

Would you want to know about a terrorist threat at any cost?

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As we approach the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks this weekend, many people may be thinking about the possibility of future terrorist strikes. If the government knew about a concrete threat, would you want it revealed to you, regardless of the consequences? A new study led by professor V. Kerry Smith of the W. P. Carey School of Business at ASU provides surprising details about how Americans view secrecy very differently, depending on the type of plot.

“There are dramatic differences in the willingness to accept government secrecy across various types of threats,” Smith said. “According to our surveys, policies that would withhold information about terrorist plots involving commercial airlines would not be acceptable to more than 80 percent of the respondents, but information about threats to airports or the financial system could be withheld from the perspective of the majority of the respondents.”

In December, Smith and his colleagues, Carol Mansfield of RTI International and H. Allen Klaiber of Penn State, surveyed about 2,000 Americans to find out their beliefs about government secrecy in connection with terrorism. The researchers believe this was “the first national survey of people’s attitudes toward public deception in the name of security.” The sample included adults from an Internet panel run by Knowledge Networks. The respondents were based in 33 large metropolitan areas, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Washington, D.C.

Participants were asked about three scenarios (summarized below), and they gave very different responses about whether to release the information in each case:

1. Should the government release the true cause of an airplane crash due to a terrorist attack, even if that will have major [economic effects](#) on commercial airlines, give the terrorists notoriety and create an increased fear of flying?

Release - 83 percent/Withhold - 17 percent

2. Should the government announce the details of a major plot to destroy airports in Los Angeles and New York after the terrorists have been captured, even though it might give away the techniques law enforcement used and make it harder to uncover future plots?

Release - 23 percent/Withhold - 77 percent

3. Should the government announce the details of a major terrorist plot to disrupt Internet service at commercial banks and prevent the processing of credit and debit card sales across the United States for 48 hours, if the terrorists have been captured, even though it would give away the techniques used to identify the suspects and reveal specifics of the security network?

Release - 24 percent/Withhold 76 percent

A second survey using different participants in four major cities in April confirmed the same results. Overall, Americans want to know about threats to commercial airplanes, even if that might result in significant damage to the U.S. economy. However, people are willing to tolerate a high level of secrecy about some other terrorist threats.

This was consistent regardless of whether or not the survey respondents lived in metropolitan areas likely to be potential terrorist targets. Women and people living in married households were more willing, in general, to

support withholding information. Those with a college degree were less willing to allow limits on information.

“In a democracy, people allow their elected leaders to manage public affairs, but they expect to be told the truth,” Mansfield said. “This can create problems when the obligation to tell the public the truth conflicts with intelligence operations or economic security.”

Smith added, “Since 9/11, many high-ranking security officials believe secrecy is the best recipe for safety and that they are acting in Americans’ best interest. However, our research shows that people are only willing to have the government withhold certain types of information, regardless of the potential consequences for specific industries or future threats. As a result, the challenge for policy makers is to incorporate the preferences of the people facing the increased terrorist risk when the government makes these decisions.”

The new research was supported by the United States Department of Homeland Security through the Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events (CREATE). It was recently published by the National Bureau of Economic Research and can be found at www.nber.org/papers/w16232 .

Provided by Arizona State University

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