

Deciding will be decisive

Procedures and manuals will always play an indispensable role in orchestrating an effective response, but they might have reached their limitations, because today's crisis communication stands on the edge of tomorrow, says **Patrick Meschenmoser**



News of the Titanic's sinking made the front pages in Europe the next day – the most rapid live coverage possible in 1912

Alamy

New media and mobile communication have been a game changer, just like the telegraph, wireless radio and television before them. They have all forced communicators to adapt. When the 'unsinkable' *Titanic* sank, wireless despatches ensured that the news made the front pages in Europe the next day. This kind of rapid coverage was as live as it could get in 1912. From now on, organisations had to be faster and more accurate in getting information out to the media if they wanted to avoid false reports from spreading rapidly around the world.

Increasing speed was not the only factor to change how the media covered crises over time. The *Hindenburg* catastrophe of 1937 is still so vividly present in the world's memory today, not only because it marked the downfall of one of the most iconic transportation means in history. If it hadn't been for a film that showed the very moment the airship burst into flames, dubbed with Herbert Morrison's emotional radio broadcast, that memory would have probably faded over the years.

Some decades later, the advent of live television coverage combining speed and moving pictures, pushed crisis communication to another level. Communicators had to be prepared to step in front of the camera at any time. Media training and manuals professionalised crisis communication, but still remained an exclusive dialogue between journalists and communicators.

With the advent of social media, crisis manuals were updated to ensure that everyone stuck to the old one-voice policy, only to realise over time that this was becoming impossible to apply. Social media users demanded direct, unfiltered dialogue, skipping traditional media as a mediator. Again, manuals and procedures were overhauled, introducing new roles, such as online communicators and social media editors to follow the new 'one message, many voices' principle.

The Golden Hour – the time following the onset of a crisis – had been considered the benchmark for timely communication with the public for years. But when Captain Chesley 'Sully' Sullenberger landed his Airbus in New York's Hudson River and an eyewitness tweeted the first picture of this masterpiece of airmanship only moments after the impact, this benchmark imploded to a few golden minutes at best. It is ironic that this Twitter image ended up on the front pages of so many newspapers the next day. Whereas the news cycle of the print media had not changed dramatically since

the days of the *Titanic*, Google listed hundreds of hits on the story within an hour of the incident.

The standard operating procedure when adapting to technical progress always focused on improving equipment and infrastructure to complement procedures and to train staff in applying them.

But while communicators still struggle to adapt to the brave new media world of today, the next disruptive technologies have already appeared on the horizon and it might be time to rethink our approach towards crisis communication preparedness.

Mobile communication has become an integral part of our daily life. The new normal is a passenger in an airliner with a massive hole in its fuselage grabbing his credit card to buy a Wi-Fi token so he can share the drama live on Facebook, as occurred in the case of the Southwest 1380 incident in April 2018.

Rice-sized microchips

The next step might be to make mobile communication an integral part of our bodies. Thousands of Swedes are already carrying rice-sized microchips – which can hold credit card information or medical records – beneath the skin of their hands. Relying on Radio Frequency ID (RFID) technology, these chips can be used for electronic tickets or as a wallet. It is easy to imagine that the same people would also be interested in having a smartphone implanted in their ear. Contact lenses can already measure blood sugar and one day technological evolution will turn them into mobile cameras and displays, projecting augmented reality information. We will be able to live stream what we see, when we see it.

The challenges of tomorrow will not only arise from how we exchange information, but in whether we can trust this information.

Fake news has been around since mankind harnessed the concept of propaganda, but has reached new heights of quality and can be spread globally in an instant. Doctored pictures and false flag campaigns can be used to create rage and provoke violence. And while some organisations are still wondering if and how they should engage on social media, a new generation of software already allows for a very sophisticated, real-time manipulation of video footage to produce so called deepfakes.

Comedian Jordan Peele demonstrated the perfection and deception of deepfakes in 2018. Manipulating a video of an address by former US president Barak Obama, Peele made him appear to say some unflattering

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things about his successor. By overlaying the president's mouth movements with the comedian's, the illusion of Obama lashing out against Donald Trump was perfect.

When you can make a president or an eyewitness say anything, anytime, this becomes a dangerously effective tool to amplify fear and panic, or just to reinforce an agenda. When we can no longer trust our eyes, it is impossible to anticipate potential scenarios. Purely amending crisis communication manuals will not do the job anymore.

Manuals work because the response can, and has to be, standardised to a certain extent. Of course, there is no such thing as a textbook crisis and each situation will require improvisation. But a certain level of standardisation is necessary to match objectives with capabilities and structures, in order to result in action. Everyone who has ever worked in a command and control structure knows this.

However, the complex communication world of tomorrow will present communicators with so many potential challenges, that this standardisation will reach its limits. They will increasingly face situations

When Captain Sullenberger landed his Airbus in New York's Hudson River, the concept of the golden hour imploded, as iconic images were tweeted within minutes of the incident. Ironically, many newspapers used the Twitter image on their front pages the following day, showing how social media had come of age

New York Times | Twitter



they have never trained for and for which they don't have a checklist. This growing complexity might force organisations to shift their focus from manual-focused, to decision-making and competency-based preparedness.

Whereas decision-making always had a place in military or tactical training, communicators, especially in the private sector, rarely receive training beyond how to apply procedures or how to answer tricky questions. When it gets harder to predict crisis communication scenarios as a basis of our preparedness, when the window for taking effective actions gets smaller, then we need to enable communicators to improvise and empower them to make certain decisions.

Lives at stake

Of course, they will still need the right technologies and infrastructure to translate their decisions into action. Sophisticated monitoring systems will be required, for instance, to filter important information from the noise and to obtain a reliable picture of the situation. Chatbots could help to relieve hotlines and social media editors, answering frequently asked questions in case of an emergency.

If they are clearly marked as bots and people are given a human contact option as an alternative, they will be accepted and will make sure that those affected by the emergency get their questions answered and receive the necessary information on protective actions or certain areas to avoid in time.

With fake news and deepfakes making it child's play

to spread rumours, a rumour management system will be needed that uses the monitoring data to identify the most dangerous mis- and disinformation. Via social media posts and on a dedicated rumour response website, this false information can be corrected. And of course, manuals and procedures will still be fundamental. As a side effect, a common decision-making model ensures that teams work more effectively together as all decisions are made on the same basis and every team member can relate to the decision made. With this, making a decision can be standardised and it is more likely that different individuals will come to the same decision under the same circumstances.

This is why communicators could – and should – learn a lot from pilots like 'Sully'.

Pilots regularly train for unexpected situations in which they have to make critical decisions in no time; and they have to be really good at it because lives are at stake. To that end, airlines have developed decision-making models that make sure pilots take all available information into account, weigh risks and options, make effective decisions and consequently execute them for the reasons already mentioned. And yet, more than many others, pilots still rely on procedures and regulations.

But it is exactly this mixture of manuals, checklists, training and decision-making competency that makes them so effective and air travel so safe. It might be worthwhile for crisis communicators to have a look and profit from this experience, to be prepared to respond to the new challenges arising on the edge of tomorrow. 

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US comedian Jordan Peele teamed up with BuzzFeed to create a public safety announcement on the Internet Age. Using Adobe After Effects, a readily available piece of video software, and FakeApp, an artificial intelligence program, the manipulated video shows former US President Barack Obama saying, among other things: "We're entering an era in which our enemies can make it look like anyone is saying anything at any point in time – even if they would never say those things." The video was released to warn the public about the rapidly evolving threat posed by digital misinformation, new technologies and the erosion of a shared reality

Buzzfeed | Jordan Peele | YouTube