



# There's still hope

## We need compelling arguments

BY DENI ELLIOTT

**S**PJ's Waco Task Force gives me the hope that SPJ may fill the analytic void left when the National News Council closed its doors. The good news about the Waco Task Force report is that the group made some judgments about how well media handled their responsibilities. The less good, but hopeful, news is that SPJ task forces of the future will undertake tighter, more consistent analyses. If an important professional organization like SPJ is going to do the trade and the public the service of providing judgment about journalistic practice, it will need compelling arguments to make up its claims.

I have three concerns with the task force findings:

**1.** Some of the conclusions seem based on a fallacious appeal to ignorance.

**2.** The report is sometimes lacking in internal consistency.

**3.** The task force has ignored the problem of news media taking government's side in the stand-off.

Appeal to ignorance is a fallacy because what one doesn't know can lead only to one concluding nothing. Yet the task force summarizes its work with statements such as "... the charges that journalists were responsible for what happened with the gun battle or the standoff are not substantiated" (summary, p. 1) and states, "...[T]he task force found no concrete evidence validating the accusations that journalists from the newspaper or television stations tipped off the Branch Davidians as to what was happening" (p. 6). One wonders which principals—either critics or supporters—the task force interviewed to reach this conclusion? Who declined interviews? Without this information, the task force's argument comes

down to saying, "We couldn't find that they did. So, we conclude that they didn't." That's not a compelling basis upon which to accept such an important finding.

My broader concern is the lack of internal consistency expressed by the task force's conclusion: "To say that the media coverage contributed to the tragedy is not a supportable criticism" (p. 9). Few could disagree with the task force conclusion if it means that the media



were *less* morally responsible for the deaths and for the lengthy stand-off than were David Koresh, some of the Branch Davidians, and some public officials. But it is justifiable to hold journalists accountable for failing to meet the moral requirements of their own profession. In this respect, it is possible, if not likely, that journalistic failings did "contribute to the tragedy."

The task force itself in the pages of its report identified some journalistic failings. Among them: reporting rumors and unsub-

stantiated information, news organizations "over-covered" the story (p. 10); KRLD-AM (Dallas) and CNN were criticized by the task force for conducting live on-the-air interviews with Koresh (p. 13). How did the task force know that these identified failings did not contribute to the tragedy?

These criticisms of form may seem picky, but it is the structure of argument that makes it withstand the test of time and memory. Better precedent is set by arguments that stand up to scrutiny.

My one substantive concern with the report is that rather than take issue with the journalists' adoption of the authorities' position as their

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- Don't become "a player" in the crisis except as a last resort and in consultation with both your management and trained hostage negotiators.
- Point out why information is withheld if security reasons are cited.
- Carefully balance the harm that giving out information can cause versus any benefit to the public.
- Don't phone gunmen or hostage takers.
- Let authorities know immediately if you hear from such parties.
- Carefully examine your "gut reaction to 'go live' from the scene of a hostage-taking crisis, unless there are strong journalistic reasons for a live, on-the-scene report."
- Avoid giving information on a hostage taker's current psychological state.
- Don't comment on or analyze hostage takers' or terrorists' demands.
- Avoid using helicopters in the standoff area.
- Don't repeat communications overheard on police scanners.
- Use caution describing the medical condition of hostages.
- Interview friends or families of participants "only if the interview legitimately advances the story for the public and is not simply conducted for the shock value of the emotions conveyed or as a conduit for the interviewee to transmit messages to specific individuals."
- Remember to cover the "larger issues" involved.

### How to get a copy:

A complete report from the SPJ task force on media coverage in Waco can be obtained by sending \$3.50 to: Waco Task Force Report P.O. Box 77 Greencastle, IN 46135-0077



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outside the institution's gates.

But what value can the SPJ task force report have without the input of the hostage negotiators?

This point is challenged by the *Star-Telegram's* Phil Record, who says the SPJ team was sent to Waco to investigate how the media did, not the government: "We weren't looking for the authorities to make recommendations."

Why not, it could be asked—if one of the purposes of the recommendations is to prevent needless loss of life in a stand-off situation because of something done by the media?

The SPJ report consists of commonsense steps to avoid divulging tactics of negotiators or SWAT teams, with such reminders as "[D]o not report information obtained from police scanners."

But there are some impractical suggestions, too. One: "Seriously weigh the benefits to the public of what information might be given out versus what potential harm that information might cause."

Can you imagine a reporter slopping around in the mud at Lucasville or standing behind the FBI lines at Waco trying to figure this out, particularly on a live broadcast?

Clearly the most provocative of the recommendations is the one to "fight the urge to become a player in any standoff, hostage situation, or terrorist incident. Journalists should become personally involved only as a last resort and with the explicit approval of top news management and the consultation of trained hostage negotiators on the scene."

When Lucasville authorities began setting up the first press pool to go into the besieged prison because prisoners had demanded to talk to media, some of the reporters consulted with their editors. It's also true that almost every reporter tried to get in the pool.

*Dayton Daily News* reporter Cheryl Reed and her editor at the scene, Ron Rollins, are still convinced that the only way they could give the public accurate information about what was going on at Lucasville was to be as aggressive as possible in try-

ing to talk to the prisoners, even if it meant cooperating with authorities trying to use the media for negotiating purposes.

It's easy to justify media involvement for other reasons, Rollins contends: "When the authorities come up to us and ask for our help, arguing credibly that lives are at stake, we can't say no. We may be journalists, but we're also citizens and people."

Another *Daily News* reporter who spent many days at Lucasville, Wes Hills, thinks it's a dangerous leap from reporter to participant.

"We are not trained to negotiate with terrorists, and we must recognize that we may cause terrible bloodshed by seeking the limelight," he argues.

The Waco report will trigger many more discussions such as those under way in our newsroom. That's why the report and its recommendations will have lasting value.

The regrettable thing is the Waco task force was willing to declare clean hands for the media without federal response.

*Max Jennings is the editor of the Dayton Daily News.*

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own—what I saw as the major failing of the Waco coverage—the task force instead suggests that journalists should have consulted authorities in determining if they were making proper journalistic decisions. The task force seems to suggest that if law enforcement believes that a news organization's assistance will end a stand-off, the news organization is morally permitted to assist. If the other party in the stand-off wants assistance, news organizations are warned to guard against the "loss of journalistic independence and the potential for others to subsequently manipulate the media in a similar manner" (p. 13).

It would be nice if law enforcement officers were always the good guys, but society needs journalists who retain a healthy skepticism about which side is right. That implies that journalistic decisions about what kind of coverage to give whom in a stand-off should be determined by what the journalists believe citizens have a need to know rather than what either side wants citizens to be told.

We live in a world in which policymakers

and dissidents alike strive to take their message live to the masses. The proliferation of electronic media talk shows and infotainment reinforces the notion for message-givers and message-receivers that media organizations serve as the conduit between those who have something to say and those who just might care. The task force itself pointed out that the public often does not and cannot draw the distinction between a talk show host and a news reporter (p. 15). I was therefore puzzled when the task force took talk-show host Ron Engleman of KGBS radio to task for sending "sympathetic messages to the compound" (p. 15) without even mentioning the highly charged, government-approved language adopted by most of the mainstream media during the stand-off.

From the first day to the last, the press adopted government language as its own and laid out governmental speculations as though they were revealed truths. News media responded to government's message as uncritically as David Koresh reportedly responded to God's.

While the fire raged on the 51st day, the press echoed government claims that the

Branch Davidians had perished in a mass suicide. Soon, survivors told a different story. They described the terror of the Branch Davidians as they found their exits blocked by the government's demolition.

It was all too easy for journalists to jump to the conclusion that David Koresh had led his followers into dramatic self-immolation. For 51 days, the press had fed the public FBI analogies that likened David Koresh to Jim Jones.

Speculations of ultimate surrender were more warranted than speculations of mass suicide. Koresh had said he would come out. Eventually. It was those on the government's side who offered mass suicide as a possible outcome.

Even with my fear of a government-armed press, I congratulate SPJ on attempting what for some is the unthinkable: getting clear on when journalists have done their job well and when they have done it badly. There's no better way I know to convince the profession that newspeople share a common ethic.

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