

The Role of Homeland Security Information Bulletins within Emergency Management Organizations

Project: The Role of Homeland Security Information Bulletins within Emergency Management Organizations: A Case Study of Enactment

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Overview:

Homeland security information bulletins from governmental, commercial, and non-governmental providers are an important source of threat information within local emergency management organizations. However, systematic assessment of how these bulletins are received and used by one emergency management organization reveals that *process changes* may enhance the contributions that homeland security information bulletins can make to emergency preparedness.

Interim Findings:

We propose specific process changes to improve the utility of homeland security information bulletins.

1. Emergency managers should make the criteria by which a threat rises to actionable knowledge more transparent, and these criteria could be negotiated on an *organizational* level. Optimal threat assessment and response is to some extent dependent on chance—that is, enacting the right piece of information at the right time. Enactment originates at the individual level and moves to the organizational level. (Within the organization studied, enactment depends heavily on the Emergency Management Coordinator's receipt of bulletins.) That so many of the assumptions about what constitutes an actionable threat remain tacit suggests that, in some cases, powerful local norms could be encouraging groupthink that prevents organizational members from considering threats and responses in novel but productive ways. Making this argument is not to suggest that emergency managers are not acting in good faith. Rather, it is to suggest organizational members come to see the world through the lens of their organizational culture. Challenging, revising, and affirming operating assumptions every now and again can promote enhanced decision making and preparedness.

2. Government producers of homeland security information bulletins should write about threats with *consequences* and *responses* in mind. Threat information is enacted within and across organizations possessing unique contexts, resources, and goals; therefore rarely, if ever, will a threat produce an unequivocal and uniform response. While the threats of dry ice bombs and suicide bombers were enacted within the organization studied, other similar organizations in the region have not prepared for them; the bulletin containing the information may not have been received or read, or

emergency managers may have decided that the threats posed a low risk (#3 proposes ways to align sensemaking and priorities). Research on the role of storytelling within organizations suggests that compelling narratives are useful for getting groups of people to make sense of situations in similar ways. Bulletin producers can use that knowledge to write in a way that enables recipients to imagine the significance of a given threat and also imagine ways to prepare for it.

3. There is a need for institutionalized interaction between bulletin producers and users. The financial and logistical challenges involved in institutionalizing interactions among bulletin producers and users are significant; however, a view of communication that emphasizes message production and dissemination (rather than active reception and response) also hinders collaboration. In absence of fora where stakeholders can come together to discuss information sharing initiatives, technology may provide a partial means of interaction. Enactment first involves noticing and bracketing; therefore, a mechanism to assess whether and when a recipient has noticed and read a homeland security information bulletin—especially an alert—may be useful for determining the adequacy of email “blasts” as a principal risk communication medium. Second, enactment involves selection, i.e., ascribing meaning to a given threat; therefore, including a feedback mechanism within bulletins may encourage active participation instead of passive reception and help align bulletin producer/user understandings. This recommendation is in-line with the Markle Foundation’s 2006 report calling for “robust two-way exchange” between information producers and consumers. Third, review of bulletin content should be included as a routine agenda item in emergency management organizations where it is not already. This may encourage recipients to contribute novel information that could trigger enactments leading to useful assessments and responses. The Los Angeles Terrorism Early Warning Group (TEWG) is widely cited as an organization that has successfully linked bulletin producers and users.

Project Background:

This study investigates the use of email-based homeland security information bulletins within one emergency management organization. Drawing from enactment theory, it employs qualitative research techniques to consider the role of information bulletins in pre-event planning and communication. It thus provides a rare empirical account of the organizational process of enactment by examining how a university-based emergency management organization used these bulletins to help produce and respond to its threat environment.

Method:

The first author conducted a one-year field study of a university-based emergency management organization comprised of about two dozen members (not all of whom regularly attended a monthly planning meeting). Sixty percent of respondents ($n = 15$) reported receiving homeland security information bulletins on a given day or in a given week. Most received an average of two bulletins per week. Participant observation, interviews, and a questionnaire were combined with textual analysis to understand how organizational members made sense of and communicated about unclassified homeland security information within the group and externally to other stakeholders. Triangulation allowed verification of impressions and interpretations.

Future Directions:

Findings from this study inform a larger project currently underway which investigates the relationship between homeland security information sharing and preparedness at the local level.

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