

# Anthrax attacks: Communication Responses to Intentional Attempts to Terrorize

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# Main Points of Presentation

- The Anthrax Attacks
- Chaos Theory as a framework
- Communication challenges
- Self organization

# 10/4/01 World Changes Again

## A Nation Challenged

The New York Times

BACKGROUND: BIOTERRORISM

### Flulike symptoms? It could be the flu

*Many Lessons  
To Be Learned  
With Anthrax*

ANTIBIOTIC

#### U.S. supply would treat 2 million for anthrax

New drug that fights disease wasn't fully tested

By MARK HANAU  
markh@nytimes.com

The New York Times

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said yesterday that it would not recommend the use of a new antibiotic to fight anthrax because of concerns about its safety.

The use of the new antibiotic, which is already prescribed to treat the disease, is still an experimental use because the drug was not shown to be safe and effective in a clinical trial.

ANTHRAX LETTER  
AWAITS DISCOVERY,  
C.D.C. CHIEF HINTS

Bay

Spores in Mailrooms of Supreme Court, C.I.A. and Army Lab

#### Anthrax episode growing

Cipro  
omi

By CHARLES S. TRAVIS  
cs@nytimes.com

#### ANTHRAX MYSTERY

No easy answer in Florida case

By GENA HOLATA

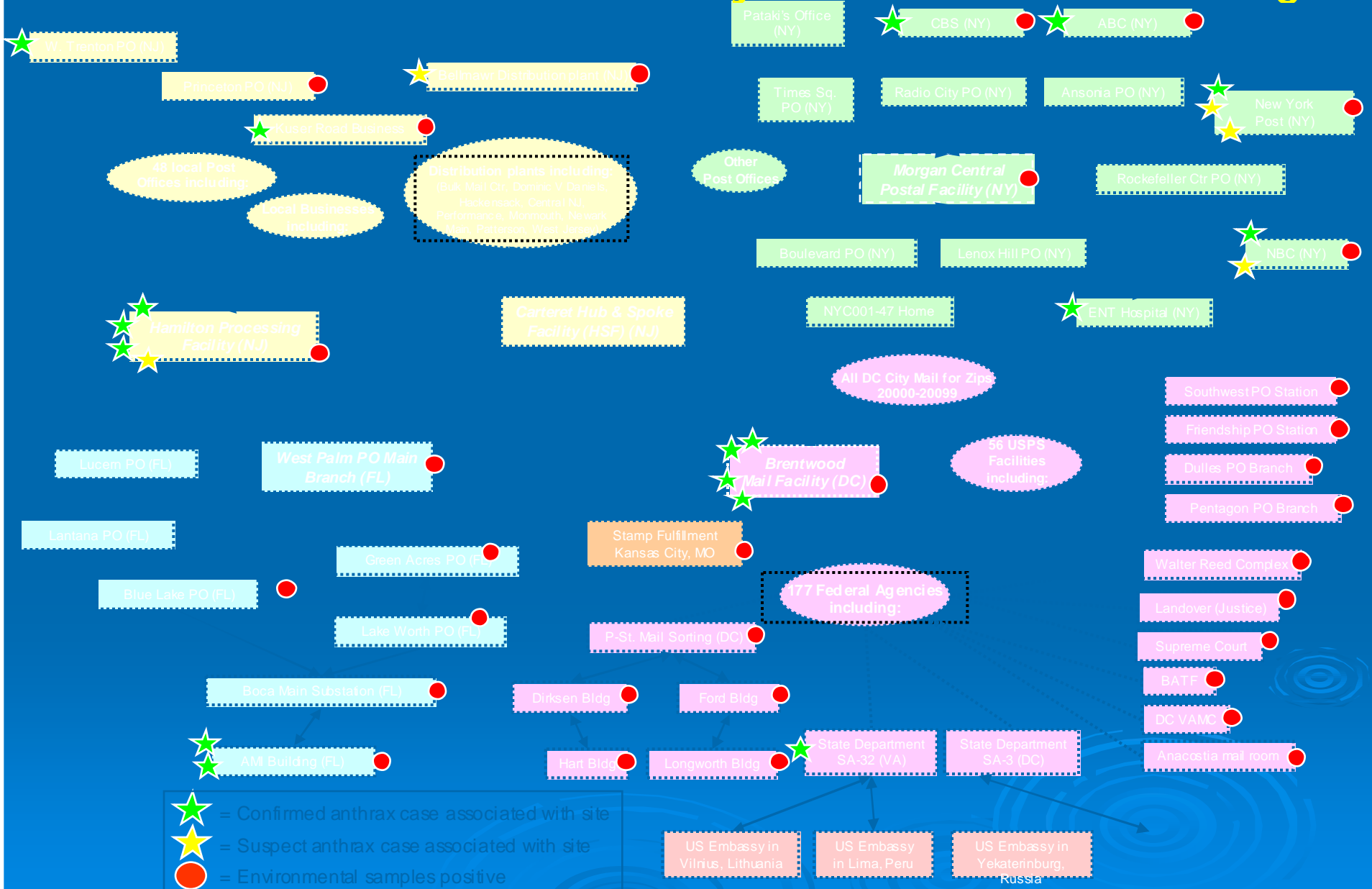
Authorities Discovering  
How Little They Know

CDC

# First Senate Letter: Postmarked 10/9/01



# Mail Flow in Florida, New Jersey, New York, and Washington,



November 7, 2001

# Chaos Theory as a Framework

- Anthrax attacks led to a cosmology episode (collapse of sensemaking)
- Self-organization—emergence of new structures and relationships

# Media Relations at CDC Prior to Anthrax Attacks

- Media relations was one division in an Office of Communication—9 press officers
- Responded to media inquiries (20,000/year)
- Promoted agency's research in press releases
- Few press events—always held in DC or NYC
- Decentralized web

# What Chaos Looked Like Communication Activity During Anthrax Attacks

- 23 phone press briefings (1,909 journalists)
- 44 press releases
- 7,737 press calls
- 306 broadcast interviews
- 18,000 public inquiries
- 10 Satellite training programs reaching 10.3 million



# Challenge of Communicating Uncertainty

**Attacks unprecedented**

**Little scientific evidence to work with**

**Fear that acknowledging uncertainty leads to panic**

**Changing practices based on evolving knowledge treated as mistakes**

**Reluctance of scientists to make recommendations with inadequate evidence**

# Challenge of Collaboration Within and Across Organizations

Who's in charge

- Clashing organizational cultures, e.g., CDC, FBI, USPS

Developing trust in highly stressful situations



# Challenge of Satisfying 24/7 Competitive Media

Information rapidly changing

Information new and highly  
technical

Attacks on media created more  
outrage and anxiety

Clash between scientific and  
criminal traditions



# The Challenge of Speed

- Time pressures prevents one from using formative research techniques—theory and research must be internalized
- Spokespeople must internalize risk communication principles
- Websites, hotlines must be updated rapidly and continuously.

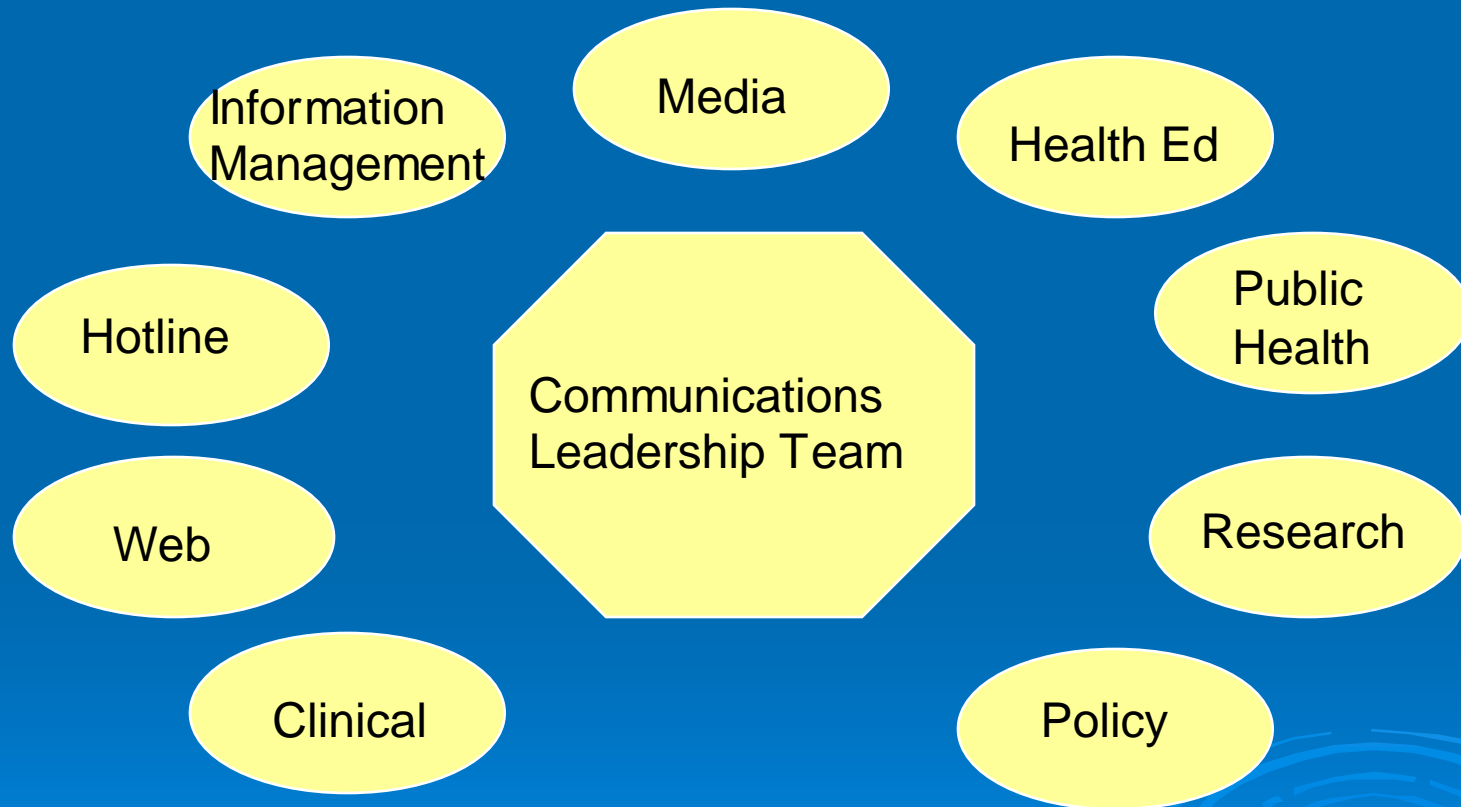
# Critical Phases of Self-Organization During the Crisis

- Tripled # of press officers to create two staffs
- New work schedule—4 days on 3 days off, 14-16 hour days
- Nearly daily press conferences—first on phone only then both face and phone
- Centralized web info
- Hotline contract to manage public calls
- Expanded stakeholders channels

# Emergency Communication System Emerged Out of Crisis

- Each major stakeholder group needed dedicated communication staff
- Channels had to be reciprocal and established prior to crisis
- Speed was critical—web updates in hour
- Communication must be coordinated and consistent across levels of government

# CDC's Emergency Communication System



# Importance of Communication

- “During the anthrax crisis as in no other, it became obvious that public communication had become in some sense fully as important as—if not even more important than—the line duties of senior decision makers. “
  - Jeffrey Koplan, Director of CDC during anthrax