

KWTX news director: New media could have changed Waco siege

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By Trevor Allison
Reporter

Nineteen years ago, federal agents attempted to execute a search warrant at Mt. Carmel, the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, after the McLennan County Sheriff's Office was notified

of the possible presence of illegal weapons.

That was the beginning a 51-day siege that ended with the compound destroyed in a fire. 82 people died in the fire, including more than 20 children, two pregnant women.

The siege of Mt. Carmel, which included agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF); the Texas Rangers and the Texas National Guard, began when ATF agents attempted to execute a search warrant for the compound on Feb. 28, 1993. The ATF is now called the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

Some wonder how different the Branch Davidian siege might have been had it occurred today, in light of the impact social media has had on other events, such as those of the Arab Spring in 2011 that led to revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and other nations.

Rick Bradfield, news director at KWTX, Waco's CBS television affiliate, was one of the reporters covering the siege in 1993. While speaking to Dr. Cassy Burleson's advanced public relations class on Wednesday, Bradfield said the Davidians were cut off from the media during the siege by FBI signal jammers.

This technology made cell phone communication impossible after Davidian leader David Koresh made phone calls to local media outlets.

This would have been different had the siege occurred today. The advances in technology and social media would have slowed the government's prevention of the Davidians' communication with the outside world, Bradfield said.

"News is no longer disseminated," Bradfield said. "It's shared."

Those inside the Davidian compound might have been able to tweet or post to their Facebook accounts about what was happening, had those technologies existed at the time, Bradfield said. They could have also posted videos online from their point of view during the siege.

"The thing that unnerved me the most was that we never saw the people on the inside," Bradfield said.

Bradfield said the only information he received at the siege was from ATF agents.

"Truth is what people want it to be, as opposed to what it is," Bradfield said.

He said many people now receive their news through social media.

"If something big happens today that people need to know about, you'll find out about it on Facebook," Bradfield said.

The sharing of news through social media has made the news cycle faster and news easier to access, Bradfield said, but there can be a trade-off in news quality.

“Internet journalism’s greatest sin is to be last, not to be inaccurate,” Bradfield said

San Antonio junior Sarah George said she sees the benefit of universal access to all kinds of media.

“I heard about the [Arab Spring] riots on Twitter,” George said. “I think it’s good governments have to go through greater lengths to stop the flow of information. It puts the power in the hands of the people.”

Chicago junior Madeline Lloyd agrees.

“I love the idea of unfiltered media,” Lloyd said. “There are a lot of people who definitely post things they shouldn’t and instantly regret they can’t take that back, but when used properly, new and social media can be extremely effective to reach a younger audience.”

Bradfield put news consumers into three groups. He said “integrators” are those who receive news through new media, such as online or social media, as well as traditional outlets.

The second group is “net newsmen,” who get their news from nothing but online media sources, such as Facebook posts or smart phone apps.

The third group, which Bradfield said includes 13 percent of the population, doesn’t regularly consume news at all.

Bradfield said with modern technology and social media, the internal story of the Davidian compound could have been made public and people could have heard their side of the situation.

“The Davidians didn’t have the means to get their story out,” he said.

Emilly Martinez, Morgan Taylor, Isaac Dovalina, Brenna Middleton and Natalie Garnett contributed to this report.
