



DANIEL MORGAN GRADUATE SCHOOL  
*of*  
NATIONAL SECURITY

*presents*

“National Security and the Media”

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There are thousands of terror attacks every single day. Many of those terror attacks are perpetrated by people and organizations that are most interested in you as a person. They're interested in affecting what you think, what you do, how you feel. The goal of many of these thousands of terror attacks is to try and shape global policy. Try to shape diplomatic thinking. Try to shape what the leadership of the world does.

And the bottom line of it is that it's designed to scare people. It's designed to paralyze people. Hundreds of these attacks are physical, kinetic attacks. But there are others— many, many more—that take place in the cyber domain. There are many of these attacks that take place through word games that we often hear about in the diplomatic arena. And we often hear military strongmen from places shaking their fists and saying things.

This is all terrorism. It all terrifies people. It all has an impact on the way in which people engage and in the way in which people live their lives. It impacts the hopes and dreams that people have. It does so in an ever more disturbing way. That's what I want to talk to you about: the pace of change and how that impacts terrorism and national security and how that impacts reporting on those elements.

Back in the 1990s, there was something called Moore's law. Moore's Law talked about basically the turnover of technology being every couple of years. I've said this, and some of you in this room have heard me say it before, that I think now where we are in society, that turnover is more like every three months or so. And so, here's how it impacts us.

Usually every night before bed I go out just for a few minutes on the patio to kind of decompress and check out what's going on, and kind of let things go before going to bed. About two years ago, I suddenly realized that for a few months the moon had been full, every night. Short of being characterized as an absolute nut, I could not figure out why that was the case. Every single time I looked up, the moon was full. Did anybody else in here know that? Has anybody else noticed that? Certain times of the year?

Okay, well here's what happened. It's called an iPhone and it's called a tablet. It's called a job. It's called a family, it's called busy, and it's called forgetting to look up to see where the moon is. And the reason that I noticed the moon was because the moon was actually out calling me. You know when the moon is full and bright, it actually is a nighttime sun. It casts shadows, you actually see it. You look up and you notice it. Well, the problem was that I had been so caught up in my thoughts and my thinking that the

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whole idea behind decompressing had gone out the window. I had forgotten to do it. Then I realized that I hadn't been looking up, that I actually noticed the moon, that the moon was full.

So that made me think about why I am doing this. I was doing it because I was so busy. I was so caught up in everything that I was doing that I had forgotten the objective. This is what's happening in many cases around the world when it comes to national security events right now. If you pull your smart phone out of your pocket or purse or wherever you keep it, take a look at it, you'll find probably dozens of applications on it. Those applications make you productive, they make you efficient, they keep you in communication and in touch with people, and they actually make you a marketable, very productive target in an economical point of view.

Terrorists and cyber-hackers have these too. Bad criminals, drug smugglers, human smugglers, everybody has one.

So, with Moore's Law going from two years to every three months, what's happened is this turnover in technology has been so great, so fast. Not only has it made folks like me who are supposed to spend time focusing on issues and keeping track of certain details and data. Not only has it made folks like me lose track of things and forget about the focus; but what it's done is it's given these bad people a leg up on many of us because we're unaware of what's going on.

So more terror attacks are happening, worse terror attacks are happening; and it's going to get worse as days pass, as each day continues to pass, as each month passes because the speed of change is not only picking up now, but it's going to continue. So the bottom line is more bad things are going to happen faster because of the times in which we live. If you look back at last week, can you remember what you did? Look back at the week before, can you remember where you were? Okay, maybe if you can, go back another month. Where were you? What did you do? And how clear is that in your memory? Bottom line on it is that we are inundated by all sorts of information. Information and the speed of change is part of the reason why the national security scene is becoming so complicated for the U.S.

And to take this to the next step, as a journalist the objective for me is to act as a surrogate for the public, you all know that. The public can't be everywhere it needs to be, so as journalists it is our job to gather information, analyze it, and report it. We have to keep in mind in this era, when everything that is coming at you seems like news, breaking news stamped all over everything, we have to keep in mind that that is not really news. News is not what people are talking about, from my perspective and by the people that I've been taught by. News is what people *don't* know.

It is our job as journalists to go find it. To take a look at the facts, sort them out, organize them, and disseminate them to you, the public, in a fashion in which you can actually digest it and make your own decision on what you think about it. That's what news is. It's becoming more and more complicated to separate it and sort it out because of all of the information that is coming from these kinds of devices and this kind of technology which terrorists and all kinds of other people are beginning to use as well. And they're actually using some of the same tools we use to be more productive in terms of communications, and in terms of learning; and for all of these good things, i.e. social media, they're using them for very bad things. We know why, we know how. Recruiting other people to do bad things, the same way we do a shout out to our friends on Facebook or on Twitter; they're using the same tool to essentially raise up a new generation of people to follow in the footsteps that they want to create.

We're talking mostly terrorism right now, but that's not the only issue. National security is far broader than that. There's a whole of government that has to be considered when you talk about national security.

So, there is a tug and a pull on reporters every day to figure out what to report. How do you report? How do you decide? Do you choose to report something or are you forced to report?

It used to be a time where there was more choosing. Now there's a whole lot more forcing. The forcing comes in from the fact that we're so closer together now because of technology, because of these platforms, because of the speed of change, more things are happening that demand us report them every day. Again, look at the breaking news thing. Every time you look at any particular network, listen to any particular radio station, there is breaking news going on. So we're having to make the decision on what to do with that information. How do we do that?

Well, it's more and more difficult. Everything is changing. There are younger people that are integrating our news organizations, and a lot of the 50-somethings and 60-somethings and 70-somethings are leaving. A lot of them decided to do that some years ago because they didn't want to be involved in what this whole new era of journalism was going to be about. People didn't want to be involved in the complications of a new era of journalism.

And national security reporting, and every other aspect of journalism, took a hit when we lost some of those older folks. Many of them threw the keys into the room of some of the younger folks and said, "Okay, you drive." And the other people were saying, "Well, how do I drive? And where am I driving to?" These are the kinds of questions that we're now just starting to get a handle on. But when it comes to national security, you don't really have time to do that. Again, because of the pace of change.

I want to tell you a little bit about my view, about why national security reporters have an extra burden and how to deal with that burden. Credentials are important. Reputations, as you all know, play a key role and arguably the success of everyone, especially a journalist. Fairness, objectivity, and trustworthiness are big factors when establishing yourself as a good journalist. There are some other key factors: the ability to listen to all sides of the story. I think it was Mark Twain that said, "There are three sides to a story, your side, his side, and then there's the truth in between." One former boss used to always tell me that 50 percent of the people are not going to like what you say and 50 percent of the people are going to like it most likely. If that's the case, you've done your job. When everyone either hates or everyone likes what you do, then you have a problem. What that means is you're one sided. The bottom line on it is that it is important to try and remain neutral on issues and do it, collect the information, and report on the information in a fair way.

What I'm going to do now is tell you how I cover national security. Each day at about five o'clock or so, regardless of where I am, I wake up. Before 5:30, my feet are on the floor and I am at work. What I do is I start in Asia and I work the time zones back to the West. I engage with contacts in each time zone or each approximate time zone to make sure I understand what's taking place or what's happening in every major region of the world. Some of those really small places it's just impossible to figure, but you can get a good idea. It's taken a while to develop these kinds of abilities and sources as well, but it is important to do. Why? Because when I get to the office, I want to be able to answer any question of any of the executives or any of the editors or any of my coworkers have with relationship to national security issues around the world. So every day it is important to me that I know what is going on everywhere in some form or in some measure. As a reporter that's gotten harder and harder to do because again of the speed of the world.

But there's another element that I think is very, very dangerous that's happening right now. Several months ago, I wrote an article for the Radio Television Digital News Association and it was about reporters and spokespeople. A report came out on the Hill about a specific topic related to national security. I immediately in working on it wanted to hear the other side. So I reached out to a spokesperson

for a particular agency, organization. This person, when I reached out, referred me to another news organization. My response was, and I wrote this down so I wouldn't get it wrong, "I am not an aggregator, I am a journalist. The comments that you've referred me to don't address what I asked. I want you to understand that this is an opportunity for you to say what you have to say, not someone else saying to me what they think someone else said."

Bottom line, this is my opportunity to do the job that I get paid to do. So what I'm saying to you is that there are people out there who quite often—and it happens more and more, not just government people, but people from all walks of life—don't necessarily want you to tell their story in the way that a good journalist is supposed to tell it. There are scenarios where people want to push an agenda. It's our job as journalists to push back on that. It has gotten harder and harder to do that because of this "if you don't like what I have to say, I will destroy you" mentality that seems to be catching on in certain areas of the world. Unfortunately, there are people in my business that do that. If I report something that you don't like, and you speak out against what I said, I'm going to dig and find some dirt on you and I'm going to drive you into the ground. And that seems to be a problem that has grown up in this country and around the world in the last few years with this proliferation of media devices, where everyone has a voice, and everyone has the ability to be bigger and wider and stronger and more. It's power. What's happened is that some people have abused that power.

As a journalist it is something that I can never stop thinking about. I'm in awe of the power that we as journalists have, but I'm also afraid of it. There are folks out there that want to tell you, "Okay, if you want to tell my story, this is what you can say. You can't say anything else, and if you do, you can't say you got it from me." The bottom line is that people want to be able to say what they want to say. And that's okay but I as a journalist am obligated to push back in situations like that. I am obligated to get to the heart and bottom of things that people don't want other folks to know about.

Sometimes there can be risk. I do recall in the early days of my journalism career, there was a gentleman that actually worked for a government organization in development. It turned out that he was involved in some shady dealings. I, as a young person, had never broken a story, had never had a big scoop. Well it turns out that this was a scoop. What happened I wasn't prepared for. When I broke the story the next day, the FBI arrested this guy and he ended up going to prison. That was something I wasn't prepared for, even though I knew that was a possibility. So as I've grown older and continued to work in this business, I've recognized that there is risk.

And more and more, situations like the one where I went to this government organization and was essentially told to go talk to another media to get my answers, suggested that they felt okay making this media organization an extension of this government organization, which everyone in this room knows that that does not happen. That is just not cool. That is not the way it's supposed to go. When you tell your story, you want to be able to tell your story to an audience that is going to listen to what you have to say. That's the objective that I as a national security reporter strive for every day. We're seeing more and more situations where people are becoming tighter on information, they're trying to manipulate information, they're trying to manipulate you, and like I said a few minutes ago, quite often what we see is if you do this I will destroy you. That mentality is out there and it's a very serious and dangerous thing.

I've been talking to you about the U.S. Looking at where we are now, we the U.S. have our own problems, but when you look at the problems of other places around the world, they are way worse. China for example, Afghanistan, Pakistan—I have colleagues in all of these places who are under pressure like never before to not do their jobs for fear that they might be rounded up. I've been to Africa probably more than any other continent. Every day journalists are rounded up, they're beaten, and in many cases they're

killed, disappeared. Governments feel emboldened to do what is necessary to protect their “national security secrets.”

The risk of being a national security journalist is increased exponentially in the last decade or so. So how do we confront that and how do we adjust to that? I argue what is necessary to do as a journalist is *more*. More reporting, more traveling, more stories that expose these issues and problems, and doing it with a sound mind, doing it with a brave heart, and doing it in a way in which you know that at the end of the day you can go to sleep. You can rest well and rest with yourself. Because where we are now, looking at the technology that’s out there, the speed of change, the mindset of people around the world, the set of problems that each and every country is facing and this set of problems which grows every day, the national security journalist is in a different place than he or she was twelve years ago when I first got into this space.

Now, here’s the good news. There are many opportunities to make a difference in national security and I want to end this with a couple small stories, something brief that will hopefully give you a sense of what you can do and how you can do it. How this opportunity to tell stories is much more readily available than a couple of years ago.

Several weeks ago, actually back in February, I was traveling through an airport in Africa, the fourth largest airport on the continent. I happened to notice a man in a restroom take a wad of money out of his pocket. He handed this wad of money to a police officer who was in uniform with a gun and the whole bit. There was never a word spoken, they didn’t look at each other, they went their separate ways, I followed them out the door to make sure I saw what I thought I saw. What I thought I saw made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Each time I think about it the same thing happens.

What I actually saw was an act of bribery. Corruption. This took place a week before a major terrorism cell was broken up just miles away from this particular airport. It also happened a week before it turned out that this particular terror cell had been operating with chemicals that they had acquired from Libya to create mustard gas. I’ve been told within the last week or so the plan was to export this to Europe to launch chemical attacks in Europe. A skip, hop, and a jump from Northern Morocco which is where this took place to get to Europe.

So what happened was I happened to be traveling, by a stroke of luck, with one of your colleagues who happened to witness the same thing. As a journalist, it’s hard for me to tell that story because I’m at the center and I never want to be at the center of the story. But what I’d like to be is at the center of the storytelling.

In this particular case I was so fortunate that someone actually saw this incident because he immediately was able to connect the dots between what was going on in that particular airport and something that had happened in Mogadishu several weeks before where a terrorist with a laptop with a bomb in it was blown out of an airplane at 11,000 feet because he had detonated his explosives at too low of an altitude to destroy the plane at 30,000+ feet which he had been instructed to do by the Al-Shabaab organization for which he was working. There was also another situation last year over the Sinai in Egypt, Sharm el Sheikh Airport, where a Russian jetliner was blown out of the sky by an individual effort that had seen an explosive placed on the plane.

Money changing hands between security and people who want these activities to happen was at the center of all three. I can’t say that that was actually something leading up to a terror attack but what I do know is that the environment was there. If an officer takes money from a stranger for whatever reason in public in front of people, clearly there is a climate there. Nobody even blinked except me and one of your

colleagues. But the bottom line on it is that when that kind of climate exists, the kind of climate that existed in Mogadishu and in el Sheikh, it can certainly set the stage for that and much worse things to happen.

Another colleague of yours who works for a foreign country spoke to me several days ago about the situation that's going on in Europe. This individual talked about the ability to move in the shadows, to use money as a vehicle. To use currency, different types of currency, as a vehicle is a problem for them. There's great concern in the intelligence community, not just here but around the world, that this type of bribery and corruption takes place.

This story that I'm telling you, again, is about the time we live in, the difficulty that we live in. I'm so happy that the individual that was there saw it and gave me permission to tell the story, which I'm going to do, we will be doing it soon. It is also an opportunity to show you, everyone that is here and everyone that might be able to view this at some point, what we're really looking at is a situation where national security journalism has got to grow. It's got to grow in a way that's responsible and it's got to grow in a way in which new people are coming into it well trained, well prepared, and willing to look at what's at stake if you don't do it.

National security journalism is not just for the public, it's also for the national security community. People within the community know that open source reporting is also a huge part of the intelligence pool that the governments around the world pull in because in many cases they don't have eyes and ears in places where a lot of this information comes from. Which is why it makes stories, like the one I talked to you about in that particular airport, all the more important. Which makes all of the stories that we, national security journalists, do all the more important.

And it's all the more important for us to be credible, reputable, trustworthy, objective, diligent, and every day showing up to work well prepared and able to deliver what it is we're expected to do.

