

Media and Public Engagement Around the Nuclear Security Summits

Jennifer Smyser, The Stanley Foundation

Prior to the Washington Nuclear Security Summit (NSS), media attention to and public understanding of the threat of nuclear terrorism was relatively shallow with occasional peaks around events like the fall of the Soviet Union, post-9/11 al Qaeda threats, and the revelation of A.Q. Khan network.¹ With the advent of the NSS came increased media and public attention to the need for cooperative, global efforts to prevent nuclear terrorism. However, that attention has been periodic at best and concentrated around the summits.

There is little doubt that the media plays a role in shaping the public's, and possibly policymakers', threat perception of nuclear terrorism. But, while the summits have clearly drawn increased media attention to the issue, it is not necessarily as recognition of the importance of what world leaders are gathered to discuss, but rather because where heads of state go, the media follows.

There have also been attempts to directly engage the public on the need for global action on nuclear security through various efforts including short and feature length documentaries or docudramas, targeted campaigns, and events featuring expert speakers. Opinion pieces in major media outlets have also been used to reach the public (and policymakers), further tying together media attention and public understanding.

Given the prospect that the bright, hot spotlight of the NSS might be going away after 2014, government officials and nongovernmental experts alike can benefit from considering how, or if, greater media and public engagement on the dangers posed by nuclear terrorism and the importance of strengthening the international nuclear security system can contribute to improved decision-making, action, and outcomes.

The 2010 Washington Summit

With President Obama calling for and hosting the first NSS in 2010 in Washington, DC, as might be expected, most of the pre-summit coverage was by US-based media. However, the US media, and therefore the public, had little understanding of what the focus and purpose of the summit was (and was not). As anecdotal evidence, consider two examples:

- In the week prior, the *Wall Street Journal* described the summit as follows, "Next week, more than 40 heads of state convene in Washington for a summit on counter-proliferation, which will lead to efforts at the United Nations to tighten economic sanctions against Iran to choke off its nuclear ambitions."

¹ "Social Science and Policy Factors Affecting Detector Design and Implementation," Institute for Science, Technology and Public Policy, Texas A&M University, accessed 11/1/12, http://nsspi.tamu.edu/media/35848/pres_12.pdf

- After an interview with Kenneth Luongo about the pending summit, during which he stated clearly what the summit was about, the host of a radio talk show came back on air after a commercial saying, “If you just missed our last hour, you missed a very informative discussion where we were educated about the nuclear summit President Obama will hold. At this meeting world leaders will talk about reducing the number of the nuclear weapons and weapons stockpiles in the countries that have these weapons.”²
- In interviews on call-in radio programs, experts were repeatedly asked by callers what the summit was going to do to address a myriad of nuclear and non-nuclear issues—Iran, North Korea, the US Nuclear Posture Review, missile defense in Europe, disarmament, nuclear energy.

The White House made efforts to educate the media and combat the misinformation through press briefings and by offering an exclusive interview with the president to the *New York Times* and a sneak peek of the communiqué to the *Wall Street Journal*, but most of those efforts were in the days just ahead of the summit. White House officials have said publicly a number of times that their focus was on the diplomatic process and the logistics of making the summit happen, leaving them with little bandwidth, if any, for crafting a media or public messaging strategy. This clearly left a void, as is evidenced above, to be filled by others.

The expert community, particularly in the US, also worked in the weeks prior to the summit to engage and inform the media. Most US-based organizations focused on nuclear security were a part of the collaborative effort undertaken by the Fissile Materials Working Group (FMWG) to actively reach out to media by providing background source material, doing their own press briefings, making themselves available for interviews, and placing opinion pieces.³ This resulted in more than 100 media mentions of the FMWG and/or its members in the month surrounding the summit. On the day following the summit, FMWG members were quoted alongside world leaders in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*—the four largest newspapers in the US. They were also mentioned in AP, Reuters, and Bloomberg wire stories about the summit.

Some US-based membership and advocacy organizations also made efforts to engage the public with tools and channels other than the media. They dispersed fact sheets, shared relevant news stories, and used other tools to help the public better understand the threat and the multilateral effort to address it through the summit. The intent of the public awareness raising was to give context to the leaders meeting and to set expectations for summit outcomes.

Media coverage is often crucial to setting public expectations of leader action on global issues particularly in a summit forum. This was no less true with the Washington NSS than it is with

² The interview aired on the Bev Smith Show on April 1, 2010. The show has since gone off the air and audio archives are not available. The quote used was captured by someone listening to the show live.

³ See <http://www.fmwg.org/press.cfm> and <http://www.fmwg.org/in-the-news.cfm> for examples.

any other gathering of world leaders. But without a point of comparison (like a previous summit), any outcome was going to appear to be a success.

While this account of media and public attention is focused on the US, the assumption is that outside of the hosting country, the degree of attention it received was relatively reduced. We know that many US experts were contacted by non-US media, but unfortunately, those tracking the 2010 NSS media coverage were limited in their ability to gauge coverage in non-English media.

Between the Washington and Seoul Summits

As the bright, hot spotlight of the Washington summit faded, so did the attention of the media and the public. Between the Washington and Seoul summits media coverage of the nuclear terrorist threat, or efforts to address it, came only when current events made it relevant. For example, the September 2011 arrest of six in Moldova who were part of a smuggling ring and in possession of HEU or US Congressional budget or legislative decisions that impact nuclear security.

While some governments actively and publicly shared the steps they took toward meeting their 2010 summit commitments, not all did. The US government intentionally looked to attract media attention to their NSS deliverables, sometimes in unique ways like offering access to top-secret HEU removal operations like the one in Poland in October 2010.⁴ There is a bureaucratic tendency to want positive news coverage of government programs, particularly if the efforts can be tied to a presidential initiative, as it might affect Congressional opinions when it comes time to determine program budgets.

Experts were often sought out for relevant quotes and background when media reports were generated. The FMWG and others in the expert community were proactive in letting journalists know they were available for this by generating press releases, hosting a well-attended pre-summit briefing at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, and reaching out to reporters directly. From the expert community perspective, media attention outside of the weeks surrounding the summits helps keep governmental focus on the issue.

The 2012 Seoul Summit

It was clear to Korean officials from the coverage of the announcement in 2010 that they would host the second summit that the media and public understanding of what the summit was or why their government was hosting it was shallow. Therefore, the Korean government took steps early to inform, educate, and engage both the media and public. Their strategy was to stress why preventing nuclear terrorism would be important even though they don't possess weapons-usable

⁴ See "Mission to stop nuclear terrorism," *The Telegraph*, October 11, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/8053159/Mission-to-stop-nuclear-terrorism.html>.

material. They drew upon resources across the government and in the expert community outside of government to take the message to the media and public. They also launched an official summit web site in Korean and English, recruited celebrities and others as summit “ambassadors,” held public events and security demonstrations, and even had a K-pop star sing a summit theme song—all of which was meant to draw media and public attention and increase their understanding of the purpose of the summit. That stated purpose, however, was somewhat muddled in documents distributed to the press during the summit that alluded to arms control and North Korea versus securing fissile material to prevent a terrorist attack.

Outside of Korea, the FMWG member organizations and other experts were actively engaging the media in their respective countries.⁵ Knowing that the pool of journalists covering the summit was likely very different from the first summit, an effort was made to again provide background source material, offer press briefings, be available for interviews, and place opinion pieces. Members of the FMWG also went directly to journalists covering the summit by embedding themselves in the media center.

The messaging strategy of the FMWG was to offer a counternarrative to the anticipated “success” narrative from the NSS-participating governments and to be the “go to” source for journalists. Post-summit analysis of English language media seems to indicate that this strategy was successful. Experts associated with the group were quoted in more than 1,000 stories on the summit.

Korean organizers felt that media and public attention motivated NSS-participating countries in the following ways:

- The portrayal by the Koreans of the Seoul summit as measuring progress on nuclear security since the 2010 summit encouraged governments to share their self-developed progress reports publicly.
- The expectation of national publics, particularly in Asia, that the leaders at the summit address nuclear safety due to the Fukushima disaster, even if it was only a tangential part of the agenda, encouraged them to “demonstrate their leadership” by showing up and including it in their prepared statements.
- Leaders wanted to be seen as contributing to the summit which encouraged more countries to bring “gifts”—house gifts and gift baskets.

As with the Washington NSS, the Seoul summit probably received the most attention from the host country’s own media and public. In general, media coverage of the summit itself was largely overshadowed by Obama’s “hot mic” incident and threats from North Korea. Korean officials felt it was more difficult to garner media attention to the Seoul summit due to its focus

⁵ The FMWG went from a group comprised solely of US-based organizations in 2010 to one that included more than 30 International Partner organizations outside of the US. For a listing, see <http://www.fmwg.org/about.cfm>.

on progress and without the advantages that the Washington summit had being unprecedented and historical.

The 2014 Hague Summit and Beyond

If the 2014 summit is the last, it can be assumed that the bright, hot spotlight that the media shines on the NSS will fade rather quickly. “The danger of nuclear terrorism is all too real. So is the danger that many of these leaders will forget what they promised the moment they get back home,” concluded a *New York Times* editorial on April 15, 2010, just after the Washington summit. Fading attention by top leaders will only lead to decreased attention by media and the public. Waning media and public interest contributes to making forgotten promises a reality. Government officials and nongovernmental experts alike have a responsibility to make sure this doesn’t happen.

Recommendations:

- Dutch organizers should create an official web site for the summit and include background information on nuclear terrorism and security, official documents from the first two summits, links to nongovernmental resources, and information specifically geared to media.
- Conversations with those involved indicate that while individual governments have found media and public attention to be a motivator, it has not been discussed or considered as a motivator in the Sherpa process. Media and public engagement should be part of the Sherpa discussion about the 2014 summit.
- Dutch organizers should engage nongovernmental experts early to serve as partners in the effort to engage the media and public.
- Countries should schedule and hold press briefings during the summit. In Seoul many countries canceled their briefings or offered briefings that were too technical increasing the odds that the media would get the story wrong.
- Identify more experts in Europe that are comfortable engaging the media and public, and keep Korean experts who were actively engaging the media at the 2012 summit involved.
- Dutch organizers should encourage all countries to submit progress reports on 2010 and 2012 commitments in advance of the summit so that they can be shared with the media and public.
- Experts in as many NSS-participating countries as possible should continue to actively engage the media in the lead up to the Hague summit and use a messaging strategy that consistently indicates expectations for the outcomes of the summit.