# Integrated Crisis Communication as new approach in Crisis Management

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent years there has been an increased need for new technical approaches in crisis management in order to meet the need for fast, target group-specific communication and improved coordination of internal- and external communications. Findings by our teams show that even though the market for technical crisis solutions has nearly doubled in the last two years, only a few of these solutions address these problems as a whole. The present research therefore proposes an Integrated Crisis Communication (ICC) approach. Based on the approach of Integrated Marketing Communication, which is used to describe a holistic approach to marketing communication by ensuring consistency of messages and a complementary use of media and communication channels, ICC aims at a similar strategic approach by using the benefits of digitalization and media convergence and thereby offering a faster, target-oriented and more efficient way to address the individual needs of people affected.

**KEYWORDS:** Crisis Communication, Crisis management, Crisis management systems, Integrated Crisis Communication, System Integration

## INTRODUCTION

Communication and therefore the exchange of information plays a vital part in today's crisis management. Richardson and Byers said in 2004, that "Effective crisis communication is critical for effective crisis management" (Richardson/Byers, 2004). Based on the findings from an 18 month research project with one of Germanys largest providers of critical infrastructure this paper likes to introduce an integrated crisis communication approach, which could improve the effectiveness of crisis communication in and between organizations. The first part of this paper highlights some of the challenges of organizational communication in the crisis management context from an organizational, a technological and a cognitive viewpoint. After that the idea of Integrated Crisis Communication (ICC) is shortly introduced. The paper ends with an example of how such an integrated solution could look like by presenting some functionalities of a prototype that our research team around Gebhard Rusch, Volkmar Pipek and Raimund Klauser developed and how such an approach helped solving some of the challenges presented in the research and development project with the critical infrastructure provider.

## BACKGROUND AND METHOD FOR ANALYSIS

When talking about crisis communication one has to take into account the whole continuum of communication from the person speaking, the intended message, the communicational environment, the stakeholder involved - as well as their cognitive states. In order to understand the crisis communication of the infrastructure provider in this context, one has to take look at the communicational environment as a whole. Who are the internal and external stakeholders, how is Crisis Management and crisis communication organized in the organization, how is it organized in other organization, how do these organizations communicate, what technology do they use and what are communicational preferences. Last but not least it is important to indentify the individual needs of all stakeholders involved in crisis situations. After identifying all stakeholders and the organizational structure of crisis management one has to take a look at the technological infrastructure and the communication channels used. Aspects such as the availability of communication channels, their capabilities, reach und usability aspects (e.g. expert vs. amateur) have to be identified. In order to identify the cognitive aspects of the stakeholders involved the research team analyzed the stakeholder's communicational needs, preferences and their emotional state. A qualitative research approach for chosen for our research. For our analysis of the internal communication we conducted participant observations, semi-standardized Interviews and informal conversations, as well as several workplace studies. For the analysis of the external communication we

conducted semi-standardized interviews with corporate clients/business customers, focus groups with private customers and did an extensive Media research for secondary data analysis, in order to correlate our findings.

## ORGANIZATIONAL ASPECTS OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

According to some sociologists such as Clarke (1992), Freudenburg (1993) or Rosa (1997), the story of risk is the story of organizations and that also applies to crisis situations. Today crisis situations do not only affect one but many organizations. When looking at a crisis communication in an organizational context, one has to look at each organization individually as well as the inter-organizational structure.

Our findings showed that the crisis management in an organization is mostly formalized by rules and regulations, as for example the crisis management handbook. Crisis communication on the other hand, is less formalized in respect to guidelines for communication channels, content or the different stakeholders involved. Even though crisis management teams are interdisciplinary most of the organizational and technological structure behind it is department specific. That means that communication methods and information sharing often differs from to department to department due to different systems. The crisis management system for example – based on a network control system– is an expert system that can only be handled by the network control team (technicians, engineers) but not by other members of the crisis management team such as the PR officer or the team leader for example. Due to the use of these different systems information is not available to all stakeholders and breaks in format between systems and departments cause significant delays.

When communication shifts from the organization to an inter-organizational context the challenge of crisis communication becomes exponentially greater because each organization brings their own systems, their own structure and procedures and therefore their own weaknesses into the inter-organizational network. This creates a larger problem in the inter-organizational context, which I would like to call the "Crisis Management Complexity Challenge**".** As Andersen & Spitzberg put it in 2009, in accordance with Nacos (2002), Turner & Pidgeon, (1997) and Turner & Gelles (2003): "The more agencies or departments are responsible for managing a crisis, the more likely there will be communication errors and problems" (Andersen & Spitzberg, 2009). To make matters worse: Even though many organizations work on the same goal to mitigate a crisis, the communicational goals and the stakeholders who need to be addressed differ from organization to organization! This creates barriers in the inter-organizational communication. Therefore policies like the "one-voice" policy – as it is often suggested - are not possible and stakeholders will receive contradicting information. Due to the complexity problem there is a need to integrate the different structures, procedures, cultures in the interorgnaizational communicational infrastructure in order to reduce time delays and incomplete data.

## TECHNOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

In modern societies technology plays an important role and thereby creates new technological challenges. Due to the proliferation of technology the availability of communication-channels is highly dependent on electricity. Our research showed that organizations often depend only on one system or solution for crisis communication instead of many. The infrastructure provider for example is depending mainly on the telephone/mobile phone, as well the automated telephone system or switch board to communicate. When this communication channels is not available, nearly no other method of communication with external stakeholders possible. Furthermore, beside the mass media, most communication channels and technologies have limited communication capacities. This creates another technological challenge, because only a limited number of people can use it.

Most systems have been developed to solve internal crisis management functions and therefore often have no physical point for interoperability – meaning they only operate separately. Due to these stand alone solutions the efficiency of crisis management as a whole cannot be exploited to their full potential, because each system only addresses parts of the problems and only addresses few stakeholders instead of many. And in respect to their usability - most systems were developed to addresses problems instead of stakeholders - meaning technology defines the user groups instead of the user groups which should define the technology.

These challenges create an interoperability problem on an intra- and inter-organizational level which causes time delays, lost information and inefficient use of technology. If the available systems would be designed to integrate other technologies the exchange of communication could be improved. So instead of developing new technologies we integrated existing technologies in order to make them more robust and effective.

**COGNITIVE ASPECTS OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

When I outlined the main goals of our research project I also outlined, that one of our objectives was to identify the stakeholder's informational and communicational needs and preferences as well as their emotional state. The term "cognition" usually refers to process of thought, such as information processing, applying knowledge and changing preferences; I would like to address this challenge under the term "cognitive challenges". Our extensive research in that field showed us that every stakeholder involved in our analysis has individual preferences about the information they need or the communication channel they prefer. These needs and preferences are defined by their emotional state, their role in the organization as well as by time. Our findings also showed that stakeholders informational needs and communication preferences also change over time. Nearly every external stakeholder we interviewed used and preferred different communication-channels, used different systems for communication or information over time and often these needs and preferences were not met by the infrastructure provider or other organizations.

**INTEGRATED CRISIS COMMUNICATION APPROACH**

In 2004 Benitez recommended utilizing communication in designing and evaluating effective channels and mechanisms of interaction between stakeholders to facilitate disaster mitigation. Based on the challenges I outlined before the Integrated Crisis Communication (ICC) approach, based on Integrated Communication approach from marketing is aimed at providing stakeholder-oriented communication, by efficiently using all available information sources and communication channels in a complementary – user defined - way in order to address the cognitive needs of individual stakeholders. So instead of developing a new systems or new technology Torben Wiedenhöfer, Benjamin Mangold and I decided to integrate all the necessary systems into one information and communication system for which we designed a special internet service portal, were stakeholders (internal/external) could register with their names, addresses, contact information. By registering there, they themselves provide their individual preference about communication channels (such as email, SMS, fax, automated call), when and how often they wanted to be contacted and if they had any special needs (like assistance for elderly, disabled, small business that need special assistance in order to provide services).
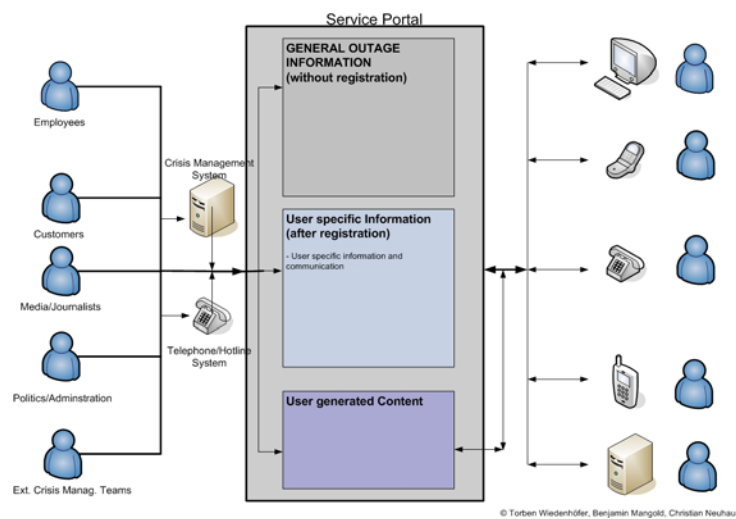


**Figure 1: Service Portal in context of the crisis management system**

We connected the crisis management system and network control system (Figure 1), as well as other important information systems with the service portal which could then either generate general information about a power-outage as well as stakeholder specific information – due to the information that had been provided by the stakeholders before. The service portal could then send out messages over preselected or redundant communication channels according to the Stakeholders individual preferences. Every system for itself could still provide information on a standalone basis, but our integration of these systems in the new integrated crisis communication solution did not only merge the available data more effectively but also provided redundant ways of communication.

**CONCLUSION AND FUTURE QUESTIONS**

In a conclusion: It is our believe that ICC - due to the digitalization and the convergence of media over multiple communication channels – as well as its stakeholder oriented approach in inter-organizational perspective - can improve crisis management by shortening reactions times, by improving consistency of message, by providing relevant and redundant information for stakeholders and by providing back-channels between organizations and its different stakeholder. Instead of standardizing communication, ICC is aimed at using the available technology in an inter-organizational communication environment in order to provide individual, stakeholder-oriented information and communication!

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