

EENA Document

Navigating chaotic times, making the most of Total Connectivity

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1 Executive Summary

The chaotic universes that we know will increasingly urge leaders to lead ever more complex steering, far exceeding the simple implementation of known principles and tools of "crisis management". In particular, they must intervene in dynamics of generalized connectivity that disrupt the rules of information and communication. New visions, new practices, new preparations are crucial to prevent our mega-crises from turning into high-intensity routs.

2 Crisis Management in Uncharted Territory

2.1 The answers we knew

Under the blows of major catastrophes - Bhopal (1984) and Chernobyl (1986) in particular - the years 1980-90 saw the growing development of "Crisis management" to the basic requirements now well established.

Organisation

Initially, the emphasis was on strengthening internal organizations: a rapid feedback circuit; a platform capable of receiving alerts and initiating an organizational response in support of the first responders; a crisis unit. This required serious cultural preparation, planning, training and exercise.

Coordination

Very quickly, the complexity of the systems and what it induces in terms of domino effects, called for complementary consolidations in terms of *coordination*, not only internal but external. The challenge: move to a clearly broadened vision, in which the success of the system, and not just its restricted domain, is seen as essential.

Communication

Finally, in a third phase, a dimension hitherto minor, if not absent, imposed itself: communication. Until then, the leaders were mainly focused on the excellence of their action. It took a real revolution of minds to understand and even more to admit that in our complex societies, sharing information became a cardinal requirement. Accelerated training has been carried out to prepare managers and leaders to meet these new requirements.

Perseverance and vigilance

These references are now known, if not always implemented. The turnover of staff, the risk of losing essential reflexes, involve above all a constant work of training, exercise, feedback. But all this, certainly necessary, is today deeply shaken.

2.2 A Whole New Ball Game

The "crisis" has in fact exceeded the territory of reference which has based our conceptions and our predefined answers, because the whole context of crises is now in a violent mutation, forcing new visions, strategies and practices. Even more so than those working in the field, top level decision-makers on the front lines.

Crises were conceived in the 1980s and 1990s as spill-overs caused by particular accidents, intervening in a strong universe of robust societal bases, of references shared by most, structured networks in terms of responsibility and leadership. In terms of information, the authorities were asked to give the citizen factual information provided by expert officials, whom virtually monopolized such information.

The world of the 21st century projects us into radically different worlds of crisis. On all fronts, anchors and references explode, be it climate, economic and financial risk, geopolitical confrontations, social ties, technologies, or even more radically still from the relation to death, when the sacrificial becomes "value" of reference... In such a scenario, any specific shake tends to generate global dislocations; and global instabilities generate multiplied systemic crises.



As a result, the crisis-manager is confronted with a fluid, chaotic, unstable material. They were in the habit of seeking speedily the answers which were necessary; now they are forced to ask themselves what *questions* shall be asked. They had reference charts for the risks, the actors, the processes to follow; now they are in an uncharted territory in all fronts, facing the need to set new landmarks, to open new paths. This is at odds with our classical cultures of emergency and crisis management, which disrupts many actors: they were strong with their answers, protocols and toolkits; they are forced to focus on questioning, no longer treating uncertainty, but indeed treating ignorance. The role of leadership has to be reinvented for these granular and explosive contexts.

In this brutal mutation, the question of social networks is certainly one of the most urgent today: technologies, societal aspirations and the fundamental dynamics of our complex societies have profoundly changed all our conceptions of information. It is no longer a question of trying to say what is known, but of embracing a broad dynamic of connectivity, in which all roles and obligations are in deep redefinition, and where there is no longer a simple expertise held by the authority. Confronted with the unknown, the leader is summoned to a scene of communication just as unprecedented.

3 Crisis Management and Social Media

3.1 The massive eruption of social networks

In these chaotic times, the arrival of social networks has only made exponential the problems developed. The internal organization was taken by surprise. Who was going to manage this new unexplored continent? At first, no one. We must always knock walls down in order to introduce new fields in the operational forecasting of crises. There was no lack of alerts from isolated people creating the SMEM² domain. The importance of social networks in crisis situations creates multiple questions and new problems, as crises impact people in a manner without temporal or geographical boundaries.

Moreover, while organizations need clear and verified information to communicate about the crisis, social networks and 24-hour news channels comment on minute-by-minute events.

Since each individual has become a potential source of information easily identified by journalists, the monopoly of information is no longer in the hands of organizations - there is no monopoly or even centrality in the broadcasting of information and even expertise. How do you manage the never-ending flow of information? Should we abandon this new field to remain in the one we know? The first reflex is to ignore the challenge.

3.2 Organizations in Great Difficulty

Faced with these questions, no response was prepared in advance. And so, it was the shock. No information, failed to fight against rumours, no collaboration with citizens: the initial setback was bitter.

At the moment the situation is less catastrophic, but social networks have struck crisis management as much as major crises. No crisis plan had foreseen the use of social networks. Moreover, the cultural shock has been huge: the hierarchical and compartmentalised organization, attached to validation processes, which are all the more burdensome in the face of urgency and seriousness, always resistant to taking the initiative not fully validated by the accumulated experience, often paralyzed by the horizontality and effervescent spontaneity of social networks. The discrepancy could only be very detrimental to the credibility, capacity and even legitimacy of traditional organizations.

In a world where the crisis is experienced second-by-second in real-time thanks to continuous social networks and information channels, we no longer only narrate the crisis through communication: we also see it through the communications that are made.

In this context, 24-hour news channels have long been the big winners, even becoming structuring, even paralyzing, in official decision-making processes.

² SMEM = Social Media in Emergency Management



In a climate of information famine established by authorities, they have set up a privileged relationship with the citizens according to a horizontal and symmetrical model: you give me information and I give you information. This situation has gradually created a citizen system on social networks which no longer communicates first with authorities, but with the media.

The analysis of the attacks in Nice (National Day 2014) revealed a particularly striking point: almost no tweet issued towards the authorities, all to LCI or BFM TV. Stigma of a year of attacks where the authorities did not communicate enough, sclerotic by the hierarchical model. Even a tweet announcing that something was actually happening seemed impossible to take into account.

Similarly, all official information from the authorities was transmitted first through the media rather than on their own behalf.

3.3 Significant advances

Fortunately, the French authorities have since reacted and decided to communicate first on the elements they had in their possession. It took 4 attacks and almost 2 years for this communication mutation. The case offers the authorities of other countries an important feedback: **there is an urgency to communicate more on social networks in order to be a central actor of the information.**

And thus re-anchor confidence: "if I want information, they will certainly be transmitted by the authorities". The heart of this dynamic of trust in social networking is, as always, a question of **relationship**. It is this relationship that is most important in a crisis situation. The case of the Belgian Crisis Center, followed by fewer than 176 000 users, is particularly convincing and triggered a worldwide wave of tweets filled with cats during the terrorist crisis "Brussels Lockdown" (November 2015) - media and citizens have made powerful positive and creative relays of the demands for discretion issued by the authorities.

In addition, crisis communication judges, who are in a large part also judging the steering of this crisis, are also increasingly far from "Ground Zero". In an emotional climate where national criticism is not easy, the international press increasingly provided a newsletter of crisis communication. During the Berlin attacks, the authorities reported that two shooters were at large, armed heavily, in the city, when this was not the case. This error, which could have created enormous anxieties and difficulties, was not retained in the assessments. The communication was praised. And for good reason, while the French authorities were communicating very little and very rarely in English in a similar situation, the Berlin authorities were tweeting massively and were still translating their message allowing foreigners to remain informed, and journalists away from scene to cover the event.

3.4 Emergencies

Crisis jurisprudence tells us that the organization will need to be acculturated by the new situation. The challenges will be:

- **Recruit profiles able to cope with the organizational challenges** presented by social networks. It will be necessary to privilege hybrid profiles, quick to take control of information, endowed with empathy, capacity of communication, while knowing perfectly the procedures and the crisis management. The icing on the cake being a bit of programming in addition to being able to manage the data. Therefore, there are three types of training (Communication, Public Safety / Civil Security / National Security and Data Science).
- **De-hierarchize decision-making.** The law is known: Information = Power. This shared basic knowledge means that information does not circulate fast enough, and especially that the validation of communications must go through too many locks.
- Corollary to the previous assertion, we must **put an end to the culture of organizational fear.** Failure is a given of crisis management. It is part of the hazards and must not give rise to paralyzing rules. Paralyzing fear prevents all personal and collective creativity - when, precisely, the uncertainty and even more the unknown structure the situation.

To reinforce the new imperative culture, a new type of coordination is also needed. This goes through other types of processes where the chain of coordination is no longer only vertical, but still more broadly horizontal. **In horizontal coordination, errors are shared, power is collective and information is disseminated among the teams.** The important thing is no longer the top-down layered information, silos by silos, but connectivity that opens-up new dynamics of information sharing and production. This does not annihilate



hierarchical responsibility, but rather places it in a much more open and dynamic world - where leadership must know how to navigate with intelligence.

In addition, the collaboration system with the VOST³ must be better adapted to this coordination. The VOST, groups of volunteers working on information retrieval and emergency message communication, had the strength to fill in serious organizational shortcomings. They are and will be interesting links in emergencies. However, they remain and will remain external volunteers and the organization cannot rely 100% on external elements whose participation and competence can fluctuate at one time or another. Nor is it a reason not to take advantage of this strong force whose true strength is to be composed of civilian volunteers, and often professionals specializing in emergencies.

The social networks therefore offer only a nth halo of the problematic of the organizational culture of authorities: lack of agility, lack of culture of the unexpected, lack of coordination and lack of communication. The problems they raise are therefore exactly the same as in the emergence of major crises. Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed.

4 Conclusion

It is now necessary for organizations to transform themselves if they are to be able to meet the two types of challenge identified in this contribution: the mutation of crises, which are no longer based on the mapped risks with responses already available, but on the unknown, strategic questioning, and collective inventiveness in the paths to be implemented; and the mutation of the information universe, now marked by an abundance of great intensity, which can no longer return to the traditional channels monopolized by the authorities.

5 EENA Recommendations⁴

Concept	Description	Who
Mindset	State the decisive importance of out-of-the box surprises, and carry on specific mind-opening sessions on unconventional challenges and surprises	Strategic Leaders
Expertise	Decision making support: set up a specific unit dedicated to unconventional surprises trained to prepare analysis and options in the unknown	
Training	Be prepared to deal with essential surprises, and set up trainings for Ministries' and Emergency Services' crisis communication staff to be prepared on how to react when they face unconventional crises, and make sure trainings are adapted to today's context: be trained to quickly react to the unknown = no automatic reaction	Strategic Leaders Public Authorities Emergency Services
Procedures	Define a clear single procedure (who, which channel, clear message, escalation paths, mandate, etc) and checklists	Public Authorities
Means to reach the population	Make a set of tools available for Ministries' and Emergency Services' crisis communication staff that they can use in a crisis (e.g. localised SMS/cell-broadcast, app, VOST, radio/TV partnerships, other local partners ...); Have a defined strategy on how to use the crisis communication toolkit (e.g. very short chain of command, use third-parties - social media, press - to relay verified information); Adapt to new ways of communications and different types of citizens; Have pre-defined messages that authorities could directly use, and consider multilingualism.	Public Authorities Emergency Services
Social Media	Be present on social media (Twitter/Facebook) before any crisis occurs; Build a community that will relay verified information during crises; Define which public authority/emergency service should take the lead in case of a crisis, depending on the type of crisis; Set-up Virtual Operations Support Teams / Partner with existing ones.	

³ Virtual Operation Support Teams

⁴ Source: [EENA Members Workshop 2017](#) – "Public Warning & Crisis Communication Preparedness" session
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