SECURITY AND TRUST: A MEDIA-MEDIATED RELATION

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Abstract: *From a specific perspective, security has both an objective and a subjective side, the later meaning that a community is only safe if its members feel safe. Sir David Omand famously stated that security is "the citizen`s trust that risks concerning their daily lives, either man-made or natural, are adequately managed, so that they are able to be convinced normal life can continue". Their perception, that of a nation`s state of security, is directly related to the security-related perceptions of political decision-makers, security-related perceptions of the citizens and civil society, and to the public reflection of security issues. Starting from these assumptions, I think the media`s role in creating perceptions at society level needs to be further explored, since it can either build or subvert trust in security organizations. There are two sides to this story. In one, the media is the proverbial bad guy¸ with its tendency towards sensationalism, multiplying messages without checking facts and confirming sources, political and economic biases, particularly in undemocratic countries or in developing democracies, where media owners are also involved in other businesses and even in politics. We are also concerned with the lack of security culture displayed by consistent parts of the media. In those cases, media isn`t able to fulfill its role in correctly informing civil society, or that of democracy`s watchdog. We are rather dealing with situation in which it misinforms – willingly or not -, induces or increases panics and hysteria, therefore actually eroding security. And there is also the positive side, in which the media can and sometimes is the good guy, with national security correspondents who understand the delicate lines of the field they are relating about. In this situation, media becomes a promoter of security by its additions to creating a real and valuable security culture. Media is also a good guardian for the democratic values and a valuable investigator, able to identify and reveal deficiencies in organizations dealing with protecting security, as well as able to press them to improve their communication. But this seems to be more a challenge than a constant reality, even in countries with consolidated democracies.*

Keywords: *communication; media; security; trust*

1. INTRODUCTION

There are many aspects and many approaches related to this wider subject of interest - media and security - which has to be seen from both sides or from both perspectives: that of the media and that of the services, as institutions designed to deal with security issues.

In order to be specific from the beginning, it is the basic interest of the media to find and present to the public subjects of interest about a variety of aspects, including those pertaining to national security, which are often the more tempting since the intelligence activity is generally veiled by requirements of secrecy. It is to our mutual benefit and to the general public`s interest that it does so in good faith, with a certain degree of professionalism and significant efforts to genuinely research any topic from credible sources.

Honest media can act as a promoter for policy change, when it investigates thoroughly and actually exposes real systemic problems most bureaucracies tend to have. It can serve as an amplifier of messages the general public and the authorities need to receive, and can generate and consolidate a security culture, without setting out to do so, just by informing honestly and ethically. Media reports are also a big factor in informing the political decision-making process, in which intelligence has lost the status of first and foremost authority some time ago. Media investigations and reports on national security issues are of real interest for intelligence services, too, therefore most democratic agencies have established solid departments dealing with open-source intelligence.

But there are also negative aspects to media reporting on security. Its relation to the security sector is, at best, tense, as, on one side, security works with secrets it doesn`t want outed. American unionist general William Sherman would state, in conditions of war, "I hate newspapermen. They come into camp and pick up their camp rumors and

print them as facts. I regard them as spies, which in truth, they are. If I killed them all there would be news from Hell before breakfast". This is only to brighten the mood with a sarcastic joke, but, in fact, there is another side to the story: in its legitimate enterprise, often - not always - going towards sensationalism, the media can also appeal to different techniques – misinformation disinformation, fabrication, fake news, fake stories. The effort to have a high-impact front page title or a breaking news, and of course, in the end, to make ratings is legitimate and almost normal in our current world, but up to a certain point. We can have a long talk and an ample debate where this point is or where it should be, and what it means to cross the line. Of course, there are legal requirements which ought to define the general limits within which media should act in a manner that is fair to society, in general, but in reality, in many delicate situations it was proven that media – knowingly or unknowingly, willingly or unwillingly - is abusing its role as a fourth power, under the pretext of free press and free speech.

In the real world, we are confronted with different scenarios, from good to terrible ones, which reveal complicated pictures and a variety/full spectrum of implications. Trying to be systematic in my approach, I will emphasize a few of them, which I consider the most relevant, at least from the intelligence practitioner's point of view.

2. FREQUENT SCENARIOS

a. **Honest reporting**. The ideal situation is that in which the media plays by the book, fulfilling its raison d'être. This is the best case-scenario, in which, working with experts and having the necessary know-how, the media is a good guardian for the democratic values, a valuable investigator, able to identify and reveal deficiencies in the activities of the organizations dealing with protecting security. The media is one of the factors that can keep the security sector in check, by publicly signaling what is being done inappropriately or missing in its current endeavors, and promoting positive change.

Some observers of the security enterprise have ranked media as an outside player – therefore active - in the process, alongside others such as academia, think tanks, lobbying groups etc, which witnesses the securitization process and has some instruments to adjust its functioning. Media with well informed, competent, and ethical journalists would fit this positive scenario. And this does not, of course, exclude incisive journalists, since it is a reality that

most bureaucratic institutions tend to not share information voluntarily, instead providing it only if asked.

In this ideal situation, the media has a very positive role, being a valuable contributor to democracy and to a healthy society, an actual "watch dog of democracy", a good observer, sensor, or whistle-blower. It also becomes a promoter of security by its additions to creating a real and valuable security culture and a trustful relationship among the actors involved, including the general public.

In this scenario, based on the media's correct work and valuable information, we can consider the following effects:

- The citizens are well informed and become knowledgeable in the security field, by understanding the basics about the level of risk exposure, the general purpose of security institutions (what they can or can`t do, their obligations and limits, some of the methods they use to achieve their goals). And knowledge is particularly important, as a first essential step for building trust between a society which is based on the social contract, in which citizens agree to be protected by their institutions, for which they, in turn, ensure the upkeep, and the said institutions.

- Ensuring a healthy checks and balances mechanism, also a positive consequence of a media activated to do its job, namely to point out, investigate, and clarify situations and to demand appropriate measures. In this line, the first responders, by default, are the institutions responsible of the field, which have to act accordingly when the situations occur, taking into consideration both the internal public – their employees, and the external one: oversight authorities, customers, partners, the general public / citizens (when possible). At the same time, when media signals irregularities, there is another actor which must intervene: the oversight authorities, specialized committees generally made of politicians which have an institutional task to inquire into intelligence services` work. They must take over and also do their job in order to confirm, primarily, the legality and regularity, whether there were actual abuses related to the subject of investigation. After oversight authorities finish their own, official investigation, they have to inform in a very transparent way the Parliament and the citizens with the inquiry results and advances measures or recommendations.

Note: If any actors involved in this investigation (media, security institutions, and oversight authorities) identifies a possible crime, they are

compelled to inform immediately the law enforcement agencies.

As a **conclusion** at the end of this best-case scenario, in the natural process everybody does its job, playing their role transparently, in a coherent manner, and achieving positive goals, benefiting the greater objective to optimize/enhance security and to protect society, while also fulfilling the media`s role to inform correctly and to guard democracy.

b. **The second situation** that can be readily identified starts from the same premises as the first scenario but, in addition, takes into consideration situations in which the media has gained access - direct or through an intermediate, voluntarily or not - to classified materials or other secret aspects of intelligence and security work: means, methods, plans, operations etc. And, although media has strict rules concerned with protecting their own sources and would, therefore, refuse to divulge them, according to domestic legislation in most democratic states, obtaining, possessing and publishing classified information is illegal. Therefore, we are stepping on shaky ground, on which, from the media`s perspective, the end can be good, but the means - potentially illicit.

Should media organizations decide to publish all or parts of the identified aspects, as it usually happens, in full belief that they are doing it in public service, we can anticipate the following reactions:

b.1 **Legitimate whistle-blowing**. In case the publicized classified aspects are real, allegations are grounded, and illegal or abusive actions or measures are used by security institutions, this should be considered (under those specific circumstances) the right and legitimate thing to do. In any democracy, institutions are expected to work exclusively in the legal framework, even when their activities are concerned with very legitimate and legal objectives of national security interests. For security services, too, the end does not excuse the means.

Note: In their actions, the media are entitled to alert the appropriate responsible bodies, such as law enforcement agencies, oversight committees etc.; resorting to publishing classified information, even in a whistle-blower capacity, should only be a and last resort solution, if and when authorities have failed to take appropriate measures or, worse, have tried to cover up the situation.

Under those circumstances, we can consider the following effects:

- The public is informed about the means and methods used by security institutions and will understand their legal limitations. The very important lessons learned and repeated is that in

democracy the ends, even legal and legitimate ones, don't justify the use of all means and methods.

- The checks and balances mechanism is compelled to admit that its sensors don't work for all situations, and its representatives need to be more proactive in order to better understand the internal mechanism of security institutions and to prevent any similar event. To implement a lessons learned mechanism, this type of media actions can prove extremely useful.

- Security institutions need to understand that, regardless of how difficult the task, nobody can invoke actual national security reasons to defend its inappropriate use of illicit – even though sometimes handy and readily available - means and methods. And the even more important lessons for them is that, when they are caught "red-handed", this comes, alongside potential legal consequences, with a high price in terms of credibility for the institution and its leadership, and credibility is very difficult to restore.

To conclude, in this case, media's activities and reports are of real importance for the public, citizens and democratic societies` health and consolidation, even when doing so creates an apparent damage, by afflicting the credibility of security institutions and their level of trust, thus harming their capacity to fulfill their missions.

b.2 **Unauthorized disclosure of classified information**. In case the classified aspects media uncovers are real, but they point to security institutions making use of legal, legitimate instruments to achieve their legitimate missions, then the media's action of publicizing classified materials or information should be considered illegitimate and, to some extent, potentially illegal, depending on specific circumstances and on particular state legislation. In any democracy, institutions responsible with security matters are allowed by law, in order to perform their missions and achieve their objectives, to secretly use a variety of special means and methods, which may temporarily affect, in special circumstances, the rights and freedom of some citizens. Every country has the legal right to work for the defense and protection of its national security, as well as to promote legitimate objectives of national security interests.

Note: In its enterprises, in this case too, in which it has legitimate suspicions, the media should alert the appropriate responsible bodies, such as law enforcement agencies, oversight committees etc. and also ask for the point of view of the involved security institutions. In case media representatives obtain a reasonable explanation from the

responsible institutions about the potential impact and damage for security, but they nevertheless publish the data they have obtained, they have no legal right and legitimacy to do so.

Nevertheless, in western democracies, where media is a lucrative business, we were shown in many occasions that, with the desire to be the first, to have an exclusivity, to be ahead of competition, unverified information is made public, without further discussions with the "accused" party. News of the security field are rarer, since they come from a field working with secrecy, therefore they become a more valuable commodity, but they are also more prone to have a more significant impact, damaging institutions, people and legitimate security interest.

Under those circumstances, we are dealing with the following consequences:

- The public is informed about specific aspects of the security activity, which will generate and satisfy a false need to know. Reality has shown that normal people / readers will get confused reading this kind of data, mainly because they don't have access to the context, circumstances etc. In this situation, it is very important for people to learn that, in democracy, institutions have to do some of their security-related activities in secret, sometimes with special means and methods.

- The checks and balances mechanism is compelled to clarify the published aspects, and if everything in the security service`s activity is correct and legal, they should support and protect security institutions in the public eye. In reality, in fact, for a variety of reasons, but mainly political ones, oversight authorities are not often inclined to make strong statements in order to protect and support the institutions in charge with security matters.

- Security institutions in this type of scenario have to learn a valuable lesson, that sometimes, regardless of how well they try to prepare, unexpected counterintelligence situations may still occur: leakages, traitors, mistakes and misunderstandings etc. And although, in some cases, they can seriously affect general trust, employee morale, and actual operations, alongside other consequences difficult to assess, security services need to continue their activity, aiming to protect themselves better next time. PR and public communication play a key role in this kind of crisis situations.

In conclusion, despite the importance of the media's activity for the general public and citizens in democratic societies, sometimes, for unreasonable reasons, the media may generate significant vulnerabilities in key security sectors,

which are often exploited by hostile entities, with unpredictable consequences. Needless to say that this also produces a negative impact in the trust relation which needs to exist among security institutions and other partners, including the citizens.

c. **Hidden agenda**. An entirely different situation, in which some media organizations have nothing or very little to do with professional media and its legitimate functions, even with its tendency towards sensationalism, multiplying selective messages without properly checking facts and confirming sources, it that in which media owners are involved in other businesses and in politics, trying to promote their interests by imposing the political agenda. In combination with a general lack of security culture, as displayed by consistent parts of the media, particularly in developing countries, this can greatly impact the security sector. In this case, references to national security issues are, usually (with very few exceptions), presented in an unprofessional manner, with low standards of knowledge and documentation, a lack of coherence, discontinuity, and in a perpetually negative narrative. No or very few resources are dedicated to correctly covering these subjects.

In this situation, the media is not playing a positive role in society and isn`t able to fulfill its role of informing citizens in an objective and honest manner, but rather it is set in the general direction of a small group`s agenda, and can only accidentally perform its task of guarding democracy. In its activities, this kind of media is often looking for a pretext rather than a subject, in order to have a reason to attack and assault the institutions in charge with security. There are cases in which no rules of professional deontology concerning dialogue and communication with the security institutions are observed. In this respect, there is no positive development towards a sustainable security culture. All those circumstances determine or cause a toxic environment, undermining a trust-based relationship among security actors, including citizens, by eroding the credibility of security institutions. Willingly or not, in particular moments, especially in crisis situations, this manner of making press induces or increases panics and hysteria, therefore actually undermining the security enterprise.

Note: Using a full spectrum of techniques, such as false accusations, misinterpretations, misinformation, disinformation, promoting intentionally falsity, partial truths, contradictory reports, distortion by omission of relevant facts, provocations, conspiracy theories, multiplying the

line of attack developed by hostile entities etc., some parts of the media or individuals from media organizations contribute and project a false or distorted image of the security institutions and their activity, with significant impact on their level of credibility. This type of media actions should be considered illegitimate and, in specific and clear circumstances, a significant vulnerability and, to some extent, illegal. We have witnessed numerous such examples, especially in the new, unconsolidated democracies, where, under the pretext of independent media activities, media moguls have developed criminal activities and promoted their own a political agenda.

Under those circumstances, the envisaged consequences are:

- The public is constantly misinformed and under pressure, due to a sensationalism-determined stream of breaking news, wow news, apocalyptic warnings etc., and, to a certain extent, it becomes captive and dependent of this kind of news. Striking titles without any real data or content can also develop a completely false perception about specific aspects of the security activity, which has nothing or very little to do with reality. Reality has shown that this type of audience will be very difficult to convince about the development of different security related phenomena and about the roles and activities of the responsible institutions.

- The checks and balances mechanism is also under pressure due to this kind of media approach, because, in most cases, oversight authorities, for example, are seen as mere instruments of the security institutions, with no actual capacities or propensity for exerting proper control in order to clarify false media accusations. In the same line, the oversight mechanism in place is almost constantly accused of being too soft in its conclusions, because security institutions allegedly influence and control its members, trying to cover up their supposed blunders.

Note: In fact, most members of the oversight bodies feel the pressure exerted by partisan media on their political party, and sometimes, despite ascertaining the reality based on facts and investigations, often respect party discipline and keep to its official narrative. And this excludes public manifestations of support for the targeted institutions in difficult circumstances, even if those institutions prove to have acted properly and legally.

Security institutions under this type of threat need to develop adequate measures, based on different contingency plans designed by variable geometry, in order to fulfill their missions in a very legal way. They have to adjust and learn this kind of lesson, but can, sometimes, be under huge pressures determined by false accusations and uselessly dedicate valuable resources to counter them. They can and should, nonetheless, develop mechanisms of resilience to be able to overcome them, without becoming intimidated or, even worse, paralyzed; the general aim is not to let such attacks affect the job and its missions. On the medium and long term, coordinated and aggressive attacks of this type can severely affect the credibility of the security institutions and create damages to the current activities, and will definitely have other unpredictable consequences. PR and public communication also play a key role in this kind of false crisis situations.

In **conclusion**, in this author`s opinion, this type of media is undermining its own raison d'être, the significance of media's activity for the general public and citizens and its role in democratic societies. For their agenda and purposes in the security field, which tend to have very little in common with the general interest and common good, this type of media generates many vulnerabilities in key security sectors, which are highly likely to be exploited by hostile entities, with consequences for national security. This type of media toxic role has a high impact on all partnerships security services painstakingly build, which is significantly detrimental to security, since trust is a very important element for developing a high standard activity.

3. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

Further scenarios can, of course, be analyzed, but for the purpose of the current study, I think the above-mentioned are sufficient. Phenomena such as new media also deserve particular attention, which could probably be extended in a different study. Suffice it to say that new media allows decision makers and security services to gain access to points of view from areas of society which are not traditionally too vocal in their communication with authorities.

Both conventional and new media – but maybe more so the latter – are currently the battle ground for hybrid warfare, or the "war of words", and can, willingly or unwillingly, be used as disinformation platforms. Through their own efforts to stop the spread of fake news, disinformation, manipulations, media organizations can become direct contributors to the security enterprise.

As to trust, there are two sides to it: that of the necessary trust needed for security to function effectively, and that of a potential trust-based

relation between the same community and media. Regarding the former, ex-Mossad chief Efraim Halevy very plastically stated, in his 2006 memoirs, that, when he became acting director of the famous agency, he was confronted with three crises:

> the first was the crisis of **trust** between the political class and the agency I was about to run. (…) The second was a crisis (of **trust**) between the Mossad and the citizens. (…) And the third was a crisis within the Mossad itself, a resultant of the other too – the damages to the **trust** and self-esteem of those serving the agency (author`s translation).

Lack of trust, at all levels, in Halevy`s and our opinion, is a disease which can lead the entire security sector to disaster. And although lately most security services have developed their own communication strategies, which include direct contact with civil society, the academic society, their own accounts on social media, their own websites etc., they still need media – both conventional and new media – to convey their messages. Therefore, media is essential to building trust in security.

As to media-security trust, in my opinion, it is only normal that this relation should be a reserved one, from both sides. Too much trust from the media can lead to partiality and blindness to issues which, in retrospect and at closer scrutiny, may seem obvious. Without claiming there is much love between the American intelligence community and the American press and without trying to exonerate American agencies of an admitted failure, such a situation can be well illustrated by the manner in which the Iraqi WMD situation was reported by most independent media, which has accepted without much inquiry the premise that Saddam Hussein owned a nuclear arsenal, therefore agreeing war against Iraq was a legitimate action. The obvious way to go, now, seems for media to keep its prudent, scrutinizing attitude and use its own filters of analysis before reporting.

There is, nevertheless, a necessary relation of solid communication between the media and the security community, which is to the satisfaction of both parties: media needs information and it needs to also confront it with official sources, and thus it can also report correctly. Security services need to show a certain degree of transparency in order to gain public support and trust and to see their missions come at a good end. And this relation needs to develop in time, with the security community accepting public criticism and acting on it, when it is justified, in order to prove it deserves trust, and with media keeping an open mind and listening to reason, while presenting the full facts.

In the reality of our contemporary world, with its alarming volume of disinformation, fake news, manipulations etc., security institutions are compelled to communicate with the general public more than ever. And the highest addressability environment for this is media, which also needs information from authorized sources and can help adequately communicate the risks and effective manners of preventing and countering them.

Therefore, partnership is needed between the security community and media, a partnership built on communication and respect.

Moreover, this consistent communication is quintessential in crisis situations, in which the media must be a solid partner of state authorities, having a positive role in promoting adequate messages, as well as the reasons behind them. Adequate reactions and potential solutions can also be collected from media reports in crisis situations, which can support decision-makers in adjusting their strategies. During crises and emergencies, a series of measures are typically needed regarding media activities, including those related to spreading fake news or information which could affect national security.

But for those particular situations, there is a definite need for building a relation of respect and trust between media and security services, which can become a cornerstone of the resilience mechanism the general public needs in order to overcome crisis.

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