

# EMERGING TRENDS IN CRISIS NEGOTIATIONS

By Dan Oblinger

*For time and the world do not stand still. Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future.*

— John F. Kennedy

**P**olice negotiators are curious creatures. They are, in most instances, sworn police officers functioning in an American institution that has a long tradition of resisting change, while at the same time scrambling to keep up with rapidly evolving technology. The exchange of information and trends in human behavior are no longer constrained by time, geography or economics. The speed of change in our social fabric can only properly be described as viral.

## MOORE'S LAW

Computer chip manufacturers have long understood the pace of change in their industry. Gordon E. Moore, co-founder of Intel, noted in 1965 that the number of transis-

---

**Rapid changes in technology and social interaction directly impact the crisis negotiator ... for us, lagging behind the times could be the difference between life and death.**

---

tors on integrated circuits was doubling every two years, and believed this trend would continue. It has. His industry now uses "Moore's Law" to guide planning, research and development. The law represents exponential growth of computing power. This increase in technology leads to the growing

complexity of the negotiations arena.

Rapid changes in technology and social interaction directly impact the crisis negotiator. The modern negotiator would do well to heed President Kennedy's warning. For us, lagging behind the times could be the difference between life and death. The operational environment of the modern crisis negotiator has vastly transformed from the early 1970s when the concept of hostage negotiations was in its infancy. It is incumbent upon police administrators, technology firms serving the industry and each negotiator to look to the future of crisis negotiations to prepare for success in an ever-changing world.

### TRENDS

There is no shortage of social and technological trends that impact the crisis negotiator's craft. Here are three examples:

**1. The three dimensions of negotiating using digital media.** The basic tools of empathy, active listening and rapport are the same as they have always been. But the negotiator is no longer restricted to communicating empathy or listening attentively while face-to-face or on a throw phone. The various dimensions of digital media pose special advantages and disadvantages to police negotiators.

**1D (One Dimension)** — Text-based messaging is increasingly popular for communications across all demographics. Whether sending and receiving SMS or MMS messages by cell phone, sending emails or using texting services embedded in social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook, barricaded subjects and negotiators lose non-verbal and "paraverbal" communication. This is critical because how people speak and how they look when they speak are both vital to comprehension and rapport. One potential advantage is the ease of coaching or crowd-sourcing negotiations when they are sent and

received 140 characters or less at a time. The message of the team can be carefully prepared before sending.

**2D (Two Dimensions)** — The traditional medium of negotiations has been voice. Whether on a throw phone or loud hailer, or more recently a cell phone, our industry has become oriented toward voice-to-voice communications. We have become masters of interpreting emotion from the spoken word over a phone line. The negotiation by phone still lacks non-verbal communications, but allows coaching and sharing of information between primary negotiator and team.

---

**One potential advantage is the ease of coaching or crowd-sourcing negotiations when they are sent and received 140 characters or less at a time. The message of the team can be carefully prepared before sending.**

---

**3D (Three Dimensions)** — One complicated feature of modern digital media for negotiators is the advent of live-streaming video. These video chats are much like a face-to-face negotiation. Experienced negotiators are already aware of the peculiar nature of this way of communicating. The negotiator is on an island, unable to receive coaching or intelligence updates. They must guard their own non-verbal communications. Mobile devices with video chat capabilities are no longer a novelty. Negotiators who wish to build empathy and rapport with a tech-savvy subject should be prepared to go face-to-face on Facetime, Skype or any other streaming video service.

---

**Negotiators who wish to build empathy and rapport with a tech-savvy subject should be prepared to go face-to-face on Facetime, Skype or any other streaming video service.**

---

The future will bring more and more subjects who prefer 1D and 3D communications. Text messaging is overwhelmingly popular, especially when the sender wishes to maintain some emotional distance from the receiver. Video chatting is similarly expanding in popularity. Teams should practice and build robust technical capabilities in communicating by text, social media and video. An example would be investing in a "sanitized" booth or area in the command vehicle where video chatting can occur without compromising the tactical element's communications or intelligence.

**2. Intelligence and counter-intelligence.** Forward-thinking negotiation teams understand that they operate in an information-rich but knowledge-poor environment. Properly analyzed intelligence about the negotiation problem is a commodity that ought to be purchased with time and effort. This knowledge of the suspect's capabilities, mindset and intention is available

---

**Text messaging is overwhelmingly popular, especially when the sender wishes to maintain some emotional distance from the receiver.**

---

for those who work for it. Knowledge will increasingly become the difference between success and failure.

In order to leverage intelligence, teams must invest in training and tools. Ensuring negotiators have access to all available electronic sources of information, including social media, is paramount. Using emerging technology should be an ongoing endeavor.

One under-explored technology for negotiators is unmanned aerial vehicles. A promising platform for gathering information in a standoff is a “multi-copter” with live video capabilities. These hobby-sized and radio-controlled vehicles are small, affordable and capable of loitering over an area providing high-resolution views of a suspect’s activities.

Unfortunately, intelligence is a two-way street. Traditionally, tactical teams have made it a goal to secure and isolate the ability of barricaded subjects to communicate with others. Containment is an important principle in resolving crisis negotiations safely. Now, with the proliferation of wireless communications via cellular phone and WiFi internet, isolating the subject is a difficult proposition.

The barricaded person can use technology to view real-time news feeds from the outer perimeter, tweet with friends and neighbors to gain intelligence on police movements, monitor their own wireless cameras, speak with their friends, clergy or newscasters between negotiator phone calls, and generally gather their own intelligence on the activities of the police. With a simple search engine query, your subject may know just as much about the negotiator as the team knows about the suspect!

Teams must limit information available to the suspect that endangers the negotiator’s mission. Best practices would be monitoring social media,

properly managing relationships with traditional media outlets, and practicing efficient electronic containment with wireless and Internet providers.

**3. Mental health resources.** A negotiator often deals with suspects suffering from severe and persistent mental illness. This is not new. The medical understanding of these illnesses continues to evolve and negotiators must stay abreast of these changes. There are

---

**With a simple search engine query, your subject may know just as much about the negotiator as the team knows about the suspect!**

---

large-scale trends in mental illness that directly impact negotiations.

A good example is the vast number of Americans who have served in combat theaters during a 12-year long war. Dealing with a warfighter in crisis is not the same as a civilian. The volume of returning service members with symptoms of post-traumatic stress leads to increases in contact with those members who fall into crisis. Building rapport with the mentally ill represents a challenge to the negotiations team and emphasizes the importance of thorough preparation.

Future success means seeking specialized training, such as the Crisis Intervention Team training model popularized by the Memphis Police and the University of Memphis, or Mental Health First Aid Curriculum imported



**www.TacticalDrawings.com**

Choose from monthly updated drawings or commission your own drawing.  
520-403-7602 jk@tacticaldrawings.com  
Artist Joonho Kim A volunteer chaplain for Pima County Sheriff's Dept, Tucson, AZ

from Australia. It is also advantageous to build relationships before the crisis with local mental health providers and the nearest U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs campus to ensure they can assist the negotiators when needed. Many larger teams have incorporated qualified mental health professionals as advisers to their team structure. These professionals serve as a guide for complex negotiations with the mentally ill.

### THE FUTURE

The future of crisis negotiations means more technology, more information to be mined from electronic sources and constant change. Successful negotiators will be those who embrace technology as a tool for maximizing the effect of their unchanging commitment to active listening and empathy. This strategy is proven to be best for meeting the challenges of a complex world. ■

---

---

**Successful negotiators will be those who embrace technology as a tool for maximizing the effect of their unchanging commitment to active listening and empathy.**

---

---

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sgt. Dan Oblinger is a hostage negotiator for the Wichita (KS) Police Department. He is a nationally recognized speaker on the subjects of intelligence-led negotiations and the future of crisis negotiations. He can be reached at [doblinger@wichita.gov](mailto:doblinger@wichita.gov).

#### Web resources

[facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com) (Use the search bar at the top)  
[twitter.com/search-advanced](https://twitter.com/search-advanced)  
[twoogel.com](https://twoogel.com) (Searches tweets)  
[whostalking.com](https://whostalking.com)  
[Itsatwap.com](https://itsatwap.com) (Tweets by physical location)  
[Accurant/TLO.com](https://Accurant/TLO.com) (Paid and free information resources for LEOs)

#### Helpful apps

Skype (Video chat)  
Google+ (Text/video chat)  
Facebook (Text/video chat)  
Snap Chat (Pictures + chat)

#### Resources

[mentalhealthfirstaid.org/cs/](https://mentalhealthfirstaid.org/cs/)  
[cit.memphis.edu](https://cit.memphis.edu)  
[warriorcare.dodlive.mil/wounded-warrior-resources/operation-warfighter/](https://warriorcare.dodlive.mil/wounded-warrior-resources/operation-warfighter/)