

## Family Ties: A Case Study of Coverage of Families and Friends During the Hijacking of TWA Flight 847

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**Abstract** *When U.S. citizens are held hostage in a foreign land, U.S. journalists have problems making the story meaningful for their readers. The hostages are usually not accessible. The political causes are far too complex to translate well into 90-second nightly news stories or 20-inch newspaper articles. Friends and families of the hostages provide journalists with a way for focusing on the human element of the story. This case study of the 1985 hijacking of TWA 847 illustrates how such a focus can lead to exploitation of friends and family to manipulation of news media.*

The hijacking of TWA Flt. 847 by Lebanese Shiite Moslems on June 14, 1985, was a high-profile news event. Between June 14 and July 3, the *New York Times* published over 2,500 column inches on the hijacking. In addition, the *Times* published 105 single photos and three photo essays relating to the event. The three major television networks devoted a total of between 4 and 5 hours of their nightly newscasts to the hijacking during this period, based on information from Vanderbilt University's Television News Archive. If one were to add special bulletins, morning talk shows, ABC News' *Nightline* show coverage, and other specials, total television time would be much higher.

The friends and families of the hostages were an important part of the coverage, providing the focus of 13 percent of the *New York Times*' print coverage and 23 percent of the published photographs. Forty-seven percent of CBS's nightly news coverage of the hijacking contained footage of friends and families, compared to 30 percent for ABC and 23 percent for NBC.

### Special Considerations

Conversations with hostages, relatives, journalists, and government officials indicated that just as the coverage of the terrorists poses special problems for journalists, so too does the coverage of the families and friends of those being held hostage. The family and friends are important because "you can't get to the people who are kidnapped," said *Boston Globe* reporter Ellen Bartlett. The relatives have the information that journalists need so that they can provide full descriptions of the hostages. Bartlett described the relationships among media and hostages' families as symbiotic. "You can't write a story without somebody to interview . . . and they were willing to talk so that they could continue to bring attention to their plight."<sup>1</sup>

"We are obviously not going to have direct access to the hostages," said Dan Rae, reporter from WBZ-TV, Boston's NBC affiliate. "The people most affected in these situations are the families. I think it is important to see how an international story affects Bostonians." In return, Rae said that the reporters have something to offer the families. "On some occasions, we can offer some solace, and even some counsel. We can provide them some support."<sup>2</sup>

Jill Brown, whose husband was among the hostages, allowed the press to share much of her experience. "I was terrified. I was crying. I was sad. I was happy. That was real. If they wanted to show that, that was all right with me," Brown said.<sup>3</sup>

However, some the hostages' families preferred not to talk to reporters. Prior to the hijacking, Terry Swack had been traveling with her friend, Stuart Darsch. She had returned home early, but Darsch was on TWA 847. She decided, along with Darsch's family, not to talk to the media, "for our own protection and, for the most part, Stuart's protection. We knew they were getting the news over there. . . . We didn't want them for any reason to single out Stuart. I didn't want them to think he was rich or important."<sup>4</sup>

Darsch's brother, Gerald, was also concerned about the effects his interviews might have on his brother's safety. He said, "At first, I tried to keep my involvement in the thing as minimal as possible. . . . One reason is that I work for the Department of Defense and I didn't think that would do my brother any good at all if that were to become public."<sup>5</sup>

Darsch said he made his concern clear to journalists who were successful in locating him and was pleased that they respected his request not to reveal his governmental connection. However, one local television station showed his brother's home on a news segment, including the address. "I thought that was a little ridiculous," said Darsch. "It was an open invitation for anyone who thought they could do a little shopping. I called the station and told them I didn't think it was in very good taste. They told me that they would not broadcast it again and they didn't."

Deborah Toga was on TWA Flt. 847 but was among those released early. She returned to her in-laws' home outside Boston to wait for the release of her husband, Arthur. Toga wanted nothing to do with the media. "We decided not to talk to the media because the only question they would ask was, 'How do you feel?' That was stupid to me. . . . If I thought I could get any message across to help him or anybody else get released I would have been willing to say that." Toga said that the media didn't easily take no for an answer. "They would come to the house at all hours of the day and night. They would call constantly. . . . I was out taking a walk one day and someone from a news station followed me in a van for a block trying to convince me to talk to them about how I felt."<sup>6</sup>

Lee Hockstader, a reporter who wrote a "friends and family" story for the *Washington Post*, believes that it is important to cover the relatives because, as he said, "There is a national interest involved here." In addition, he stated, "I think that one of the fundamental tenets of journalism is explaining to a great mass of people who are reading the paper what other people are doing and what's happening to other people. . . . It's a tradition in journalism and simply a response to natural human emotion to want to know how those other people felt about what happened to them or their friends."<sup>7</sup>

Bartlett said she didn't feel comfortable approaching the relatives, but did so because their feelings were "part of the story." "There's something gruesome about this whole business of emotion," she said, "the recording of every tear. It may not be so bad when there's one reporter there, but when thirty people are covering it, it becomes gruesome."<sup>8</sup>

The recording of feelings became most gruesome when the press had confirmation of the identity of the one hostage killed during the incident before the victim's family had that information. Cameras were set up outside Rob Stethem's home in Waldorf, Maryland, hours before Navy officials arrived to tell Mr. and Mrs. Richard Stethem that their son had been killed. Cameras recorded the delegation's walk to the door and the entrance into the Stethem home. As the officers left the home, they walked into an impromptu

press conference on the front lawn where they relayed the message they had given to the family for the viewing audience.<sup>9</sup>

"When you hear that it's your son from the media before you hear it from the Department of Defense, it's unbelievable," said Mrs. Stethem, according to the press reports.<sup>10</sup>

Rae said that although the presence of cameras outside the relatives' doors provides people "the chance to emote about what's going on, it's still something of an intrusion, even if they open the door willingly. . . . I think that if you're set up outside a family home and the family comes to you and says, 'Look, we really would like you to leave,' I don't think you have any right at that point to stick around. They aren't public officials. They have been thrust into a crisis as a coincidence of a travel schedule or whatever."<sup>11</sup>

"I refuse to go bang on doors at a time like that," said *New York Times* reporter Andrew Malcolm. However, he added, "The problem comes in when the sensitive people who don't go banging on doors go home and some obnoxious guy goes to the door. To get rid of him, the family talks to him and then the sensitive guy gets his butt reamed in the morning because he doesn't have the story."<sup>12</sup>

### Controlling the Media

When Jerry Kautz of Algonquin, Illinois, watched his fellow parishioners taking communion "with a minicam shoved in their faces," he decided to set some rules including allowing only pool coverage during church services and setting off some areas as off limits.<sup>13</sup> Friends and families in Algonquin and elsewhere found that not only could they control the journalistic "feeding frenzy," but they could use the appetite for news as a way of meeting their own agendas.

Jerry Kautz was returning home to Algonquin from a business trip when TWA Flt. 847 was hijacked. More than twenty parishioners from his own St. Margaret Mary's Catholic Church and surrounding parishes were on the plane. They were returning from a tour of the Holy Land led by three priests, including St. Margaret Mary's pastor, Father William McDonnell. Kautz dropped his suitcases at home and went to the church to see if he could help. "It was a zoo," said Kautz. "We have a large parish and large grounds, a huge parking lot and empty fields around that. They were actually landing helicopters there."<sup>14</sup>

Kautz decided to take a leave of absence from his company so that he could share coordination of press coverage of the hostages' friends and families with Craig Sundstedt, a vacationing school district administrator. Kautz and Sundstedt set up rules for the media. "No one could get to the families unless they went through Craig," said Kautz. "Whenever we didn't tell them what they should or shouldn't do, they did what they wanted," said Sundstedt. "But, when we told them, 'You'll stay in this area, don't go anywhere else,' then they did just that. I was amazed that you could keep them in place with just a piece of tape on the floor."<sup>15</sup>

Unlike the other area parishes, which refused to cooperate with the media, Kautz and Sundstedt sought ways to simultaneously meet the media's and the community's needs. "Our school was empty (since it was summer)," said Kautz, "so we gave each network a schoolroom and I called the telephone company. They set up phone lines for the press, so we had a little media center set up in the school."<sup>16</sup>

"We couldn't bury our heads," said Sundstedt. From this point of view, the town had an obligation both to be part of the news and to control the news coverage.<sup>17</sup> Kautz said that they made a decision to make sure that the world saw what the parish was really like. "We made a decision to show the world that we're concerned and that we're not

just going to sit around sniffing and crying or wringing our hands. We're praying, but trying to cooperate," said Kautz.<sup>18</sup>

"We wanted to present a legitimate image of church life, which so often is difficult to come by in the media," said Father Bob Garrity, associate pastor at St. Margaret Mary. He saw the media attention on the parish as a way to offset some of the "oddball" images of churches that have been portrayed by the media. The families also wanted to present an image of trying to understand the political issues behind the hijacking in the hopes that their attempt at understanding "might get through the media (to the terrorists) and enhance the chances of getting their relatives home," said Garrity.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the hostage relative who received the most media attention was the one who most actively sought that attention—Bostonian Axel Traugott. Traugott, brother of hostage Ralph Traugott, believed that the press wanted "to exploit the emotional state" of the friends and families because "that sells papers and creates ratings." He was willing to meet this media need because he was meeting his own needs as well. He stated, "My feelings and the feelings of many members of my family were that we should focus as much public attention as possible on the hostage situation. . . . We thought the government would do its best to ignore what was going on to hide it from the public."<sup>20</sup>

As long as someone from the press was willing to listen, he was available for interviews twenty-four hours a day. Traugott opened his home to reporters. "When they came up here, they were fed, offered something to drink." Traugott said that he treated the reporters as guests. "In many other situations, they were told to go away or stand outside and maybe someone would come out to talk with them."<sup>21</sup>

"It's very obvious that we have lost a great deal of respect in the Middle East not only as a military force, but as human beings," said Traugott in an interview for the *Boston Globe*. "I think we need to learn more about the people and understand them, and I think we can all coexist, rather than automatically putting Israel at the top of the list."<sup>22</sup>

Traugott said he disagreed with Ronald Reagan's handling of the hostage crisis and with his foreign policy in general. The media gave him the opportunity to let his opinion be known. "I have the right to free speech and I'm going to utilize that right any opportunity I have."<sup>23</sup>

Reporter Rae termed Traugott an "outspoken critic" of the Reagan administration.<sup>24</sup> Bartlett said that Traugott was "almost too keenly aware of the fact that people were writing down every word he said. I think he manipulated that in some ways."<sup>25</sup>

Traugott recommends to other families and friends that "rather than allow the media to manipulate you, you have to manipulate interviewers." He said he learned "when you have something you want to say, you want to deal with a live show as much as possible. . . . the thing to do is to ignore the man's questions. . . . say what you are going to say. You have twenty seconds before they try to interrupt you. . . . Many times if you are articulate enough about what you are saying and make an interesting enough point, there will be a follow-up question to your statement and not to what was originally asked."<sup>26</sup>

Allison Davis, a reporter for NBC's *Today Show*, said, "Axel clearly knew how to use the media. I felt my job was to minimize that, not to allow him a forum for his political beliefs. . . . I tried not to allow him the opportunity to use us as he wanted to."<sup>27</sup>

### Impact and Consequences

Perhaps the coverage that potentially had the greatest impact was a quote included in an early story published by the *Miami Herald*. After the hijacking was announced, the

family of Michael Brown of Miami, Florida, tried to find out if Brown was on the plane. When TWA would not confirm, Leah Abramson, Brown's aunt, called the *Herald*. "She called and said who she was," said her son, Bruce Abramson, "and they said they would get back to her."<sup>28</sup>

Jeff Leen, a reporter from the *Herald*, called back later that day. He confirmed that, based on the newspaper's information, Brown was on TWA Flt. 847.<sup>29</sup> Abramson said that although his mother knew she was speaking to someone from the paper, she didn't know she was speaking for publication.

At the time when the terrorists were reportedly attempting to separate Jewish passengers from those who were not Jewish, Leen quoted Leah Abramson as follows: "I'm praying. . . . We're Jewish but Michael doesn't look Jewish, thank God. I just hope they don't hurt him. That's what worries me. Thank God, in this country we don't have to put religion on our passports."

"Not only did she have no idea that she was talking to a reporter," said Bruce Abramson, "but she also told him in a way that said, 'Thank goodness it's a secret.'"<sup>30</sup>

"There was no decision about whether we should keep this in or take it out," said Leen. "It went through about three editors and everyone just thought it was a good strong quote." However, Leen said after the story ran, he did think about the effect of running that quote. "If I had known it would have gotten to the terrorists and they would have translated it and found out that the guy was Jewish and took this guy out and shot him, would I have printed it? The answer would be no. In this case, there was probably a 95 percent chance it would never get to them and a 5 percent chance that it would."<sup>31</sup>

Leen said that he didn't think there was realistically any chance of the quote reaching the hijackers. "They were flying back and forth between different cities and countries. There was no clear sense that this was a prolonged type situation where somebody was in a stationary place." Leen didn't think it was likely that the terrorists would read U.S. newspapers during the siege. "My feeling was that it probably wouldn't have gone overseas."<sup>32</sup>

The quote was picked up by the wire services, however, and found its way into other publications during the next day, including the *Washington Post*. *Post* reporter Spencer Rich included the Abramson quote "according to press reports" in a round-up story on hostage families' reactions. "I didn't give much thought to using it," said Rich, "it was broadcast all over the place. The crucial point was that it was largely known."<sup>33</sup>

No matter how well known information may have been about the hostages, reporters chose which information to include and which to leave out. *Boston Globe* reporter Bartlett deleted information about a hostage's military status.<sup>34</sup> *New York Times* reporter Fox Butterfield chose not to include the fact that some of the hostages were gay.<sup>35</sup> Information concerning military or governmental connections or religion are notably absent from the biographies on the thirty-nine men held that were published during the incident in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

The families and friends of the hostages would not have cooperated with the media at all, if it weren't for the possibility of press coverage having an impact on the government and on the terrorists.

Gerald Darsch believed that relatives' demands to the government "played a role in keeping the momentum going to try to achieve some sort of successful end to the whole thing."<sup>36</sup> Government officials interviewed said that relatives' pleas and demands did not affect the negotiations.<sup>37</sup>

"We felt that the only way we could exert any influence on the process was by generating as much publicity as possible," said Traugott. "Our politicians are quite sen-

sitive to public opinion. . . . if you can sway public opinion in a certain direction, then that has some influence on the process.”

Traugott said that when he spoke to the released hostages in Germany they seemed grateful for the media attention. The hostages “gave us the feeling that creating as much of a stir as we did, by being as public as we were, we did help them get out of there a little sooner,” he said.<sup>38</sup>

Jill Brown said she went on the *Today Show* during the crisis and asked people to call the White House or send telegrams to the president urging him to work on the crisis more quickly. She said that the White House received between 300 and 500 phone calls because of the show. “I thought the more it was in the public eye, the more pressure government might feel to end this quickly,” she said.<sup>39</sup>

Although it may be comforting to the friends and families that someone is listening through the press, said Mike Burch, who was then a spokesman for the Pentagon, “the government has to do what needs to be done regardless of the press. . . . Once you come up with a plan of action within the diplomatic arena, you can’t be jerked around by the press, or shouldn’t be.”<sup>40</sup>

Ed DeJerejian, who was deputy press secretary at the State Department during the hijacking, said that any pressure from the relatives was irrelevant because “any administration is going to do anything possible to release American hostages.”<sup>41</sup>

## Special Favors

“[The friends and families] are granting interviews right and left—live, or taped, or over the telephone—for one reason,” wrote Ellen Bartlett in a piece written for the *Boston Globe*. “They want their loved ones released, and they believe one key to speeding up the process is publicity. . . . And local and national news organizations have been more than willing to accommodate, flooding families’ homes with telephone calls, haunting their neighborhoods. Some have gone even further and are offering private viewing of taped interviews with the hostages, transportation, even hotel rooms, to family members in an effort to lighten their load, and maybe at the same time get a scoop on what one television producer described as the ‘nation’s hottest story.’”<sup>42</sup>

Amid charges among all the networks that each was, in some way, “paying for the news,” the most visible media reaction occurred when NBC flew Terry Swack, Gerald Darsch, and Axel and Susan Traugott to Germany a day before the hostages left Damascus.

Fox Butterfield wrote in the *New York Times*, “Mr. Traugott and the others had insisted earlier in the flight that they agreed to let NBC pay their airfares and hotel bills only on the condition that they be free to talk to other news organizations. But once the four checked into the Frankfurt Sheraton Hotel, situated adjacent to the air terminal, they virtually disappeared. They were put in rooms not registered in their names, and NBC representatives declined all queries about where they were.”<sup>43</sup>

Swack, Darsch, and Axel Traugott denied that they were hidden from other news organizations. Said Swack, “The flight we went over on was in the middle of the night and it was all media people. . . . All night long they were asking us questions. . . . Finally we got to the airport and there’s a hoard of reporters asking, ‘What do you think? How do you feel?’ . . . We said we had nothing to say.”<sup>44</sup>

“One guy (a journalist) accused us of vacationing, of taking a free ride from the *Today Show*,” said Traugott. “All we wanted was to get to the hotel, get something to

eat, and try to get some sleep." He said that he and the other relatives asked NBC to put them in a room under assumed names so that they wouldn't be bothered.<sup>45</sup>

"They were not protecting them from NBC," said Alex Jones. "Clearly there was self-interest for the family. They got somebody to pay their airfare and they didn't have to wrestle with the press. The question, seems to me, is who's kidding whom about what's going on here?"<sup>46</sup>

Allison Davis, of the *Today Show*, said that the show normally pays guests' airfares and hotel. "We didn't pay for them to come on the show in Frankfurt. We didn't do anything out of the ordinary." Davis said that, in addition, the four were not under any obligation to NBC or to the *Today Show*. They were free to speak with whomever they wished.<sup>47</sup>

"NBC protected us from totally unreasonable reporters, people who didn't want us to sleep, people who just wanted to be with us twenty-four hours a day and watch us agonize," said Traugott.<sup>48</sup>

"We had some spirited discussions with the NBC personnel over access to them," said Rae. "I remember NBC saying 'All we want is for these people to have some peace and quiet,' but they were using that to keep these people to themselves."<sup>49</sup>

The competition among reporters attempting to get interviews from the four grew as the day went on. "Some women from CBS got hold of a piece of NBC stationery and wrote some kind of note to us saying that we should call her," said Swack.<sup>50</sup>

Traugott said that other reporters tried to trick them into interviews. "We actually had one guy in an elevator at the hotel tell us that he just came from his newsroom and that there was a new development. If we gave him an interview, he would tell us what the new development was."<sup>51</sup>

Allison Davis said she will never forgive or forget that scene in the elevator. "It was a CBS reporter. He said, 'Are you the family of the hostages?' and they said, 'Yes.' And he said, 'I'll tell you the latest about your family members if you give us an interview.' I called that boy everything but the child of God because I was so embarrassed for my profession. And I almost choked him. I couldn't understand how he could do that."<sup>52</sup>

Rae recalls networks trying to trick hostages' relatives and the other networks for the family interviews during the Iranian hostage-taking. "It's a stupid, malicious game played on people when emotional capacities are extended. The competition at that point is just immoral," he said.<sup>53</sup>

Swack did appear on the *Today Show* with released hostage Stuart Darsch. Brother Gerald Darsch chose not to appear. Traugott appeared on the *Today Show* and the other morning shows as well.

Deborah Toga paid for her own ticket to Germany to meet her husband because, as she says, "I didn't want to be used." She said she had discovered early in the crisis that media expected favors to be repaid. "When I was released in France, I met a woman from the *Today Show* who wanted to interview me. I said, 'No,' and she said, 'Let me see if I can get some current information for you.' She called me with a few things, nothing major. When I got back to Boston, she called my mother-in-law and said, 'I helped her in France and I want her to come on the *Today Show*.' "

## Acknowledgment

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## Notes

Research for this case study included:

- (1) analysis of the *New York Times*, June 14–July 3, 1985
- (2) analysis of video footage from ABC, CBS, and NBC relating to coverage of the families of TWA 847 hostages as provided by the Vanderbilt Television News Archives, Vanderbilt University
- (3) analysis of selected articles from the *Boston Globe*, *Miami Herald*, and the *Washington Post*, and
- (4) interviews with 58 principals—government officials, hostages, hostage family and friends, print and electronic news journalists and executives—between December 1 and December 23, 1986.
  1. Telephone interview with Ellen Bartlett, reporter, *Boston Globe*, December 18, 1986.
  2. Telephone interview with Dan Rae, reporter, WBZ-TV, Boston, December 18, 1986.
  3. Telephone interview with Jill Brown, spouse of hostage, December 20, 1986.
  4. Telephone interview with Terry Swack, girlfriend of hostage, December 11, 1986.
  5. Telephone interview with Gerald Darsch, brother of hostage, December 16, 1986.
  6. Telephone interview with Deborah Toga, hostage and spouse of hostage, December 12, 1986.
  7. Telephone interview with Lee Hockstader, reporter, the *Washington Post*, December 19, 1986.
  8. Interview, Bartlett.
  9. Video clips, Vanderbilt Television News Archives.
  10. *Washington Post*, June 23, 1985, p. A20, "Coverage of Hijacking Echoes Iran Hostage Crisis."
  11. Interview, Rae.
  12. Telephone interview with Andrew Malcolm, reporter, *New York Times*, December 16, 1986.
  13. Telephone interview with Jerry Kautz, media representative for Algonquin, Illinois, during crisis, December 17, 1986.
  14. Interview, Kautz.
  15. Telephone interview with Craig Sundstedt, media representative for Algonquin, Illinois, during crisis, December 17, 1986.
  16. Interview, Kautz.
  17. Interview, Sundstedt.
  18. Interview, Kautz.
  19. Telephone interview with Father Bob Garrity, associate pastor for St. Margaret Mary's Catholic Church, Algonquin, Illinois, December 10, 1986.
  20. Telephone interview with Axel Traugott, brother of hostage, December 21, 1986.
  21. Interview, Traugott.
  22. *Boston Globe*, April 14, 1985, p. 3, "U.S. Policy Frustrating, Families Say."
  23. Interview, Traugott.
  24. Interview, Rae.
  25. Interview, Bartlett.
  26. Interview, Traugott.
  27. Telephone interview with Allison Davis, reporter for NBC's *Today Show*, December 19, 1986.
  28. Telephone interview with Bruce Abramson, cousin of hostage, December 18, 1986.
  29. Telephone interview with Jeff Leen, reporter for the *Miami Herald*, December 18, 1986.
  30. Interview, Abramson.
  31. Interview, Leen.
  32. Interview, Leen.



33. Telephone interview with Spencer Rich, reporter for the *Washington Post*, December 17, 1986.
34. Interview, Bartlett.
35. Telephone interview with Fox Butterfield, reporter for the *New York Times*, December 10, 1986.
36. Interviews with Michael Burch, then Pentagon spokesman; Ed DeJerejian, then State Department deputy press secretary; David Noble, then member of the State Department crisis task force; and an official close to the National Security Council who asked not to be identified.
37. Interview, Darsch.
38. Interview, Traugott.
39. Interview, Brown.
40. Telephone interview with Michael Burch, then Pentagon spokesman, December 16, 1986.
41. Telephone interview with Ed DeJerejian, then State Department press secretary, December 19, 1986.
42. The *Boston Globe*, June 16, 1985, p. 14, "Families Are Saying 'Yes' to Media."
43. The *New York Times*, July 1, 1985, p. A9, "Loved Ones Gathering in Germany for Reunion."
44. Interview, Swack.
45. Interview, Traugott.
46. Telephone interview with Alex Jones, *New York Times* reporter, December 11, 1986.
47. Interview, Davis.
48. Interview, Traugott.
49. Interview, Rae.
50. Interview, Swack.
51. Interview, Traugott.
52. Interview, Davis.
53. Interview, Rae.
54. Interview, Toga.

