

## Key Takeaways

### *Panel 1: Tools and Best Practices for Informative Hostage Coverage*

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**Moderator:** Bill McCarren, Press Freedom Center

#### **Building Trust and Navigating Relationships**

- Journalists covering hostage cases operate within a complex web of relationships that encompass families, U.S. government officials, NGOs, and foreign governments.
- Maintaining trust is paramount.
  - Reporters must remain impartial and patient while working with traumatized families.
  - They must remain cautious of individuals who seek to exploit hostage situations.
- Families often come forward when frustrated by the pace of government efforts. Responsible reporting requires balancing transparency with sensitivity to family needs and security considerations.
- Being “first” should never outweigh being accurate and compassionate. Premature reporting can actually jeopardize releases.

#### **Best Practices in Coverage**

- Basic journalistic principles of accuracy, fairness, and balance remain essential. Reporters must not inadvertently amplify a detaining regime’s propaganda or allegations.
- Journalists often serve as the first-ever media contact for families unfamiliar with press norms. It is important to over-explain concepts to them such as on/off record and consent.
- Each case is unique; reporters should recognize that wrongful detention designations, family strategies, and government engagement vary widely between cases. It is important that reporters understand the distinctions.
- Continuous communication builds trust. Families and officials are more likely to share critical information when they know a journalist handles stories responsibly.

#### **Government and Policy Context**

- The U.S. government’s approach has evolved, particularly since the enactment of the Levinson Act, which clarified criteria for wrongful detention.

- The establishment of the Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA) has improved coordination, but there remain inconsistencies in prioritization and awareness across agencies.
- Some officials and even senior spokespersons have lacked familiarity with specific cases which prompts families to seek media attention as leverage.
- Raising awareness of wrongful detention cases does not increase hostage-taking; rather, it provides pressure and visibility that can potentially expedite resolution.
- Governments whose citizens are taken often prefer quiet diplomacy, but silence may prolong situations when progress stalls. Families typically decide when to go public, and media outlets have a responsibility to respect that choice.
- Public coverage can serve as deterrence by exposing the political nature of detentions and holding regimes accountable.
- Reporters should continue to question regimes directly during diplomatic events and summits, ensuring accountability on wrongful detention cases.