

## A STAND-BY RESEARCH CAPACITY

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Since the fall of 1973, a group within the School of Journalism at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, has maintained a stand-by capacity to do research in the wake of crisis or disaster. This article is a review of that capacity – how it was developed and how it is maintained and operated.

The origins of the Carleton project date back 10 years, to 1966. It was then, from a chapter called, “Anticipatory Studies and Stand-by Research Capabilities” in a book called *Social Indicators* (Biderman, 1966) that the author of this article and some others became interested in stand-by research. It seemed that this idea – the idea of having a research group on tap at all times – had a particular relevance to those involved in journalism; for it is a matter of professional pride that journalists are always available for duty.

But it wasn't for several years (until 1970) that the Carleton project became less of an idea and more of a reality. That year – the year of Canada's October crisis – the idea of stand-by research was discussed in a fourth-year undergraduate seminar. Those in that seminar (two faculty and 12 students) agreed to operate as a stand-by research unit if an appropriate opportunity arose [1].

Actually the agreement was more specific than that. The seminar was particularly interested in interpersonal communications – in the flow of information from one person to another. And it was struck by the fact that a number of

researchers, notably Elihu Katz, had stated it would be difficult if not impossible to trace the flow of information through all of its stages (Katz, 1957). What those in the seminar agreed was, given an appropriate opportunity, they would do an advanced form of diffusion research. The research team would select a sample, find out how those in the sample had learned a specific item of information, then, if interpersonal communication was involved, trace that flow of information from person-to-person back to its original source. The seminar group assumed that, in order to do this, it would have to be tracing a piece of rather dramatic information or news.

As things turned out, such a piece of dramatic information was not long in coming. The seminar took place on a Monday. On Thursday that same week (three days later) it was learned that a kidnapped British diplomat, James Cross, had been located alive and well in Montreal. The kidnapping of Cross had begun the Canadian crisis of 1970; it had been followed by the kidnapping and murder of Quebec cabinet minister, Pierre Laporte; and it had led to the stern war measures taken by the federal government. The finding of Cross, alive and well, was a singularly dramatic event.

Although the seminar group had agreed to operate as a stand-by research unit, it had not made any preparations to do so. The finding of Cross caught it unprepared. So, that same day, Thursday, the team put together and pre-tested

a brief questionnaire [2]. It sought out and found help in drawing a small sample. It located transportation and accommodation [3]. And it activated all but one of the 14 members of the group. Not only that, it achieved all of these goals so quickly, it was able to begin interviewing just after supper on Thursday evening.

(The actual Cross study was done in Kingston, Ontario, a community about 115 miles from Carleton's location, Ottawa. Kingston was selected not because it had any specific connection to the finding of Cross but because it was a medium-sized, relatively homogeneous community. Since diffusion of news was being studied – and not a specific crisis or disaster – any comparable community would have sufficed.)

The Cross study was relatively successful and it has been reported elsewhere (Scanlon, 1971). As important, however, as its findings were its implications for stand-by research. The seminar project had established it was possible at Carleton to activate a research project in a matter of hours given advance commitments by a number of researchers.

Two years later – autumn, 1972 – a number of academics at Carleton decided to try to follow up on this achievement. At a meeting called by the author of this article, five of them – Taylor and Scanlon and Dr. Stephen Richer (Sociology), Dr. Jack Graham (Mathematics) and Dr. John R. Weston (Journalism) – decided to seek funds to carry out further research into interpersonal communications [4]. As a result of some discussions with officials of the D.R.B., the Canadian Defence Research Board, the group further decided they would focus on the flow of interpersonal communication in time of crisis or disaster.

This latter decision is really not surprising. It had always been clear that tracing interpersonal communication made more sense when a dramatic, well-defined event was being dealt with. When it appeared D.R.B. might fund the project, the researchers were quite content to

deal with dramatic events such as crises and/or disasters. The proposal for such crisis and/or disaster-related research, therefore, went to the D.R.B.

In the spring of 1973, the Carleton project, now known formally as ECRU, the Emergency Communications Research Unit, got a D.R.B. grant, its first non-university funding [5]. It then began the planning of the present organization, the organization which is described in the rest of this article.

Despite the passage of time and despite the expanded experience, the present ECRU *field* operation is a great deal like the original Carleton stand-by research unit. It still consists of two faculty (the same two) and it still consists of undergraduate university students. It is still mainly interested in the flow of interpersonal communications – and the tracing of that communications system. And it is still using survey research as its main research tool.

But there have been some major changes. And most of these changes affect not the field operation, which has remained fairly standardized, but the advance preparations. The Carleton research unit (ECRU) is now very well prepared when it moves into the field.

The first critical development was the preparation of a questionnaire – one that would be appropriate under most crisis or disaster situations. Over the past two and one-half years, ECRU has developed, and tested, more than a dozen different versions of a questionnaire. It has now settled onto a fairly standard one, useful in almost all situations. The questionnaire has several component parts. One attempts to fix the way the respondent learned about the event. A second tries to establish reaction to the news – emotional and physical. A third pins down the precise nature of the communication. A fourth covers socio-economic data. And a fifth tries to establish the respondent's normal communications patterns.

In a number of the areas mentioned there have been refinements over the years as a result of field experience. People who learn first

from media are now asked, for example, whether they heard a news broadcast or a special bulletin, and whether they were listening closely or just happened to catch the information or if someone called their attention to the broadcast. People who learned from someone else are asked to categorize that someone else in a very precise way – and many of these categories such as “know them to see them” have been developed by ECRU. And people are pinned down about the nature of an interpersonal communication with such questions as “was that person talking directly to you or did you overhear as part of a group?”

What all this means is that with one or two exceptions a complete questionnaire with detailed code categories, can be run off in a matter of hours. The only changes necessary relate to warning systems (the questions are slightly different if there was a warning) to the precise definition of the event and to listing of media outlets in the area being covered (to save coding problems). It took only three or four hours to run off 200 questionnaires for the last study.

The critical element here is, of course, that ECRU’s goals are defined and, therefore, its instrument is well-defined. ECRU research takes advantage of an unexpected event; but its approach to studying that event is not ad hoc.

The selection and maintenance of the research team has been standardized in the same way. The team now normally consists of two faculty and 15 undergraduate students. The faculty are regular team members. The 15 students are volunteers and are selected at two regular recruiting sessions held each year at the School of Journalism. At any given time, the team’s membership has certain characteristics [6]. At least half to two-thirds have had previous field experience. Approximately half are male, half female. Approximately one-third come from each of the second, third and fourth years in Journalism at Carleton. Approximately 40 percent are aged 21 or more and can drive (this is a necessity because of insurance re-

strictions on rented cars). Roughly half are bilingual French-English. And a number of others can speak additional languages, normally Italian, German, Ukrainian. In addition, all have signed a legal release absolving Carleton (and ECRU) from liability and have available identification including both an ECRU ID and a specific government ID issued by the Federal crisis agency, Emergency Planning Canada. Finally, as of this year, almost all team members are among the top students in their year.

This balance of experience and capacity has been achieved by a very careful selection process. Each year at the two recruiting sessions, available talent is carefully screened: the choice of team membership is then made according to the above targets. This selection process is possible, of course, only because team membership has become a high status function at the School of Journalism. As a result of this, there is usually a far larger turnout of volunteers than is necessary for field operations.

Undergraduate students have, obviously, other commitments than crisis research. This has been taken into account in developing the ECRU system. What happens is this: each term (Canadian universities operate mainly on a two-term system, one in the fall, one in the spring, with summer off) at the recruiting session, team members discuss their availability. Normally, it is agreed that those selected will make themselves available from late September (after the first week of fall classes) until late November (about one week before Christmas exams), again during the Christmas holidays (except for Christmas day itself) and finally from the second week in January (after the first week of spring term classes) until late March (10 days before final exams). It is also agreed that once a team is activated during a term, it will then stand down for the rest of that term.

All team members (who, incidentally, are unpaid volunteers) agree to be available for those periods once selected. ECRU agrees to draw

any field research group from the posted list of those selected until a new recruiting session is held (the sessions are held in September and January).

In order to make this stand-by situation meaningful, ECRU insists: volunteers attend a number of simulations (though never in conflict with classes); volunteers notify all faculty of their situation and clear, in advance, arrangements to make up any missed course work; and volunteers list with ECRU a complete personal inventory of how they spend their time.

This last inventory (which is used only to locate personnel in time of crisis) covers all personal habits: It has proved to be incredibly efficient: no team member has ever not been located; some team members have been located very quickly in places hundreds of miles from Ottawa.

This covers the questionnaire and the team. But ECRU's arrangements do not stop there. In addition to planning at home, ECRU has planned abroad. The two ECRU field research faculty have travelled coast to coast in Canada briefing municipal officials, police and emergency personnel about ECRU and its operation. These officials have promised assistance in time of crisis [7]. Furthermore, with the assistance of Emergency Planning Canada, ECRU has a standing arrangement with Air Canada: ECRU personnel can get priority service when moving into or out of a crisis area.

Finally, ECRU appears to have resolved one critical aspect of speedy survey research – the high-speed selection of a sample. A graduating student, Rodney Borm, under the supervision of Dr. Graham, has completed a thesis dealing with this problem, "Sampling Techniques with Application in the Field of Emergency Communications Research" (Borm, 1975). The Borm system is now available for use by ECRU during crisis activation.

This system does not, of course, run by itself. It requires secretarial help (for maintaining contacts by letter) and for typing and

preparing questionnaires. It requires administrative assistance for maintaining contact with airlines and holding files on team members. It requires time for recruiting sessions, for simulations and for visits to potential disaster communities. The ECRU operation is still run almost entirely on a volunteer basis. The two faculty are not paid. The students are not paid. Most of the secretarial help (which is provided by the School of Journalism) is not paid by ECRU. Only the administrative assistance (provided by a part-time student) and some secretarial help (provided by a part-time secretary) costs the project money. But, despite this, ECRU does require funding and that funding has come almost entirely from two sources – the Defence Research Board and the Federal crisis agency, Emergency Planning Canada.

This, therefore, is the system. How is it activated?

When a crisis or disaster occurs, ECRU usually hears about it first from the news media. The team originally had tried to develop contacts in specific communities but this did not work and, in any case, it was not found necessary. Any event significant enough to study will be given major media coverage.

Once this word is received – word that an event of some importance has taken place – a number of things begin to happen:

1. One of the two faculty involved consults with Emergency Planning Canada, and a decision to go or not go is made on the basis of available information;
2. Someone (usually the administrative assistant) notifies team members of the possibility of a field trip;
3. The senior team staff (usually the two faculty) decide which personnel will move first;
4. One senior team member (usually one of the faculty) calls secretarial help and begins the process of running off questionnaires;
5. One senior team member (usually one of the experienced fourth-year students) talks to persons in the affected community; and

6. One person (usually the administrative assistant) begins drawing the sample.

Since all of those involved in this process are experienced personnel, and since these tasks are well known, all of these functions usually go fairly smoothly.

As this is going on, team personnel are also deciding – if the decision is to move – just how to reach the affected community. (The team has used private automobiles, bus, train, rented cars, plane and even boats in its various field trips.) Once this decision is made, one team member begins the process of making travel arrangements.

All of this may sound complicated but it is not – and it is not complicated because of a number of other factors: all team members have been thoroughly briefed as to just what happens – they even are provided with a list of what to carry: most team members have had previous field experience which means they are carrying out a routine; all team members are in journalism – and are used to the idea of a quick response; all team members have made arrangements with others or at least have notified others of what might happen; and all team members have been given (and have read) a manual which spells out precisely what happens during a mobilization (Scanlon, 1975). The manual is available for those who may wish to read it.

In the field, the same sort of planned routine is followed. First, an advance team moves in ahead of the main operation. This group, some experienced, some inexperienced personnel, makes contacts with local emergency officials, makes accommodation arrangements, arranges for car rentals, and so forth. Then, as the main group arrives, the survey begins: experienced and inexperienced personnel are matched, so new personnel can be both trained and monitored. On a daily basis, team meetings are held, and problems are discussed in a group situation. (These meetings are considered especially important to ECRU. They allow a constant checking on all work – and on all

problems. And they guarantee that all team members get an insight into all parts of the operation. They are probably the place at which the major learning process takes place – and thus, the reason why students are anxious to volunteer for the project.)

Perhaps, at this point, it would be useful to note that the existence of inexperienced and experienced personnel – and the ratio of each – is deliberate. It is assumed by ECRU that in any operation there will be some turnover – people will move, retire, become ill, etc. In a student operation, this will be especially true. So ECRU, to avoid unplanned turnover, deliberately rotates about one-third of its personnel each field trip. This guarantees a constant injection of new personnel and assures a steady supply of trained people [8].

In the field, there is also a systematic approach to research. All questionnaires are kept in numbered files and a record is kept, at all times, of the location of each file. Each night, each file must be turned in. In addition, ECRU uses a system of color coding, a quick glance indicates the situation regarding each file. This is especially necessary in the ECRU project which involves tracing: one sample point can lead to as many as nine additional interviews – it is never possible to tell until the original source is located how many interviews may be necessary to complete a file.

One further requirement is that every person handling a file is required to note, in order and in detail, what he or she did with it. Thus anyone picking up a file can read its history. Furthermore, at the regular team meetings, any problems are discussed and the status of every incompleting file is reviewed. (This often leads to sharing of information – something increasingly important as the various interpersonal communication chains start to interconnect.)

Another aspect of the ECRU field operation is the designation of specific responsibilities to individuals. One person acts as treasurer and handles all finances. Another looks after the file

room and, when coding begins, after the coding operation. Still another looks after car rentals and travel arrangements. Each day, at team meetings, each of these people look after any problems in their area of responsibility.

As an operation in the field approaches its end, the same people take over the job of clearing up. The file person must check out each team member before departure: no one is allowed to leave without having completed his or her coding. The treasurer clears each person's finances. The travel and car officer checks out accommodation, makes travel arrangements and returns rented equipment.

Once again, all of these activities follow a specific laid out plan – and, once again, this plan has been spelled out in detail, in the ECRU manual.

Once the team is back in Ottawa, the situation is again a fairly standardized one. The material gathered in the field is turned over to the research staff for processing and analysis [9]. Those contacted in the field are thanked for their assistance. A review of team personnel takes place. The questionnaire is revised to take into account the new field experience. And a new recruiting session yields a revised field team ready for another field experience.

The whole procedure has gradually worked itself into a smooth, consistent operation. As this is being written, for example, the team has just finished a field operation. It is now down (not on stand-by) for another 10 days. There is a new recruiting session already scheduled. A team review has taken place. Letters of thanks have been written. A first report on the latest project has been made. And a questionnaire revision is under way. In 10 days time the field team will be ready to move once again if events so dictate.

A quick rundown of the present situation is probably the easiest way to illustrate the way the ECRU stand-by process works. At present, ECRU has available 16 students with field experience ranging from one, who has been on every ECRU trip, to five students in their

second year, all of whom had their first field experience this fall. This group of experienced personnel includes seven males and nine females and includes six students from the fourth year, five from the third year and five from the second year. It includes students who speak French, Italian, German, Ukrainian and Russian. And it includes seven over 21 with licenses (who can therefore drive rented cars).

When the team is re-activated, about eight of these experienced persons will be put on stand-by. The rest will be held on a reserve list. This will mean that if, for any reason, an experienced person withdraws, it will be possible to replace them with another experienced person. Thus, by constant rotation – and by maintenance of experienced personnel on a reserve list – the balance of experienced personnel is maintained.

All this probably makes it sound as if ECRU is always a beautifully-tuned operation. Most of the time that has, in fact, been relatively true. But there have been some problems: on one occasion, the team lost approximately 13 questionnaires – questionnaires that had been completed (a situation that led to the present checking system); twice the team has had automobile problems – minor accidents have caused rows with rental agencies; once the team left behind its questionnaire cover sheets – an error that took 48 hours to rectify because the team was in an isolated community; once the selection process has generated inadequate field personnel – personnel who later had to be replaced; and once – and once only – a team member on stand-by declined to respond to an alert.

On the whole, however, the ECRU system has functioned well. So far, it has been activated six times. Each time it has responded quickly and quite efficiently. It has moved into action in as fast as 24 hours (on the ground in the affected community). It has dealt with events as diverse as a shoot-out, a snowstorm, a windstorm, a building explosion and a mudslide. And it has worked in communities as far apart as St. John's, Newfoundland, and Port

Alice, British Columbia — communities approximately 5,000 road miles apart — as far east and as far west in Canada as it is possible to go from ECRU's home base at Carleton University in Ottawa.

## NOTES

- 1 Although the students have all since moved on, the two faculty members involved in that seminar, Brian Taylor and Joseph Scanlon, are the ones still most active in the current project.
- 2 One of those who provided impromptu help for this project was a sociologist, Dr. Stephen Richer. He became a founder of the current operation.
- 3 The project received a great deal of support from the Kingston daily newspaper, the Whig-Standard.
- 4 Dr. Richer and Dr. Graham are no longer associated with the ECRU project.
- 5 The initial Cross project, which cost well under \$ 500, was funded from the School of Journalism departmental funds, normally available to a fourth year seminar.
- 6 The reasons for these characteristics are spelled out in the team manual. See Scanlon, 1975.
- 7 These promises have always been kept. ECRU, in turn, systematically makes its findings available to such officials.

- 8 This concept of planned rotation (conceived by Mr. Taylor) also guarantees that fresh ideas will be constantly injected into discussions in the field.
- 9 There has been no attempt to describe the analysis here. It is the usual slow laborious process. Work on the first field study, done in 1973, still continues.

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