

The events of 7 July in London, when bombs in four locations caused the deaths of 56 people, saw all branches of news journalism acquit themselves well in tragic circumstances. But with few pictures available initially, radio was the medium of the moment.

Suddenly my hands were shaking

Matthew Bannister

By any standards, the first week of July 2005 was an extraordinary one for news. Even before the London bombs, we had lived through Live 8, London's successful bid for the 2012 Olympics, and the protests surrounding the start of the G8 summit at Gleneagles. Arriving at Radio Five Live on the Thursday, we were ready to reflect the euphoric mood generated by the previous day's Olympic win with the phone-in question: "How do we make the 2012 Olympics the best ever?" As we went on air at 9am, suggestions were already pouring in from listeners. Our studio guests were Sir Bob Scott, who headed up the successful Manchester Commonwealth Games bid, and Olympic gold medallist swimmer Sharron Davies. But just as Sir Bob was talking about the need for the 2012 Games to have a viable legacy, a message flashed up on my studio computer screen. It said that emergency services had been called to London's Liverpool Street station after reports of an explosion. The ambulance service had confirmed they'd sent several vehicles. That was it. No more information. I read out the message and continued talking to Sir Bob.

Behind the scenes, my colleagues were working frantically to find out more. On occasions like this, Radio Five Live really comes into its own. Experienced teams scrap the planned output and devote all their resources to

covering the breaking news. BBC reporters and correspondents are quickly deployed. In the studio, reporter Ross Hawkins joined me, monitoring the wire services and available regularly to summarise the changing information. Travel reporter Helen Blaby was on hand to keep us informed about a chaotic and fluid situation. Both reporters played a crucial role in updating listeners who were joining the broadcast as events unfolded during the morning.

The first eyewitness was on the air at 9.25am, with sirens wailing in the background. She described being evacuated from Liverpool Street station with hundreds of other commuters as the whole area was cordoned off and “dozens of ambulances” rushed to the scene. Then British Transport Police confirmed there were “walking wounded” and that King’s Cross and Aldgate East stations had also been evacuated. First explanations suggested a power surge was the cause. By 9.30 another eyewitness described seeing people with “smoke-blackened faces” being treated on the ground outside Aldgate East Underground station. The Olympics were forgotten as we moved to bring continuous coverage of what was clearly a major incident.

For me, the description of people with smoke-blackened faces brought back terrible memories of being the first reporter to arrive at the scene of the King’s Cross tube fire in 1987, in which 31 people died. Then, I saw smoke-blackened bodies being carried up from the inferno below to be laid on the pavements. There is something particularly frightening about tragedies that unfold in familiar streets where, moments before, people have been going about their ordinary business, blithely unaware of the disaster about to strike. For Londoners, an incident on the tube with all its associations of claustrophobia and lack of escape routes is a nightmare vision. So I was conscious of the need to keep calm and to balance reporting the news as quickly as possible with the need not to speculate ahead of the known facts.

Calming voice in my ear

There’s undoubtedly a surge of adrenalin when a big story breaks while you are on air, but you’re constantly aware that it mustn’t cause you to become over emotional. In putting out information, you might affect the behaviour of the listener – incautious speculation could cause panic and make the incident far worse. The key rule we followed was to be absolutely clear about the source of each scrap of news. Was it on one wire service or more than one? Was it from the emergency services or Transport for London? Or from one of our listeners? Behind the glass of the control room, I could see

colleagues coming and going, but the constant, calming voice in my ear was that of programme editor Husain Husaini, always ready with a timely prompt and directing me from one interview to the next with terse but clear headphone instructions or one-line messages via the screen in front of me. The studio managers were as professional as ever, moving seamlessly from one unpredictable source of information to another. In a four-hour broadcast of such complexity, it was a tribute to them that there wasn't a single technical error or missed cue.

As we continued to interview eyewitnesses, the "power surge" theory persisted. We even received a text from a former Underground employee explaining how a "power surge" could affect such a wide range of stations. But the rail expert Christian Wolmar, interviewed by mobile phone from a side street near Euston Station, where he was being evacuated, was puzzled by the power-surge explanation. It didn't add up, he said. As we were to discover, he was right to be sceptical.

Just before 10am, a London taxi driver called to say he'd spoken to a police officer at Aldgate station who'd told him that 30 people had died in the incident there. Shocking information, which I made clear was unconfirmed by the emergency services. At 10 o'clock the first eyewitness who had actually been on one of the trains described an explosion, with many people injured and screaming in agony, and the top of the train blown apart. The power-surges theory vanished and at 10.10, we broadcast the first report about a bomb in Russell Square, although at that stage it was suggested it had exploded in a litter bin. But then a listener called from Milton Keynes (of all places) to tell us that a friend had rung him from London to say he had seen a bomb explode on a bus in Tavistock Square, and that there were "bodies everywhere—a gruesome scene".

This seemed to come completely from left field. I must confess, I was rather sceptical and made it clear that we had no confirmation of this explosion. But then the wire services started to carry eyewitness reports from a range of sources also describing a bomb on a bus in Tavistock Square and our home news editor, Mark Easton, on the line from King's Cross, described hearing a loud bang in the area.

At about 10.25 Scotland Yard issued a statement confirming a number of explosions on the Underground and the explosion on a bus. This was quickly followed by interviews with Liberal Democrat MP Simon Hughes (being evacuated by police with loudhailers near King's Cross) and the MP for the Cities of London and Westminster, Mark Field. He was the first to use the

words “terrorist attack”, and Hughes the first to issue a call for London to react with solidarity and to rise above the threat. Terrorism expert MJ Gohel then came on air to explain that the simultaneous explosions in different places bore “the hallmark of al-Qaeda” and to draw parallels with what had happened in Madrid last year.

The next concern was whether there would be further explosions. Reporters began to describe police cordons being extended around the affected areas and we heard that Houndsditch had been closed. Problems with mobile phones were adding to the confusion. Long queues formed at phone boxes as old fashioned technology became the only reliable way of contacting families, friends and employers. In a uniquely London image, casualties were being taken to the Royal London Hospital by a fleet of red double-decker buses. An emergency casualty centre was set up at the Hilton Hotel, but still there were no confirmed numbers of dead or injured. At about 11.20, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair came on air to describe on the phone “events which may be explosions” at King’s Cross, Edgware Road, Russell Square, Liverpool Street, Aldgate East and Moorgate. But there was still confusion, he said, and asked the media not to speculate.

A comprehensive picture

My task during the following couple of hours was to link the different reporters, eyewitnesses and experts as the picture of a major terrorist attack on the capital became clearer. The Prime Minister made his first statement at midday, confirming a terrorist attack, and shortly afterwards our crime correspondent, Neil Bennett, quoting police sources, made the first suggestion that a suicide bomber had been responsible for the bus bomb. So, within a couple of hours of the first newsflash, we had presented a pretty comprehensive picture of a confusing story, pulling together diverse threads of information into a narrative which showed the enormity of a co-ordinated terrorist attack by suicide bombers on London’s travelling public.

A number of word pictures from that terrible morning will stay in my mind for a long time: the eyewitness breaking down in tears as he talked about the carnage on the Aldgate East train; people describing victims screaming for help in the pitch darkness of the tube tunnels; casualties “covered from head to toe in black soot”; the top deck of a London bus “ripped apart like a sardine can” as other red buses ferried scores of casualties

to hospital; thousands of evacuated Londoners with mobile phones “clamped to their ears” as they tried to reassure loved ones; the Prime Minister, “flanked by stony-faced G8 leaders” at Gleneagles, issuing his second statement of the day, condemning the attacks and vowing to defeat the terrorists; and through it all the sirens wailing and wailing in the background of so many interviews and reports.

Such is the pressure of fronting a live broadcast during a major breaking news story that personal emotional considerations take a back seat. It was only after I came off air that the true enormity of what had happened to my home city really hit me. I called my daughter, who sometimes travels through Edgware Road on her way to work. Once I knew she was safe and I had spoken to my son at home, I noticed that my hands were shaking uncontrollably as I put down the phone.

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