Clarifying the role of communication experts in CBRN terrorism crises

Markus Mykkänen and Marita Vos

University of Jyväskylä, Finland
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The CBRN Communication Scorecard\(^1\) as a strategic tool is designed to improve communication in the various phases of a crisis. The scorecard can assist both in communication planning and preparedness for communication in emergencies. As the scorecard addresses critical factors in the communication of public authorities with stakeholders, it also forms a tool to evaluate decision making processes during emergency exercises. Communication as a facilitator of cooperation within the response network and with various stakeholders is crucial for the successful management of crises.

Together, the scorecard indicators show how communication contributes to crisis management by response organisations and clarify the role of crisis communication experts within response organisations. In the following sections, this is further explained in relation to each of the four crisis phases of preparedness, detection and warning, crisis response, and recovery and evaluation\(^2\).

1. Improving preparedness

In the CBRN Communication Scorecard, communication is seen as implemented by communication experts, assuming that the roles and competences of communication experts are clarified and developed in contact with response managers. From the decision making point of view, this requires that communication experts take part in strategic crisis management as a competent team with expertise in CBRN issues able to operate and conduct crisis communication. Communication experts in general preparedness can contribute to crisis management and decision making—with more or less decision making power—in several ways\(^3\). They should ensure that communication plans and strategies cover a range of crisis scenarios, keeping an open view, as crises typically develop in unexpected directions. They can also monitor the organisational environment and stakeholders on a daily basis. Earlier plans can be updated regularly, as, for example, when new citizen groups emerge that need to be included in crisis planning. Plans should also be updated to match with those of other key participants in the response network.

The responsibilities of communication experts during crises need to be clear. Efficient communication also builds on, and in that sense calls for, transparent decision making in the crisis response network. In turn, communication experts can provide advice to ensure that decision making is transparent enough for the whole response network to cooperate and work efficiently. This contributes to internal communication in the network and enhances the interconnectedness of the different organisations participating in response activities.

\(^1\) This scorecard has been based on a general scorecard developed in 2011 by the University of Jyväskylä, Finland in CrisComScore, an earlier EU-funded project (FP7/2007-2013, n° 217889) http://www.crisiscommunication.fi/criscomscore/. In the project CATO the tool was customised to CBRN terrorism crises, utilising various studies. The CATO project, the research leading to these results, has received funding from the European Community’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement n° 261693. http://www.cato-project.eu/page/homepage.php?lang=EN


As not all actions can be foreseen in planning scenarios, the quality of the collaboration itself is vital for being able to coproduce response and recovery solutions. This concerns improving preparedness for such collaborative processes and related decision making within response organisations and within the network of the response organisations involved. The network can be seen to include various governmental organisations and non-governmental organisations, but also civil society groups along with private organisations such as critical infrastructure companies. The actors comprising the network should be (re)defined for different levels (local, national, or international) and types of crisis situations. In this way, organisations will be better prepared to respond to crises and will not need to spend so much effort clarifying the communicative actions needed for a particular crisis, as would be where proper preparedness is lacking.

Preparing to arrange communication facilities and information exchange in a timely and an effective manner is regarded one the most important tasks of communication experts before and during crises. This entails that these experts have a good understanding of the management and communication processes both inside the organisation and with its publics⁴. One important aspect of this is to ensure that the needs of the news media and other stakeholders are recognized when planning, for example, co-located work spaces of risk experts and communication personnel. Next to having access to the situational picture and being included in decision making roles, proximity to the operating centre in crises is crucial to ensure better communication across the response network, news media and public groups. When preparing communication channels, for example, for crisis website and social media use, the role of communication is to enable multichannel communication and other points of interconnection with news media, civil society groups and individual citizens.

Crisis situations call for flexible and timely decision making and communication. Often, crises involve multiple organisations that may need to coordinate activities and that can join a decision making table. Communication experts may bring in information gathered by their monitoring activities and provide advice on, for example, crowd sourcing and expectations of public groups. This also includes the diverse views of the public on, for example, risk perception and trust in authorities, and may relate to ethical decision making and communication⁵. In general, communication experts can have a variety of roles related to decision-making processes. For example, as liaison officers and spokespersons in media relations, website and social media editors, facilitators of meeting points and platforms with civil society actors and individual citizens, and as monitors of communication ongoing in the news and social media. Communication experts also often advise and educate others in the response network in communication with stakeholders when unfamiliar problems are encountered that need creative problem solving.

In the preparedness phase, communication is undertaken that will facilitate smooth operations in the later phases of a crisis. This focuses on building relations and mapping contacts, and arranging procedures and means for the exchange of information. Knowing the key stakeholder groups, risk perceptions and media use is also a crucial part of cooperative decision making in crises. The CBRN scorecard acknowledges that organisations should be able to identify what public groups are involved and how they seek, share and receive risk information. Communication experts in this process can ensure that this information is acknowledged and the views of public groups are taken into account⁶ in decision making as well as in the communication itself during crises.

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It has been acknowledged that people trust some sources more than others. Communication experts need to monitor and evaluate what sources, media and style of communication are valued as trustworthy regarding risk and crisis management decisions. This facilitates better decisions on communication strategies and, consequently extends the reach of important public groups, which is an important goal. Emergency response organisations also need trusted and credible spokespersons. Managers and politically responsible persons, for example a chief of police, mayor or minister, are often trained for such roles and assisted by communication experts, while in some cases communication experts themselves are also considered a trustworthy and credible spokesperson.

Communication experts are usually assigned to analyse the risk perceptions and the related information needs of public groups. Monitoring provides information on how different citizen groups see risks. Several factors shape perceptions, and hence communication experts’ insights concerning different social contexts can bring valuable information to the decision-making table. The monitoring of news media content and social media also helps to evaluate what kind of questions, concerns and misperceptions different groups have. Communication expertise is of value when insights gained from monitoring and crowdsourcing need to be interpreted for decision making by the response organisation. In addition, communication experts are responsible for information dissemination following the decision making, even if others are responsible for the risk data gathering.

The role of online communication and social media has grown not only in crisis response and recovery, but also in preparation for various crises. This involves connecting with public initiatives to promote risk awareness and collaborative educational activities. Preparing for risks also means prioritisation of the risks to be managed. A participative approach to such decision making can include public input.

Bringing public input to the decision-making table is no simple task, but in a democratic society it is important to do so, and send a signal to the public that its voice is heard in risk prioritisation processes. In such processes, knowledge of ways of working and interests of the news media and key journalists is also useful. Similarly, organisations need to be prepared for media relations in later crisis events and be able to connect fast with the news media. One indicator included in the CBRN Communication Scorecard, for example, addresses the need for the media database and channels to be kept up-to-date and maintained by communication experts. The hectic pace and huge scale of some crises hardly allow for establishing and documenting new media relations.

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2. Enhancing detection and warning

When crisis mode is activated, the response network needs to act fast. As mentioned in one indicator in the CBRN scorecard, "at this point the procedures need to be clear regarding who sets matters in motion and how". At this point, the communication function also needs to be on high alert. Inside the response organisation, information about the initial organisational measures is now actively shared. Key warning messages are formulated and communicated. As the type of crisis affects who to reach in what ways and via what communication channels, communication experts have to bring this information to the decision-making table and possibly acknowledge that in a particular crisis some communication channels might lack reach, for example owing to power outages. Depending on proposed actions, for example intended evacuations, communication experts can also clarify the possible reactions of different publics and help ensure that diversity is taken into account, along with ethical procedures. From the decision-making point of view, this kind of information might be needed to reach as many of the relevant stakeholders and public groups as possible.

During the detection and warning phase, information received from public groups is important, for example in the case of crowdsourcing. Communication experts can map the different public groups and address their concerns. As, in this phase, coherent and consistent communication is needed, communication experts should also ensure that the interconnections between the actors function so that these criteria can be met; coordination can include, for example, links on the relevant websites, and the use of similar hashtags and retweeting among key response organisations. Specific additional information that certain public groups might need should also be considered in the decision-making process and communicated.

It is also necessary to monitor if the decisions made and instructions issued reached the people involved and met their needs. This can be measured by analyzing the gap between advised and observed behaviour. Media monitoring of the effect of the decisions disseminated is important not only for communication but for the whole response organisation. Monitoring discovers and enables possible misperceptions in the news and social media to be corrected via the organisation’s own channels. It also shows the needs of public groups as these are portrayed in the news and social media. The technical details of a particular CBRN risk may be misunderstood, and hence the decisions made may need clarification or more detailed information may be required.

Spokespeople and mediated communication messages need to avoid jargon and be as clear as possible. At this point, the decision-making process should be made as transparent as possible to demonstrate that the organisation is clear about its own responsibilities, is reliable in its motives and actions, and is disseminating information as fully and accurately as possible.

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3. Cooperating and assisting in the crisis response

During the crisis, information needs to be exchanged among all the groups involved in the response activities. As stated in one of the indicators in the CBRN scorecard, “not just the decisions taken but also the reasons why and how they were communicated should be shared”. From the communication perspective, this means active cooperation with those responsible for decision making. Communication experts can also coordinate their communication activities with those of other organisations and ensure that the communication strategy is in line with the actions of the emergency management.

In crisis response, communication activities should aim to increase understanding of the crisis and related risks in the current situation. However, communication experts should not concentrate solely on “materializing” the decisions of the response network. From the organisational decision-making standpoint, they should also concentrate on explaining, if possible, the information that the response network has used in making its decisions. This includes relevant uncertainties and possible consequences the response network might encounter. In addition, possible delayed effects can be addressed, as some of the beneficial effects of the measures taken may not be immediately recognizable.

Decisions during the response phase may give rise to questions and misinterpretation among citizens. These need monitoring, and questions and misinterpretations must be addressed as soon as possible. Incorrect rumours should also be addressed. Communication experts in this phase have many different responsibilities and need to use multiple communication channels when communicating with the public groups affected by the crisis, and also with those less directly affected, as the latter may, for example, be in social media interaction with the first group.

Depending on the hazardous substances involved and how they spread, it may be difficult to map target groups. For example, hazardous materials may show up in different places and over a longer period of time. Uncertainty could also prevail for some time about the materials involved, and the cause and consequences of the crisis. In addition, the public may have little knowledge about the substances in question and therefore about how to reduce the risks involved. In some CBRN crises, for example those involving infectious diseases, there may be much pressure on hospitals so that the priorities in the measures taken will need to be carefully explained. Depending on the cause of the threat, there may be a risk of repetition, such as in the case of a terrorism crisis where the perpetrator has not yet been apprehended or because of possible copycat behaviour. All of this needs to be taken into account in the communication with the public.

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Public groups and news media relations during crises demand immediate or at least timely acknowledgement. Communication services, for example in the case of international communication, often need to be available around the clock, thereby requiring a three-shift rotation of experts in various roles, exchanging insights with each other and with those of a later shift. This calls for a large group of communication experts trained for crisis situations. This need may be met by pooling expertise with similar organisations that are not involved in the crisis. During this stage, communication experts find themselves more often in the role of spokespersons or a voice for relaying the decisions made by the organisation, but mostly they will continue in the task of assisting the managers who function as spokespersons. Public groups and media on the crisis site will also be interested in the progress of the response activities and the decisions related to these and what lies behind them. Communication experts are thus seen as accountable disseminators who can help in this process. The response organisation needs to be able to concentrate on saving lives and reducing harm. In communication, not only facts known are made public, but uncertainties in the reality of the situation can also be addressed. People can also be asked to help, for example, by posting photographs of damage on a platform. Or, if the crisis situation continues and new risks evolve, they can assist by sharing signs of ongoing risks.

4. Supporting and facilitating recovery and evaluation

In the recovery phase, other actors may participate in the response network, for example building and insurance companies. Collaboration across the network and the coordination of communication with citizens and other stakeholders needs to be redefined. Communication experts gather information and monitor news and social media to see what matters might be hampering the recovery process. They also promote collaboration and continued attention for recovery activities.

Communication experts need to ensure and support participative decision making on the recovery goals and process. All the public groups that are directly involved should have a broad understanding of what has happened and what options exist for recovery. Public groups want to feel that they and their needs have been acknowledged in the decision making process. In this process, communication experts can advise and support decision makers in arranging how the involved public can have a voice, such as in face-to-face meetings and possibly by supporting media platforms.

Communication experts can also facilitate meeting points and platforms for public groups to express their feelings and provide feedback about the decision making process during and after the crisis. One major activity for learning is evaluation of the communication carried out during the crisis, as addressed in one indicator on the CBRN Communication Scorecard: “Communication in the individual organisation and with other participants in the response network is evaluated”. Evaluation of the decision making communication is also needed, both at the organisational and network level. This will facilitate organisational learning for use in future crises and enhance cooperation with other organisations. In this way the effectiveness of decision making also can be improved.

After the crisis, evaluation and learning can be supported by communication activities. This includes coming to terms with what has happened, the crisis and its consequences, facilitating the learning of lessons and feedback on the mitigation process. This is also the time, within the response network and within each organisation, to analyse look back on the decision making and operational process, and draw conclusions for future events. Some policies and actions based on the decisions made during the crisis might initially have been supported but subsequently criticised. Communication experts can facilitate an open-minded discussion of the organisation’s actions. This is not easy, as many may be eager to get back to normal life, and prefer to forget rather than reflect on the crisis event.

The response organisation should also be willing to discuss its decision making process with the media if necessary. At this juncture, communication experts should support the organisation and emphasize transparency. Mistakes that have been made need to lead to lessons learned for the future. Sometimes public evaluations are harsh, as crises can have devastating consequences and expectations of authorities may be high. Therefore, the motivation of the responders should also be kept in mind. Communication experts should also critically monitor their own actions during a crisis with an eye to improvements. In sum, communication experts should develop the response organisations’ communicative preparedness, response and evaluation processes and not just concentrate on designing external communication activities or disseminating messages.

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