

Selected aspects of communication between emergency services and the mass media in crisis situations

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Summary:

We live in times where information is the supreme value. The mass media seek sensation and often misinterpret the situation, which usually occurs in the case of limited access to information. Due to their mediagenic nature, crisis situations as well as emergency actions taken to eliminate their consequences are undoubtedly a treat for journalists. Correctly performed rescue operations are essential during events that make people suffer or feel endangered. Nonetheless, appropriate conveying information about performed actions to the media, and then to the society, is a crucial element of rescue operations and influences both perception of emergency services and prevention from spreading speculation and panic in the society.

Key words: media, crisis situation, rescue operation, emergency services, panic.

Introduction

Continuous civilization development and growing population make us live in expanding agglomerations, which results in the fact that the issue of disasters is becoming increasingly important. Phenomena bearing marks of crisis, although varied and reaching different extents, which makes it difficult to define them precisely, have some common features [1-3]. Firstly, in view of the fact that nobody can expect crisis situations at a particular time and in a particular place, the affected population is usually helpless. Secondly, the extent of damage and number of people in need exceed the ability to satisfy all expectations. Another feature of crisis situations is their mediagenic nature [2,3].

For hundreds of years, since humans started to deal with disastrous events, the concept of

catastrophe has evolved. At present, there are numerous definitions of “catastrophe”[4]. The most accurate one, with regard to the way of thinking in any situation that surpasses in extent the abilities of rescuers and bears the features of catastrophe, is a definition approved in the USA by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) [5]. It defines catastrophe as an event causing death, injuries or damage to possessions, to an extent that makes routine emergency actions insufficient. According to this definition, catastrophe occurs suddenly and requires immediate, coordinated actions taken by many individuals and institutions.

Efficient crisis management is not only a medical emergency assistance provided to casualties. One of the basic conditions of effective

actions reducing the consequences of the event is a well-organised communication between emergency services units, including the fire brigade, the police, the medical rescue, etc., as well as between emergency services and the public. Due to technical advancements it is possible to exchange information via the electronic media, however, the basic way of contact between the emergency services, the authorities and the society is undoubtedly public media, including press, radio and television stations (TV and radio are electronic media) [3,6].

Communication with the media in crisis situations may be divided into three stages. The first of them includes actions preceding a crisis situation, and next two stages – actions during and after eliminating such a situation [1,2,6,7].

Actions preceding catastrophes

Communication infrastructure, consolidating all emergency services and the public, is an inherent element of the efficient security system. The above mentioned mass media, i.e. radio, television, press, and nowadays also the Internet, are main channels of conveying information. Lack of proper circulation of information between the emergency services leads to chaos, whereas, disturbed communication with the media results in misinterpretation of the event, which may raise many unfavourable interactions in the public, including panic.

Actions preceding a crisis situation are inherent preparatory stages for various emergency services and crisis panels. Continuous updating of knowledge by people who coordinate actions of emergency and crisis services, results in progressing improvement of professional skills [8,9]. Constant training, exercises and simulations help these services, to a greater or lesser extent, prepare for possible crisis scenarios.

Exercises should not only involve rescue services, but they should also include elements of cooperation with media [7,10]. In the future it will help avoid information chaos. It is important to become acquainted with the rules of the public media. It is also worth establishing and practising the method of appointing persons responsible for contacts with the media (spokespersons), creating healthy relationship with the media and

preparing (adequately to the situation) necessary information for the public. Therefore, establishing procedures for crisis situations seems indispensable.

Media communication and legal provisions

Circulation of information between public services and media is regulated by legal acts, ethical codes and internal regulations. Thereby, such regulations impose duties on the emergency services workers, authorities and journalists. Informing the public about states of danger is defined by, among others, a notation in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1984 [11]. In the face of a crisis situation, people would feel much safer to know that they receive reliable information about current actions and changes that may affect their lives and environment.

Act of 26 January 1984 – Press Law, conferred powers on journalists to obtain information about actions of government agencies, public companies and other organisational units, whereas, heads of such units, spokespersons or other persons authorized to convey information to media are responsible for providing such information [12]. However, according to the above Act, journalists should make every effort to be careful, reliable and honest while collecting and conveying press materials; they should check credibility of all obtained information and publish its sources. According to the Act, the media are obliged to publish (free of charge) statements issued on the basis of acts, announcements, ordinances or resolutions of the central administration authorities and government administration authorities in the province, and, what is important for this paper, they are obliged to publish (free of charge) announcements issued by the government administration authorities or local governments and concerning crisis situations defined in the Act on crisis management of 2007 [13].

Legal provisions concerning reliable conveying information about events and phenomena in the country and abroad, are also included in the Act on the state of natural disaster [14] or in the Act on National Broadcasting Council. Principles of correct collection of and publication of press materials may be found not only in the above acts

but also in ethical codes, including the Polish Code of Ethics for Public Relations Association and the Ethical Code of Journalists.

A great example of internal acts referring to the role of communication between the emergency (rescue) services and the media may be internal regulations of the National Fire Service of 1998, defining press-information activity within the NFS structures, including the actions of spokespersons and cooperation between NFS and journalists during crisis situations. In 2004, the Headquarters of the National Fire Service established principles of proper conduct for the commanding officer during a rescue operation. The above-mentioned guidelines categorically forbid the commanding officer to inform the media in the event place about the reasons, identity data and names of casualties. Guidelines also clearly define the way of taking over informational function by a person appointed to a post of a spokesperson.

Appointment of spokespersons

A deficit of information is commonly associated with crisis situations. From a point of view of the media, a crisis situation is a special opportunity to develop their own image among media market participants while gaining as much information as possible and reporting it to the public [15]. In order to avoid information chaos, it is important to take actions which guarantee that statements issued by all persons authorised to convey information are consistent, relevant and answer the questions instead of ignoring them using a phrase “no comments”. A requirement of consistent communication is one of the most important elements connected with the entire management of communication in crisis situations. Consistency is necessary for information exchange between particular emergency services, organizations and the media. Therefore, it seems important to develop a strategy of communication with both internal (services) and external (media and public opinion) environment.

Misinterpretation of the event is a common action taken by the media, which results from shortage of information or conflicting data presented to the public. Thus, it is essential to appoint a person who will solely inform the

media about progression of rescue actions from the onset of crisis. Such a person should be chosen much earlier and systematically prepared for his/her role, since in order to increase the level of reliability of the released statement, the speaker must show competence, enjoy respect, be reliable and dynamic, and enjoy a positive opinion. Such a person should have several crucial abilities:

- must be resistant to stress and control his/her own emotions;
- must have extensive substantive knowledge about activities of the emergency services and know the services which he/she is talking about;
- must have great interpersonal abilities and make contact easily.

Professional actions of a spokesperson build up trust of the media in emergency services and strengthen positive public opinion about their hard work [16]. Thus, it is so important to obey the rules defining what a spokesperson should or should not do.

Table 1: Principles of spokesperson’s work.

Allowed	Not allowed
Release information only via a press spokesperson responsible for public relations.	Speculate on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • possible causes of the crisis situation; • number of fatalities; • further scenarios of events; • date of termination of the actions.
Create equal opportunities to obtain information by various types of media.	Provide information that can hinder the progress of rescue operations, raise panic or bring about any new threat.
Release only proven information	Issue official statements to incompetent persons
Supervise information outflow by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • own, frequent contacts with the media; • collecting all information in a version reported by the media to the public; • controlling movement of journalists in the endangered area. 	Evaluate rescue operations when they are in progress. Lay the blame for the situation on anyone.
	Misinform the media.

Preparation of information

During a rescue operation, a lot of information asked by the media is unpredictable. However, there is still considerable amount of information that can be prepared earlier and successively released to the public. Such information includes:

- alarm information;
- instructions for behaviour in crisis situations,
- data concerning places and sources of information and help;
- data concerning services involved in the rescue operation;
- appeal to support services in relevant situations.

When preparing rules for cooperation with the media, all forms of communication should be taken into consideration [10,17]. The most popular forms of communication in crisis situations include: press note, statement, information, telephone response, written response, interview, talk, utterance and press conference.

Actions during a crisis situation

Communication with the media during rescue operations mainly includes: appointment of a 24-h duty spokesperson, collection of information from various services, preparation and conveying information to journalists, information management for the regional and national media, checking and correction of information that was released to the media, organisation of press conferences, responding and release of statements on the current situation, and coordination of journalists work in the area involved in rescue operations.

It is important to establish an information centre near the place of rescue actions [3,4,9]. Persons responsible for contact with the media should all the time monitor the situation and respond immediately to the needs reported by the media, if it is possible and not against the rescue operation.

Another important element regarding participation of the media in a crisis situation is to separate and adapt for journalists the area around the event site. This area is separated according to two important principles. The first of them is

the superiority of rescue operations interest. This principle forbids the media to enter places, where it could pose a risk to the rescue action or to the media. The second principle, used while separating areas for the media during catastrophe, is the best possible availability of the media. The media should have possibly the best, acceptable “viewpoint” for observation of the rescue actions, to assure that when looking for a good place for taking pictures the media will not hinder actions taken by emergency services.

Persons responsible for contacts with the media are obliged to separate such areas, in agreement with persons in charge of the rescue operation.

Actions after eliminating a crisis situation

After termination of the rescue actions, persons responsible for contacts with the media are obliged to inform the local community about the current situation and taken precautions, and to inform the entire country about a situation in the particular region.

Unfortunately, it is often seen that the end of the rescue operation is the end of all actions aimed to eliminate a crisis situation. However, it should be an introduction to preparations connected with future actions. Conclusions should be drawn from all experiences, regardless of whether they were positive or negative; all actions should also be thoroughly analysed. Efforts put into analysing the particular action should help revise arrangements and prepare for future events.

Summary

When analysing this paper, it may be hypothesized that the public authorities, emergency services and mass media are all responsible for reliable conveying the current information in crisis situations.

However, cooperation with the media is not easy. Journalists are characterised by natural scepticism. They are more interested in criticising the services and government authorities responsible for controlling the crisis situation than in defending or justifying such services and authorities. Probability of negative comments given by the media during a crisis situation is almost 100%.

Although several acts, including the Act on the state of natural disaster and crisis management, imposed on the media an obligation to report any threat (in agreement with the local authorities), we should remember about the role of the way how information reaches editorial offices. Thus, it is important to work out methods of

presentation to the media a problem of catastrophe or emergency.

Taking the above-mentioned actions increases the chances for peaceable, and at the same time, effective participation of journalists in a crisis situation.

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