UNCERTAINTY IN CRISIS NEWS REPORTING

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Background

• In the aftermath of terrorist attacks and mass shootings, rumors often abound
• Puts news media in a difficult position
• Dilemma: quick reporting vs. accurate reporting
Journalistic solution to the dilemma: Uncertainty words

• When journalists are unsure about the reliability of something, but still want to report it, they sometimes rely on uncertainty words/phrases

• Examples: unconfirmed, unverified, uncertain, unreliable
What about news consumers?

- Do ordinary people understand that news might not be true?
- While challenging, people are expected to notice differences in reliability under normal circumstances (non-crisis situations)
Hypotheses

**Uncertainty words hypothesis:** When news stories include uncertainty words, they are perceived as less reliable.

**Crisis context hypothesis:** Smaller effect of uncertainty words in crisis situations compared to normal situations.
High reliability

Low reliability

Non-crisis context

Crisis context

No uncertainty words

Uncertainty words
Just nu: Knivattack vid Riksdagshuset
Två män har attackerat människor med knivar på Riksbron i närheten av Riksdagshuset. Flera personer är skadade.

Reports

Just nu: Obekräftade uppgifter om knivattack vid Riksdagshuset
Två män har enligt obekräftade uppgifter attackerat människor med knivar på Riksbron i närheten av Riksdagshuset. Flera personer kan vara skadade.

Unverified reports

No uncertainty
Normal (non-crisis) news context: high level of uncertainty = news perceived as less reliable, but no effect of medium uncertainty words

No uncertainty

Reports

Unverified reports
Terrorist attack context

• Also experimentally varied crisis context
  – Two treatments: crisis context
  – One treatment: non-crisis context (no terrorist attack story)

• Truck bomb at Stockholm Central Station with several causalities and many wounded
Många skadade vid explosion utanför Stockholms centralstation

En lastbil har exploderat vid ingången till Stockholms centralstation. Explosionen inträffade vid åttatiden på onsdagsmorgonen.

Enligt polis och ambulanspersonal har flera personer bekräftats döda och många personer är allvarligt skadade. Räddningsarbetet pågår fortfarande.

Polisen utreder händelsen som en terrorattack.

Förövarna är fortfarande på fri fot.
Support for the crisis context hypothesis

![Graph showing support for the crisis context hypothesis]
Support for the crisis context hypothesis

The graph shows the relationship between Tillförlitligheten i knivattacksnyheten (Terror-attack credibility) and Terrornyhet (Terror threat) with different levels of uncertainty (Ingen osäkerhetsmarkör, Osäkerhetsmarkör, Stark osäkerhetsmarkör). The graph indicates that there is NO SIGNIFICANT difference between the levels of credibility across different threats, suggesting support for the crisis context hypothesis.

NOT SIGNIFICANT
Conclusion 1

• In a normal (non-crisis) news environment...
  – Uncertain news are perceived as less reliable
  – However, uncertainty needs to be communicated very clearly
Conclusion 2

• In a crisis news environment...
  – People do not differentiate between levels of uncertainty
  – People are more skeptical of everything