of the suites were occupied and reporters were dispersed to individual rooms, which made communication among them difficult. One experienced reporter noted how vital internal communication was and described the situation at the Bristol as "frantic chaos" (informant, interview, September 30, 2011) in relation to the relative calm of the VG Nett newsroom. When the online group first arrived at the hotel, they found colleagues sitting in corridors, writing stories while leaning against the walls. However, there was no longer the feeling of life-threatening disaster that the journalists had experienced at the VG building. Instead, they felt renewed pressure to produce their news in a satisfactory fashion. One informant noted, "It was chaos ... but an organized chaos, sort of. People worked and different newswriters focused on their own tasks, and from an overall perspective, the work was controlled" (informant, interview, September 29, 2011). Despite a dearth of computers, mobile chargers, and other devices, everyday newsroom routines, such as nominating a specific journalist to oversee the main script of the story, helped to organize the work.

The main difference between the VG Nett newsroom and the Hotel Bristol was the physical layout and its impact upon the positioning of people in various rooms. Compared to the VG Nett newsroom, where everyone was together, the Bristol necessitated the division of the organization physically into various sub-units with different statuses and tasks. This undermined the ability of staff members to interact face to face. The VG online group was assigned what one informant thought was the last suite, which happened to be three floors below the other allocated suites, which obviously complicated internal communication. Moreover, the work at the Bristol was hampered by the lack of tools that the reporters were accustomed to using on a daily basis. Just logging on to the homepage to edit it was difficult, even though there were IT developers to find a way around the problems. Likewise, the lack of multiple TV screens-which are common to every newsroom-made an overview of outside media coverage impossible. In general, everything became more manual rather than automated, and computers, charged phones, iPads, and chargers were scarce. One informant recalled how other media houses were

interviewing sources while equipped with computers, phones, and even bulletproof vests, while VGs reporter would arrive with pens and notebooks, dressed in their tee shirts.

At the same time, the environment was described as caring; informants recalled that staff members were allowed to eat and drink whatever they wanted for free, and that a crisis therapist was present within a few hours of the first attack. When a young reporter declared that she should have been at UtOya, where many of her friends had been killed, and that her closest family members were not even in Oslo, her colleagues hurried to comfort her. Later that evening, several middle-aged journalists with children who were the same age as the UtOya youth headed home because their children had lost friends. One informant said that he wished management had chosen a hotel that was further from the VG building, for safety but also for emotional distance. Compared to phase 11, the emotional stress of phase III become worse at the Bristol, especially as more and more journalists returned to the newsroom after having met with relatives of the victims. In other words, although the location was not exactly ideal for those staff members who had chosen to return to the VG newsroom, they had been able to remain at a distance from what some outgoing reporters experienced as emotional exposure. Meetings with relatives of dead or wounded victims, friends of victims, or the victims themselves at a time when confusion reigned led to enormous emotional stress. Some informants even suggested that they were lucky to be able to concentrate on specific tasks and thereby escape the responsibility of continuously following the massive media coverage of the ongoing event. Due to the scale of the demand for information, journalists from both the newspaper and the website worked together closely, despite the different speeds of their respective production processes. Still, the time at the Bristol also revealed a certain intra-organizational competition. All were competing for stories from the same pool of interviews and observations, and all wanted to release their stories right away rather than saving something for a later edition. Several reporters ended up annoyed at being left out of the bylines of the (relatively historical) coverage the following day, wondering to themselves, "Why didn't I have a byline?" (informant, interview, September 30, 2011). Some ultimately surrendered to the longstanding competitiveness between the newspaper- per people and the online people, but others took the opportunity to develop or expand connections with those on the other side (informant, interview, September 30, 2011 ). The newspaper and the website had merged a year before the terror attack, and official guidelines stated that the two should cooperate. In the end, they did.

In this last phase, then, the VG Nett group dealt with a new work site and a lack of technology, as well as the emotional burden of meeting with journalists who had been to

UtOya in person. At the same time, things began to normalize in relation to the situation at the VG Nett building, where the threat of an additional attack remained so vivid. Managers arriving at the hotel had to organize whoever was there and meet expectations for a restoration of normal functioning. In turn, this last phase was characterized by the appearance of some competitiveness between both groups and individuals. As the situation became less directly dangerous, journalists stopped making use of specific improvisation techniques such as trying to compensate for not being able to get in touch with colleagues or *even* sources and started practicing normally again.

### **Concluding Discussion**

Crisis journalism involving frame-breaking *events* such as the July 22 attacks cannot be understood without taking into consideration the notion of journalistic professionalism and its impact on improvisation as a precondition for the ability to *cover* the news. With this article, we have tried to supplement a scholarly understanding of how journalists handle terror incidents, particularly in cases where they are not only required to *cover* the attack but also come under attack themselves. It has long been assumed that journalists *cover* extraordinary *events* by referring to similar *events* in the past and modifying everyday routines as necessary. In this case, *very* few such references or directions were available. In addition, the organization itself fell apart initially, which undermined all of those journalistic routines deriving from interpersonal interaction and the presence of supervision (as well as technology). In this study, on the other hand, we saw that the VG Nett journalists, faced with a host of unfamiliar challenges, solved them through a host of sometimes novel coping mechanisms during each phase of the *event*.

Right after the bomb exploded near the VG building, journalists struggled with their own sense of shock and disbelief as well as a lack of organizational structure and leadership. What followed was a shift in balance from the reliance on a clear organizational hierarchy to a necessary empowerment of the individual. Due to the temporary lack of organizational structure and leadership, both personal and professional responsibilities were put upon the individual staff members. Relying on their professionalism, they tried to compensate for the new circumstances by creating a virtual organization through which roles and tasks were allocated as would have been "normally" (Weick 1993). After a while, a core group of VG Nett journalists emerged, preserving the crucial aspect of personal interaction first in the VG Nett newsroom, then in the Hotel Bristol. Organizational rebuilding, starting in the newsroom, was based on improvisation and instinct rather than calculation, because no precedent existed for such a challenge. The newsroom proved to be the best place to restore routines and professionalism, given its familiar surroundings



and, at least to some extent, technology. In the second phase, the core group built up a workable *ad hoc* structure that allowed its members to function as individual journalists *and* as a newsroom-contacting sources, making sure that the information technology was working, and checking information. A key coping mechanism in this second phase is what Weick (1993) called "respectful interaction," which compensates for the lack of formal structure and management in a crisis situation by allowing members to engage face to face in the sense-making process that was necessary for them to start fulfilling their professional responsibilities. In this case, respectful interaction was made possible by the small size of the group and the physical structure of the large newsroom.

In the third phase, the VG Nett staffers regrouped at the Bristol, where the rest of the VG organization had set up shop. The group got the last available hotel suite, located three floors below the other staff members, so communication with them was difficult. The evacuation from the VG newsroom had taken these journalists from their known environment and forced them to adapt to a completely new one, albeit one that was not about to be shut down by the authorities due to the threat of another attack. At the Bristol, then, the obstacles were less psychological than physical—a lack of space, computers, mobiles, batteries, monitors, tables, chairs, and so forth. Yet routines began to stabilize nevertheless, allowing the staff to generate a continuous workflow, despite all of the challenges. It should also be noted that the journalists managed to coordinate their own work, and to work in teams, despite the lack of an overarching structure and the presence of what one journalist called "frantic chaos." As everyone pitched in, everyday organizational characteristics such as tension, competitiveness, and rivalry resurfaced, which eventually hampered organizational improvisational capacity. In this phase, that is, professionalism encouraged not only positive coping mechanisms but also negative aspects such as competition and rivalry.

Based on the findings of this study, we conclude that societies become even more vulnerable to the repercussions of terror attacks when media organizations are directly affected as well. In such extreme situations, most journalists lack relevant previous experience and must look elsewhere to inform their responses. Hence, this study shows that coping mechanisms in times of organizational stress will range from the expected (routine, habit) to the unexpected (improvisation, bricolage). Moreover, the study shows, in contrast to classic research on news production, that individual journalists' understanding of an event and individual actions do matter, and this sometimes has significant consequences for crisis decision making, and, accordingly, the ability to report on the event. During a frame breaker, the individual must pick up where the organization leaves off, relying upon experience and professionalism as well as face-to-face interaction

and the assistance of whatever technology has survived. It is not only the day-to-day routine itself but also its profound disruption that lends the clearest insight into the contemporary practice of journalism in the digital age.

## NOTES

1. *Verdens gang* means "The way of the world" in English. Although VG newspaper and VG Nett remained daily collaborators in 2011, we focus on the group that worked with online news in this study.
2. Buskerud is a county in Hole municipality in Norway. Utøya is a small island in Buskerud county.
3. The maxim "when in doubt, leave out" refers to certain guidelines at VG Nett. In a recent ethnographic study, the organizational culture was characterized by its emphasis on responsibility and awareness when making choices (Konow-Lund 2013).

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**Maria Konow Lund**, Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Høgskolen i Oslo og Akershus , Norway. E-mail: Maria.Konow-Lund@hi oa.no

**Eva-Karin Olsson** (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), CRISMART, Department of Security, Strategy, and Leadership , Swedish Defence University, The Swedish National Defence College, Sweden. E-mail: eva-karin. olsson @fh s.se