

Communication Ethics in the context Communication for Security

Dipl. Medienwirtin Christine Schütz

Abstract

The objective of communication ethics is understood as a deliberation of lived moral: What norms and values guide decisions of whether or not passing on information, at what moment and to whom? Indeed, these questions are vital for the protection and rescue of people. It is a necessity to reveal ethical conflicts in communication for security. Current ethical discussions mainly focus on technology, but the importance of communication is only inadequately recognized.

The principal duty for organizations involved in crisis and disasters (police, rescue services, firefighters etc.) is to enable the public to cope with the situation and to recover. The media are challenged to find the balance between informing and disturbing the people. Therefore, this paper discusses forms of cooperation as trust based relations between the involved organizations, administration and the media. The presentation claims that organizational communication in crisis and disasters is a matter of communication ethics and not only of public relations.

Preface/Introduction

This presentation is a 'working progress'. I want to outline a concept, some ideas how to approach the issue of communication ethics in context of Communication for Security.

In disasters we haven't just to deal with material damage and loss of property, but with 'irritations and disruptions of social order and cognitive structures'. During a disaster everyone is confronted with new, unusual, catastrophic and probably scary situations. Of course different players have according to their backgrounds (education, profession, age etc.) distinct possibilities to deal with challenges of a disaster. The approach of our project 'Emergency Communication for Security' is that communication itself is a tool for protection and rescue of people. False or misunderstood information can cause wrong decisions, wrong measures and even death.

We claim that an immediate and transparent communication is necessary for making best possible decisions and for staying capable to act. This is accompanied with a commitment to truth. – Well, the question "What is truth?" is quite complex and de-

serves a philosophical discourse itself. In the context of this presentation an adequate discussion is not possible. I just want to point out that my theoretical background for all considerations of communication is constructivism. With this background my understanding of truth follows the ideas of Ernst von Glasersfeld who pronounces: "'truth', can never be claimed for the knowledge (or any piece of it) that human reason produces." (Glaserfeld 2003)

For the issues of this presentation we want to simplify the term truth and define a truthful communication as *passing on all available information*. It is obvious that in such a complex situation like a disaster all potentially available information will only be conceived afterwards. So the question about the right communication is not only one about truth, but about knowledge or in Glasersfelds words 'knowing'.

Communication Ethics

Communication ethics are a broad field so I want to say a word about the subject we're dealing with: The term 'communication ethics' is frequently connected with Habermas's Discourse Ethics. Though his concept has many interesting aspects, we don't want to base our analysis on it. Furthermore, we don't understand communication ethics as the ethics of professional communicators, thus the media. Communication ethics is the examination of norms and values guiding communicational behavior and of conveying norms and values through communication. (Zillig 2003, 237f) The objective of communication ethics is understood as a reflection of practiced moral (descriptive ethics). Our aim is to analyze ethical challenges for organizations (rescue teams, firefighters, policemen, politicians and the media) in crisis and disasters. On the one hand this means dealing with questions about behaving and communicating in catastrophic situations adequately. On the other hand discussing moral concepts that form the basis of decision making in catastrophic situations: What norms and values guide decisions whether to pass on information or not, at what moment and to whom? Indeed, these questions are vital for the protection and rescue of people.

Context of Communication of Security

The principal duty for organizations involved in crisis and disasters (police, rescue services, firefighters etc.) is to enable the public to cope with the situation and to recover.

The objective target for everyone is protection and rescue of people and to conserve their physical and psychological integrity.

The media are challenged to find the balance for informing, but not disturbing the people. Therefore rescue teams and the police have to provide the media with reliable information. Especially in times of crisis and disasters people want to know what has happened and how many are injured or dead. Constant updates about the ongoing rescue, are requested. It is obvious that people in charge only want to pass on such sensitive information to trustworthy partners. It can be assumed that through trust based relations between the involved organizations, administration and the media, security for the public increases. For a long-term cooperation, it is not enough to know the telephone number of your contact person in case of a disaster: You should know your contact person and be sure that he or she is reliable.

For this reason we claim that organizational communication in crisis and disasters is a matter of communication ethics and not only of public relations. In this connection communicating means more than informing people, but rather to convey comfort, courage and confidence. An initial solution is to take account of the emotional factor *how* to communicate with people and how to show that you care.

Communication Ethics in context of communication for security

Values and norm can be found in our everyday life in generally accepted principals as well as specified for certain professions: In everyday life one should be polite and respect taboos such as nakedness in public. However, the moral standards for a doctor or a priest are fairly higher than for others. If those people transgress moral rules the popular outrage is huge. At least theoretically in all professions involved in crisis or disasters, the issue of Ethics plays a prominent role: (For) Medical professionals, journalists, policemen, psychologists, chaplains and politicians. The expectations from the public to these professions are high and popular outrage is an expression of the fact that those professions have to fulfill a certain responsibility. Responsibility is a largely discussed ethical concept: E.g. in consequence to Hans Jonas' 'Imperative of Responsibility' German philosophers as well as politicians and active environmentalists discussed the claim "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life." (Jonas 1980, 36) Jonas approach centers on social and ethical problems created by technology – which leads us to the question of the cause of disas-

ters: What is a disaster? Professor Rusch already pointed out how we understand disasters, but I also want to refer to one of the most prominent disaster researchers in Germany: Lars Clausen (1978, 1994) formulated the thesis, that all disasters are cultural disasters. The perception of disasters is so to say a man-made problem.

During disasters ethical conflicts most of all base on communication, they are specific for culture and caused by norms and moral ideas. In catastrophic situations moral taboos somehow have to be ignored for the benefit of fast acting and rescuing lives: Injured have to be unclothed on the spot of a disaster, maybe their clothes and property has to be destroyed (e.g. cut off). In case of an accident or terroristic act with toxic gas, field helpers in strange work clothes will attend and wash people. One can imagine this as a quite scary situation. – As you can see in these photos of an exercise.



LÜKex 2010: Cross-border crisis exercise in Germany.

Of course modern concepts for decontamination include sex segregation, but can this be done in an actual disaster? Does it even matter anymore? At the beginning of our project the question of whether or not disasters abrogate norms and values came to our mind and couldn't be answered yet. This is also due to the fact that analyses of communication during disasters are rare – and thankfully also real disasters are rare, too.

Professionals are prepared for such situations; a respectful interaction with patients is part of their education and their day-to-day work. E.g. medical professionals are trained for disasters and a friendly response towards injured people. Such response as the sentence "Hello, I'm an emergency responder, may I help you?" are supposed to build

trust at first sight. But what they know theoretically and in how they actually behave in disasters is also a question of our project: How well trained are their communication skills and are ethical principles for communication put into practice? However, in contrast the public is unaware of what to expect in a catastrophic situation.

Analysis

Based on first empirical input through discussions with experts and participant observations during disaster exercises, we define four groups of communication: (1) Persons concerned or victims, (2) security and rescue teams, (3) politics and administration and (4) the media. These groups of communication are characterized by specific objectives. As a matter of course, intra-organizational concerns take effect in decision-making and communication strategies. Therefore, they've got different preconditions for interaction and communication in their connecting links. Hereby problems of communication ethics can be distinguished in their particular configuration and priority.

So, our objects of investigation are clearly defined scopes of duties: Medical professionals, journalists, policemen, psychologists, etcetera. In all organizational contexts you find a job description with explicit rights and duties. The *role*, norms, expectations and general conditions for behavior are framed. So, looking at the subject from the perspective of role theory – assuming that a person acting in society is confronted with and fulfills context-specific and social roles – is a possibility to describe interactions in specialized societies.

Within an analysis of the behavior of people through their role one should include both, the self-image and the way others perceive the role: As mentioned, the public has high expectations towards e.g. policemen, firefighters or medical professionals. They are certainly aware of that, but that doesn't mean that the self-image or internal expectations concurs with those prospects.

It becomes apparent that ethical, intra- and interpersonal conflicts can occur from fulfilling several roles with contradictory expectations simultaneously; social, cultural, gender, situation-specific roles: It is expected that during a crisis professionals stay calm, have the situation under control, act fast and solution-oriented. So, displaying power by verbal and nonverbal (clothing, conduct, gesture etc.) communication is also of importance. When such authoritarian roles encounter, inter-personal or inter-organizational rivalries can easily cause ethical conflicts. According to Ralph Dahren-

dorf (1969), this is basically due to social sanctions or rewards. So, for our future analysis of communication ethics in the context of communication for security, we want to analyze adequate behavior and communication in crisis and disasters with concepts such as 'appropriate to a situation or not' or 'compatible with requests or not'.

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