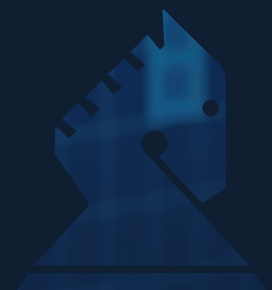


# CRISIS

## Communication Handbook



2024





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We all live in a time of crisis. Crisis can happen at any time, at any scale, at any place, and with the involvement of various actors. All crises are unique in its way, but none of them should be neglected. Taking into consideration the complex and multifaceted nature of the national, regional, and international crisis, which requires a comprehensive approach, organizations and states should be prepared to effectively and timely manage the crisis.

Considering the fact that “Every little thing counts in a crisis,”<sup>1</sup> being well prepared for crises is critical to maintaining and developing trust in our society and institutions and increasing state and societal resilience.

Crises can be destructive and damage democracy, fundamental values, and trust in institutions and cause reputational and financial damage. But if crises are handled well – not least through effective crisis communication – crises can also be opportunities for development, improvement, and renewal. Crisis communication is an indivisible part of crisis management endeavors and taking into consideration emerging technological advancement and a complex information environment, it bears increased importance.

The purpose of the Crisis Communication Handbook is to contribute to crisis preparedness and to give the reader knowledge and understanding of how to plan, manage/organize and learn from crises in the best possible way. The focus is on communication - the art of creating shared meaning, which is especially challenged during crises in both societies and organizations.

The Crisis Communication Handbook gives clear guidance on strategic, operational and tactical levels and equips readers with theoretical and practical knowledge on crisis communication. The Handbook, which is based on the best international practices and research, aims at providing clear understanding on fundamentals of crisis communication, communication principles and mechanisms that need to be considered when turning strategy into tactics. The Handbook also focuses on 3 phases of the crisis communication – pre-crisis, during crisis and post-crisis- and provides concrete recommendations on course of actions that can be tailored to the specific organizations’ needs upon necessity. The Handbook pays particular importance to relations with media and develops ideas and recommendations for news media relations during a crisis. In order to provide readers with a clear understanding on practical aspects of crisis communication, the document analyzes the best international practices and portrays specific case study to illustrate challenges and opportunities of crisis communication.

Having clear insight into each of the above-mentioned areas of crisis communication, will largely contribute to effectively and timely handling all kinds of crises and minimize damage to the maximum possible extent.

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<sup>1</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, “Crisis Management & Disaster Recovery,” <https://yellowrailroad.com/what-we-do-1/crisis-management-disaster-recovery/>; (retrieved on 29.08.2024).

By Jesper Falkheimer

We live in an era of paradoxes. On the one hand, scientists produce more and more knowledge, and we can access new information instantly due to the digital transformation. On the other hand, we experience an increase in complexity, volatility, and uncertainty. It is therefore no surprise that societies repeatedly end up in different types of problematic and threatening situations. Sometimes these incidents and events have major negative consequences for the fundamental functions in society, organizations as well as for the individuals who are affected. Crises occur, need to be handled and communication is one of the main tools.

Crises happen all the time at different levels – in societies, organizations as well as with individuals. Sometimes a crisis is very limited and mostly of concern for a small group or an individual (for example related to cases of illness or family tragedies), sometimes crises have organizational consequences (such as a reputational crisis due to mismanagement). What is perceived as a crisis is always in the eyes of the beholder. But in this Handbook, we mainly focus on crises that may be serious threats to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of society, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making critical and fast decisions.<sup>2</sup> Even if the focus is crises that threaten societal structures it also includes advice about organizational crises, where the consequences are narrower and more limited to events or incidents that threaten organizational trust, reputation, and goals. This is so since in practice these two different crisis perspectives both add to each other and may lead to conflicting strategies – defending public or organizational interest. But crisis communication always involves organizations since they act as “the entity responsible for managing the crisis” and have a legal responsibility for managing many crises.<sup>3</sup>

While there are physical events and incidents such as accidents or disasters that create crises, there are also crises that amplify due to moral scandals or experienced misbehavior. It is important to understand that a crisis is always about how people create meaning about what is or has happened, not necessarily about what is or has happened. That said, for professional crisis communicators the goal must always be that people get a correct and fair perception of what is happening or what has happened and may act and respond based on facts rather than misperceptions. Obviously, some people do have a direct experience of an event or incident, but the overall majority in society is dependent on secondary sources such as news media, social media platforms, governmental or corporate information sources. Crises are mediated for most of us. This is why crisis communication is such an interesting but complex practice, and why fact-based, fast, and transparent crisis communication is so important for the functioning of society and its institutions.

Crisis communication may be defined as goal-oriented communication before, during, and after crises in relation to different groups, stakeholders and society. In practice crisis communication includes different operations such as:

<sup>2</sup> U. Rosenthal, M. T. Charles, and P. t Hart, eds., *Coping with Crisis: The Management of Disasters, Riots and Terrorism* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1989), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022).

- Build legitimacy (capital of trust) through strategic communications among the public, for your organization or institution in everyday work.
- Prepare and implement crisis communication organization as a coordination effort.
- Develop action plans and checklists.
- Train and exercise crisis communication scenarios.
- Preparation and activation of the crisis communication team.
- Build relationships with important stakeholders, collaborators, and opinion leaders for resilience.
- Produce and disseminate information to the public during a crisis through various media channels.
- Give instructional warnings and advice to the public about how to act in the event of a crisis event with potentially dangerous consequences.
- Communicate with journalists through press conferences and other activities.
- Adapt crisis information and communication strategies to different target groups, situations, and contexts.
- Support management with crisis communication advice and information, participate in the handling of a crisis including the decision-making, and disseminate information about decisions.
- Support co-workers with crisis information during and after the crisis.
- Listen and audit responses (attitudes and behavior) related to the crisis and crisis communication activities.
- Improvise in a strategic framework during the crisis due to unforeseen events.
- Analyze the outcome of the crisis.
- Establish fora and forms for learning after the crisis which may reduce the effects of a new crisis.
- Build new relationships and, if needed, a new reputation after a crisis.





## 2.1. What does crisis communication really mean?

Crisis communication is a given combination of *crisis* and *communication*. As mentioned earlier a *crisis* in this Handbook is defined as events or incidents which threaten societal fundamental structures. But the word *crisis* originally comes from the Greek *krisis* and does not necessarily mean something negative. In fact, *krisis* as a word is related to illness and stands for a deciding moment or a critical turning point which may lead to recovery or death. Even in societal crises this definition may have some value since some societal crises indeed may lead to something better, if managed in a beneficial way. This is obviously not the case with crises related to disasters or accidents but may be relevant when it comes to some political, financial or organizational crises. A related concept worth mentioning here is risk. Risk means that there is a latent and potential threat that something will occur – it is the step before crisis. If we learn to identify and manage risks, we will have less crises. A crisis may be called an extreme event, an extraordinary event or a serious social disturbance. The word *crisis* is also used by some researchers as the condition when an organization cannot handle an extreme event in a satisfactory manner. It means that if a difficult situation is managed in a good way, the crisis will not occur. On the other hand, a crisis which is badly managed and communicated may lead to a double crisis – a second crisis related to the fact that the first crisis was mismanaged. This occurs very often in the so-called post-crisis phase (we will present the phases later) when news media and other actors scrutinize the management of the crises and may find that information was uncoordinated, rare and sometimes even false.

The word *communication* comes from the Latin word *communicare* and can be defined in two ways. Either one defines communication as the transmission and exchange of information between a sender and a receiver or mass of receivers, or one defines communication as sharing common meaning and sense between participants in a symmetric process. The first view is called a transmission perspective, and the second view is called a sensemaking perspective. Both perspectives have their merits even if the sensemaking view is more relevant if one aim to create deep human understanding and a common meaning, since it builds on dialogue as a foundation. But one of them does not necessarily exclude the other, since they focus on different aspects and phases of the communication process. The transmission perspective is still a primary approach in crisis situations when an organization needs to inform a large group of people as fast as possible. One example of this is during an evacuation situation, where instructive information needs to be transmitted to all concerned actors at once through public information systems and news media. But there is often also a need of adding a sensemaking communication approach in these situations, when people that are resistant to evacuate need to have interpersonal dialogues with emergency personnel (that still have a persuasive aim, so these are not true dialogues of course).

## 2.2. Three fundamental crisis communication approaches

The crisis communication ideal is based on the idea that one should be open and inform as completely as possible about what happens in a crisis and what consequences it has for the public to protect fundamental values such as the life and health of citizens. There are three fundamental crisis communication approaches defined by different overall objectives<sup>4</sup>:



*Instructing information:* Crisis information that tell the public, stakeholder and individuals how to react to the crisis with public safety as the directing principle. This includes communication efforts concerning the physical handling of the crisis, for example information about evacuation or other forms of emergency communication. A typical crisis message following this approach would be a simple, clear and mass communicated instruction telling people what to do. Successful instructing crisis information was probably easier to manage when societies were not so multivocal and diverse regarding media platforms. On the other side digital platforms make it possible to reach diverse groups with targeted messages instantly.



*Adjusting information:* Crisis information that helps people psychologically cope with the magnitude of the crisis. This involves communication efforts concerning the psychological state of the public or groups during a crisis, aiming to decrease uncertainty, avoid panic, and amplification of crises. A typical adjusting crisis message focuses on reassuring the public that there is a plan and leadership and that things are taken care of.



*Reputation management communication:* Crisis information that will affect the legitimacy or image of the organization among the public and stakeholders. This includes image repair strategies (from denials to excuses) and other communication efforts intended to improve an organization's reputation before, during, or after a crisis. Instructional and adjusting crisis communication needs to be prioritized in all crises, putting the public in the center, while reputational crisis communication mainly serves the self-interest of organizations. It is also a fact that the reputational damage of organizations in a crisis becomes severe if instructing and adjusting communication is not working well.

## 2.3. Different types of crises

Aside from the division between organizational and societal crises, which are tied together in crisis communication practice, it is important to understand different types of crises – since the type also affects which strategy to use.

Firstly, you can differentiate between crises caused by nature and those caused by humans. But many crises obviously involve a combination of these.

Secondly, you can make a division between when crises are unintentional or intentional. Among the unintentional, we find accidental crises such as natural disasters, epidemics, and (most) technical accidents. Among the intentional crises, we find terrorism, fraud, riots, and sabotage, as well as cyber-attacks against companies or a government.





Thirdly, a common typology divides crises into different characters: natural crises, technological crises, social crises, leadership crises, and economic crises. These crises are also linked to each other in the sense that one may cause the other.

<sup>4</sup> David L. Sturges, "Communication through Crisis: A Strategy for Organizational Survival", *Management Communication Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1994): 297-316.

- *Natural crises* consist of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, landslides, storms, severe flooding, and similar events.
- *Technical crises* include accidents (for example airplane and train accidents), fires, breakdowns of technical facilities such as power plants but also product defects.
- *Social crises* often deal with crises such as riots, violent demonstrations, and attacks, but can also apply to famine and emigration from an area.
- *Leadership crises* consist of, among other things, mismanagement and fraud.
- *Environmental crises*, which have similarities with natural crises and other crises but may be related to intentional action or climate change.
- *Economic crises* concern issues such as financial breakdowns, stock market crashes, and currency crises.

Natural disasters are location-bound in origin but can produce effects and major consequences elsewhere. Technical crises of a larger format have many times more uncertain consequences but have a clearer dimension of responsibility. As mentioned earlier some crises can be attributed to different types at different stages. A natural crisis can result in a social crisis, like the tsunami disaster that wiped out the whole Aceh Province in Indonesia 2004–2005. A technological mistake can create a natural crisis, like the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986 that happened due to a flawed reactor design operated with inadequately trained staff, leading to a natural crisis. A leadership crisis can lead to an economic crisis, such as the 2007-2008 financial crisis which was partly caused by financial institutions, for uncontrolled lending and unscrupulous bundling and selling of securities. All kinds of crises may end with a *communication crisis* where the lack of resilient and effective crisis communications leads to political, public, or corporate crises.

A fourth division of crises is based on the course or passage of events, i.e. how fast the crisis event develops and ceases. This division leads to four types of crises<sup>5</sup>:

-  The fast-burning
-  The cathartic
-  The slow-burning
-  The long shadow crisis

The fast-burning crisis occurs and ends quickly, the cathartic crisis ends quickly after a slow emergence, the slow-burning crisis creeps forward slowly and slowly fades away, and the long shadow crisis may occur quickly but creates continued further problems, often of a political nature. Many accidents, such as major flight accidents, are fast-burning crises. Fraud in an organization leading to bankruptcy may be an example of a cathartic crisis. Flooding is an example of a slow-burning crisis. The earthquake in the Indian Ocean in 2004 that caused several tsunamis on December 26 leading to a human disaster in many countries may be an example of a long shadow crisis.

<sup>5</sup> P:t Hart and A. Boin, "Between Crisis and Normalcy: The Long Shadow of Post-Crisis Politics," in *Managing Crises: Threats, Dilemmas, Opportunities*, ed. Uriel Rosenthal (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 2001).

Finally, one of the more well-known and used definitions of crisis types is *situational crisis communication* theory, SCCT<sup>6</sup>. The latter is based on the understanding of how people attribute the causes of crises to other people's behaviors and events – in other words, who is to blame. Most of us tend to project responsibility on others, also in crisis situations. This is also valid for organizations where top leaders may do everything they can to avoid taking – and communicating – responsibility. For example, this means that the cause of an accident is at first considered to be related to some external factor, rather than being related to the organizational routines or internal factors. In SCCT, the crisis analysis takes its starting point in the current situation in that an assessment is made of how people are supposed to relate to and perceive a crisis and its causes based on both emotional and cognitive reasons. According to SCCT, we can typically find *three different crisis types*.

- When the organization is also a *victim* (attributed weak responsibility which means that legitimacy or trust is hardly threatened at all). Typically, this includes natural disasters, false rumors, terrorist attacks, or sabotage.
- When the organization experiences an unintended crisis due to *unfortunate circumstances* (the organization is attributed minimal responsibility, which means a moderate threat to reputation or trust). Typically, this includes technical errors and accidents.
- When the organization is *responsible* and could have prevented the crisis (attributed great responsibility that leads to a serious threat to legitimacy or trust). Typically, this includes accidents caused by people (managers, employees) e.g. in the form of industrial accidents or products exploding, and misdemeanors (e.g. cheating, breaking the law or rules and taking risks that lead to accidents).



After concluding the crisis type – which may not be totally clear in the beginning of the process – it must be established whether there are aggravating circumstances from previous crises and what trust capital the organization has from before. After that, a communication strategy is chosen that is suitable regarding the situation, type of crisis, trust capital and previous crisis history. Based on the SCCT, there is some general advice for crisis communication strategy. Among other things, to:

- Only engage in instructive (e.g. factual warnings) and adaptive crisis communication (focus on psychological aspects) crisis communication during crises when the organization is a victim, has trust capital and lacks previous aggravating crises in its history.
- Act with mitigating crisis communication (don't take responsibility) during crises where the organization is a victim or in connection with unintended accidents.
- Make efforts with restorative crisis communication (take responsibility) during crises that are accidents or that could have been avoided where the organization has a previously weak trust capital.
- Make efforts with denial crisis communication when rumors, which are not true, are spread.
- Do not mix denial with diminishing or restorative crisis communication strategies.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy W. Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communications: Planning, Managing and Responding*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2022).

## 2.4. Crisis Communication, Crisis Management and the Role of Disinformation

Crisis management and crisis communication are two inseparable elements. Crisis management has a broader approach and contains other aspects. In a classical article crisis management is described with the following dimensions and actions<sup>7</sup>:

-  Proactive approach: In practice this entails focus in prevention, preparation (simulations) and detection (creating systems, routines, cultures which can interpret early crisis signals), as well as learning post-crisis through assessments.
-  Reactive approach: In practice this entails strategies and tactics for coping with the crisis, repairing as well as recovery and return to normalcy.

To manage a crisis largely means communicating since an organization is built up by communication, which creates the social structure that is the organization. Crisis communication naturally takes place when a crisis event has occurred, during the acute phase and the recovery phase. But as is shown in crisis management theory it is also important for organizations to communicate during other phases, during the preparation phase (if it exists) and during the learning phase. During the preparation phase communication can be decisive for the development of the crisis. But also, before a possible crisis, under regular operating conditions, risk communication is essential.

Governments and corporations with risky activities as well as authorities with responsibility for risk issues must communicate risk continuously, externally and internally. This risk communication is based on the risk analyses that every organization needs to do, where you identify the types of hazards, issues and problems that one can imagine being affected by and clarify what the consequences are which can follow – consequences of both technical and economic as well as social, political and societal nature.

Leaders and managers have an extremely important role when it comes to crisis communication. In addition to the ability to make decisions, they must be able to create understanding and bring about learning (as well as being able to end a crisis). Understanding (sensemaking) means, among other things, being able to identify a crisis and define it, state what it is about, and create meaning about the crisis. Communication skills are thus central for crisis managers:

**“Leaders who lack the ability to communicate cannot lead in crisis.”<sup>8</sup>**

Legitimacy and trust are central aspects of crisis work. Crisis managers must take care to become reliable and credible in their relationship practice and as sources of information:

**“The most important factor that determines the effectiveness of governmental crisis communication effort is, of course, the degree of credibility.”<sup>9</sup>**

<sup>7</sup> I. Mitroff, P. Shrivastava, and Firdaus E. Udawadia, "Effective Crisis Management," *The Academy of Management Executive* (1987-1989) 1, no. 4 (Nov. 1987): 283-292.

<sup>8</sup> Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, Eric K. Stern, and Bengt Sundelius, *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

Contemporary crisis communication practice also needs to understand how to identify, analyze and counter different forms of false information. The digital evolution and the development of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies may be used by crisis communication professionals, but they are also threats when used by malign actors. In this Handbook, we take the stance in established definitions of three forms of false information:

- Disinformation: *verifiably false information that is produced and shared with the intent to deceive and mislead.*
- Misinformation: *verifiably false information that is shared without an intent to mislead.*
- Malinformation: *information that deliberately misleads by twisting the meaning of truthful information)<sup>10</sup>*

In Chapter 4 we discuss these forms of false information further.

## 2.5. The Anatomy of a Crisis

A crisis usually goes through a few phases from the time it appears until it is over. The sequence of events basically consists of three phases – before, during, and after the crisis – which are usually called:

- the warning phase.
- the acute phase.
- the follow-up phase.

A somewhat more detailed division of the process states that we have five phases to deal with:

- the prevention phase.
- the preparation phase.
- the emergency phase.
- the recovery phase.
- the learning phase.

Prevention is about minimizing the risk by, for example, both physical and psychological means. Preparedness means preparing for an approaching crisis by, for example, developing systems for auditing and detecting potential crises, and informing people about where to get information if a crisis occurs. The acute phase is when the crisis event occurs and the first time of the impact of the crisis. Recovery means to get the organization's business or community life going and the social apparatus after the crisis. The learning phase is of the utmost importance to systematically and long-term take advantage of and appropriate the experiences

<sup>10</sup> Government Communication Service, RESIST 2: Counter-Disinformation Toolkit, 8.

you acquire during a crisis. Often the phases overlap and sometimes there is no time for preparation. The acute phase usually goes quickly into recovery – so as soon as the crisis management starts, the work to solve the problems brought about by the crisis, such as healing and repairing damage.

## **2.6. Do not forget the value of professional improvisation**

Aside from the definitions, divisions and plan models that have been introduced in this chapter, and will be developed later in the Handbook, there is a need to highlight the relevance of improvisation in crisis communication before moving on. Improvising stands in contrast to the emphasis on planning and linearity, but we know from experience and research that in a chaotic and rapidly changing world that is hard to plan for it is important to be able to react fast, even to shoot from the hip. In these situations, experience, intuition, and gut feeling is important. But it is not recommended to react in just any way without any thought whatsoever. Organizations' actions should be based on improvisation within a strategic framework.

Improvisation has to do with the ability to act with flexibility and adaptation, as well as not entirely following a certain template or plan. Improvisation is not for novices but demands training and exercising (see jazz musicians as role models). Improvisation comes with the long experience that provides security.



By Jesper Falkheimer

In the first chapter we mentioned two fundamental perspectives – communication as transmission (from a sender to a receiver) or as sensemaking (interchange between participants). In this chapter we will develop this reasoning and highlight some leading principles for crisis communication practice. We will also describe a few cognitive mechanisms which define peoples' abilities to perceive, understand and develop opinions, attitudes and behavioral change.

Aside from the division between transmission and sensemaking, which in practice often are intertwined, (crisis) communication may be understood at four different levels.

- *The individual level*, which is mainly based on psychology and is about perception, experience, and cognition. Integrates biological as well as social and cultural aspects.
- The group level, which is mainly based on social psychology (how the social context affects individual attitudes and behavior).
- The organizational level, which involves sociological and social-psychological research (goal-oriented collectives of people with pre-defined, often professional, roles).
- The society level (e.g. cities, regions, or national states), which involves the use of a multitude of knowledge fields such as sociology, anthropology, political science, and media and communication studies.

There are common characteristics between the different levels, but also differences. From a crisis communication point of view, the organizational and society levels are of core interest, but we must also understand how individuals process information into meaning. As in the broader field of strategic communications, crisis communication is form of goal-oriented communication. The art and science of rhetoric is therefore a good source of knowledge for professionals.



### 3.1. Rhetoric and Crisis Communication

Ancient rhetoric is divided into three different genres of speech: political, judicial, and ceremonial. Within crisis communication, there are links to all genres but especially between the judicial speech and theories of crisis response strategies (see later in the Handbook). But in the context of communication principles, it is worthwhile to understand the three main elements or tools of rhetoric – elements which are in play in all crisis communication situations:<sup>11</sup>

- *Ethos*, which is related to the speaker (or sender) legitimacy. Legitimacy is at stake in every communication situation but is also dependent on history and status before the crisis occurs. For institutions or organizations which are perceived as legitimate before a crisis, the conditions for having a positive impact during a crisis are a lot better. But from an individual perspective there is still a risk of what may be called a boom-bust-situation – the higher your position is in society, the longer you fall if you do wrong. Aristotle mentioned three factors which are crucial for ethos: (1) the orator is perceived as intelligent, (2) the orator is perceived as a person of high moral judgement, (3) the orator is perceived as a person who wants the best for his/her fellows. In a crisis it is valuable to consider these criteria when choosing communicator in public spaces.
- *Pathos*, which is related to the emotions that the sender is expressing (intentionally or unintentionally), and how the audience or public experience these. This is a well-known problem in crisis communication situations where there is a need for a balance between rational facts-based information and expressions of empathy. In emergency crisis information messaging the level of pathos is usually minimal, since the objective is to communicate instructions as fast as possible and try to avoid unnecessary effects. But in many other situations such as at press conferences, interviews with journalists, and meetings with victims or relatives, there is a need to express empathy in a serious but controlled manner.
- *Logos* which means rational communication based in facts and logical reasoning, used by an orator or sender. Crisis communication must obviously always be based in facts and reality, but due to the character of a crisis there is often a lack of information or facts. When that is the case, the sender should never speculate and communicate unverified information (but be aware of the need of both ethos and pathos). This is what makes crisis communication so challenging. From the outside a simple recommendation is to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, but from the inside it may not be clear what the truth is. When it is clear – such as in a scandal concerning an individual (e.g. a celebrity or politician) – there is no doubt that telling the truth is recommended and ethically sound, but for a complex crisis such as a major accident or disaster, it is not an easy task.

Besides defining genres and crucial elements or tools, rhetoric is a source of knowledge for operational crisis communication practice, especially when it comes to producing messages or narratives. The rhetoric recommends the use of eloquent language and various rhetorical figures such as metaphors, analogies, or parallelisms. It is a fact that words matter in crisis communication – words may be used for good and bad, for propaganda as well as symmetrical communication.

<sup>11</sup> J. Falkheimer and M. Heide, *Strategic Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Global Practice* (London: Routledge, 2023).

### 3.2. Four Crisis Communication Principles

Based on experience and research it is possible to define four crisis communication principles that may be guiding lights for every crisis communicator, independent of national context.<sup>12</sup> These principles combine and balance two considerations – efficiency and ethical practice.

#### *Preparedness*

Every organization must be prepared for a crisis event to occur. This is also an important assignment for crisis communicators who are supposed to be the ears and eyes of institutions and authorities. Many organizations, especially public ones, must also be prepared to deal with crisis events out in society even though they themselves are not directly affected by them and are responsible for their own part. One preparatory step is to acquire knowledge about crises by studying relevant crisis events. Another step is to organize

forums to identify and discuss risks and possible crises. The third step is to organize listening mechanisms – auditing signals, media reports, and environmental scanning. For the organization, preparedness as a communication principle means to:

-  auditing crisis signs and signals.
-  analyze risks where vulnerability and possible crises are listed.
-  state consequences of these risks.
-  set guidelines and take measures to prevent crises.
-  prepare a crisis management plan and a crisis communication plan.
-  outline a crisis organization/institution.
-  identify everyone who may be affected by various crises.

It is necessary to prevent crisis events by implementing measures that prevent such or mitigate the consequences of them. For crisis management, it is about improving resilience (for example, building sufficiently safe dams in the water reservoir, safeguarding telecommunication lines in the ground), safety margins, and alarm functions, as well as increasing the quality of practice and competence of crisis staff. For crisis communicators this means preparing staff, organization, channels, and platforms as well as auditing opinions, and so forth.

<sup>12</sup>These principles are inspired by different sources but especially SEMA (Swedish Emergency Management Agency), "Crisis Communications Handbook" (Huskvarna: NRS Tryckeri, 2008:3).

## Credibility

Legitimacy is, as mentioned before, built over time and may be seen as a capital to spend when a crisis occurs. Legitimacy is usually defined as an individual or collective perception about which actors and institutions have the right to rule, regulate, and decide.<sup>13</sup> In other words, it is about who and if you trust an institution, authority, organization or even an individual. Credibility is necessary for building legitimacy and what you can work with in an operational way. The principle of legitimacy means that you and your organization need to focus not only on plans, strategies and actions during crises, but on strategies that enhance legitimacy during “normal” times. We know that honesty, openness and competency are important dimensions of being experienced as credible and in the long run legitimate. Therefore, there is a need to focus these dimensions on your organization all the time and to communicate them to all possible stakeholders and to the wider public.

## Openness

Openness towards the public, news media, and other authorities is a crucial communication principle, based on ethical and moral standards. Hiding what has happened or not telling the truth about possible consequences is never a good idea. Openness is also recommended from an efficiency perspective since crisis communication depends on, as mentioned, legitimacy. The public or concerned groups in a crisis follow authorities’ recommendations and instructions only when they trust the same authorities. Openness may sound like a clear principle, but in practice, it is surrounded by complexity and not always so easy to follow. This is due to two factors. First, you may not have access to correct information and the whole picture of what has happened. Information about what has happened may be unverified and unreliable. Second, there may be judicial constraints that make it impossible to be totally transparent. These constraints may be linked to the protection of national safety as well as individual privacy. The principle of openness can guide us as a principle but does not mean that all information can be instantly free. You as a crisis communicator are responsible for not spreading false or unverified information and following legal standards. You can be open anyway by being open about uncertainties, explaining the situation as much as possible, and explaining considerations for privacy that needs to be fulfilled. In practice, it may also mean that you communicate that you do not have information right now but will be back as soon as possible (preferably a set time) and inform again. It is important to avoid the so-called information vacuum, a situation where you remain silent towards the public (and news media) due to different reasons. In an information vacuum rumors, misinformation (unintended), disinformation (intended), and conspiracy theories emerge and amplify.

## Speed

A crisis usually happens fast. Even if there may be signals about what is happening, a crisis means that you as a crisis communicator need to respond instantly. This is, as discussed above regarding openness, not always easy since you do not have the information you need. But the public as well as news media demand instant crisis information. In practice, authorities cannot compete with the speed of news media, and they shall not compete either. Still, one may need to learn from some of the logic of how professional news organizations work since they have efficient working methods. Professional news organizations are:

<sup>13</sup> J. Falkheimer, "Legitimacy Strategies and Crisis Communication," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

- ▶ constantly auditing signals in the outside world, and are quick to identify upcoming crises.
- ▶ having preparedness to quickly staff the newsroom in the event of a crisis.
- ▶ are constantly trained in processing and producing information for a wide audience.
- ▶ working in the field as close to events and crises as possible.
- ▶ can, thanks to digital publishing, correct inaccuracies quickly.

As emphasized above one may learn something from news organizations when organizing and preparing crisis communication, but one should avoid competing with the speed that journalists have. Compared to news journalists, crisis communicators can never spread information that is not certain or verified – this may also be a principle for news journalism, but in practice, the standard of verification is not as high as for authorities.

By spending resources on exercising, training, leadership, and preparing platforms and networks, authorities may increase their possibility of being fast when the crisis comes.

Finally, one may add some more principles that greatly facilitate successful crisis resolution<sup>14</sup> :

#### *Accessibility*

Creating systems for dialogue promotes accessibility for both the public and the media. These encompass expertise, technology, systems, relations, and procedures. An authority's channels must be in place before a crisis: technology, website, telephone numbers, and procedures for maintaining contact with the media and handling the questions they ask. Employees must be open and accustomed to handling the media. This applies not only to communicators but also to other employees.

#### *Expertise*

Expertise is a basis for credibility- a hard-working organization that values expertise, and media relations characterized by professionalism and respect for individual journalists. This applies to managers, communicators, and any other representative of the organization.

#### *Understanding*

Organizations and individual employees who demonstrate empathy can significantly shape public perception during a crisis. An effective crisis response is based on understanding and sympathy for the victims. One important point to remember - no matter what type of organization is in crisis, lives and health are always more important than material damage or loss of property. Understanding the needs and demands of people seeking information is also essential, even when it's not always possible to provide all requested information.

<sup>14</sup> J. Falkheimer, "Legitimacy Strategies and Crisis Communication," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

### 3.3. Communication Mechanisms

People are different and the public is a complex phenomenon. When you plan for a crisis communication operation you need to know and understand how people and the public process information, also from a cognitive approach. Obviously, the effect of communication depends on many factors such as context, culture, situation, and social norms. But there are also some generic cognitive mechanisms that one needs to consider. Some of these mechanisms are individually based while others tend to develop in and through groups. Below is a list and selection of some of the most well-known mechanisms.

- *The Availability Bias:* this is a shortcut humans tend to take – judging or deciding something based on the immediate examples that we can recall. News media attention, as one example, tends to lead to this effect. If the news that we are exposed to consequently gives a lot of attention to risks with flying and airline accidents, the likelihood that we overestimate the risk of flying is high, while we may not recall any risks with driving cars and feel safer than we should. Stereotypes are also possible consequences of availability bias – if a group with a certain ethnic background is repeatedly blamed for something bad, there is a risk that we generalize and blame all persons with the same ethnic background. The availability bias affects risk aversion (how we rate risks and act accordingly) and may be an obstacle during crises and explain irrational opinion formation and behaviors.
- *Confirmation Bias:* this mechanism means that we humans tend to focus on information that supports our preexisting beliefs and ignore what does not. This includes how we give attention to information (we give attention to information that mirrors and confirms our beliefs and avoids other information), interpret information (we try to integrate new information in our current belief system – even information with an opposite objective is adapted to the preexisting belief system). Another concept linked to confirmation bias is cherry-picking – when humans selectively choose evidence that supports their beliefs. In a crisis communication situation, the confirmation bias is an obstacle to influencing people's perceptions, attitudes, and behavior, when they already have a set belief that does not match what has happened.
- *Correspondence Bias,* which means attributing behaviors to personal dispositions rather than situational factors. In a crisis, this may lead to blaming persons while overseeing external factors – a common example is a car accident where we are more likely to blame the driver than other possible explanations (such as weather or a technical fault). The focus on persons (especially leaders and persons who have different responsibility roles) is strong during crises and as a crisis communicator, one must consider that personal attributes (style, looks, clothes, and others) may lead to a correspondence bias – that the crisis is related to a person rather than a more complex situation. The correspondence bias may also be related to understanding the origin of a crisis since we tend to evaluate personal behavior as linked to people being good or bad, while it is known that also ordinary people may do evil things under certain conditions.
- *Bandwagon Effect:* This public opinion effect is related to humans' ability to follow others – people 'hop on' the bandwagon when they think everyone else is already there or on their way. The need to belong to the majority or the in-group is human and explains this effect which is also related to persuasive communication where arguments that "everyone else is" or "9 of 10 support" are used. It is also a fact that humans who feel they belong to the majority are more likely to voice their opinions, while minorities tend to keep silent. In our digital media landscape tactics such as bots may be used

to boost the number of likes, comments, and shares, and give the impression of social acceptance. In a crisis the bandwagon effect may be good – say in an emergency where your objective is to get an evacuation message across to the public, or bad – as in a situation where an opinion that has based its ideas on false or misleading information opposes correct crisis information from the authorities.

- *Spiral of Silence*: This social psychological mechanism was initially named and researched by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in the 1970s, while she was trying to understand how public opinion was formed. Following this theory, public opinion is a form of social control where individuals, sensing the opinions of others around, shape their opinions and behavior along with what is experienced as acceptable. In practice this theory focuses on the opposite bandwagon effect – that people who feel they belong to the minority are less likely to voice their opinions.

- *Echo Chambers*: This effect is linked to confirmation bias and other fundamentally cognitive mechanisms but has a certain relevance in the digital media landscape. Basically, echo chambers are closed information environments where persons confirm and amplify their preexisting ideas, opinions, and beliefs through communication that reinforces them. Echo chambers consist of sub-groups in which people communicate with others who hold similar opinions and beliefs. It is a human need to engage and socialize with others with whom we share norms, opinions, and values, but the echo chamber demonstrates what may happen when we only do this and do not challenge our beliefs or take in new information.

- *Planned Behavior* is one of the most well-known theories in behavioral science focusing on the relationship between intentions and behavior. The theory of planned behavior is useful when planning crisis and risk communication campaigns and other communication efforts. The results of this theory<sup>15</sup> demonstrate that there is more likelihood that an individual change a certain behavior if the individual:

- ... believes that the behavior has positive effects that the individual values – *communicating positive consequences for a specific target group is more effective than enforcing negative outcomes for a wide public.*

- ... believes that other people who are important and credible support the behavior – *communicate by using opinion-leaders and emphasize social norms.*

- ... believes himself to have the resources and opportunities that are necessary for the behavior – *give concise information that helps the individual to change his or her behavior (if possible, by small and concrete steps).*

Finally, crisis communicators also need to base their practice in knowledge on some media theories. The spiral of silence mentioned above is partly one example of these, but some others are useful for planning and executing crisis communications. Below some of the main practical advice linked to these theories are highlighted.

- *Identify and work with opinion leaders before, during, and after a crisis.* News media (also on digital platforms) usually have indirect, not direct, effects. This premise is based on decades of media communication research, initiated by the sociologist Lazarsfeld and his research team, based on the

<sup>15</sup> I. Ajzen, *Attitudes, Personality, and Behavior* (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1988).

results of their major studies of media influence on political elections and voters during the 1940s and 1950s. This research challenged the idea that media had a direct and unidirectional effect on attitudes and behaviors and showed three types of media effect (on election campaigns): activation (of underlying values and attitudes), enforcement (see confirmation bias), and inversion (which does happen but is not a general effect). Lazarsfeld's studies led to the creation of the *two-step flow of communication model* that claims that interpersonal communication between people has a stronger effect than mass communication. The main players in these processes are *opinion leaders*, people with high media use which are considered trustworthy. In our time these opinion leaders, at least for younger generations, are so-called influencers in social media – communicating in an authentic way on platforms that combine elements of mass and interpersonal communication. As a crisis communicator, it is important to identify and work with opinion leaders at all levels – locally (e.g. credible role models that are integrated into certain groups – may be a teacher, priest, or chair of a local community organization). The main value here is authenticity.

● *Being first, taking the communication initiative is crucial.* This advice is linked to the agenda-setting theory, another classical media communication theory, based on empirical studies of how people are influenced by political opinion formation in the media.<sup>16</sup> The agenda-setting theory shows that there is a strong link between what the news media reports and what people consider to be important issues. In the contemporary media landscape, this conclusion needs also to include communication of news that is done aside from professional journalism, by amateurs and others on social media platforms. Translating the agenda-setting theory into crisis communication practice is easy – it is an argument for being first on the ball. This does not necessarily mean that your messages will have a unidirectional effect on the public (see earlier). But if you wait and let someone else take the first communication initiative in a crisis other actors will fill the information vacuum, and your organization will thus lose control of the situation.

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<sup>16</sup> Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176–87, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747787>; (retrieved on 07.07.2024).



By Tinatin Aghniashvili

**“By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail”**

- Benjamin Franklin

In a contemporary informational landscape, where emerging threats, challenges, and risks are interconnected and multifaceted, effective crisis communication has become more crucial than ever. A vast amount of information is swiftly circulating worldwide, fostering competition among sources. Technological advancements and globalization have expanded access to this information to more people. Therefore, crisis communication significantly impacts state and societal resilience, shapes public opinion, influences institutional reputation, and contributes to the overall development of nations and organizations. While crises vary in nature, the importance of crisis communication remains paramount across all situations.

Crisis is a risk manifestation<sup>17</sup> and an organization's ability to manage such risks is a key determinant of its resilience. Even if a crisis cannot be entirely prevented, assessing its scale and preparing accordingly are essential. Crisis is an emotional event. It profoundly affects the psychological and emotional states of individuals and groups directly and indirectly involved. Decision-makers must recognize that audiences receive information under stressful conditions, which can heighten emotions and the potential for panic. Therefore, communication during crises demands patience, accuracy, and empathy.

To effectively navigate a crisis, it is crucial to develop timely, consistent, content-rich, and contextually appropriate communication with target audiences and stakeholders. As Chinese interpretation suggests<sup>18</sup>, and as mentioned before the Greek origin of *krisis* may be understood, crisis embodies both threats and opportunities at the same time. Managing a crisis poses significant risks to organizational reputation as well as offers opportunities for its reinforcement, which requires substantial effort and time to build. While the outcome of a crisis is often unpredictable, one certainty is that the credibility and reputation of an organization/institution will undergo change, especially after a major crisis, “it is the moment in time that can make or break a career”<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, former British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill famously noted, “never let a good crisis go to waste.”<sup>20</sup>

Crisis management involves a complex process that integrates all efforts aimed at overcoming crises and minimizing damage.<sup>21</sup> Horizontal and vertical coordination and tight cooperation among governmental structures, civil society organizations, and the private sector can decrease crisis dynamics and mitigate future escalation. Timely resource allocation, mobilization of support, and efficient information exchange are crucial for achieving maximum results within limited timeframes and resources.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, “Introduction: Do We Have a Commonly Shared Definition of Crisis?” in *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Chester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010), 3.

<sup>18</sup> University of New Hampshire, March 7, 1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/university-of-new-hampshire-19600307>; (retrieved on 07.07.2024).

<sup>19</sup> Amanda Coleman, “Are you ready for a crisis? Creating and testing a crisis communication plan” in *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations*, 2nd ed. (London: Kogan Page Limited, 2023), 1.

<sup>20</sup> “Have We Wasted a Good Crisis?” *Constructing Excellence*, <https://constructingexcellence.org.uk/have-we-wasted-a-good-crisis/>; (retrieved on 07.07.2024).

<sup>21</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 36.



Crisis management encompasses prevention and preparedness activities, timely and rational orchestration of all instruments during crisis, and post-crisis assessment and evaluation. Accordingly, crisis management can be divided into three phases: pre-crisis, crisis prevention, and post-crisis phases. Crisis communication involves gathering, processing, and disseminating information to overcome the crisis. It is inseparable from the broader crisis management process and is equally critical at every stage.

#### 4.1. Why is it important to prepare for a crisis?

Preparing for a crisis is one of the decisive phases of crisis management and can significantly influence its trajectory and outcome. "An issue ignored, is a crisis invited," wisely stated US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger back in the 1970s<sup>22</sup> highlighting the importance of proactive crisis preparation. No one is immune to a crisis. It is a matter of "when" rather than "if" it will occur. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to prepare for the "unknown" to mitigate adverse outcomes in a rational and timely manner. How well the communication works during a real crisis depends on how well an authority has prepared itself before the crisis and the level of credibility achieved.<sup>23</sup> Failure to do so can lead to several negative consequences for institutions or states, including:

- Threat to the security and stability of the wider public or specific groups, contingent on the crisis's nature and magnitude.
- Violation of public safety and public order.
- Impeded decision-making process exacerbating the crisis.
- Escalation of negative sentiments among crucial stakeholders and society at large.
- Exposition of institutional or organizational weaknesses and deficiencies.
- Revealing weaknesses and shortfalls of the institutions/organizations.
- Financial losses for the institution or organization.
- Damage to reputation.





Considering all the aforementioned factors, pre-crisis preparation significantly determines the resilience of states, institutions, or individuals when faced with a crisis.

<sup>22</sup>"Crisis Management and Crisis Trainings," Bureau of Communication (BOC), <https://bureauofcom.com/crisis-management-e>; (retrieved on 11.07.2024).

<sup>23</sup>SEMA (Swedish Emergency Management Agency), "Crisis Communications Handbook" (Huskvarna: NRS Tryckeri, 2008:3).

## 4.2. Guiding principles for preparation phase

According to the Swedish Crisis Communication Handbook, forward-looking planning and preparation will deliver its outcome during the crisis response phase. The following guiding principles greatly assist in the preparatory and response phases of a crisis<sup>24</sup>:

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
|  <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Be proactive, not simply reactive.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Decide what are the right things to do, and do them in the right way.</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Decide what are the right things to do, and do them in the right way.</li></ul>                                    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Gain insight into long-term and short-term values.</li></ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Develop the ability to bring in the right advisory and decision-making expertise.</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Ensure clear information provision for your employees, the general public, managers, and the news media.</li></ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Be honest about what is happening and about things that you either do not or cannot know;</li></ul>                            |  <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Respect the media's working conditions.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Utilize human and material resources to achieve the most optimal result.</li></ul>                                 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Be able to work with the right things, even when under severe physical and mental pressure.</li></ul>                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Work together with and in cooperation with other organizations outside of your own.</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Take care of yourself and other people so that people and the organization do not become worn-out.</li></ul>       |

<sup>24</sup> Swedish Emergency Management Agency (SEMA), "What we mean by a crisis" in Crisis Communication Handbook SEMA's Educational Series 2003:1, 9.

### 4.3. What needs to be done during the preparation phase?

In the pre-crisis phase, effective and thoughtful planning forms the solid foundation for an efficient crisis response. As President of the United States Dwight Eisenhower noted, "Plans are nothing... planning is everything".<sup>25</sup> During the pre-crisis phase it is crucial to dedicate time and resources to elaborate crisis communication strategy and its action plan, conduct strategic foresight, identify and assess potential risks that could lead to a crisis, establish and regularly train crisis response team, including a designated spokesperson, draft general narratives and messages, identify appropriate communication channels and instruments to reach key stakeholders, set up monitoring and early warning system to detect emerging issues and build robust internal and external partnership networks. By focusing on these areas, organizations can enhance their preparedness and responsiveness to crises, ensuring effective management and mitigation of potential impacts. All these can be translated into Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). In order to strengthen the institutional approach and build strong capacity for the organization, it is advisable to elaborate SOPs for crisis response and recovery. The latter aims to provide a robust institutional and operational framework so that critical decisions and actions can be taken quickly in response to the crisis situations at a country, regional, or global level; the SOPs also aim to ensure a transparent and fast process to request and receive critical assistance to respond to a crisis and initiate early recovery activities.<sup>26</sup>

The following framework serves as a fruitful guideline for crisis preparation:

#### ► 4.3.1. Elaboration and Revision of the Crisis Communication Strategy and its Action Plan

A crisis communication strategy and action plan form a solid conceptual framework for effective crisis management. They outline organizational approaches, tools, and responsibilities necessary to respond promptly and consistently to any situation. This structure ensures alignment and timeliness in communications when a crisis arises. However, it's crucial to acknowledge the heightened risk of disseminating false or misleading information during crises. Disinformation, misinformation or malinformation can deliberately or unintentionally confuse or polarize the broader audience, exacerbating the impact of the crisis. Therefore, alongside the structured framework, strategies must include mechanisms to monitor, verify, and debunk information swiftly. This proactive approach helps maintain credibility, mitigate confusion, and uphold trust with stakeholders amid challenging circumstances.

It's important to distinguish between a communication strategy and its action plan. A communication strategy is a long-term, strategic-level document that outlines key policies, strategic directions, and approaches to handling crises. On the other hand, an action plan is a tactical-level document that focuses on specific procedures, tools, and concrete steps to be taken during crisis situations. It serves as a detailed roadmap for crisis response. Both documents must align closely with each other. The Action Plan must be a dynamic and flexible document, regularly updated on an annual basis to ensure relevance and effectiveness. Similarly, the communication strategy can be updated based on organizational priorities or changes in the informational landscape. Following updates, it's essential to implement appropriate measures within the organization. This may include adjustments in legal frameworks, organizational structures, technical resources, strategic

<sup>25</sup>Thomas Jefferson National Accelerator Facility, "Plans Are Nothing; Planning Is Everything," accessed July 21, 2024, <https://www.jlab.org/montage/plans-are-nothing-planning-everything>; (retrieved on 28.08.2024)

<sup>26</sup>Standard Operating Procedure for Crisis Response and Recovery, UNDP, Programme and Operations, Policies and procedures. [https://popp.undp.org/policy-page/standard-operating-procedure-crisis-response-and-recovery#:~:text=UNDP's%20Standard%20Operating%20Procedure%20\(SOP,country%2C%20regional%20or%20global%20level](https://popp.undp.org/policy-page/standard-operating-procedure-crisis-response-and-recovery#:~:text=UNDP's%20Standard%20Operating%20Procedure%20(SOP,country%2C%20regional%20or%20global%20level;); (retrieved on 28.08.2024).

approaches, and personnel training. By maintaining alignment between the communication strategy and its action plan and by regularly updating these documents based on organizational needs and evolving circumstances, organizations can enhance their readiness and effectiveness in managing crises.

Each crisis is inherently unique, characterized by its own specific context and variables. Therefore, when a crisis unfolds, it is essential to customize the communication action plan to fit the current reality rather than rigidly adhering to static guidelines.

The key sections of a Crisis Communication Strategy are<sup>27</sup> :

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
|  | strategic purpose  |  |
|  | approach   |  |
|  | communication priorities   |  |
|  | structure of the response, phases of a crisis – roles and responsibilities |  |
|  | scenarios, narratives, and key messages                                    |  |
|  | prioritized channels   |  |
|  | methods for stakeholder engagement   |  |
|  | resourcing   |  |

Elaborating communication strategy and its action plan is an important step forward towards effective management of the crisis, however, as mentioned before, it is not enough. Crisis communication documents should undergo annual reviews, with updates made in response to significant changes in the informational environment. Moreover, being ready for a crisis goes beyond having a plan on paper or hidden in a database – it is essential to consider how the strategy and approach are shared, communicated, tested, and developed further<sup>28</sup> as well as training and developing professional skills of the team.

<sup>27</sup> Amanda Coleman, “Are you ready for a crisis? Creating and testing a crisis communication plan” in Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations, 2nd ed. (London: Kogan Page Limited, 2023).

<sup>28</sup> Amanda Coleman, “Are you ready for a crisis? Creating and testing a crisis communication plan” in Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations, 2nd ed. (London: Kogan Page Limited, 2023).

### ► 4.3.2. Establishment of the Crisis Communication Team

The crisis communication team plays a pivotal role in managing crises successfully. To ensure its effectiveness, providing timely and accurate information is crucial. Situational awareness is key, as it enables the team to make informed decisions promptly. Continuous and relevant information must be available to the team throughout the crisis. This aids in maintaining situational awareness and enables timely decision-making. The team should comprise professionals from appropriate directions and with relevant expertise and experience. Specific roles and responsibilities should be defined in advance to streamline operations once a crisis occurs. This system clarifies decision-making processes and assigns responsibilities, minimizing confusion during high-pressure situations. While a structured approach is important, the team should also remain adaptable to unforeseen developments during a crisis. Flexibility allows for adjustments in strategies and tactics as the situation evolves.

*Why is it important to establish a Crisis Communication team?*

Crisis communicators are an integral part of a crisis management/response team, yet establishing an independent crisis communication team is recommended for several reasons<sup>29</sup> :

- Crises can arise unexpectedly and pose significant risks to an organization's reputation, financial stability, and relationships with stakeholders. By having a dedicated team in place, an organization can respond promptly and efficiently, mitigating the negative impact of the crisis.
- A crisis communication team brings together individuals with diverse expertise and perspectives, enabling comprehensive crisis management. Each team member plays a specific role and has defined responsibilities, allowing for a coordinated and strategic approach to communication.
- A crisis communication team ensures consistent and accurate messaging during a crisis. Having a designated spokesperson and information coordinator helps prevent conflicting information and minimizes confusion among stakeholders, including employees, customers, partners, and the media.
- An effective crisis communication team can help build trust and maintain credibility with stakeholders. By demonstrating transparency, empathy, and a proactive approach to communication, organizations can foster positive relationships even during challenging times.

*Who are the members of the Crisis Communication Team and what are their main roles and responsibilities?*

Assigning roles and responsibilities within a crisis communication team can vary depending on the organization's structure and scale. However, several potential key positions are typically essential for effectively managing a crisis<sup>30</sup>:

<sup>29</sup> Tahir Abbas, "Crisis Communication Team and Its Role and Responsibilities," Change Management Insight, June 15, 2023, <https://changemanagementinsight.com/crisis-communication-team-roles-and-responsibilities/>; (retrieved on 28.08.2024).

<sup>30</sup> Tahir Abbas, "Crisis Communication Team and Its Role and Responsibilities," Change Management Insight, June 15, 2023, <https://changemanagementinsight.com/crisis-communication-team-roles-and-responsibilities/>; (retrieved on 28.08.2024).

## CRISIS COMMUNICATION TEAM

| Position  | Roles & Responsibilities   |
|---|--|
|  <p><b>Team Leader</b></p>                   | <p>The Team Leader takes charge of coordinating all activities related to crisis communication, and is responsible for making timely and informed decisions. The Leader serves as a liaison between the crisis communication team and top management or executives. Besides, Team Leader plays a vital role in identifying and prioritizing stakeholders who need to be engaged during the crisis and provides support and guidance to individual team members, fostering a collaborative and cohesive working environment.</p>  |
|  <p><b>Spokesperson</b></p>                  | <p>The Spokesperson acts as the primary point of contact for the news media during a crisis and develops key messages and talking points in line with the overall crisis communication strategy. The Spokesperson is responsible to deliver messages to the media and stakeholders effectively, keeps a close eye on media coverage, public sentiment, and social media platforms and may provide media training and coaching to other team members or organizational leaders to enhance their communication skills during a crisis.</p>   |
|  <p><b>Information Coordinator</b></p>       | <p>The Information Coordinator is responsible for gathering information related to the crisis from various internal and external sources and then categorizes it to ensure easy accessibility and retrieval by the crisis communication team. The Information Coordinator verifies the accuracy and credibility of the information and plays a crucial role in disseminating information to the crisis communication team in a timely manner. The coordinator monitors media coverage and public sentiments and in handling sensitive information during a crisis, ensures the security and confidentiality of data.</p> |
|  <p><b>Legal Advisor</b></p>               | <p>The Legal Advisor assesses the legal risks associated with the crisis and analyzes potential legal implications. The Legal Advisor reviews all statements, press releases, official communications, public statements, assists spokespersons and team members in preparing for media interactions and interviews and provides guidance on legal compliance throughout the crisis communication process.</p>   |
|  <p><b>Public Relations Specialist</b></p> | <p>The PR Specialist focuses on protecting and managing the organization's reputation during a crisis, develops communication strategies for engaging with various stakeholders and collaborates with the team to develop key messages and craft compelling narratives. The PR Specialist prepares communication materials specific to the crisis situation, oversees the organization's presence on social media platforms during a crisis and following the crisis, assists in the organization's recovery efforts.</p>  |

|   |   |
|---|---|
|  <p><b>Technical Expert</b></p>                  | <p>The Technical Expert provides specialized knowledge and expertise related to the technical aspects of the crisis. They play a crucial role in understanding and addressing any technical issues or challenges that arise during a crisis.</p>  |
|  <p><b>Employee Communication Liaison</b></p>    | <p>The Employee Communication Liaison facilitates communication and engagement with employees during a crisis. They act as a bridge between the crisis communication team and the organization's workforce, ensuring that employees are informed, supported, and engaged throughout the crisis.</p> |
|  <p><b>Stakeholder Engagement Specialist</b></p> | <p>The Stakeholder Engagement Specialist within a crisis communication team manages and fosters positive relationships with key stakeholders during a crisis. Stakeholders can include customers, suppliers, partners, government agencies, community members, and other entities.</p>              |

Moreover, the crisis response team should be permanently trained and be provided with individual professional development opportunities. Regular training and development ensure that team members remain well-prepared and equipped to handle crises effectively. Crisis Simulation Exercises which are recommended to be conducted at least on an annual basis, serve to identify gaps, refine procedures, and improve coordination among team members. Joint efforts further enhance communication, coordination, and prompt decision-making under the stressful situation.

### ► 4.3.3. Training of Leadership and Spokespersons

#### *Who is a Spokesperson?*

A spokesperson is a crucial representative of an organization, entrusted with the responsibility of communicating on behalf of the organization during routine operations and crisis situations. The role of a spokesperson is vital as they convey the organization's messages, manage public perception, and ensure consistent communication with stakeholders. According to Ray (1999) and Seitel (1983), a key aspect of the spokesperson's role is to communicate with "one voice", ensuring that all efforts are coordinated to maintain a consistent message.<sup>31</sup> This often necessitates having multiple spokespersons, as different individuals may be required to address various aspects of the crisis. For instance, while the public may expect comments from the CEO/decision maker, specialized technical details might be better addressed by experts with specific knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

In major incidents, it is recommended that a senior spokesperson of appropriate status, often referred to as a "Gold spokesperson",<sup>33</sup> is identified to handle media interviews. This person's seniority should reflect the severity of the situation and help reassure the public and stakeholders. However, starting at a too high level may cause difficulties if the spokesperson is not available for subsequent media engagements, and using someone of lower seniority might downplay the importance of the response.<sup>34</sup>

Pre-crisis identification and training of the spokesperson are crucial, ensuring they are prepared to handle media and communication duties effectively.<sup>35</sup> While the CEO/decision maker is often the spokesperson, it may be more suitable for another senior executive to take on this role, depending on the nature of the crisis.<sup>36</sup> The chosen spokesperson must undergo rigorous media and communication training, including understanding the crisis communication plan and strategies and practicing their responses to maintain readiness.<sup>37</sup> The spokesperson must also be supported by the organization's communication team, which should provide relevant advice, guidance, and opportunities for proactive communication. This includes handling media interviews, developing digital content, and maintaining visibility and consistency in messaging throughout the crisis. If a crisis is prolonged, having a deputy speaker is advisable to prevent burnout and ensure continuity.<sup>38</sup>

#### *General Guidance for Spokesperson*

The guiding principles for a spokesperson during a crisis are foundational to effective communication and maintaining public trust. The following guiding principles ensure that spokespersons are well-prepared, empathetic, and effective in delivering consistent, accurate, and timely information during a crisis.

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<sup>31</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022).

<sup>32</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 161-162.

<sup>33</sup> Albany Academy: *Comprehensive Communication Training for Development, Diplomacy and Defence*. London: Albany Associates International Ltd, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Albany Academy: *Comprehensive Communication Training for Development, Diplomacy and Defence*. London: Albany Associates International Ltd, 2021, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Amanda Coleman, "Are you ready for a crisis? Creating and testing a crisis communication plan" in *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations*, 2nd ed. (London: Kogan Page Limited, 2023), 125-126.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-128.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-128.



Preparation is crucial in the pre-crisis phase, with a focus on comprehensive training in crisis communication and media relations. Training helps develop decision-making skills and equips spokespersons with techniques to handle media effectively. Key advice includes maintaining solid eye contact, minimizing vocal fillers, and avoiding nervous habits, as these behaviors can signal deception.<sup>39</sup> This preparation ensures spokespersons are confident and credible when addressing the public.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, one of the most critical principles is to avoid saying "No Comment." Research shows that when people hear "No Comment," they often assume the organization is guilty or hiding something.<sup>41</sup> Instead, spokespersons should be transparent and provide as much information as possible, even if it means acknowledging that certain details are still being investigated. This approach helps build trust and prevents negative speculation.<sup>42</sup>

A poor spokesperson during a crisis can significantly damage an organization's credibility, stakeholder trust, and overall response effectiveness. One of the primary risks associated with an ineffective spokesperson is the erosion of credibility due to inaccuracies. Accurate information builds trust, while inaccuracies can endanger stakeholders.<sup>43</sup> Speculating on the causes of a crisis can also be detrimental. The public often demands immediate explanations, but determining the causes may take weeks or months. Speculation can lead to the dissemination of erroneous information, further damaging the organization's reputation. Instead, spokespersons should state that the cause is "under investigation," which is usually accurate and conveys that the organization is actively addressing the issue.<sup>44</sup>

In the Chapter on Media Relations, we develop the role of the spokesperson further, focusing on the relationship with the journalists.

#### ► 4.3.4. Drafting messages in line with the Strategic Narratives

Each organization should craft its own strategic narrative based on its priorities. During crises, effective communication hinges on a well-executed message strategy. It's crucial to disseminate quick, focused messages that align with strategic guidance and organizational objectives. While every crisis is unique and requires tailored messaging, having pre-prepared generic message templates allows for rapid adaptation to specific situations. To ensure effective implementation, gathering relevant data, examples, and narratives in advance is essential to strengthen these messages.<sup>45</sup>

The first step in preparing appropriate messages is to outline potential scenarios your organization might face. Each scenario should be tailored to your business's nature. If you're uncertain where to begin, reviewing your organization's risk management plan can provide insights into potential threats. Once scenarios are identified, it is recommended to develop initial key messages focusing on essential points such as providing helpline contacts, acknowledging awareness of the issue, outlining response efforts and sharing pertinent

<sup>39</sup> Thomas H. Feeley, Mark A. deTurck, & Melissa J. Young, "Baseline familiarity in lie detection." *Communication Research Reports*, 12(2) (1995). doi:10.1080/08824099509362052; (retrieved on 01.09.2024).

<sup>40</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 26-27.

<sup>41</sup> David W. Guth, "Organizational crisis experience and public relations roles." *Public Relations Review*, 21 (2) (1995). [https://doi.org/10.1016/0363-8111\(95\)90003-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0363-8111(95)90003-9); (retrieved on 01.09.2024).

<sup>42</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 26-27, 28.

<sup>43</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 28-29.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>45</sup> Albany Academy: *Comprehensive Communication Training for Development, Diplomacy and Defence*. London: Albany Associates International Ltd, 2021, 16.

details to show a proactive and serious approach.<sup>46</sup> Encourage public cooperation by offering ways they can contribute, like providing information or avoiding specific areas. These initial messages serve as a foundation for swift crisis responses and allow time to develop more detailed, situation-specific communications as needed. They act as guiding principles, adaptable to fit the specifics of each incident or issue that arises.<sup>47</sup>

How can we develop key messages that consistently resonate with our target audience and achieve the desired impact?

Certain concrete features are crucial in the process of elaborating key messages<sup>48</sup>:

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>Concise:</b>    | Maximum 3 key messages per page; each statement only 1-3 sentences long or under 30 seconds when spoken. |
| <b>Strategic:</b>  | Define, differentiate, and align with benefits/value proposition.  |
| <b>Relevant:</b>   | Balance what you need to communicate with what your audience needs to know.                              |
| <b>Compelling:</b> | Meaningful information designed to stimulate action.   |
| <b>Simple:</b>     | Easy-to-understand language; minimal jargon and acronyms.  |
| <b>Memorable:</b>  | Easy to recall and repeat; avoid run-on sentences.   |
| <b>Relatable:</b>  | Active rather than passive voice; no advertising slogans.  |
| <b>Tailored:</b>   | Adaptable to different target audiences, with flexible language and depth of information.                |

Message House provides a simple, powerful image that can be used as a guide for staying on track with key messages and to show internal and external stakeholders how the message strategy operates<sup>49</sup>:

01. A key overall message or ‘umbrella statement’.
02. Supporting messages.
03. ‘Proof points’ offering backup and/or more detail – shown in the above diagram as ‘Foundation’.

<sup>46</sup> Amanda Coleman, “Are you ready for a crisis? Creating and testing a crisis communication plan” in *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations*, 2nd ed. (London: Kogan Page Limited, 2023).

<sup>47</sup> Amanda Coleman, “Are you ready for a crisis? Creating and testing a crisis communication plan” in *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations*, 2nd ed. (London: Kogan Page Limited, 2023).

<sup>48</sup> Kim Harrison, “How to Create Compelling Key Messages,” *Cutting Edge PR*, June 1, 2020, <https://cuttingedgepr.com/articles/create-compelling-key-messages/>; (retrieved on 28.08.2024).

<sup>49</sup> Marc Fest, “Get The Message House Toolkit for Free,” *Message House*, 2024, <https://messagehouse.org/>. (retrieved on 28.08.2024).

### Key message/umbrella statement

- conveys your broad message as an overall guide to keep you focused, but doesn't need to be quoted. For instance: "Help save our planet by using renewable energy!"

#### Supporting message 1.

Eg. "Switch to Sunny Solar Panels technology and never again pay for an electricity bill."

#### Supporting message 2.

You could pre-empt possible skepticism of your product or service, eg. "Sunny Solar Panels clean energy technology is scientifically proven by the highly respected XYZ Institute to help save our planet." Or you can say how popular the product is with customers.

#### Supporting message 3.

##### *Call To Action*

Say what you want your audience to do. Specific actions, eg. Their next step: "Visit sunnypolarpanels.com to find out more about our world leading starter panel set today."

### Foundation

- Supporting facts, proof points, statistics, etc.

<sup>50</sup> Kim Harrison, "How to Create Compelling Key Messages," Cutting Edge PR, June 1, 2020, <https://cuttingedgepr.com/articles/create-compelling-key-messages/>; (retrieved on 28.08.2024).

### ► 4.3.5. Identification and Preparation of the Communication Channels

Preparing the communication team and drafting general messages are basic requirements, but they are not sufficient for effective crisis response. It's essential to also prepare communication channels through which messages will be transmitted to the various target audiences. The wider public relies on the channels to receive and analyze information, making it crucial to identify and prepare them beforehand. During a crisis, there's a heightened risk of the channels becoming overloaded, amplifying the need for thorough preparation.

Based on assessments and research outcomes, every organization should have a deep understanding of their target audience's perceptions and their preferred communication channels, especially in crisis situation.<sup>51</sup> The vast array of social media sites and digital platforms can be overwhelming, making it impractical to maintain a presence on all of them effectively. Instead, organizations should focus their efforts on prioritizing key channels where their audiences are most active and engaged. For example, if an organization has a strong presence on Facebook or LinkedIn these should be identified as priority channels in their communication strategy during a crisis. However, it's crucial not to overlook more traditional communication channels such as local media, face-to-face interactions, helpdesks, and frontline workers.<sup>52</sup> Each of these channels plays a vital role in reaching different segments of the audience effectively. The key to an effective communication response lies in concentrating efforts where they will have the greatest impact. This necessitates a thorough understanding of the audience and detailed insights into their behavior and preferences. By strategically focusing on the channels that matter most to their audience, organizations can optimize their crisis communication efforts and enhance their overall effectiveness.

Another critical factor to consider is the potential overwhelming demand for information during a crisis, which standard platforms may struggle to handle. While most organizations have a website, it may not be equipped to manage the surge in online traffic and information requests effectively. A solution to this challenge is the concept of a “dark site”—a fully developed website specifically designed to handle the increased demand during a crisis.<sup>53</sup> Unlike the main website, a “dark site” remains offline until activated. It is designed for rapid deployment and can accommodate a large volume of information, including video and audio updates. It typically includes features like integration with social media platforms such as Twitter and possibly a blog, allowing for swift dissemination of critical updates.

During a crisis, there is little time to build such a site from scratch, and using the existing site, which might not be crisis-prepared, is not advisable. Therefore, constructing a “dark site” ahead of time is essential preparation. Twitter has emerged as an especially effective communication channel during crises due to its ability to quickly transmit and receive information to and from a broad audience—both internally and externally. Even if an organization does not regularly use Twitter, it is recommended to secure a handle in advance, which can be dormant until needed.<sup>54</sup> Training staff in its use ensures readiness for rapid crisis response. Preparing a “dark site” and having a Twitter presence are crucial steps for organizations to effectively manage communications during crises, ensuring timely and reliable information dissemination to stakeholders.

<sup>51</sup> Amanda Coleman, “Are you ready for a crisis? Creating and testing a crisis communication plan” in *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations*, 2nd ed. (London: Kogan Page Limited, 2023).

<sup>52</sup> Amanda Coleman, “Are you ready for a crisis? Creating and testing a crisis communication plan” in *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations*, 2nd ed. (London: Kogan Page Limited, 2023).

<sup>53</sup> Albany Academy: *Comprehensive Communication Training for Development, Diplomacy and Defence*. London: Albany Associates International Ltd, 2021, 8.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

### 4.3.6. Assessment of Potential Risk

During the pre-crisis preparation phase identification and evaluation of the risks are of utmost importance. Risk Matrix represents a well-known method to evaluate the risks and calculate their impact on an organization's priorities. It helps to visualize and compare the likelihood of an event against its potential severity. This visualization aids in prioritizing risks and determining which ones require more immediate attention and management. The matrix is used to assess risks by considering two key factors:

01. **Likelihood**- measures how probable it is that a risk event will occur;
02. **Impact** - assess the consequences or severity of the risk event if it were to occur.

The risk matrix can subsequently be used as a risk register for ongoing monitoring and revision of risk. The following is an example of a risk matrix<sup>55</sup>:

### Risk matrix

| Areas      | Risks  | Likelihood | Impact | Controls  |
|------------|--|------------|--------|---|
| Reputation | A real or perceived link or association between the charity and terrorist activity damages the charity's reputation. | Low        | High   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● draw up detailed partnership agreements</li> <li>● review partner's governance structures</li> <li>● review project audit and monitoring, including field visits</li> <li>● include an impact and risk assessment for all projects</li> <li>● take references and contact other affiliates of the partner for recommendations</li> <li>● request standard documentation and invoices</li> <li>● check the consolidated list of designated individuals and entities (see chapter 1 of toolkit)</li> </ul> |

<sup>55</sup>Tool 4: Risk Management. Risk Matrix. Charity Commission for Wengland and Wales, tool 4- Risk management, Risk Matrix; [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8008a4e5274a2e8ab4dcad/Tool\\_4.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8008a4e5274a2e8ab4dcad/Tool_4.pdf); (retrieved on 28.08.2024).

| Areas                          | Risks   | Likelihood    | Impact        | Controls  |
|--------------------------------|---|---------------|---------------|---|
| <b>Financial/<br/>Criminal</b> | Financial loss, fraud, money laundering, terrorist financing.   | <b>Medium</b> | <b>High</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● clear responsibilities and segregation of duties</li> <li>● scheme of delegation</li> <li>● developing and implementing a fraud policy</li> <li>● purchases and tender controls, reconciliations of cash book to petty cash and bank, expenses procedures and authorisation limits</li> <li>● monitor exchange rate losses or gains and review impact on expenditure and income</li> <li>● use appropriate bank accounts and procedures</li> <li>● quarterly project financial reviews and project reports</li> <li>● documented financial procedures</li> <li>● regular budget monitoring and forecasting and grant management</li> </ul> |
|                                | Failure to comply with UK, International or local regulations.  | <b>High</b>   | <b>Medium</b> |   |
|                                | Exchange rate losses or gains.  | <b>Medium</b> | <b>Medium</b> |   |
|                                | Funds or assets provided are not used for the intended project or misappropriated.  | <b>Low</b>    | <b>Medium</b> |   |
| <b>Security</b>                | <p>Risk to staff and/or beneficiaries.</p> <p>Obstacles to the effective delivery of services.</p> <p>Areas of conflict, political instability, hostile government.</p> | <b>High</b>   | <b>High</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● country specific security risk assessment</li> <li>● crisis management policy and procedures</li> <li>● health &amp; safety and security training</li> </ul>   |

### 4.3.7. Establishing Monitoring and Early Warning System

An Early Warning and Monitoring System is a crucial and adaptable tool that significantly enhances the crisis preparation process. It is essential for all organizations and institutions to have access to monitoring services. These systems vary from basic metrics (such as likes, shares, and comments) to more sophisticated tools (like big data analysis, sentiment analysis, and network analysis).<sup>56</sup> The monitoring system provides a clear understanding of key audiences, influencers, and of the broader debates that relate to the organization's strategic aims and objectives. Monitoring tools should be used to gain an understanding of<sup>57</sup>:

- digital debates that are taking place in relation to your organization and its work.
- the main attitudes held by key influencers and audiences.
- how influencers and segmented audiences engage on digital platforms with your organization and its work.
- changes in trends over time.

Understanding the value of monitoring systems lies in their ability to enhance readiness for managing different kinds of risks and provide early alerts for potential threats.

“RESIST 2: Counter Disinformation Toolkit” offers a framework in order to increase an organization's resilience to different kinds of risks by improving campaign planning, better-directing monitoring, raising awareness of vulnerabilities, and providing early warning of potential threats<sup>58</sup>:

|                               | Our priorities  | Areas of risk  |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Objectives to protect</b>  | What are our <b>priority policy areas and responsibilities</b> ?                              | What are the prevailing attitudes in these areas that could be harnessed for mis and disinformation? What types of mis- or disinformation could be particularly harmful to our priorities and our audiences? |
| <b>Information to protect</b> | What are our <b>key messages and narratives</b> ?   | What misleading or manipulated information is being spread? What are the main messages and narratives we should be aware of? What is untrue or misleading about them?  |
| <b>Brands to protect</b>      | What are the <b>core values</b> that we stand for?  | What values and interests do we and our partners wish to protect? What types of mis- or disinformation could undermine our credibility, engagement, or ability to deliver results?                           |
| <b>Audiences to protect</b>   | Who are the <b>key stakeholders and audiences</b> affecting or dependent on our policy areas? | What are their values and interests? Who do they communicate with and listen to? Which parts of their relationship with my organisation are susceptible to mis- and disinformation?                          |

<sup>56</sup> Government Communication Service. RESIST 2: Counter-Disinformation Toolkit. (London: UK Government, November 2021). <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/RESIST-2-counter-disinformation-toolkit.pdf>; (retrieved on 01.09.2024).

<sup>57</sup> Government Communication Service. RESIST 2: Counter-Disinformation Toolkit. (London: UK Government, November 2021). <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/RESIST-2-counter-disinformation-toolkit.pdf>; (retrieved on 01.09.2024).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

### ► 4.3.8 Build Internal and External Partnership Networks

No matter how resourceful an organization is, during a crisis, both internal and external support may be crucial, especially when dealing with large-scale emergencies. Building networks should commence during the pre-crisis preparation phase.

In addition to establishing a clear internal organizational structure, it is vital that management levels and the information service align with shared fundamental principles regarding the goals of crisis communication:<sup>59</sup> Appropriate resources should be allocated for information-related activities, and they must be fully integrated into overall objectives as part of the crisis communication plan. Communicators should be represented at the senior management level of the organization and be part of the decision-making process.<sup>60</sup>

Regarding external support networks, organizations should maintain both horizontal (between local authorities) and vertical contacts (between local and government authorities). Establishing confidence between parties forms a solid foundation for effectively managing crises. Parties involved should clarify tasks, responsibilities, and roles, and agree on language use and terminology, which may vary. Cooperation related to telecommunications and data technology should also be defined. During a crisis, these networks should be activated to ensure consistent real-time information dissemination to all involved parties and facilitate dialogue before information is released to the media.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, it is crucial to establish networks with foreign partners and create reliable communication channels that can be utilized during crisis situations. Building these connections enhances preparedness and ensures effective coordination across borders when needed most.

In addition to the previously mentioned points, organizations should ensure that adequate resources are available whenever needed during the pre-crisis phase. This involves analyzing the initial number of resources required and identifying existing as well as potential sources. Particularly during the post-crisis phase, the recovery process may require sustained resources. Therefore, organizations should plan to ensure they have appropriate resources available to facilitate a smooth recovery. Preparing in advance in this manner ensures that organizations are well-equipped to manage crises effectively, both in the immediate response and during the longer-term recovery phase.

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<sup>59</sup> NATO Civil Preparedness Civil Protection Group, A Practical Guide to Public Information during a Crisis (Budapest Guidelines III).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.



#### 4.4. Checklist for Crisis Preparation Phase:

The following recommendations and advice are helpful to effectively handle the pre-crisis preparation phase<sup>62</sup>:

- Elaborate and Review the Crisis Communication Strategy and its Action Plan.
- Designate a Crisis Response Team that is properly trained.
- Pre-draft crisis management messages you may use for the general crisis statements.
- Spokesperson should be a first responder to the crisis and provide quick, accurate, open, and consistent responses.
- Assess potential risks based on two criteria's-likelihood and impact.
- Establish Monitoring and Early Warning system in order to effectively and timely deal with the crisis.
- Be prepared to use a specially designed website or existing website to address crisis concerns.
- Build Internal and External Partnership Networks.
- Conduct Crisis Simulation Exercises at least annually to test the effectiveness of the crisis communication plan and the readiness of the response team.



<sup>62</sup>Institute for Public Relations. "Crisis Management and Communications." <https://instituteforpr.org/crisis-management-and-communications/> (retrieved on 20.08.2024).

By Tinatin Aghniashvili



**“The crisis you have to worry about most is the one you don’t see coming”**

*Mike Mansfield, former US Diplomat*

During the crisis response phase, an organization faces the impact of a crisis and activates its preparedness activities to respond effectively and timely. When a crisis takes place, the organization shifts its focus and resources away from regular operations to handle the crisis. A crisis occurs due to some event or a realization by management that an organization is in crisis.<sup>63</sup> This often leads to disruptions or the potential for disruptions within the organization. The disruption aspect is what differentiates a crisis from an incident or simply a bad day for the organization.

The scale and impact of the crisis vary, but crisis responses generally aim to achieve the following goals<sup>64</sup>: limit harm to constituents, facilitate the psychological recovery of victims, limit social disapproval liabilities, reconstruct social approval assets, regain share value, protect and restore market share, reduce negative emotions towards the organization, increase empathy, lessen media coverage/discussion of the crisis, return to baseline (pre-crisis) coverage and discussion, reduce dis-identification with the organization, improve sentiment analysis and etc.

There is a high possibility that once the crisis happens, criticism and negative attitudes across various stakeholders will spread immediately. This often puts the organization in a defensive mode. Despite proactive preparation and communication efforts beforehand, organizations may still face emerging and “unknown” challenges. Before the clear picture and actual impact of the crisis is identified, there are two critical aspects that need to be considered immediately:

-  Emotional Impact on Victims: Victims directly and indirectly affected by the crisis may experience heightened emotional states, potentially leading to panic spreading not only within their immediate group but also throughout the wider society, consequently creating difficult-to-manage situations.
-  Emotional State of Crisis Management Team - employees (and their families) of the organization, might be severely affected (emotionally, physically and etc.) by the crisis and in this case, they have double responsibility, to stay calm as well as take over their responsibilities in a timely and rational manner.

Managing the above-mentioned emotional aspects is essential during a crisis to provide a strategic and rational crisis response and mitigate further negative impacts. Another aspect that needs to be considered is that every element of the response to the incident will be thoroughly scrutinized and analyzed both during and after the crisis. This includes the operational response and the success of communication, which is always a key area to review.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, organizations must strive to maximize their preparedness for crises to effectively manage outcomes and perceptions.

<sup>63</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 6.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, pg.10.

<sup>65</sup> Amanda Coleman, “Are you ready for a crisis? Creating and testing a crisis communication plan” in *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations*, 2nd ed. (London: Kogan Page Limited, 2023).

A crisis typically involves various actors, including directly and indirectly affected, their families, authorities, organizations, local and national media, and volunteers, with various perceptions. In addition to the immediate challenges of a crisis, there are other risks that need to be addressed at an early stage:

- *Information challenges proliferate rapidly* - once the crisis occurs, there is a big likelihood of spreading disinformation (*verifiably false information that is shared with an intent to deceive and mislead*), misinformation (*verifiably false information that is shared without an intent to mislead*) or malinformation (*deliberately misleads by twisting the meaning of truthful information*).<sup>66</sup> The primary aim and objectives are to mislead and manipulate groups of people or a wider audience potentially threatening public safety, community cohesion, trust in institutions and media, the integrity of the organization and etc.<sup>67</sup> New techniques and approaches in technology and social media provide a robust toolkit that can significantly disrupt processes and hinder effective crisis management;
- *Every individual becomes a “decision-maker” to some extent*. Each individual has their own perception on the outbreak of the crisis, its severity, nature, and the consequences for themselves and their organizations. There is a significant risk that individuals in various roles might exceed their authority and act beyond their competence during the crisis. Besides, ordinary individuals, who serve as communicators can inadvertently influence public opinion negatively and hinder the effective handling of the crisis.
- *“The truth lies with the receiver”*<sup>68</sup> - the most frequently made mistake during a crisis is a different perception of the crisis picture by the decision-makers and the public. Productive dialogue and gaining public trust will be very difficult if their perceptions, challenges, and expectations are not considered. Their views, no matter how far from reality, are still very important, regardless of whether the receiver’s picture of the crisis is right or wrong, this is where communication must start .

Therefore, on the one hand, authorities must be well-informed about the diverse perceptions, actors, and information challenges involved in various processes and on the other, maintain structured, rational communication with the wider public and a clear division of responsibilities within the crisis response team.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Government Communication Service, RESIST 2: Counter-Disinformation Toolkit, 8.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>68</sup> SEMA (Swedish Emergency Management Agency), "Crisis Communications Handbook" (Huskvarna: NRS Tryckeri, 2008:3), 10.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 10.

## 5.1. Crisis Response Stages

Each organization and institution should have its own terms of reference for dealing with the crisis specifically tailored to their strategic goals and objectives. However, there is a general, five-stage approach that can be applicable to the whole organization during the crisis response phase. Namely<sup>70</sup> :

01. *Mobilise* – Following the reporting of an incident requiring a response, the team shall mobilize to the incident site and response centers per the written plans. During mobilization, the principle of cautious overreaction shall be followed concerning the mobilization of both internal and external resources which shall be stood down if found to be above the needs of the eventual assessment, on the basis that it is easier to stand down resources.
02. *Assess* – Once the team is gathered in the nominated response center, an assessment of the current status of events and potential escalation shall be conducted.
03. *Respond* – Based on the assessment, actions shall be undertaken to mitigate escalation.
04. *Recover* – through the implementation of business continuity strategies.
05. *De-escalate* – may be taken at different times by different teams and it is important to take a clear decision when a team is being disbanded and actions handed back to the asset or Business to close out.

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<sup>70</sup> Albany Academy: Comprehensive Communication Training for Development, Diplomacy and Defence. London: Albany Associates International Ltd, 2021, 9.

The following annex provides detailed guidance for each stage of crisis response<sup>71</sup> :

| Crisis Communication Cycle                       |  |   |   |   |   |
|--|--|---|---|---|---|
|  | Pre-Crisis   | Mobilise & Assess   | Respond   | Recover   | De-Escalate   |
| Information Requirements (of the Public)         |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happened?</li> <li>• Where and when?</li> <li>• Who's responsible?</li> <li>• Are we safe?</li> <li>• What are the consequences for myself and my family?</li> <li>• What's being done to protect or help people?</li> <li>• Has anyone suffered?</li> <li>• Who are they?</li> <li>• What are you going to do about it?</li> <li>• Who's in charge?</li> <li>• What's going to happen next?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What's the risk to me?</li> <li>• What can I do to minimize my risk?</li> <li>• What should/can I do to help?</li> <li>• Why are you doing what you're doing?</li> <li>• Why aren't you doing more/differently?</li> <li>• Who should I listen to?</li> <li>• Who's right?</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why didn't the response go better/differently?</li> <li>• Who is to blame?</li> <li>• Who's responsible for getting us back to normal?</li> <li>• Why is it taking so long to deal with this?</li> <li>• I'm not seeing this on the news anymore. Should I still care?</li> <li>• What are the long term implications / consequences?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did the organization perform?</li> <li>• Should we rely on/invest in the organization?</li> </ul>  |
| Communication Requirements (of the Organization) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify audiences.</li> <li>• Develop generic messages and materials.</li> <li>• Identify channels of communication.</li> <li>• Exercise the plan</li> <li>• Get approvals from legal, management etc</li> <li>• Build relationships with audiences and media</li> <li>• Identify and train spokespeople.</li> <li>• Ensure staff aware of media policy</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge the event / issue with empathy (apply PPP) rapidly</li> <li>• Seek strategic guidance</li> <li>• Explain and inform in simple terms</li> <li>• Establish your credibility</li> <li>• Provide appropriate courses of action (including where and how to get more information)</li> <li>• Keep all stakeholders informed of events and communications</li> </ul>                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help appropriate stakeholders accurately understand the impact of the situation and their risk</li> <li>• Provide background and encompassing information to those who need to know</li> <li>• Gain understanding of and support for response</li> <li>• Monitor and analyse communications</li> <li>• Correct misinformation</li> <li>• Explain emergency recommendations (if any)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyse the prevailing narrative</li> <li>• Frame the narrative through proactive use of imagery</li> <li>• Counter misconceptions</li> <li>• Consider post-crisis media campaign</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve future response by providing education about this response</li> <li>• Examine and address problems and mishaps</li> <li>• Reinforce what worked</li> <li>• Persuade/build support for policy and resource allocation changes</li> <li>• Promote the activities and capabilities of the organization</li> </ul> |

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 202.

## 5.2. Initial Response - Basic Requirements

The crisis response phase is marked by a high-pressure environment in which authorities must operate.<sup>72</sup> This phase is characterized by a sense of urgency and the challenge of working with limited time and incomplete information. Information management during this phase is particularly demanding, compounded by the additional pressure from media scrutiny. Therefore, following the basic requirements gains utmost importance during the initial crisis response phase:

- *Information must be submitted quickly*<sup>73</sup> - This is the first rule of information management, which is simple but often difficult to achieve. Authority needs to demonstrate rapidly that it is handling the situation and establish itself as the official source of information. It is recommended to provide a response within the first hour after the crisis occurs that puts a great deal of pressure on authorities to have a message ready in a short period of time.<sup>74</sup> If an organization fails to tell its side of the story, the information environment will be filled with “other stories”, which will be difficult to counter in the future.
- *An authority cannot afford to speculate*<sup>75</sup> and it should stick to facts. The credibility of the organization should not be jeopardized. In practice, this is often difficult because, during the initial phases of a crisis, information requirements are expanding greatly but only partial answers can be provided.<sup>76</sup> People seek accurate information during a crisis to understand the situation's impact on them. Correcting any mistakes promptly is crucial. The philosophy of speaking with one voice in a crisis is a way to maintain accuracy<sup>77</sup>;
- *An authority should provide information on a regular basis in an active and open manner.*<sup>78</sup> Media representatives should be informed that authorities are committed to updating the public transparently and promptly, without withholding information. This commitment should be demonstrated through actions, not just statements. It is advisable to proactively provide the latest information to the media rather than waiting for them to ask questions.<sup>79</sup> Regularly updating the media about its latest findings and actions is crucial for maintaining an authority's credibility, even when certain answers are not immediately available. Understanding the media's point of view is very important during the crisis. Journalists and reporters depend on timely and accurate information for their articles and news reports. When official information from authorities is lacking, journalists may seek alternative sources, potentially leading to speculation and rumors<sup>80</sup>;

<sup>72</sup> NATO Civil Preparedness Civil Protection Group, A Practical Guide to Public Information during a Crisis (Budapest Guidelines III).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Institute for Public Relations. "Crisis Management and Communications." <https://instituteforpr.org/crisis-management-and-communications/> (retrieved on 20.08.2024).

<sup>75</sup> NATO Civil Preparedness Civil Protection Group, A Practical Guide to Public Information during a Crisis (Budapest Guidelines III).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Institute for Public Relations. "Crisis Management and Communications." <https://instituteforpr.org/crisis-management-and-communications/> (retrieved on 20.08.2024).

<sup>78</sup> NATO Civil Preparedness Civil Protection Group, A Practical Guide to Public Information during a Crisis (Budapest Guidelines III).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

- *Crisis managers should express concern or sympathy for any victims of the crisis*<sup>81</sup> - Victims are individuals who have been adversely affected or inconvenienced by a crisis. They may have experienced financial losses, illness, evacuation, or property damage. Expressing concern can mitigate reputational damage and reduce financial losses. Experimental studies by Coombs, Holladay, and Dean have shown that organizations experience less reputational damage when they express concern compared to when they do not<sup>82</sup>.

### 5.3. What exactly needs to be done during a crisis?

#### ● Immediate Mobilization of the Crisis Communication Team

When a crisis occurs, it is imperative that the crisis communication team is mobilized and activated promptly. If any team member is not available due to unavoidable circumstances, managers should activate designated backups who have been identified and trained during the pre-crisis phase. Pre-assigned roles and responsibilities must be swiftly activated and clear and timely managerial guidance provided.

An integrated and coordinated response is crucial during a crisis, where managerial, operational and communication efforts must align and support each other. The communication team has to start implementing an information campaign and ensure coordinated and synchronized communication among all stakeholders.

#### ● Identification of the Crisis Type and Scale

In the initial stage, it is crucial to identify the exact scale and nature of the crisis. Hereby, two challenges may arise: firstly, the clarity about the crisis may be initially unclear due to the objective reasons and secondly, the spread of disinformation, misinformation, or malinformation can further obscure the true nature of the crisis. Despite these challenges, understanding the specific contours of the crisis at the initial stage, is of crucial importance in any crisis scenario. Organizations with an early warning and monitoring system may find it easier and quicker to determine the precise scale of the crisis. Having a clear understanding of the crisis enables organizations to initiate appropriate response measures promptly.

#### ● Adaptation of the Crisis Communication Action Plan

Given the pressure and speed of a crisis, there is less chance to develop a crisis communication action plan from scratch when an issue or incident is unraveling on social media and on rolling news channels.<sup>83</sup> Once the crisis communication team identifies the exact nature of the crisis, it needs to promptly update the existing action plan.

Specific objectives tailored to the situation should be clearly defined, aligning closely with the crisis at hand. Division of responsibilities and roles within the team must be reviewed and adjusted, if necessary. Tools and resources required to achieve these objectives effectively should be identified and allocated accordingly. From a strategic perspective, the organization must ensure that these concrete objectives are in compliance with the overall strategic aims and priorities of the institution. This alignment helps maintain coherence and consistency in the organization's response efforts during the crisis.

<sup>81</sup> Institute for Public Relations. "Crisis Management and Communications." <https://instituteforpr.org/crisis-management-and-communications/> (retrieved on 20.08.2024).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Amanda Coleman, "Are you ready for a crisis? Creating and testing a crisis communication plan" in *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations*, 2nd ed. (London: Kogan Page Limited, 2023).

## ● Elaboration and Dissemination of the crisis-related narrative and messages

In all types of crises, there is an urgent and rapid need to exchange information, which can evolve and change swiftly. It is crucial for the crisis communication team to efficiently manage information, promptly provide guidance, advice, and recommendations, and address numerous questions posed by different groups. It is also about analyzing myths, rumors, and decisions – and everything must be done simultaneously.<sup>84</sup> During the crisis, the information environment will be filled with different messages, leading to the formation of various narratives around the incident. The information environment, particularly fragile during crises, often becomes a battleground for competing narratives. Narratives represent a form of storytelling that helps to explain and shape perceptions of an issue and messages are the building blocks of narratives.<sup>85</sup> Public response, feedback, and commentary from those caught up in the crisis can quickly become the narrative of the incident or issue and can last for some time even through an investigation or public inquiry.<sup>86</sup>

Therefore, it is significant for the organization to swiftly develop a narrative that will become the dominant version of the crisis, trusted by stakeholders and the public. The crisis communication team must craft and disseminate specific messages tailored to the unique aspects of the crisis, taking into account the ethical, cultural, and religious considerations of the affected groups. These messages should closely align with the organization's strategic objectives to ensure coherence and effectiveness in communication. Communication thrives on creativity, however, at the initial stage, creativity must be replaced with a systematic approach to sharing information in order to successfully manage crises and build resilience.<sup>87</sup>

## ● Activation of the Communication Channels

During a crisis, it is imperative to activate all communication channels immediately. Traditional and Social Media platforms serve as primary instruments for disseminating crucial information to various target audiences. The crisis communication team should leverage prior analyses to determine which groups have access to which platforms and activate those channels accordingly, focusing especially on reaching the primary target audience effectively.

Given the substantial flow of information during crises—from both the organization sharing messages and the public requesting responses—the volume of information exchanged can overwhelm communication channels. Therefore, the team must ensure that main communication lines operate smoothly without delays, and information exchange is not hindered by technical issues. Moreover, depending on the nature of the crisis, there might be a need to upgrade or create new, separate communication channels, for instance, dedicated platforms for victims and their families. New communication channels have to be created promptly and tailored to specific needs during the crisis.

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<sup>84</sup>SEMA (Swedish Emergency Management Agency), "Crisis Communications Handbook" (Huskvarna: NRS Tryckeri, 2008:3).

<sup>85</sup>Government Communication Service. RESIST 2: Counter-Disinformation Toolkit, 12.

<sup>86</sup>Amanda Coleman, "Are you ready for a crisis? Creating and testing a crisis communication plan" in *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations*, 2nd ed. (London: Kogan Page Limited, 2023).

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.



## ● Informing and Cooperating with Media

During the crisis response phase, the media plays a critical role which can have positive as well as negative impact on handling the crisis situation. The image that various interested parties have of a crisis to a very large extent, is created by the media, which decides whether they want to cover the crisis, how they are going to describe it and in what forms different decisions and activities are to be presented.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, the communication team must have a clear understanding of the needs, perceptions, and working ethics of the media. If sufficient information is not provided by the organization on the crisis, journalists are forced to find it elsewhere, which can open up the scope for speculation and rumors.<sup>89</sup>

In certain cases, the communication team can proactively provide the media with appropriate information about a crisis before official engagements in order to save time. Organizing press conferences to update the public, issuing regular press releases, and establishing hotlines are highly effective methods for communicating and disseminating information to both the media and the broader public.<sup>90</sup> This approach not only keeps stakeholders informed but also helps manage perceptions and maintain transparency during critical times. You can read more about media relations in the following chapter.

## ● Mobilization and activation of the Spokesperson

When a crisis emerges, the spokesperson, alongside the crisis communication team, must promptly assume his/her responsibilities. The spokesperson acts as a crucial liaison between the organization, media and the public. Spokespersons are not solely responsible for messages, they play an integral role in developing crisis messages to ensure a sense of ownership - "Spokespersons don't just read a statement, they are the statement!"<sup>91</sup> During a crisis, it is essential to respond quickly, accurately, and consistently. Rapid responses, ideally within the first hour, help control the narrative and prevent misinformation.<sup>92,93</sup> Consistent messaging maintains credibility and ensures stakeholders receive clear and reliable information. This approach, known as "stealing thunder", can reduce reputational damage by having the organization disclose bad news rather than letting the media break the story.<sup>94</sup> Spokespersons should demonstrate a genuine understanding of and sensitivity to the victims' situations. A competent presentation is also very important when it comes to an effective spokesperson. The "one-voice principle" dictates that one spokesperson consistently addresses the public to build confidence and personalize the authority. However, specific questions may require support from specialists. It is essential to balance technical accuracy with simplicity to avoid confusing or alarming the public.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>88</sup> SEMA (Swedish Emergency Management Agency), "Crisis Communications Handbook" (Huskvarna: NRS Tryckeri, 2008:3).

<sup>89</sup> NATO Civil Preparedness Civil Protection Group, A Practical Guide to Public Information during a Crisis (Budapest Guidelines III), 20.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>91</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "CERC Spokesperson," [https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/ppt/CERC\\_Spokesperson.pdf](https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/ppt/CERC_Spokesperson.pdf); (retrieved on 28.08.2024).

<sup>92</sup> Laura Arpan and Donnalyn Pompper, "Stormy weather: Testing "stealing thunder" as a crisis communication strategy to improve communication flow between organizations and journalists." *Public Relations Review*, 29 (3) (September 2003): 291-308. DOI:10.1016/S0363-8111(03)00043-2; (retrieved on 01.09.2024).

<sup>93</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 28.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

A well-trained spokesperson effectively achieves the organization's goals and is prepared to address a variety of questions, including the following<sup>96</sup>:

- What is the incident and how severe is its magnitude (e.g., who, what, where, when, why, and how)?
- What are the health and safety risks for individuals and communities?
- Who is managing the event and what are they doing to respond to the incident?

While operating as a spokesperson in a “theater of operation”, it's crucial to adhere to the following detailed rules to enhance effectiveness<sup>97</sup>:

- **Don't over-reassure:** The objective is not to placate but to elicit accurate, calm concern; for example, “This is a very dangerous winter storm, but people can take actions to limit their risk. If at all possible, stay at home and off the streets until the storm passes and roads are clear”.
- **Acknowledge uncertainty:** Offer only what you know: “The situation is developing and we don't yet have all the facts. Based on what we do know, we expect...”.
- **Emphasize that a process is in place to learn more:** Describe process in simple terms: “Samples are taken from each person reporting flu-like symptoms. These samples are being tested now to identify the exact strain”.
- **Give anticipatory guidance:** If you are aware of future negative outcomes, let people know what to expect. For example, to foreshadow side effects of antibiotics, you could say, “This broad-spectrum antibiotic is an effective medication, but it can cause stomach upset, including nausea in some people”.
- **Be regretful, not defensive:** Say, “We wish that more doses of vaccine were currently available” or “We feel terrible that...” when acknowledging mistakes or failures from the organization.
- **Acknowledge people's fears:** Don't tell people they shouldn't be afraid. They are afraid, and they have a right to their fears. Use statements like, “We understand people are concerned and afraid, and it is normal to be frightened when facing a wildfire”.
- **Acknowledge the shared misery:** Some people will be less frightened than they are miserable, feeling hopeless and defeated. Use statements like: “Right now, with so many people in shelters, it's hard to see how things can return to normal. We are working hard to start the process of returning people to their homes”.
- **Express wishes:** Say, “I wish we knew more” or “I wish our answers were more definitive”.
- **Be willing to address the “what if” questions:** These are the questions that everyone is thinking about, and to which they want expert answers. Use statements like, “We have considered the possibility that the situation will get worse and we have identified additional locations for shelters”.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

- **Give people things to do:** Simple actions will give people a sense of control and will help motivate them to stay tuned to what is happening. Use statements like, “You may wish to cook spinach thoroughly before eating it. You may wish to avoid eating spinach. Or, you may wish to eat only prepackaged frozen spinach”.
- **Ask more of people:** Perhaps the most important role of the spokesperson is to ask people to manage the risk and work toward solutions. People can tolerate considerable risk, especially voluntary risk. Determination of a spokesperson to face risk will help others looking for role models.

## ● Activation of Internal and External Partnership Networks

During an actual crisis, productive coordination among both internal and external stakeholders is a crucial and complex process. An organization should activate previously established networks on horizontal and vertical levels and strive to minimize the negative impact of the crisis.

Firstly, the organization must ensure that all employees responsible are ready to be engaged in the crisis-handling process. This ensures that they are well-informed and can respond appropriately to the crisis situation. In accordance with managerial guidance, the Information or Communication Unit assumes a crucial role in disseminating information and ensuring that staff members are equipped with relevant information that aligns with the organization's narrative and messages. During a crisis, every employee can potentially become a communicator. Therefore, it is essential that all actions are cohesive and unified across the organization.

Secondly, an organization must promptly approach national stakeholders depending on the characteristics of the crisis. This includes local, regional, and national governmental structures, civil society organizations, private companies, and other relevant entities. Parties involved in the crisis management process should clarify tasks, responsibilities, roles and agree on language use and terminology, which may vary. This real-time information dissemination to all parties involved, before it is released to the media, will positively impact the swift resolution of the crisis and help prevent its escalation.<sup>98</sup>

*Thirdly*, organizations must involve external stakeholders in the crisis response phase when necessary. External stakeholders may include international partners such as other states, organizations, and other actors. This collaboration becomes particularly crucial when the organization lacks the resources needed for the timely and effective management of the crisis.

<sup>98</sup>NATO Civil Preparedness Civil Protection Group, A Practical Guide to Public Information during a Crisis (Budapest Guidelines III).

## 5.4. Three Dimensions of Crisis Communication

There are three main dimensions to crisis communication in this phase: communication during the actual crisis; communication of how the crisis is being handled and portraying the crisis image.<sup>99</sup> The most significant challenges often stem not from the crisis itself, but from how it is managed or mishandled by those involved. This can include inadequate preparation, challenges in finding effective solutions, inflexibility, incomplete understanding of the situation, and difficulties in adapting to new roles and responsibilities. Each dimension will be explored in detail:

### ○ Communication during the actual crisis<sup>100</sup>

In a crisis, one common characteristic is the rapid escalation of information demands. Managing operational updates, offering advice, providing guidance, and promptly responding to inquiries are all critical tasks that must be handled swiftly and efficiently. Simultaneously, it's crucial to analyze and address myths and rumors while making informed decisions. The huge volume of information that has to be exchanged during a crisis often results in overloaded information channels. Hence, appropriate measures have to be taken in advance.

### ○ Communicating how the crisis is being handled<sup>101</sup>

Effective crisis communication relies on the presence of a well-functioning and professional information operation. This entails that an organization has an established information policy that outlines its fundamental principles, such as commitment to openness, speed, accessibility, credibility, proactive stance over-reactive, detailed planning, collaboration with other entities, and continued evaluation. Additionally, technical resources for both disseminating and receiving information, such as phones, faxes, and information technology are essential components of this operational framework.

### ○ Portraying the image of a crisis<sup>102</sup>

Authorities must assume that the crisis image is as real as the crisis itself. Poor handling of the crisis image can exacerbate the crisis or alter its course and nature. The crisis and the crisis image must be handled in parallel. The image of a crisis is largely molded by the news media. The portrayal of a crisis is heavily influenced by the media, as they determine whether to cover it, how it's portrayed, and the way decisions and actions are presented to the public.

<sup>99</sup> NATO Civil Preparedness Civil Protection Group, A Practical Guide to Public Information during a Crisis (Budapest Guidelines III).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

## 5.5. Checklist for Crisis Response Phase<sup>103</sup>:

The following recommendations and advice are helpful to effectively handle the crisis response phase:

- Be quick in adapting the Crisis Communication Plan and try to have an initial response within the first hour.
- Be accurate by carefully checking all facts.
- Be consistent by keeping the spokesperson informed of crisis events and key message points.
- Make public safety the number one priority.
- Use all of the available communication channels including the Internet, Intranet, and mass notification systems.
- Provide some expression of concern or sympathy for the victims.
- Remember to include employees in the initial response.
- Be ready to provide stress and trauma counseling to victims of the crisis and their families, including employees.



<sup>103</sup> Institute for Public Relations. "Crisis Management and Communications." <https://instituteforpr.org/crisis-management-and-communications/> (retrieved on 20.08.2024).



By Jesper Falkheimer

News media play an exceptionally large role in a crisis. Since the entry of the Internet, social media and new digital platforms the role of professional journalism has been challenged also by non-journalistic sources spreading information before, during, and after crises. Still, professional news media have a core role as providers of credible information for most of the public, not least during crises. In major crises, the most established news media often become the campfires where people gather. Servicing journalists and having good relations with news media institutions and journalists is therefore a prioritized assignment for crisis communicators. A professional crisis communicator respects the role of journalists and a free news media.

In this chapter, different sides of the news media's importance will be highlighted – such as how the media works, what crisis journalism looks like, how to communicate with news media and journalists, and how to build a media relations unit for crisis management. As mentioned, the news media have a central role and task of informing about various events in society but also to comment and investigate these events. In crisis situations the role of the news media changes along the evolution of a crisis.

- *Acute phase – news media as a megaphone.* Here the news media tend to mainly act as distributors of governmental (and other actors) information. There is a risk that speed conquers correctness and that the reporting is based more on speculation than verified facts.
- *Next phase – news media as a scriptwriter.* When there is more information available the news media attempt to frame the crisis following a clear narrative (chronological, with main actors, victims, also focusing numbers of causalities, amount of money et cetera, if possible, setting a scene with a hero, someone to blame).
- *Final phase – news media as an examiner.* In this critical phase, usually taking place when the crisis event is over or almost over, the main question of interest for news media is who is to blame, and issues of responsibility are in focus.

The news media can to some extent influence the development (and management) of a crisis due to the reporting. It also happens that journalists become actors in crises, including when they create contact between authorities and, for example, protesters. That crisis situations are so interesting in the news media is not particularly surprising since a crisis is synonymous with news items. Crises are dramatic and critically negative in nature, they are unexpected and take place right now, they often affect a broad public, they usually happen locally with proximity to the audience, they can be personified with individuals who are affected in different ways and are often about elite people.

News media and authorities have a two-sided interest and purpose to have a relationship. The news media and journalists need information from relevant sources. For the authorities, they need to use news media to reach citizens and other stakeholders. The relationship between the media and the authorities is close and intense in regular everyday activities – sometimes too close so that it is described as a symbiosis – but is further intensified in crisis situations. This applies especially to the relationship at the local level, where

most crisis events take place. In the contemporary media landscape, the public has also become a source of information for the news media. By social media, citizens may publish relevant news material that the newspapers can publish. This has come to be called citizen journalism. It has also been shown that crisis management may receive information directly from people who observed, for example, an accident or who were able to provide information from the field about the situation in a crisis management operation.

### 6.1. Typical tactics for crisis media relations

There are numerous ways of getting publicity or developing a relationship with news media. Ever since the dawn of modern journalism, governments, corporations, and other entities have tried to influence the news media. Sometimes unethical strategies have been used – based on false information and manipulative tactics. This is not accepted ethical behavior in crisis communication (or in other forms of strategic communication) where we respect a free press and professional journalism, which is a prerequisite for modern democracy.

In a crisis, the premise for news media relations is normally the opposite of how it is in everyday work for authorities, corporations, and other organizations. In everyday work and regular times, organizations tend to do what is possible to achieve publicity while interest from journalists is low. In crises the journalists' interest is high and organizations need to be ready with information material instantly. There are many tactics for attention, publicity, and media relations (in regular situations as well as crises), some of them specifically relevant to crises are mentioned below:

- *Press releases* – this tactic is probably the most well-known one in news media relations. Efficient press releases are written according to the same media logic that journalists use (highlighting the main message according to the so-called inverted pyramid – telling the most fundamental information in the lead paragraph, and then arranging the remaining details, from most important to least important). A good press release is never more than a one-pager, including contact information. The first press release ever was made by the PR consultant Ivy Lee, in October 1906 and was actually also about a crisis, a railroad accident involving the Pennsylvania Railroad in the USA. In our time the traditional press release is still relevant, but we also have social media press releases, a hybrid between a social media post and the traditional press release directed towards the broad public and news media at the same time. These social media press releases (e.g. at X where celebrities tend to write these) are picked up by news media, but have the advantage, from the senders' point-of-view, that the information instantly also reaches a big audience. In a crisis, press releases are used, but during the acute phase of, say, a natural disaster crisis, there is need of a press conference where the authorities may give more extensive answers to journalists, and when live-recorded by television, also directly to the public.
- *Press conferences* – due to high pressure from the public and news media to get the latest information and to ask questions, press conferences are arranged. A press conference can be both a risk and an opportunity. On the one hand side arranging a press conference may reduce public anxiety and the pressure outside the crisis organization to answer questions. It can also, when well planned, provide a common and accurate picture of the situation. The risk is that the press conference does not

provide clear answers and that the people speaking at the press conference give contradictory and vague information, which leads to increased uncertainty and anger towards the individuals communicating the message and decreases credibility. There are some concrete recommendations for anyone organizing a press conference during a crisis. First, you need to be very clear about who will contribute and be on stage (preferably it is an official with the mandate, who is also good at communicating). During press conferences in major crises, it is customary to have several persons at the stage, representing the authorities in charge (e.g. from government, police, hospital). Second, press conferences should be led by a press secretary or alike, who moderates the conference (collects the questions and decides who answers) and may break in and clarify when needed. Third, as in a press release, it is important that the speakers at the conference have planned and agreed upon which will be the main answers and messages. Speculations are never beneficial, and there is a need for balancing rational information with empathy when that is the case (see rhetorical tools in chapter 2). Obviously, high officials should be trained to execute press conferences in advance. Details matter – such as how to dress. In some crises, it is logical to wear clothes that signal authority and expertise – medical doctors wearing hospital clothes, military and police spokespersons wearing uniforms. In major societal crises with a high threat towards core values or democracy, or connected to major disasters, this may be applicable to send a message that this is very serious. In other crises uniforms and alike may scare parts of the public and lead to an increase in anxiety that counteracts the objective of a conference (which sometimes is to lower the experience of crisis and risk in the public). The physical place of the press conference also sends signals. In some crises it is beneficial to arrange a conference in a formal authority setting, in other crises it may be beneficial to arrange a conference close to the site of a disaster or alike.

● *Interviews* – journalists may listen to press conferences and read press releases, but they primarily want their ‘own’ quotes and stories from high officials, authorities, and, if so, victims and relatives. Ideally, they get information from top sources such as the high governmental representatives, but in a crisis, they usually need to settle with crisis responders or communicators when it comes to interviews, while the press conferences gather top representatives. As a communicator, you may have different roles. You may be an assigned spokesperson representing the organization. You may be a media relations coordinator, organizing and setting up media contacts. You may also be an advisor to management persons, training and helping them to communicate with journalists when needed. Before every interview, four questions should be answered<sup>104</sup>:

- *Why – should we agree to do the interview?*
- *Who – should speak – what works best in this situation and for the next steps?*
- *What – is our message and what do we want to focus on?*
- *Who – do we want to reach (the public, or a vulnerable target group?)*

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<sup>104</sup>SEMA (Swedish Emergency Management Agency), "Crisis Communications Handbook" (Huskvarna: NRS Tryckeri, 2008:3).



Journalists do what they need to get in contact – by calling you, e-mailing you, sending SMS, running to you directly after press conferences, trying to catch you in the street and so on. This is traditional journalistic work. Finally, you might end up in an interview situation. Journalists may have a good intention (getting information to communicate to the public), but they sometimes use rhetorical tactics to get you to say more than you ought to. So, bear in mind the tips below when talking to a journalist before, during, or after a crisis<sup>105</sup> :

- Avoid taking interviews instantly, give time to plan.
- Plan for the main message or messages.
- Plan for where the interview takes place (in an office, outside, in front of an authority building, close to a crisis scene – what supports your message best?).
- During the interview, think before you answer.
- Stay within your field of competence – it is okay to say that “this is not my area of knowledge” and recommend someone else.
- Be aware of judicial constraints and be clear of when you cannot, or are not permitted, to answer a question.
- Stick to the facts – avoid saying things that are not verified.
- Everything is “on the record” and do not say things that you cannot stand up for right after or before the interview.
- Be firm, fair and honest.
- Never lie, guess or focus on your personal experiences (you represent an authority).
- Never get upset or angry.
- Avoid technical or other forms of jargon.
- Never discuss classified information.
- Never say “No comment”. Instead explain why you cannot or do not want to answer the question – due to judicial constraints, respect for privacy, that you unfortunately do not have information (but will look for it as soon as the interview is done), or that you are not able to answer since this is not your field of knowledge.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 48-49



**Media training** – to be prepared for press conferences and interviews it is beneficial to exercise and train during regular times. It may also be possible to do urgent media training right before a conference or interview, where the team may prepare a range of possible questions and draft model answers for each. The official who will be in the spotlight of the news media may train to answer the questions a few times before the interview. If possible, the official should learn how to “stick to the message”. The official should also learn how he or she reacts under stress – professional journalists may use accusations and different tactics to get you out of balance, and it is good to know this in advance, so you do not lose your temper or focus. The responsibility of media training falls on crisis communication officers.



**Media Monitoring and Analysis** – During a crisis you also need to assign resources to audit and analyze the news media coverage. It is an important task to monitor how the news media report on the crisis since the public perception of the crisis is shaped by these mediated images. Aside from monitoring the general image as well as how crisis communication activities have been covered, you may also identify signs of new advances in the crisis that you did not know about. If possible, you should assign a person (sometimes several persons) to coordinate and execute the media monitoring during the crisis. You may also use this monitoring later – post-crisis – to learn from what has happened. One of the main reasons for setting up media monitoring during the crisis is that it makes it possible for you to react quickly to the dissemination of false or misleading information (intended or unintended) or rumors. Aside from unintended false and misleading information that is spread in crises, due to speed and lack of verification, we live in a world where foreign malign actors exploit crises and vulnerabilities aiming to amplify uncertainty and increase polarization and conflicts. For professional crisis communicators it is important to identify false or misleading information spread through news media (and other forms of digital communication), and correct errors (or request news media to) as soon as possible. Ideally, the signals from the media monitoring are reported in a feasible (easy to take in) both to field workers, the crisis management team, and the people in charge of the authority daily – or instantly when there is a risk that the false information will lead to serious consequences.

## 6.2. What defines a credible news media source - and the golden rules

As in all relationships, credibility is necessary for you as a crisis communicator (and your organization). So which criteria are crucial for you as a source?

- *Previous contact and suitability.* If you have an established and credible relationship with news media and journalists, you have a better chance to reach out. Good media relationships also depend on your ability to communicate clear and short messages. If you can support your messages with secondary sources with independent expert status the interest increases. The value of having established journalist contacts is an explanation for why external agencies are often employed to manage media relations. In practice, it is the interpersonal, local, and direct relationships that are of greatest significance.
- *Productivity.* You need the capacity to give journalists newsworthy information. Distributing a flood of press material to editors does not go down well. Journalists are usually bombarded by different sources with emails and press releases. The capacity to understand what is relevant and newsworthy before sending is crucial.
- *Reliability.* Sources who provide trivial or incorrect information lose their authority. If it comes to light that the information was unreliable and was reported on false grounds, the reporter will dismiss future messages from the source as unreliable.
- *Authority.* Credible public servants or those with established authority in a field, such as government representatives or researchers, have an advantage. However, it is important not to manipulate connections to authorities; this affects reliability and long-term relationships.
- Researcher Richard Bailey,<sup>106</sup> who has long practical experience, has formulated four golden rules for good media relations that we also consider to be ethically defensible:
- Act as a service function for journalists: answer questions quickly and objectively, be available, and convey relevant information.
- Respect and accept the independent role of the media (and realize that as a source, your role is different).
- Be honest with who you are and what you represent. Never try to cover anything up.
- Be just as readily available when the news is bad as when the news is good.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

By Tinatin Aghniashvili

**“The focus on managing the crisis is over, but managing the effects of the crisis - continue ”<sup>107</sup>**

Post-crisis communication plays a crucial role in the overall crisis management process, especially once the active phase of the crisis has passed. Post-crisis communication is a natural continuation of the crisis communication process. The crisis response and pre-crisis phases are inextricably linked and often overlap. According to crisis scholar Timothy Coombs, post-crisis considers actions after operations have returned to normal and includes providing follow-up information to stakeholders, cooperating with investigations, and learning from the crisis event.<sup>108</sup>

While the active phase of managing the crisis focuses on immediate response and containment, the post-crisis phase shifts towards recovery, repair, and rebuilding. Repairing activities can be linked to reputation, operations, relationships with stakeholders, or financial standing. Rebuilding efforts aim to restore normal ways of life and stability as quickly as possible. During the post-crisis phase, it is time for the organization to renew itself. The organization cannot simply seek to return to business as normal but must position itself to become different and better.<sup>109</sup>

The post-crisis phase is often overlooked because the immediate danger has passed and there's a tendency to shift focus back to normal life. There is psychological relief among team members and might be reluctant to allocate additional resources (whether human or material) to continue with the crisis communication in the final phase.

Executing post-crisis communication is undeniably complex and challenging, however, neglecting it can lead to several critical challenges:

- *Risk of Triggering New Crises:* Failure to communicate and fulfill promises made during the crisis can escalate tensions and potentially trigger new crises. If parties to the conflict feel dissatisfied or neglected, then the crisis is not managed effectively and the potential of the new waves increases. This could arise from unresolved issues, unmet expectations, inadequate compensations or safety levels among stakeholders.
- *Further Damage to Reputation:* If post-crisis communication is not handled effectively, it can prolong negative perceptions, worsen the organization's reputation, and affect its relationship with the partners, the wider public and the media. Stakeholders may perceive the organization as unresponsive or uncaring, which can undermine trust and loyalty.

<sup>107</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022).

<sup>108</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 22.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

- *Lack of Learning and Adaptation:* Without proper reflection and analysis of the crisis and its aftermath, the organization may miss valuable lessons that could improve future crisis management strategies and its action plans. Updating the conceptual bases of crisis communication and retraining staff based on new realities becomes challenging if lessons learned are not effectively communicated and integrated into organizational practices.
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*Loss of Institutional Memory:* If employees (especially decision-makers and key personnel) leave their positions without passing on the lessons learned and not documenting them, the organization risks losing valuable institutional knowledge and experience. This loss can hinder the organization's capacity-building efforts in the long run, as new members of the communication team may have to relearn lessons the organization has already faced.

Addressing these challenges requires a structured approach to capturing, documenting, and disseminating lessons learned from crises, ensuring they are integrated into organizational practices for continuous improvement and resilience.

During the post-crisis phase, there is another important aspect that needs to be taken into consideration: an organization must deliver all “promised” information.<sup>110</sup> Consistency between words and actions is paramount. If information was promised by the leadership or the Information Unit during the crisis, it must be delivered in the post-crisis phase without delay. Failing to deliver on these promises can lead to a loss of trust from stakeholders, which can be detrimental and require significant effort to repair. As Warren Buffet noted: “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently.”<sup>111</sup> Commitments regarding information delivery not only preserve trust but also reinforce the organization's credibility and accountability, ultimately fostering stronger relationships with stakeholders over time.

Taking into consideration all the above mentioned, organizations must execute post-crisis communication regardless of the crisis outcome. Effective communication after successfully managing a crisis reinforces resilience and facilitates a smooth recovery by emphasizing lessons learned and engaging with stakeholders. Conversely, if a crisis is mishandled, communication during recovery becomes even more challenging, requiring comprehensive strategies across multiple dimensions to address lingering issues. Navigating post-crisis communication effectively is crucial for maintaining trust, enhancing organizational learning, and mitigating future risks, regardless of the severity of the crisis impact.

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<sup>110</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 45.

<sup>111</sup> Perheyritys, “It Takes 20 Years to Build a Reputation and Five Minutes to Ruin It. If You Think About That, You'll Do Things Differently,” accessed July 17, 2024, <https://perheyritys.fi/uutishuone/blog-it-it-takes-20-years-to-build-a-reputation-and-five-minutes-to-ruin-it-if-you-think-about-that-you-ll-do-things-differently-warren-buffet/>; (retrieved on 20.07.2024).

## 7.1. What needs to be done during the Post-Crisis Phase?

### 7.1.1. Information Provision

The provision of information after a crisis depends on the scale and outcome of the crisis, however, it is of crucial importance in all possible cases. Typically, this communication effort can extend over several months or even years, beginning shortly after the incident occurs.<sup>112</sup> Certain questions will always arise following any kind of crisis<sup>113</sup>:

*Why has the crisis happened? Why was nothing done beforehand, could it have been avoided? What are the effects of the crisis? Is there a possibility of a reoccurrence? Are there any preventive measures the public can take, e.g., to protect health?*

Information provided by the organization during the post-crisis phase has to be as transparent as possible and clearly articulated. The main aim of disseminating information to the stakeholders involved aims at explaining:

- *Rationality of Policy Choices*: focusing on explaining the reasons behind the decisions made during the crisis response phase. This helps stakeholders understand why specific actions were taken and how they align with organizational strategic goals and priorities. Besides, it clearly demonstrates that decisions made on strategic levels were not made spontaneously, but were the outcome of thorough assessment and evaluation.
- *Concrete Actions Taken*: Detailed communication about the specific steps and activities (on operational and tactical levels) that the organization has already implemented before the post-crisis phase. This includes efforts to mitigate damage, support affected individuals or communities and restore normal operations.
- *Remaining Challenges and Proposed Solutions*: Transparency about ongoing issues or challenges that still need to be addressed after the crisis. It allows stakeholders to understand the whole cycle of the crisis, with its complexities involved. Additionally, presenting proposed solutions or strategies for resolving these challenges demonstrates the organization's commitment to continuous improvement and future resilience.

Overall, effective information dissemination in the post-crisis phase serves to maintain transparency, build trust, and manage expectations among stakeholders. It ensures that everyone involved understands the decisions made, the actions taken, and the path forward as the organization navigates the aftermath of the crisis.

<sup>112</sup> NATO Civil Preparedness Civil Protection Group, A Practical Guide to Public Information during a Crisis (Budapest Guidelines III).

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

## 7.1.2. Target Audiences that need to be addressed

The provision of information during the post-crisis phase to specific target groups is significant. As in the pre-crisis and crisis response phases, it remains crucial to maintain regular and transparent communication to keep people informed. In this process, the unique requirements and needs of the target audiences should be considered and a tailored-based approach implemented accordingly.

The following target groups should be considered during the post crisis phase:

### Victims and their Relatives<sup>114</sup>

Victims encompass all individuals who have suffered harm in various forms throughout the crisis. The harm can be reflected in various forms, such as physical injuries, psychological distress or damage to property. Additionally, relatives of those who were injured or lost in the crisis also require specialized support and care due to the psychological stress they have received. The significance of a personal and compassionate approach cannot be overstated.

Providing aid to victims should be promptly organized following the crisis. This envisages establishing a help desk where individuals can receive concrete assistance or obtain information. This should cover details on compensation procedures and access to organizations offering legal guidance. Moreover, authorities must disseminate information on acquiring support for temporary or replacement housing, where needed. This proactive approach ensures that those affected receive essential support swiftly, promoting recovery and easing the burdens imposed by the crisis.

Post-crisis information should be delivered to victims with a personalised and individualised approach. This is particularly important in cases involving crises abroad. Returning victims often experience feelings of isolation and disorientation when they reencounter their usual surroundings. They may struggle with a sense of loss and a lack of connection with others who have undergone similar trauma. A personalized approach is invaluable in highlighting to victims that their traumatic experiences are acknowledged and taken seriously by authorities. This approach fosters trust, reassures those affected and underscores the commitment to providing compassionate support during their recovery journey.

### The General Public<sup>115</sup>:

The general public encompasses those who are involved in a crisis, those who experienced it indirectly without suffering direct harm and those who are interested in knowing more despite not being directly involved. Public opinion on a concrete crisis, their perceptions of events and aspirations are shaped by the media.

Public information is a frequently and intensively discussed topic, especially in emergency planning and management contexts. During a crisis, the general public holds a fundamental right to be informed about the nature of the event, its current status, the planned response by authorities, and potential consequences. This principle is rooted in democratic values. In a democratic society, individuals are considered responsible and capable of participating in the decision-making processes of their country. Therefore, equipping the general public with relevant information during the post-crisis phase is essential for fulfilling their responsibilities and contributing to the successful handling of the crisis.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

If an Information Unit was established during the crisis phase to act as a liaison between the general public and authorities, it is advisable to continue using this center for information dissemination during the post-crisis phase. This unit should remain active in answering questions from the public and providing relevant updates regarding the recovery efforts.

Consistent communication through the Information Unit ensures that the general public remains informed about ongoing recovery initiatives, procedures for assistance and any other pertinent information needed to navigate the post-crisis period effectively.

Overall, maintaining an open flow of information to the general public significantly enhances the effectiveness of post-crisis activities. It fosters transparency, builds trust in authorities, and contributes to societal resilience by empowering individuals and communities with the knowledge needed to participate in and support recovery efforts.

## Media

Continuing cooperation with the media during the post-crisis phase is vital. Authorities should ensure that all key points are communicated to diverse audiences through various media channels. Effective relations with the media significantly enhance the accomplishment of post-crisis tasks and objectives.

In order to foster productive collaboration in this phase, authorities should consider the following directions:



**Understand Media Dynamics:** Authorities must grasp how the media operates, including its rhythms, information dissemination practices and the potential impact on public perception. This understanding helps in effectively managing communications and preventing misunderstandings;



**Proactive Communication:** Maintain ongoing and proactive communication with the media regarding current and planned activities, even after the immediate crisis has been managed. This ensures that accurate information is consistently shared, reducing the likelihood of misinformation;



**Monitor Media Portrayals:** Organizations shall be vigilant about how the media portrays the post-crisis phase and how and what messages are disseminated. Media coverage can influence public perception and even trigger secondary crises if not carefully managed;



**Correct Misinformation Promptly:** If the media disseminates inaccurate information to the public, authorities should promptly approach the media to correct factual errors. This helps maintain credibility and ensures that the public receives reliable information.

By adhering to these directions, organizations can effectively cooperate with the media during the post-crisis phase. This proactive engagement not only supports transparency and accountability but also enhances public trust and confidence in the authorities' handling of the situation.





## External Support Networks

Organizations must maintain communication with the networks that were activated during both the pre-crisis and post-crisis phases. The horizontal and vertical contacts established during these phases were crucial in managing the crisis effectively, and they need to remain informed about the specific outcomes of the crisis and the organization's future plans.

Continued engagement and assessment of these networks can positively influence the dynamics of the post-crisis phase. The support provided by these networks may be equally important during the post-crisis phase as it was during the pre - and crisis response phases. Therefore, in addition to expressing gratitude to external networks if they provided assistance during the crisis response phase, organizations must foster ongoing and fruitful cooperation with them for current and future activities. Maintaining these connections ensures that the organization benefits from shared resources, expertise, and collaborative efforts, enhancing resilience and readiness for any future challenges.

## Internal Staff

In the post-crisis phase, organizations must ensure that all internal team members are thoroughly informed about the outcomes of the crisis and ongoing activities. Their roles and responsibilities are crucial for several reasons:

-  *Communicators to the External World:* Members of the organization serve as communicators to the external world. Especially when the organization's reputation has been affected by the crisis and recovery efforts are ongoing, their roles become even more significant. Clear communication from internal staff can help rebuild trust and manage external perceptions;
-  *Timely and Clear Communication:* Managers should provide timely and clear information to staff regarding upcoming plans and activities during the post-crisis phase. This enables staff members to effectively fulfil their responsibilities and contribute to the organization's recovery efforts.

Ensuring that internal staff are well-informed and engaged fosters a cohesive and responsive organizational environment. It allows for unified communication both within the organization and externally, promoting transparency, accountability and effective management of post-crisis challenges.

### 7.1.3. Assessment and Analysis of the Crisis

The crisis should be thoroughly analyzed from its initial outbreak through its development dynamics and subsequent waves, encompassing the entire cycle. Close collaboration among the communication team members is essential, fostering the exchange of meaningful experiences and insights crucial for learning lessons. It is imperative that this process is actively encouraged by managers. While it may seem tedious, dedicating time to analyzing and documenting the crisis is always essential.

However, a critical factor underpinning fruitful lessons learned is an unhealthy organizational climate. The decision-makers within the organization must create a free and transparent atmosphere where employees feel free and comfortable providing honest insights and impartial findings. Sometimes, the fear of blame or potential punishment can deter individuals from sharing unbiased experiences and they might feel reluctant to analyze the shortfalls of the crisis situation.

In a healthy working environment, the communication team should focus on compiling and delivering lessons learned in the following specific areas:



*Root causes, development and outcome of the crisis:* Analyze the causes of the crisis, its development stages, the scale, speed of its dissemination and the final results;



*Effective Strategies and Success Factors:* Identify what worked well, why it worked well, and under what circumstances it was effective. Evaluate specific aspects, processes, procedures and dissect the positive factors that contributed to the overall success;



*Identifying Shortfalls and Failures:* Highlight areas with the most shortcomings and gaps, pinpointing where failures occurred and identify factors that facilitated negative outcomes;



*External Influences:* Assess any external (unpredictable) factors that influenced the crisis dynamics but were not anticipated during the initial planning stages, despite detailed preparation.

#### ●▶ 7.1.4. Integration of the Lessons Learned in Communication Strategy and Action Plan

As Timothy Coombs noted, “post-crisis are efforts to learn from the crisis event”.<sup>116</sup> Once the lessons learned is defined, they should be leveraged to enhance organizational development. Initially, it is essential to disseminate these insights among relevant staff members, including those who were not directly involved in managing the crisis, to raise their awareness. Effective communication is pivotal here.

Subsequently, the communication team should revise the crisis communication strategy and its action plan based on these lessons. This ensures that past mistakes are not repeated and the organization possesses more sophisticated guiding documents for handling crises in the future.

#### ●▶ 7.1.5. Retraining the Communication Team and the Spokesperson

After the crisis is over and specific lessons learned have been identified, the organization should prioritize retraining the communication team. The training programme should integrate the insights gained from the lessons learned to ensure that the communication team is updated according to current realities. Additionally, the spokesperson should actively participate in this retraining process, focusing particularly on addressing any shortcomings highlighted in the lessons learned pertaining to their role. The retrained team and Spokesperson will be very valuable resources for the potential crisis and they can play a decisive role in the effective and efficient management of the crisis.

<sup>116</sup> Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 202.

## 7.2. Checklist for the Post-Crisis Phase<sup>117</sup> :

The following recommendations and advice are helpful to effectively handle post-crisis communication phase:

- Deliver all information promised to stakeholders as soon as that information is known.
- Keep stakeholders updated on the progression of recovery efforts including any corrective measures being taken and the progress of investigations.
- Analyze the crisis management effort for lessons learned.
- Integrate lessons learned in the organization's crisis management system.
- Update and review the Crisis Communication Strategy and its Action Plan.
- Retrain the Crisis Communication Team and the Spokesperson.



<sup>117</sup> Institute for Public Relations. "Crisis Management and Communications." <https://instituteforpr.org/crisis-management-and-communications/> (retrieved on 20.08.2024).



By Jesper Falkheimer

As mentioned in the earlier parts of the Handbook, news media (nowadays mainly on digital platforms) have a very important role in crises. But compared to some decades ago, the media and communications landscape has changed a lot. Professional crisis communicators need to understand also the logics of this new emerging media landscape. Put simply we can conclude that we live in two parallel communication systems. On the one hand, we are still living in the system that was developed during the last century – the era of mass media and mass communications. In this system:

- ➔ Mass media actors and governments had a monopoly on the technologies and distribution resources that were needed to produce and spread mass communication – the process was basically vertical (top-down).
- ➔ The production was done by professional communicators (such as journalists) while ordinary citizens had almost no possibility to spread messages to many people.
- ➔ The production process was slow (compared to today) and the mechanisms for verification had more time to control information.
- ➔ The public or audience had almost no possibilities to interact with the professional senders or media content.

Today's digitalization – and the emergence of AI – has challenged the old system. In the new system:

- ➔ Professional communicators are challenged by everyone – citizens, amateurs and people with diverging intentions may use digital media platforms (social media) to produce and distribute information.
- ➔ The communication process has become more horizontal – people as well as organizations may side-step professional news media organizations and establish their own mass communication platforms.
- ➔ The production process has become very fast – almost instant.
- ➔ The public or audience has, sometimes, turned into a participatory actor – in this system the model of senders and recipients become obsolete.

Aside from this system shift one may highlight two other trends of major concern for crisis communication. Both trends are consequences due to increased competition between media agencies and corporations.

- ➔ *Convergence of content:* Articles, interviews, visual content and other forms of content appear not only in one channel nowadays but may be used and reused at several media platforms.
- ➔ *24-hour news cycle:* Today news media organizations cover events every hour of the day. When a major crisis happens, news media organizations often report or send directly from the place of the crisis IRL – everything that happens may be sent on-line directly.

Finally, the technological change that is and will have the most profound impact on all forms of strategic communications, and specifically crisis communication, is Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI enables computers and machines to simulate human capabilities. AI may be viewed both as an opportunity and a threat. Obviously, we can get help from AI planning, producing, distributing and analyzing crisis information, and in many other ways. But AI may also be wrong, and AI may be used by malign actors to instigate, amplify and control crises. AI is already used in many ways, but it is not possible to make definite conclusions of how AI will affect crisis communications in the future - the only thing that is clear, is that it will. One expected consequence is that robotization and automation lead to less qualified tasks being taken over by machines. This in turn may lead to new working methods, increased efficiency as well as a re-structuration of the working market, which in turn may lead to increased polarization. AI is already used to produce and spread massive amounts of disinformation (e.g. deepfakes) that threaten democracy. In World Economic Forum's *Global Risks Report 2024* it is also concluded that: "Misinformation and disinformation are biggest short-term risks, while extreme weather and critical change to Earth systems are greatest long-term concern<sup>118</sup>".

On the other hand, another possible consequence is that human leadership becomes even more important. Ethics and morality are ultimately human issues.

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<sup>118</sup> World Economic Forum, Global Risks Report 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/>; (retrieved on 29.08.2024).

## CASE STUDY: THE TERRORIST ATTACK IN OSLO AND UTØYA, NORWAY, JULY 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2011<sup>119</sup>

The terrorist attack in Norway began with a bomb explosion in the Government Quarter in Oslo at 15:25 on 22 July 2011. The bomb exploded in a parked car next to the Prime Minister's office as well as other public buildings, killing eight people and injuring several others. Two hours later, a man dressed as a policeman shot 69 people to death on the island of Utøya. The young victims of the shootings on Utøya were there for the annual summer camp organized for many years by the Labor Party's youth union AUF. The perpetrator Anders Behring Breivik, hereinafter referred to as the terrorist, was arrested by police on Utøya at 18.35. In August 2012, he was sentenced to 21 years in prison and "detention", which is Norway's harshest punishment, and in 2024 he is still in prison. The trial was dominated by the question of whether the terrorist was psychotic at the time of the attacks or not. The terrorist did not want to be declared mentally ill and was clear on that he had carried out a conscious political act.

The horrific attacks can be analyzed from many different perspectives. This case study examines how the government, authorities and the news media handled the incident from a crisis communication perspective. Terrorism is here considered, based on previous research, as a form of strategic communication where the attention given to the attacks is an important and strategic goal. The purpose of the case study is to show the concrete value of the descriptions, ideas and recommendations in this handbook.

### 9.1. The Uncertain Information Phase

One of the major newspapers in Norway, *Verdens Gang* reported early, at 19:59, that the terrorist was an "ethnic Norwegian", until then most speculations were that it was an Islamist terrorist attack – probably a consequence of human cognitive mechanisms (e.g. availability bias where people recall recent attacks in other close-by countries). The authorities did not support this speculation, but it was spread partly via expert commentators in the news media. One example is from *the Washington Post*, where a reporter quoted another newspaper, *the Weekly Standard*:

"We don't know if al-Qaeda was directly responsible for today's events, but in all likelihood the attacks were carried out by a group within the Jihadist hydra. Prominent jihadists have already announced on the Internet that the attacks are retaliation for Norway's participation in the war in Afghanistan".

The journalist then went on to speculate on reasons why the attacks had been carried out by an Islamist terrorist group. A Norwegian security expert played down this rumor in a live interview on the evening of July 22 on Norwegian public service television. There were also other rumors that were spread via Norwegian and international mass media, e.g. that the prime minister was injured, and that the perpetrator had no ammunition left when he was arrested.

The identity of the terrorist was first made public by the newspaper *Aftenposten* at 03:16 on July 23, but his name had already circulated via *Twitter* (now X) since 00:48. Twitter had a central communication function during and after the attacks themselves, as many of the young people at Utøya tweeted directly from the

<sup>119</sup> This case study is based on J. Falkheimer, *Kriskommunikation, medier och terrorism: En analys av terrorattacker i Oslo och på Utøya den 22 juli 2011*, Working reports 1 (Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University, 2014); J. Falkheimer and EK. Olsson, "Depoliticizing Terror: The News Framing of the Norway Terror Attacks 22nd of July 2011," *Media, War and Conflict* 8, no. 1 (2015); J. Falkheimer, "Crisis Communication and Terrorism: The Norway Attacks on 22 July 2011," *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 19, no. [issue number] (2014).

massacre. In a Norwegian study of the media reporting during the first 24 hours (Brurås, 2012) it is found that TV also had a central role and that "[a] striking feature in the days after 22 July was precisely the image of community, togetherness and solidarity that was established in the media" (ibid., p. 13). This is a common news media response to disasters. The news media takes on a ritual mourning function and becomes a forum for official ceremonies.

Investigations of how NRK (Norwegian public service TV) and the newspaper Dagsavisen reported on the attacks found that there was a change in the news media image when it emerged that the perpetrator was a Norwegian. The concept of terrorism in the news media and for most people was mainly associated with Islamist terrorism, not with right-wing extremism. Terror attack or terrorist attack was used as a word 35 times in NRK and Dagsavisen until Brevik was revealed. After he was arrested, these two words were used only twice. Instead, terrorism as a word was replaced by tragedy, disaster or massacre and the terrorist was labeled a murderer, perpetrator and the like despite his political motives becoming known soon after the arrest.

The terrorist had a communication strategy, expressed among other things in the 1,518-page long manifesto that he communicated just before the attacks and in a film that he posted on YouTube. *The Manifesto, 2083 – a European declaration of independence*, which largely consists of texts plagiarized from other sources, is filled with right-wing extremist political criticism as well as instructions for terrorism. He attacks people with different political views as well as the news media for "not telling the whole truth about the extent and consequences of Muslim immigration" (Manifesto, p. 698). In another section, the terrorist carefully describes the most effective tools of communication to achieve his goals. As an example, the terrorist advises his companions to appear moderate, dress normally, and sound and act like well-educated European conservative men. Lacoste shirts are preferred. The terrorist also states in his manifesto that the arrest is the start of a core propaganda phase.

## 9.2. The Governmental Crisis Management and Communication Response

How did the national and local governmental agencies and the Police act and communicate during the crisis? This description is based on expert interviews with officials at the national crisis communication secretariat in Norway, the police's own evaluation and other documents.

The Norwegian government and authorities had little if any experience of terrorist attacks but, like most nations, has several experiences of major social crises (e.g. the tsunami disaster in 2004). Norway was and is also a member of NATO and was occupied by Germany during the Second World War and has experience from war interventions. Norway has a well-functioning government system and a high degree of public transparency and trust. The crisis management structure in Norway was then based on a main principle – that the ministry that has responsibility for a certain sector during normal conditions must also have this responsibility during a crisis. The Ministry of Justice was responsible for coordination and supervision via the crisis management agency DSB, the National Security Agency and the main rescue central. At the national and strategic level, where the Crisis Unit (see later) was located, the government made political decisions about overall goals. The government's crisis council worked with strategic coordination, e.g. between the ministries. The leadership department (the department responsible for the sector at the center of the crisis) reported to the crisis council and the government.

The Crisis Unit (KSE) was established in 2006 and assisted with support functions to the lead ministry and to

other ministries as well as to the Government's crisis council, during crises in peacetime. The unit was working around the clock and supplementing the crisis resources that were already available in the various ministries. Through KSE, the ministries could get access to extra staffing and resources in crisis communication. In 2011, KSE consisted of approx. 6 employees, three to four assistants, a staffing pool in crisis communication and a contingency pool. KSE offered the following services:

|   |   |
|---|---|
|  | Crisis management advice and support                      |
|  | Mobile technical equipment                                |
|  | Situation reports   |
|  | Analysis capacity   |
|  | Logging capacity  |
|  | Communication readiness                                   |
|  | "Public inquiries" (handling increased telephone traffic) |
|  | "Emergency professional assistance during crises"         |

The attacks were carried out when most of the KSE staff were on vacation. Only three out of eight of the employees at KSE were on duty. Despite this fact, KSE managed to build an operational crisis organization quite quickly, among other things by calling in personnel who were in the immediate area. Already at 16.45, KSE was ready for work. The manager received the first information by phone from a colleague at KSE six or seven minutes after the first attack. KSE received the first information about the attack on the island of Utöya via news media. The first news broadcast about the attack was broadcast at 18.07 on NRK.

KSE had written plans and communication strategies. But they lacked access to these because they had to immediately move to another location due to the first bombing in Oslo (the permanent secretariat was evacuated). Computer access was not available due to security restrictions and the printed plans remained in the office. Staff also had problems publishing material on their own web portal and were unable to use their intranet.



"We had to improvise because all emergency plans were locked away in the other office or in intranet systems that we could not access. / All we could do was work from 'our memory'" (interview).

Despite the lack of access to formal plans and intranets, the management of KSE perceived that they succeeded in creating a well-functioning communication system. The most important communication platform was an e-mail loop between the parties concerned, e.g. KSE, the Ministry of Justice, the Police and other ministries and organizations. Through the e-mail loop, talking points (message platform) were coordinated, which were constantly updated depending on the information situation. The talking points were forwarded to the corresponding office of the Prime Minister's Committee, which had been moved to the Prime Minister's private home. A speech, based on these talking points, was written by the Prime Minister's staff.



The main problem was the lack of information from the operational organizations, especially the Police, and feedback from the government. KSE also had some problems communicating with the Prime Minister's office. The e-mail loop was the most effective channel, according to KSE management. The fact that KSE lacked access to plans was not perceived as a major problem. However, the technical problems that existed did, the fact that the intranet system did not work, and that the Norwegian government did not have a coordinated external web portal for crisis communication.

A major evaluation focusing on the Norwegian police operations was carried out after the attacks (National Police Board, 2012). Part of the evaluation was focused on operational crisis communication and there are some relevant conclusions.

-  The evaluators state that the national Police had plans for crisis communication, but that these plans were outdated and not integrated into the organizational work.
-  One of the major problems during the acute crisis was the lack of professional crisis communication in the field, especially in the local district where Utøya is located. There were no professional communication officers in the local police district. There was also no plan or coordination for how to build a rapid communications organization that linked the National Police to the disaster area.

The police chose not to continuously inform about the assumed number of deaths. Not until 03.50 on July 23, 2011, was it announced that at least 80 people were dead. Before that, the official figure was ten deaths. The evaluators conclude that the Police should have announced the extent of the massacre in approximate terms at an earlier stage. The police knew that this was a high-fatality attack and that it involved far more people than ten. This is a controversial recommendation. Crisis authorities are often criticized for conveying information about the number of deaths that is not correct, which is usually the reason why one does not want to release such information until it is certain and confirmed. However, the spread of information and rumors through social media may lead to this established strategy needing to be reconsidered. The risk is, of course, that speculation via social media leads to unforeseen consequences.

As previously mentioned, speculation about who was behind the attacks was rife at an early stage directly after the attacks (as previously noted, al-Qaeda was mentioned several times in the national and international media). At 19:59, one of the major daily newspapers in Norway, *Verdens Gang*, announced that the perpetrator was an ethnic Norwegian. However, the police communicated this later. The evaluators believe that the police should have informed about the identity of the perpetrator at an earlier stage. At the same time, the evaluation shows that when the police were proactive and communicated, their message gained great impact in the media. The police dominated as a source in news reporting and has high legitimacy in Norway.

The evaluation also shows that crisis communication during the phase after the acute crisis had too few resources and too little support (limited personnel) and that this received limited attention in the police organization. News media relations were managed without a strategy. After the acute and immediate follow-up phase, criticism of the police's actions increased (e.g., that information about the perpetrator's car given to the police on a note disappeared, that the boat used to get to the island broke down, that they took too long time to become operational and that relevant information was not communicated quickly enough). The evaluation emphasizes that the Central National Police should have coordinated the crisis communication efforts, and that communication staff should have been on site at the local disaster area next to Utøya.

Certain tactics are considered to have worked well, e.g. the central press conferences, the press releases and the fact that the central communication organization was quickly organized. In summary, the evaluators were partly critical of the crisis communication during and after the attacks: the need for personnel did not reflect the need for communication, the plans were poorly updated, exercises had not been carried out to a sufficient extent, governance and relationship between the center and the local disaster area was deficient, the competence of the police in communicating through social media was not developed and they were reactive and released information too late.

The study of national governmental Crisis Unit KSE, mentioned earlier, shows that plans and strategies may have been important as a tool for learning but that they had a less direct operational use during the crisis. This result strengthens assumptions based on ideas about improvisation and the need of training and preparedness. The evaluation also shows that the coordination of information flows between different organizational levels is a serious problem during terrorist attacks and similar crises. In this case, the lack of coordination of information between the center and the local level seems to have been a crucial problem. Problems with coordination are both an organizational and a communicative problem.

### 9.3. Concluding Remarks

From a general perspective the attacks in Norway and how they were communicated, especially before the perpetrator was identified, were linked to a global discourse on terrorism. Even when the terrorist has been identified, there is a clear connection to global conflicts, in this case especially the far right and xenophobic movement. The attacks were intended to create fear and debate, not only in Norway but also throughout the world. Established crisis communication knowledge is valuable in any type of crisis, but there are some challenges that are specific to terrorism. One of the challenges is of course the fact that terrorist acts are organized and carried out as intentional communication.

The crisis challenged the linear process of standard planning and information transfer. The evaluators of the police believe that the plans were not updated, trained and that the police were too slow to provide information about what had happened. The speed of the contemporary media society challenges the information control that the authorities have previously had. An increased ability to improvise based on a strategic approach and act also through social media is required. One reason for this is to undermine the spread of rumors, speculation and misinformation that can lead to unforeseen consequences and actions, which ultimately threaten democratic legitimacy and stability.

The media coverage of the crisis has been analyzed and show that the news media took the same perspective as the Norwegian government and reinforced the framing of the terrorist as a lonely and deeply disturbed individual. The media de-politicized the attacks, indirectly relaying fragments and images from the terrorist's manifesto, but ignored the terrorist's aim to be seen as a politically motivated terrorist.

In many ways this case illustrates the typical features of a severe crisis communication situation where:



several actors need to but have troubles to collaborate (especially between national and local levels) under uncertain conditions.



where the news media act both as an arena for (initially) misinformation and community communication.



where cognitive communication mechanisms show up.



where most traditional crisis communication measures are taken (press conferences, press releases, speeches, social media communication and so forth).



when hard decisions need to be made when unverified information should be communicated or not.



when the importance of strategy, preparedness and training becomes crucial.



in a context where trust and transparency already are built into society, which simplifies crisis management and crisis communication.

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