

The News Scoop To End All News Scoops

How NBC Radio beat everybody else, including all of television, in the Iran-hostage-release story.

By Don Blair

To many in the news business, January 18, 1981 may linger in their minds as “a date that will live in infamy,” but to a few of us who became intricately caught up in the events which unfolded so dramatically that day, it is a day of which we remain immensely proud. It is a feeling that was not shared by most executives at either the once-great NBC Radio Network or (especially) at NBC-TV’s *Nightly News*.

The “Iran Hostage Story” was in its 442nd day and we all knew that a break was imminent. Jimmy Carter was about to leave the White House and Ronald Reagan was practically standing in the doorway. Frankly, we were all very tired of trying to find something new to say about a situation which did not seem to change much, week after week, month after month. Daily network features would begin with “The Iran Hostage Crisis. . . . Day number such and such. Tiresome.

It was a Sunday and I was on the desk to write and deliver six hourly five-minute newscasts when suddenly the open line from London boomed out—“New York . . . this is Kennedy. It’s over . . . the hostages are coming home. Put me on!” The NBC Radio Network’s London bureau chief was breathless, having just raced up four flights of stairs to the bureau’s studio and office.

This was basically a one-source story and there’s a time-honored rule in journalism: two sources on every story. If not, hold it until you DO find a second source.

Susan, an employee who Fred hired largely because she spoke Farsi, the Iranian language, had raced to find Fred outside their building to tell him some very dramatic news. Susan had fled Iran after the Shah had been overthrown but she still had friends back in Teheran. This allowed her to converse with a friend at Teheran radio, in his language,

and he told Susan that Pars, Iran's official news agency, quoting the head of the Iranian hostage negotiating team Behzad Nabavi, was reporting that agreement had been reached with the U.S. Government.

This was basically a one-source story and there's a time-honored rule in journalism—two sources on every story. If not . . . hold it until you DO find a second source. Fred was having his doubts but after receiving a Telex of the agreement (second source?) and hearing Susan say that the Prime Minister's interview was on tape and being held for release for several more hours, he decided it was valid enough to run with.

That is when he breathlessly called NBC Radio in New York, where our desk producer that day immediately invoked the two-source rule, at which point I stood up and told him, "That's the best bureau chief in the business up on that speaker. If he's wrong, then we're both out of work . . . I'm putting him on the air." I marched into the studio (yes, he could have stopped me but he didn't—perhaps because of the tone of my voice), did a one-minute talk-up to alert the network and here is a verbatim of what followed:

Blair: This is an NBC News Hotline Report. This is Don Blair, NBC News. We take you now to NBC's Fred Kennedy in London.

Kennedy: This is exclusive! It's an answer (pause) to all our prayers. The prayers of a nation have been answered! The captivity of the 52 American hostages is ending, and freedom, freedom is absolutely just around the corner! We have been told

in an exclusive interview with Pars News Agency, the official Iranian news agency, that has just spoken with the Prime Minister's advisor and the head of Iran's hostage negotiation team, Mr. Nabavi. He said the final reply from the U.S. government had been received a few minutes ago, and they have reached an agreement. Nabavi says there are some small disagreements, but they are not important. They are not important at all. He says that an agreement has been reached.

Blair: OK Fred. Don Blair in New York. Uh, where do we go from here? Who do we hear from next before we can nail this thing to the wall?

Kennedy: Well, from here it's simple. Freedom! From here, if we were going to look at the logistics, the scenario, this is going to be announced throughout the world very shortly, uh, officially. BY THE OTHER NETWORKS AND THE OTHER WIRE SERVICES. They will pick it up soon. Uh, from that point, the, uh, the hostages will be checked by the six Algerian doctors, which are in Teheran. From there they will be moved to Teheran airport and put on an Algerian aircraft, chartered aircraft, which is arriving in Teheran tonight, and then flown to Algiers. From that point, we understand, they will be turned over to the Americans, and the tricky financial and legal complications, which have gone on over the last week in Algiers, will be finally completed, and, uh, Iran will get its assets. They will be unfrozen, and America will get its 52 hostages back.

Blair: OK Fred, just one more thing to wind up quickly here. Again, who

is the source for this report that the agreement has been reached? Who is

Kennedy: (interrupting) The source is Pars. Pars—the official news agency of Iran. They have just finished having an interview with the head of Iran’s hostage negotiation team, Mr. Nabavi

Blair: (interrupting) OK, Fred

Kennedy: (continuing) Mr. Nabavi says we have an agreement. There are (pause) a few small technicalities, but they are, quote, “not important.” What is important is, we have an agreement. It is settled. We are in agreement with Washington. Everything is all go for the 52 hostages to come home to friends and families. Don, it’s sensational, tremendous news.

Blair: Thank you Fred, and I can understand why you’re out of breath. Thanks very, very much for bringing us the news we’ve been waiting for, for 442 days. NBC’s Fred Kennedy in London. An agreement has been reached. We now wait for the details on when and where the Americans will head for home. Thank you very, very much Fred Kennedy in London. This has been an NBC News Hotline report. (NBC chimes).

Since our newscasts could be heard throughout the halls of 30 Rockefeller Plaza (in all NBC offices there), *Nightly News* was getting no such report from correspondent Garrick Utley in London, and their execs in our building

reportedly went ballistic. “Who the hell were we to go with such a report?” They were in essence saying—if they didn’t know about it then it didn’t happen.

Should the reader be wondering why I repeated myself a few times? Asking the same question of Fred Kennedy more than once? It was to deliberately lengthen what I instantly knew was an incredible scoop and that our network was leading the pack. I simply did not want it to be a 30-second flash and then end. We were collaborating on a big piece of history and I must have considered the reality that we both could have been doing our last broadcast so . . . let’s make it a good one, let’s make it last.

In the news business a one-hour lead is great — five hours is an eternity.

Fred Kennedy sweated out the next five hours waiting for “those other networks” to catch the story and go with it. When Teheran radio finally did broadcast their taped interview with Behzad Nabavi it was monitored by the Associated Press in nearby Cyprus and AP immediately posted a bulletin announcing the release, fully five hours after Kennedy’s newsbreak. But even before that, the NBC Radio London bureau was being besieged by phone calls from every other news organization on earth. The BBC was going with NBC Radio News live . . . complete with the chimes. TV crews from all over London were camped outside our radio network offices watching and filming the frantic activity.

NBC Television’s *Nightly News* was not shy about saying it had broken the story but it never specifically said it had been the radio network that actually

pulled it off. Just NBC News. Fred got a royal chewing out for his audacity but kept his job. As for myself, I was the guy who bent the golden rule but I don't recall anything in the way of a rebuke. I still feel, considering the source and his well-earned reputation, it was the right decision to make.

Months later, I called Walt Dibble, news director of WTIC, Hartford, one of our oldest and best affiliates. "What did he think of that Sunday in January?" I asked. "Your finest hour," Walt replied, "a perfect example of what radio news is all about." And he added,

"Cassettes of you and Kennedy are on my desk right now and no WTIC time salesman or woman leaves the building without one." I couldn't have asked for a better endorsement and to this day I still have to smile when I recall Fred's sly comment during his "exclusive" that soon (he never thought it would turn out to be five hours) the story would be picked up by the OTHER networks and wire services. It was an irresistible comment. I probably would have done something similar had I been in his shoes. In the news business a one-hour lead is great—five hours is an eternity.

Don Blair is a veteran of 51 years in broadcasting: 25 years in network radio, of which 15 were with the NBC Radio Network. Previous affiliations include Mutual, WCBS NewsRadio 88 and the ABC Entertainment Radio Network. He has been retired since 1989 and is now writing, hosting and producing programs for cable TV.