Crisis and Internet Networks

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter explores how people use the media when confronted by a crisis. It reports on a case study of the communication problems surrounding the impact of the Asian Boxing Day Tsunami (2004) on the citizens of Finland. It considers how crises are reported and the implications of that reporting for the people who are personally involved in the crisis. It also explores the expectations that people bring to their search for information about relatives and friends who are unaccounted for in the disaster regions. The use of text messages, the setting up of makeshift websites, and the desire for personally relevant information all play a role in the crisis information scenario. Of particular interest is the finding that text messaging was an important way that people in the affected area were able to remain informed about the situations they encountered on the ground.

Key terms
- crisis communication
- state information management
- citizen rights

Issues
- What happens to people’s use of information when something unexpected happens?
- What happens when a crisis hits citizens of an ‘information society’ with a multitude of web-based networks?
- In web-based communication, two-way traffic of communication is possible. But is it possible in a crisis situation?
- Is the Internet able to shorten distances and thus to ‘globalise’ loyalties and accountability in crisis situations?
Introduction

There is a multitude of research evidence about people's media behaviour on dramatic events such as wars, coups, deaths of leaders and big accidents (e.g. Anker, 2005; Bennett and Paletz, 1994; Demers, 2002; Reimer, 1994; Sood et al., 1987). Such studies mostly focus on reception and diffusion of information, and argue that in crisis situations the information needs of those affected are found to increase immediately by roughly one-third. This is quite understandable as people want to know what has happened and whether/how the new development relates to them. This growth in information need depends on the size, nature and closeness of the incident. In this respect, quite crude, even cynical values are present. Ten deaths in a neighbouring town are found to generate much more interest than tens of thousands of lives lost in a far-away country. If only measured by loss of life and destroyed infrastructure, the World Trade Center drama in New York on September 11, 2001 was actually a far smaller event than the annual floods in Bangladesh. Still, the news value of the two cases was of a totally different scale.

Certain types of accidents can be relied on to arouse people's interest. Aeroplane accidents always generate front-page headlines, although far more people die in car accidents. And all over the world, a man's struggle with nature seems to be a theme that arouses affections even if the case does not directly touch the people concerned. Floods and hurricanes fill this criterion. Crises are thus, to a certain extent, not only sudden but man-made and culture-bound. It is also typical that unexpected events gather more attention and create more anxiety than long, oppressing and complicated political processes. Open conflicts and wars belong naturally to such crises that always collect considerable attention and increase the need for information. Governments and other official institutions have to express themselves immediately. Especially in industrialised or post-industrial societies people are used to having access to a continuous flow of information. Rumour spreading is an alternative they do not want to play with, and passivity in action gives an impression that the officials do not care.

In such circumstances people don't need just any kind of information. In the case of crisis, the credibility and experienced truthfulness of information is highly valued, since rumours can be spread very easily if relevant and reliable information is delayed or is shown to be biased. In the case of major accidents, the requirement to gather and distribute reliable information in the midst of chaos is quite a demanding task for the prominent actors in the dilemma, and often the volume or details of the crisis are not even totally clear to those responsible for the activity. The criticism around Cyclone Katrina could be given as an example here. It has been shown that the US administration underestimated the severity of its impact on the local populations. After a year, the various grassroots organisations, established
to defend Katrina victims, were still appalled by the negligence shown by the US administration.¹ It is interesting to note that in the case of the WTC disaster, the excess of websites is—finally, years after the disaster—considerably more formal and less grassroots-oriented. There are websites covering crisis counselling and financial support, but the majority of the web-based information available in fact focuses on what is going to happen for the place in the future. This is not the case with the Katrina websites, which are still strongly oriented to what happened in 2005 and what happens to the victims today.

**Think about it**

It is worth wondering whether we now are at the gate to a new phase: has the Web overtaken television as the dominant medium in crisis situations. Does the Web now offer a faster and far more complex framework for both public and participatory elements in crisis situations?

In a post-industrial society, the increasing use of the Internet has challenged the centrality of radio and television as bearers of bad tidings. The Internet now is part of the everyday routines of a large proportion of the population. The public has become used to the availability of continuously updated information when they want it, although not everybody uses this access regularly. For example in the Nordic countries, some 80 per cent of the population uses the Internet at work on a daily basis, while the use of the Web for personal needs is somewhat lower (Nordic Media Trends, 2003). However, quite often the border line between workplace use and private use is blurred. With increasing expansion of Internet use, it can be safely assumed that in the coming years, a ‘new’ and more demanding public will emerge. Above all, future web users will obviously demand more two-way traffic in mass communication than has traditionally been the case, and more personalised information (Heinonen, 1999).

The spontaneous emergence of a multiplicity of critical grassroots websites around Katrina indicate the new Internet-based phase, and the importance attached to the Internet as a source of crisis information was already demonstrated in the reporting of the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004. This event caused widespread distress in the Nordic countries because the area around the Bay of Bengal, which was at the centre of the destruction, is one of the most popular holiday destinations for Nordics. Thus concern about the tsunami catastrophe spread rapidly even in the remote Scandinavian countries. For example, of the roughly 40,000 Nordics spending Christmas in the affected area, forty-seven Danes, eighty-four
Norwegians, 179 Finns and 544 Swedes were killed and several thousands were injured. For the peaceful Nordic countries, the tsunami catastrophe caused more deaths than any other event in peacetime.

In all the Nordic countries, people are heavy media users—the Norwegians lead the global statistics, while the Finns and the Swedes are placed as the third and the fourth. It is normal practice in these countries that a person reads two to three newspapers on a daily basis. Television viewing remains at about 110–115 minutes per workday and somewhat higher during the weekends. Television is considered an ‘all round’ medium for information, entertainment and education. Practically all big media have had websites for over ten to fifteen years, and government and municipal organisations have established home pages. However, these websites are maintained mostly as one-way channels of information. Some sites provide discussion columns, but these are meant for questions and answers, for general feedback rather than for genuine debate. In this sense it can be argued that the Web has been used in a very restricted way, not utilising its full potential.

Immediately after the tsunami, each of the four Nordic countries set up official investigations and all four commissions reported heavy criticism of public officials and especially the foreign ministries. All reports indicated that the Nordic welfare states were not prepared to respond adequately to this ‘new’ kind of threat and to their citizens’ demands for information, especially during the Christmas season when most officials are on holidays. The Swedish report even demanded that the top political leadership be brought to court for mismanagement (Sverige och Tsunamin-granskning och förslag, 2005, Andersson Odén et al., 2005), and in 2006, the political debate on the tsunami continued. The minister of foreign affairs was forced to quit her job. On the other hand, these reports also indicate—mainly with carefully phrased, politically correct formulations—that Nordic citizens perhaps have unrealistic expectations for the efficiency of the state and its capacity to act on behalf of citizens in foreign countries. Many citizens seemed to expect that the
state is able to protect them even when they travel to far-off countries without reporting their proposed destinations to anyone other than their families. The commissions therefore argued that nation states cannot be held responsible for all kinds of present-day vacation nomadism.

**Reporting the tsunami**

Initially, the volume of media reporting on the tsunami was enormous, but it decreased quite quickly. In Finland, as many as 20,000 news dispatches and reports were filed in the first month. Nine out of ten stories covering the tsunami followed a news format. Compared with routine news coverage, the tsunami coverage focused on ‘ordinary citizens’—Finnish tourists in Asia and their concerned relatives and friends at home—who were given far more space in the media than usual. While the normal proportion of media coverage devoted to this type of coverage rarely exceeds 10 per cent, at this time it increased to 25–35 per cent. In the first two days, the media reports mainly described the phenomenon itself and the destruction it had caused. After the first month, the Finnish media changed its focus almost entirely to what had happened to the Finns in the area. All the Nordic media seem to have behaved in a similar manner. The fact that more than 150,000 Indonesians and thousands of other people from the Bay of Bengal area lost their lives disappeared from the Nordic public arena. The Nordic media attention was totally on what happened to the citizens of their own country only. At least in Finland and in Norway, this kind of ‘selfishness’ of orientation later created discussion among media critics. Another sign of this kind of narrow orientation was the fact that the news coverage reduced dramatically after all rescued and injured Finns/Norwegians were brought home.

As in the case of Katrina, the Nordic experience seems to suggest that web-based citizen activity is at its strongest when it deals with a concrete, dramatic case with a clear domestic or local focus—it was naïve to interpret that the Internet activity in both cases would be an indication of global or even national solidarity.

In Finland, several detailed studies of the media coverage and people’s reactions to news of the tsunami were undertaken (Mörä, 2005; Huhtala et al., 2005; Jääsaari, 2005; Orava, 2005; von Frenckell, 2005; Kivikuru, 2006a, 2006b). In these studies, people criticised the state, especially their ministry of foreign affairs, but they also indicated their unhappiness about the behaviour of the media during the crisis. They criticised the media for ignoring the wishes of interviewees suffering from shock, for exploiting injured and lost children, and in general for not letting the people’s voices be heard. It also became clear that the audience was, in fact,
divided into two groups, Although many Finns felt that ‘I could have been there’, the majority remained more dispassionate observers. But a group of 80,000–100,000 individuals experienced the tsunami very personally indeed. Their relatives were among those killed, injured or missing, or they had visited the region quite recently. Understandably, they were those most vocal and critical of government inaction. All were shocked first, because the crisis was ‘unprecedented’—it showed Finns in great difficulties in a far-away place, previously considered a safe holiday destination. While the majority of the population seemed to calm down and to lose interest in the issue quite quickly, those whom the crisis had hit personally remained in distress for a much longer period of time.

However, the most shocking criticism emerged from audience statistics. The ‘new’ media had played a far stronger role in the chaotic period immediately after the tsunami than ever before. Partly, people were forced to access information from new media because radio and television did not have as many bulletins on Boxing Day as usual. People listened first to the radio, then turned to the text-TV in order to get more information, and finally they started phoning. Those most concerned telephoned the ministry for foreign affairs, others telephoned their friends and relatives. At the ministry, again due to Boxing Day, the personnel on duty was minimal, and only three telephone lines were available for crisis work. During the month of January, almost 60,000 phone calls were recorded at the ministry, though a majority never got through. In a country calling itself an ‘information society’, such a problem decreased the credibility of the whole state apparatus.

Although the media first presented the Asian tsunami as a terrible but distant event, many Finns knew that their loved ones were in the region. Uncertainty pushed people to seek new routes and channels, and new sources of information. People started phoning, sending and receiving text messages with their mobile phones. This was reflected in the telephone statistics. For example, the number of mobile phone calls from Finland to and from Thailand rose by 260 per cent and the number of text messages sent to Thailand by 370 per cent (Aisan luonnonkatstrofi, 2004, pp. 116–17). The mobile phone was the only medium available for contacts between Finland and the holiday resorts in Thailand, and text messages became a crucial source of information because the SMS traffic operated smoothly throughout the crisis, while telephone connections were quite fragile. The most crucial information between Finnish tourists in the tsunami region and their families at home were delivered in 160-digit messages. Afterwards, the Nordic tourists in the affected regions stated that they were probably the ones most in need of more information about the event since the destruction of communications infrastructure in the Asian resorts meant they only occasionally ran into a functioning television set at hotels, hospitals or airports. They knew less
about the total situation than their relatives at home even though thousands of
news dispatches circled around them.

There also was a contradiction embedded in the situation. The Finns at home
wanted tailored, specific information about their relatives and friends and felt
that too much was said about the whole tsunami process, although quantitatively
speaking this was not true because the media in fact focused strongly on Finns. The
Finns in the tsunami region wanted more general information about the situation,
since the information available to them hardly reached beyond the hotel where
they were staying. This is an interesting contradiction and difficult to resolve. Later
all the Nordic countries considered whether or not the assistance organisations
should have sent information officers to the region. Doctors and nurses did not
have time to brief the injured about the total situation, although that could have
assisted in calming them down.

In addition to individual mobile phone use, the Finnish Ministry of Traffic and
Communications sent a mass text message to 6000 mobile phones on December 29,
informing people about evacuation places in Thailand and Sri Lanka. The message
was not successful. It came too late and caused additional confusion. Arrangements
had been changed because the Communications Regulatory Authority tried to
solve the technical and legal problems involved in such an exercise. However, this
type of mass messaging is apparently here to stay, since a new Act was passed by the
Parliament recently, enabling the Communications Regulatory Authority to more
easily send this kind of message to Finns in crisis in the future. Other forms of
early warning systems for ordinary people are also in the pipeline. For researchers
interested in more theoretical considerations, these messages provide an interesting
challenge—should they be defined as interpersonal communication or part of mass
communication with fixed messages? By mass communication, it is usually meant
information relayed to a large, unidentified mass of people in ‘packaged’ form and
repeated at regular intervals. In this particular situation, the audience is large but
not anonymous, the messages are standardised but not regularly repeated. However,
the new technology obviously provides potential for a grey zone between the mass
communication and interpersonal communication, although official SMS messages,
with a volume of 160 digits, are forced to operate on the same lines as conventional
mass communication.

During the crisis, the use of conventional media thus rose. In addition people
visited official websites, but the most dramatic rise was experienced in the use of
amateur-run websites that offered people a forum for debate and also comfort
and consolation. The information offered on the websites run by Finnish divers
in Thailand or by various friendship associations did not depart much from the
conventional media output, and they gave access also to rumours and non-credible
information. This clumsy ‘mixed grill’ approach was able to create a community feeling among mourners and concerned individuals. That was something that the conventional media obviously could not achieve with their packaged and professional output. Conventional media prioritised credibility while the websites prioritised affections. The result was that the websites, usually visited by a few hundred people per day, counted both roughly 300,000 visits per day for a month after the tsunami. In February 2005, the figures started declining and reached the normal volume quite fast.

Perhaps the most interesting outcome was the fact that although 300,000 people visited these websites, only a few hundred actually participated in the discussions. The rest remained as observers, only checking what was going on. In a way, it can be said that the Web behaviour of these people hardly differed much from that of receivers for conventional media since most did not personally participate. However, it should also be noted that the message exchange that they observed at the websites was somewhat more two-way and tailored according to receiver needs than conventional mass communication due to the discussion option. The layout and style of reporting on these Finnish websites have remained quite the same, while in the case of Katrina websites a move towards more organised and professional, newspaper-like style is noticeable, and sender emphasis has grown. It would be interesting to carry out research on the mass communication legacy in web-based communication, but for the time being such longitudinal research is impossible to find.

One could perhaps propose that in these dramatic events, the state and the conventional media, for the first time on a larger scale, met a public that carried the characteristics linked with the ‘information age’ in slogans: these people were not content to be audiened and served with non-tailored, impersonal messages. They wanted special services, they wanted to have the choice to participate even if not everybody used it. During the first days after the tsunami, neither the state nor the media could meet this challenge. In fact, they used a kind of ‘turtle defence’, turned conservative and conventional in whatever they did.

On the other hand, the behaviour of the citizens in the tsunami case at least can hardly be called logical and consequent, either. People seemed to be quite confused about their own roles. On the one hand, they wanted the state to take responsibility and secure their and their loved ones’ lives; they wanted to be offered services as a right. On the other hand they wanted individual solutions and tailored information services. The requirements set on the public and the private sphere were mixed and diffuse, and this fact became perhaps more striking in the contradictory demands set on information and communication needs than other, more concrete social actions.
Global communities?

While it has often been claimed that new technology assists in the creation of a global village, we have also been warned about global standardisation of cultures. It has been assumed that because of the potential embedded in new technology, people learn to know more about people and events far from them, and subsequently they develop a kind of global community. However, the recent Finnish—and in general, Nordic, because very similar results have been collected at least from Sweden (Nord, 2006) and from Norway (Eide, 2005)—experiences suggest that this is not automatically so. At least in a crisis situation people easily become selfish, egocentric and parochial. They are almost entirely interested only in their own concerns, in people in similar situations as they themselves, or perhaps in the experiences of their countrymen and people from nearby countries. In fact, the new technology seems to increase this selfishness of attitude by offering them a channel for more personally tailored information and debate than has been available via the conventional media. These people are in need of forming a community to compensate for their own feelings of insecurity, but the sense of community does not expand because of the options available through the Internet. Quite the opposite, their sense of community appears to shrink. Another issue concerns the reality of such a community. Several researchers have claimed that the Internet tends to privatise the political public sphere, since individuals can only tap its potential in isolation. Even when conversations in the interactive zones of Internet communications include many people, they still have the air of exchanges between private persons, not action groups. The individual lacks the opportunity to emerge from the private sphere into a public space. True participation and the potential for empowerment are missing.

One can contradict this conclusion by saying that the solidarity shown by the global community can be counted in euros and dollars; the voluntary financial assistance to the tsunami victims all over the world reached enormous sums. It is no doubt true that the Internet enabled people to know and be alerted to the destruction caused by the tsunami. However, the motives of those donating money have not been analysed. They might be far more complicated than it has been assumed. For example in the Nordic countries, several journalistic stories have indicated that many people thought that the funds would be used for their countrymen suffering from the losses caused by the tsunami. In the same way, people have also been irritated about the fact that so little improvement has taken place in the tsunami-affected countries although so much money was donated. Westerners are anxious and suspicious that their money has been wasted, and they have not been motivated to collect more information about the target countries or international donors mediating the funds. The tsunami remained as a news event,
and the framing of this event was carried out by the conventional media, although the people used the Web for recovering from the event.

It is problematic that very little is known about how people actually connect media or the Web to their lives as citizens. Within political communication there is a great deal of research (e.g. Bennett and Paletz, 1994) concentrating on questions of transmission; how politicians get their message across or what do people learn about campaign issues from the news-media or the Web arena, but there has been very little research into how people make sense of events and opinions mediated to them on their own terms. As a political being, the citizen is most often treated as an abstract, disconnected bearer of rights, privileges and immunities instead of one of persons whose existence is located in a particular place and draws its sustenance from circumscribed relationships: family, friends, workplace, community etc. Such relationships are the sources from which political beings draw power—symbolic, material and psychological—and they enable them to act together. Our limited knowledge about the linkage between mediated information and citizen interpretation might bring us such surprises as the tsunami aftermath in Finland. Citizen behaviour sounded irrational and contradictory—people did not accept information packaged for them according to professional standards. Instead, they preferred amateurish websites lacking credibility.

Internationally, the perhaps most significant political role that the Internet has played is in promoting links between community groups and political activists from different parts of the world (e.g. Rodriguez, 2001; Cammaerts and van Audenhove, 2005). On the other hand, there is also contradictory information available. Some researchers (e.g. Mayer and Hinchman, 2002; Dahlgren, 2005) claim that the Internet’s capacity for social organisation and empowerment is limited, because it tends to privatise the political public sphere. Individuals can only tap its potential in isolation. Even when conversations in the interactive zones of Internet communications include many people, they still have the air of exchanges between private persons, not action groups. However, the Internet is assumed to have positive consequences in extending and pluralising the public sphere. Obviously in crisis situations such as the tsunami, the Internet’s capacity for creating a combination of the private and the public pleases and comforts people, at least giving an illusion of audience power.

Conclusion

The news about the tsunami flew all over the world through the conventional media and the Web, and in most countries web discussions on the item started within a few hours. However, although the news item as such was international,
it was in a way 'split' into localised pieces in the Web discussions that focussed on national or regional aspects of the catastrophe. A certain amount of loyalty was no doubt shown by the huge sum of money collected for repairing the tsunami casualties all over the world—according to Reuters, the flood of funding amounted to over US $9 billion. It is still hardly probable that a global wave of loyalty would develop in similar situations online only towards those hit by a crisis—in any case, not more so than during the old days with only access to conventional mass media. In 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983), the solidarity tends to be quite thin, and without social structures, it dies out soon, as in the case of the 'Live Aid' campaign in 1985 (e.g. Harrison and Palmer, 1986), established to fight the famine in Ethiopia. Sustainable international solidarity requires organisation and structures. In this respect, the growing use of the Web does not seem to have made any change. The transmission of information is perhaps faster, and the volume of discussions on the Web are vivid, but they still focus mainly on localised items. For example, the Finns communicating about the tsunami via the divers' and friendship associations' websites directed their criticism towards domestic institutions and media, not any global ones. They felt themselves strongly localised, although the crisis itself happened far away.

In a way, it can be claimed that production processes lag behind technical development, and when a crisis breaks the normal routines, it can slow down as production staff seek to sort through and authenticate the vast quantities of information accumulating. So while a 'new', more interactive audience is emerging, it is still at an initiation stage. This has become especially clear in crisis situations, when a large proportion of the audience escape to amateurish websites that allow more social networking than the conventional media or public institutions. However, this does not necessarily mean that everybody wants to participate in such discussions. Many remain quiet observers, but they still favour channels that are based on two-way communication. In a conventional media system, receivers have supported their security feelings by credible information from reliable sources. In these more recent cases, people seem to reach the same result by getting confirmative communication from other people in the same situation as they themselves are.

- In this chapter the use of information in crisis situations has been discussed. In principle, the existence of new technology has not changed the traditional media hierarchy.
- In a crisis situation, the need for information grows, but conventional media are not always able to provide the audience with immediately updated information, either via their traditional formats nor via their web versions.
• In the same way, public information providers (ministries, policy makers, health services) play it safe and become conservative in their information activity despite their fine policy documents meant to promote democracy via information.

• In a crisis, people make do with top-down information flows and seem unaware of what to do when citizens demand information and specific action.

Tutorial questions

• Describe what happens to people's use of traditional media and web-based information networks in a crisis situation.

• What kinds of effects does the Internet have on national and global audiences in crisis situations?

Recommended reading


Websites


Katrina Information Network: www.katrinaaction.org


New Orleans Network: www.neworleansnetwork.org

People's Hurricane Relief Fund & Oversight Coalition: www.communitylaborunited.net

Note

1 Such organisations are multiple. See e.g. Katrina Information Network (http://www.katrinaaction.org), the New Orleans Network (http://www.neworleansnetwork.org), the People's Hurricane Relief Fund & Oversight Coalition (http://www.communitylaborunited.net). The sites were strongly discussion-
based immediately after the catastrophe. Now small pieces of relevant information, e.g. about how to apply for extra funding, dominate the sites. However, the focus is still strongly citizen-oriented and the texts indicate suspicions about government actions.

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