CrisComScore

DEFINING TARGET GROUPS AND MESSAGE STRATEGIES DURING CRISES: SOME GUIDELINES BASED ON EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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1   Introduction

The guidelines in this report clarify points of attention when defining target groups and deciding on message strategies during crises. They are based on qualitative and quantitative research[1]. The scientific background leading to these guidelines and research methods used are explained elsewhere; this is a user friendly summary of the research results reported earlier[2].

2   "The general public" is not enough

It is deceptive to think that crisis communication can be planned for the "general public". A more realistic approach is to imagine target groups of different kinds. For rescue teams, target groups might be defined according to socio-demographic categories, such as language, age, living place etc. For crisis communication public organizations might find it advantageous to define sub-groups of the general public according to "zones of meaning" (many people across a society or organization share the same knowledge and interpretation of events) and communication habits. Mapping these zones of meaning and communication habits would help planning information delivery, focus the crisis message better and finally increase the size of the informed public.

Four general categories can be taken into consideration in defining target groups:

a) A socio-demographic map of possible crisis factors, such as languages and access to media channels (e.g language minorities in the country; foreigners, blind and deaf people; possible verbal illliteracy; age that may restrain access to some media channels or makes comprehension of the message difficult)

b) The communication habits of different groups of civilians: use of media channels, information processing activity or ignorance, importance of network communication including mouth-to mouth communication (e.g. some people do not watch television at all, others are not used to process information by using Internet;

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[2]   See (section 4 in) Vos, M., Lund, R., Harro-Loit, H., and Reich, Z. (2011), Developing a crisis communication scorecard. Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities, University of Jyväskylä.

network communication might be efficient in a village but depends on certain communication habits of the community, etc.)

c) Trust towards institutions and different sources of information (people usually trust public broadcasting channels, and e.g. experts they are familiar with or whose explanations are understandable for them)

d) Vulnerability of certain target groups (e.g. kindergartens, schools, hospitals, younger schoolchildren who are alone at home in the daytime, old people, people who do not follow media channels regularly, people with special needs, foreigners who do not know the language and understand local media).

3 Factors that influence the reception of crisis communication messages

The reception of messages is a complex process that includes attention, understanding, interpretation and trust. The following characteristics of risk and crisis situations along with audience and message-specific factors should be considered in planning crisis communication and defining target groups:

a) **The type of crisis and the perceived threat to life and health**
(for example, people that perceive nuclear pollution as a serious threat will observe messages about this topic more carefully than other warnings)

b) **The time, according to a weekly and daily cycle, or season**; so if it is a workday or holiday, during office hours or the night, peak hours when people are in transit, etc.
(for example, when the crisis message is delivered during the workday and family members are separated, mobile communication would be much more overloaded than when it happens at night)

c) **The reaction time between the warning message and the time the danger appears** (for example fire evacuations should be followed up immediately, while storm warnings may leave some time for preparation)

d) **Previous immediate and mediated experience of different types of crisis** that shapes the reception process of crisis messages, often called "risk literacy"

(we propose the label "discursive experience of crisis" to denote this factor, which is culture-sensitive and includes the collective memory of local risks, what people have learned from the mass media about earlier crises, knowledge gained in formal education, fire evacuation drills, etc.)

e) **How information is formatted in the message**, the genre, structure, language, and amount of information
(for example news stories and warning messages should have an entirely different structure, language and information order).

We will further explain the concepts of "risk literacy" and "discursive experience". Risk literacy in the present context means the knowledge about various risks, awareness of the threats and ability to process information in case the risk is developing into crisis (e.g. the ability to "translate" the general knowledge about the weather into behavioural guidance in the case of a storm, and the ability to interpret the numbers that mark the speed of the wind).

Discursive experience in this context means that people have acquired their experience from various crisis-related discourses (e.g. mediated news, fiction and documentary films, pictures, books, but also family stories, evacuation trainings and instructions, formal education concerning risks and security). For example, a certain community might be acquainted with a very specific gas-pollution discourse, because the local factory once had a pollution incident that is narrated among the community members and became part of the collective memory.

In the following we will discuss how communication habits can be taken into account in the communication in various phases of a crisis. Next, we will focus on communication with children, who are one of the vulnerable groups that need special attention. Finally we will discuss what a good message is.

4 Communicating with target groups according to communication habits

The processing of information, use of channels, information sources and finally the motivation of civilians to seek information depends on which the crisis is currently at. The preparation phase and the later warning and crisis response phases require somewhat different points of attention. This will be explained further.

4.1 Preparation

For any given type of crisis people will have different experience, i.e., immediate experience or mediated experience, and previous knowledge about the risk.

Therefore, in the preparation phase it is important to ask: what is the "risk literacy" of civilians and what are civilians' existing perceptions concerning specific types of threat? In some geographical areas certain types of crisis are more probable than others. Also, previous crises are always different from what might happen in the future.

Citizens may have acquired for example from media, mouth-to-mouth communication misleading perceptions about the possible threat and means of safety. They may also lack the tacit knowledge that would help them better understand the threat.

Focus-group interviews or surveys among different socio-demographic groups help in plotting out the possible disharmonies of a given risk literacy (e.g. people might be very well prepared to take action in the event of fire but not, say, in the event of air pollution). Hence it is important to improve risk literacy among the most threatened people and among those whose communication habits, preconceptions and attitudes do not support quick and sufficient information processing during a crisis. Public organizations can outsource such research in the preparedness phase and initiate risk communication before the possible crisis.

As a part of such preparatory research it is also important to follow the media coverage of previous crises. Was the information accurate and trustworthy? Media analyses of past crises could provide answers to the question of what lessons civilians learned from them.

4.2   Warning and crisis response

In the event of a real threat - radiation, storm, floods, bomb threat - there is also the question of what channels of information would be important and reliable with respect to different target groups. This is related to the type of crisis (the seriousness of its implications for life and health) and the reaction time between warning and crisis onset.

It is important to know citizens' habits in using information channels and the sources they trust in the case of a crisis.

People get the first warning message either via the channels they regularly follow (e.g. television or radio) or via extraordinary channels (e.g. word-of-mouth communication, SMS, warning delivered via loudspeakers). If people understand that there is a serious threat they turn to their more trusted channels. The hierarchy of information channels is not mono-semantic. In times of crisis more attention is usually paid to the public broadcasting channels than commercial channels, but the hierarchy of information channels differs significantly by ethnicity, age and other variables.

It is important to know the media usage habits of citizens. Different groups turn to various channels. It is important not to overestimate the Internet or underestimate the traditional media channels.

Word-of-mouth communication with acquaintances and family members potentially also has an important role in a situation of threat. Some citizens, in hope of obtaining additional information, would call someone they know who has worked in the relevant institution or had an experience in the relevant field. Also, people generally want to warn their relatives and acquaintances. This could lead to overloading of the mobile network. In connection with word-of-mouth communication it should be borne in mind that telephone calls within personal networks seem to serve two functions: to warn others or discuss the situation and to search for additional information. It may not be viable to ask citizens to keep the telephone lines free and avoid personal calls[3].

Telephone networks might be overloaded in a crisis situation despite instructions to refrain from making telephone calls.

Crisis information should be delivered via various channels, and thus it is important to know which channels are not used or trusted by certain social

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[3]   The test warnings showed that respondents felt unconfident with the instruction to keep telephone lines free and avoid personal calls. They admitted that telephone calls would be made even if this was not recommended.

groups. When designing warning messages one is advised[4] to address the following three response patterns[5].

1. Loyalty (following mass media for instructions). Socially well-integrated people who actively use a variety of media rely on information and instructions given via both the traditional and new mass media channels in times of crisis. We have labelled this pattern "Loyalty", because the crisis communicator can maintain contact with those people during all phases of the crisis providing contact is not interrupted owing to technical problems.[6]

2. Voice (active seek for information, word-of-mouth). There are people who are more likely to ask for and deliver information about threats via their personal communication networks: family members, friends, and acquaintances who are considered to be experts in the relevant field. They also obtain additional information directly from institutions – for example, by calling the rescue centre. [7]

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[4]   This is based on qualitative research data and a nationally representative survey of the Estonian population.

[5]   As these patterns are analogous to Hirchmanns' classic typology, we have named them accordingly.

[6]   Our earlier resrarch showed that the national public broadcasting channels (television and radio) were preferred, but in time of crisis the various channels would be used simultaneously.

[7]   Critical reflection on information and the wish to form one's own picture from various fragments of information are characteristic of this response pattern. People with this pattern follow media content critically. This distrust might be explained by poor earlier experiences in obtaining information from official channels or a vague, generalized distrust of information put out by the media.

3. Exit (acting/not acting by relying on ones' own knowledge). There are also people who, having heard about a possible threat, do not consider seeking additional information from external sources. They may simply act (e.g. escape) or ignore a warning (e.g. go out to look at a storm), relying on their own discursive experience. This pattern is designated "Exit". [8]

The boundaries of these three response patterns are not limited to socio-demographic variables, but some peculiarities can be noted and considered in crisis communication planning.[9]

Different people use different information processing strategies and act in different ways. It is important to take this behavioural variety into consideration. This is even more important when the reaction time between warning and crisis onset is short.

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[8]   This pattern seems to have several subtypes. Some people who belong to this segment are usually active information seekers familiar with different information sources (Internet sites) and aware of the reasons why they would turn to one or another information channel. They do not always check rumours or wait for information, but rather act. In some cases the pattern of relying on one's own knowledge means non-action. For example, in the case of rumours that the river was polluted, someone explained that she did not take any action, because she thought that her body had adapted to it, as she had been using this water for a long time already. A small group of people, who do not take a threat seriously or are not able to interpret overly sophisticated or long messages, expect short and simple instructions and that others will help them. Another sub-group of this pattern would underestimate the threat and not follow instructions (they might not stay indoors during a storm because they wish to see the high waves etc.)

[9]   For example, in Estonia the "Voice" and "Exit" patterns are widespread among the largest ethnic minority of Estonian Russian-speakers, many of whom do not trust Estonian institutions. Thus achieving trust in the communicator should be the key issue in crisis communication targeted at this group.

5 Instructing children of 10-13 years old

It should be taken into account that children can also form part of the audience. Some advice is given for the preparation phase, followed by suggestions for the later phases of warning and crisis response. This serves as an example of how to address vulnerable groups listed at the beginning of these guidelines.

5.1 Preparation

Kindergartens and schools, but also pupils who are home alone after school, are vulnerable target groups for whom special communication plans need to be made.

Recommended activities for schools are:

- Lectures for children, where they will be instructed in detail about potential crisis situations and possible dangers.
- Crisis training and lectures should also contain recommendations on how to search for information: the channels used to disseminate information, the use of crisis lines etc. This could be done in the form of role play, a training format especially effective with 8-15 years old children, where some of the children play the role of public authorities and others of survivors.
- Training could be carried out on how to listen and memorize information relating to a crisis situation. Alongside memory training, children must be taught to identify the main information and recommendations and react appropriately.
- Training on how to behave in various crisis situations, such as a natural disaster.
- Gaining acquaintance with simple means of protection.
- Instructions on how to use diverse communication means in a crisis situation.

Schools and kindergartens should have communication plans for various types of crisis in addition to fire drill.

5.2   Warning and crisis response

Not just for younger kids but even for 17- to 18-year-olds warning and instructions seem to be complicated and difficult to memorize[10]. Some recommendations concerning crisis announcements will follow below.

Children could be given the following advice:

1. Have pen and paper ready and write down the details of the announcement.
2. The announcement should be repeated at least twice.
3. Children should be told beforehand what means of communication they should use in order to get in contact with their parents if a crisis occurs.
4. To allow for the fact that children might panic and fear to be alone, it would be useful in situations where parents or rescue team are on their way to get them into safety, to give them the explicit advice to stay at home and wait for their parents or rescue team.
5. To take account of possible addictiveness to the telephone, children should also be advised not to spend long on the telephone, as it could happen that while they are informing all their friends and sharing their emotions, their parents or rescue services are simultaneously trying to reach them.

The single repetition of a long complicated crisis announcement is insufficient for the adequate understanding of children aged 10-13 years who might be alone when they hear the announcement. They might not know how to use the information they have heard. Clear advice must be given.

Various media channels could be used to bring information to the attention of children and youth audiences. The most popular TV entertainment channels, music radio channels and Internet sites should be used, in addition to official news sites. It would be useful to enter into preliminary negotiations with the owners of these media outlets concerning situations in which placement or insertion of urgent information would be possible.

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[10]   After listening to a warning message once the majority in this age group clearly remembered fewer details than the adults in the other focus groups. None of the children participating in the focus groups reported having even thought about writing down the information given to them in the simulated warning messages, although they all had pens and paper and there was no ban on writing down information.

6   Criteria for good message

A good message should be easy to remember. Based on our research the following advice can be given for warning messages.

- Instructions are remembered best when repeated several times in the message.[11]
- Concrete instructions such as: stay indoors, protect domestic animals, find your iodine tablets, close windows etc. are remembered best.[12]
- A crisis message that resembles a typical news story is not remembered well.
- Citizens are often confused about the time and place names mentioned in a warning message. When the message is about a nearby region it is easier to remember the place mentioned[13].
- References to further information are not remembered when given at different places in the message.[14]
- Information given in a negative form will not be remembered well.[15] It is not effective, for example, to urge people "not to be afraid".

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[11]   This was revealed in tests with simulated warning messages.

[12]   When a list of various threats was presented (e.g. a storm: falling trees, broken power lines, closed roads) many respondents remembered the possibility of a threat but only a few risk factors were remembered and often incorrectly.

[13]   When the time category was related both to the time of danger and the time when the news was broadcasted people could not remember both. When time categories were presented in a random order the respondents were not able to remember them. The time of the start of the threat, which was repeated twice, was the only time remembered by most of the respondents. Place indicated both the geographical area of the threat and the region where the people targeted by the message were living. This was complicated for some respondents. The reception test results indicated that if the original message contained too much information, part of which did not concern the listeners, the majority of the test subjects were not able to understand the information adequately. Although the possible duration of the threat was mentioned only once, more than half of the respondents remembered it correctly. This information was considered to be important.

[14]   In the test message, references to sources were given in more that one place. As a result the respondents remembered vaguely that "it is important to listen to the information sources" or that "one should listen to the radio" or "one should listen to the next news programme", This implies that people remembered only the suggestion that they should listen to the radio.

[15]   In the test negative messages went largely unnoticed (e.g. "radiation is not life-threatening/hazardous to health"; "radioactive pollution in Estonia is not life-threatening").

- How information is interpreted depends on the knowledge people have of the context.[16] It can be assumed that the nature of certain threats, and thus how to behave, as in the case of a radioactive pollution threat, will be unfamiliar ground for many people.

People may be familiar with situations similar to the current impending crisis (e.g. a storm or health risks) that, do not, however, contain a serious threat. In that case they often are unable to recognize the seriousness of an important warning message. Thus the threat should be clearly presented.

Warning messages should be given in a format that can be easily distinguished from the general flow of news stories. Also, the message should not too be overloaded with details. References to time and place should be kept in minimum and repeated. The likely duration of the threat can be mentioned.

Negative forms (e.g. instructions what <u>not</u> should be done or matters that one should <u>not</u> be afraid of) should be avoided. Some people may remember an alarming message better, but for most people a message that is too alarming creates panic. Tacit knowledge about various types of threat should be developed.

An example of a fairly good message is provided below. People could hardly remember the elements mentioned between brackets. Hence, these elements could be left out.

Announcement
A breakdown took place at the (Ignalina) Nuclear Power Station (resulting in the emission of a radioactive substance into the surrounding environment). The emission occurred at 7.45 AM. A radioactive cloud is moving in the direction of Estonia and will reach South Estonia at 1 PM at the earliest. (Until that time the level of radiation should remain normal.)
The inhabitants of the south-east of Estonia and Viljandi County are requested to remain tuned in to the radio. (In the next announcement that will be forwarded at 10.30 AM at the latest it will be specified the inhabitants of which rural municipalities are requested to stay indoors.)
The necessity to stay indoors will take effect at 1 PM at the earliest. People are requested to have iodine tablets at hand but not to take those in until instructed to do so. (The detailed instructions about how to take cover and to take iodine tablets will be announced on the radio and TV.

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[16] The reception test showed that messages concerning a radiation threat, such as "radioactive cloud" and "emission" are translated by people in various ways: "the radiation is moving", "radioactive substances are spreading", or "nuclear accident".

There is no reason to abandon the area. Elsewhere in Estonia no precautionary measures are needed.)

The radiation threat will probably last approximately for two days. (The radiation will <u>not</u> reach the level causing urgent health threat.) Nevertheless, all persons are requested (not to expose themselves to radiation) and to stay indoors. Staying indoors is a sufficient measure for the time being.

Domestic animals, animal forage and drinking water must be protected from radiation. Refrain from using the phones to keep the lines open. (This is your input to maintaining the important official communication channels available.) Further information will be given on the radio and TV. The next announcement will be made at 10.30 AM (at the latest specifying the inhabitants of which rural municipalities are requested to stay indoors).