17. medzinárodná vedecká konferencia
Riešenie krízových situácií v špecifickom prostredí,
Fakulta špeciálneho inžinierstva ŽU, Žilina, 30. - 31. máj 2012

IMPORTANCE OF GOOD COMMUNICATION AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SUCCESSFUL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Živković Snežana[1]), Živković Nenad[2])

ABSTRACT

Situations that may arise from the effects of natural disasters or disasters caused by human negligence are a major challenge to public service. In order to create conditions for an adequate response to the occurrence of emergency, a necessary prerequisite is the existence of an adequate system of communication, its safety and training of intervention participants in using communication tools. Emergency management has its own direct and indirect effects. Direct effects are seen in practicing public relations during the crisis period, while indirect effects of crisis management are manifested in the aftermath of the crisis itself. In case of emergencies, the media have a special responsibility to broadcast warnings, information and advice given by public authorities, as well as to participate in promoting values of social responsibility significant for providing assistance to vulnerable groups in eliminating consequences of emergency.

Key words:
communication, emergency, information management, emergency management, media

РЕЗЮМЕ

Ситуации, вызванные ненастьем или несчастьем, просишедшим вследствие человеческой ошибки представляют огромный вызов для публичных предприятий. В целях создания условий соответствующего реагирования в случае возникновения чрезвычайных ситуаций нужны соответствующая система коммуникации, отличающаяся точностью и обучение участников интервенции правильно использовать средства коммуникации. Управление чрезвычайными ситуациями имеет непосредственные и посредственные эффекты. Непосредственные эффекты наблюдаются в отношениях с общественностью и в период кризиса. Посредственные эффекты управления кризисом наблюдаются по окончании кризиса.

---

[1] Živković Snežana, Ph.D., assocciate professor, University of Niš, Faculty of occupational safety in Niš, 10a Čarnojevića st., snezana.zivkovic@znrfak.ni.ac.rs, tel +381 18 529701; fax +381 18 249 968
[2] Živković Nenad, Ph.D., professor, University of Niš, Faculty of occupational safety in Niš, 10a Čarnojevića st., nenad.zivkovic@znrfak.ni.ac.rs, tel +381 18 529752; fax +381 18 249 962

Средства массовой информации несут особую ответственность, потому что в случае возникновения чрезвычайной ситуации должны передавать предупреждения, информации и советы государственных органов, а также участвовать в продвижении ценностей социальной ответствености, имеющей значение для оказания первой помощи и устранения последствий чрезвычайных ситуаций.

Ключевые слова:
коммуникация, чрезвычайная ситуация, управление информациями, управление чрезвычайными ситуациями, средства массовой информации

1   INTRODUCTION

Communication is the process of exchanging information over an agreed system of signs. Communication is used for sending information to one's own self or any other entity, typically through language. Communication is commonly defined by three main dimensions: content, form and goal. Communication content and form together create messages that are sent toward a goal that may be the person itself, some other person (in case of interpersonal communication), or other entity (a group or a company).

Our usual communicative discourse, despite numerous variations in the definition, typically refers to communication as the principle of exchange or transfer - someone says something to someone else and transmits the information to him, while in exchanging thoughts one person sends and the other one receives. (Labudović, 2007)

Successful communication involves a process in which it is important first to identify: who sends a message, what is its meaning and content and perhaps, most importantly, whether it is received and whether feedback has confirmed how the message was understood. If any answer to these questions is negative, the process of communication is probably ineffective in itself. In order to eliminate errors and slips in communication process, it is necessary to apply the following principles of efficient and effective communication:

1. Develop and establish a sense for the most effective and acceptable model or way of communication;
2. Try to look at things and circumstances the way the people you communicate with see it;
3. Choose the best method of communication;
4. In the case of direct conversation, pay attention to nonverbal communication and body language;
5. Ask precise and open questions;
6. Develop and encourage dialogue, discussion and interactive communication;
7. Be consistent and do not give confusing, contradictory and incomplete information, or messages;
8. Be transparent and open in communication.

2   EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION

Communication in cases of emergency is an interactive process, and can be defined as an exchange of information and opinions before, during and after the outbreak of crisis. The term "emergency" implies a specific, unexpected and unusual event that creates a high degree of uncertainty, and a threat to people and property (Živković, 2009).

Any management process is inconceivable without the existence of communication. Emergency management implies the existence of IT and communication system that perform their function in order to enable creating and implementing action plan for dealing with states of emergency by processing collected information (Pavić, 2007). Properly installed and implemented action plan is the basis for decision making in cases of emergency.

Emergency communication can be seen in two areas: Rules and order of communication between participants in an emergency; IT and communication technology on which the communication is based.

Emergency communication includes individuals, associations and organizations. Messages during this communication are often multiple in order to eliminate the impact of crisis and reduce it to a minimum. During emergencies, communication between the parties shall be governed by certain rules and according to a specific order, which implies that the crisis center should communicate with emergency services, alarm system, mass media, representatives of local authorities and authorized government representatives. Depending on the size of emergency, communication can take place at several levels, local, regional, national or international level.

The kind of IT communication system used between the participants in an emergency depends on the nature and phase of the emergency itself. Thus, private and public radio and television stations will be used in case of issuing warnings and alerts or rescue actions, landline and mobile telephone equipment and radio communication apparatus during search or coordination, satellite systems during prediction and exposure, etc.

Successful emergency response requires a plan prepared ahead that consists of two equally important elements: a plan for resolving the crisis and a plan for communication in a crisis situation. Crisis, as an unexpected event, can occur sooner or later, in one form or another. It is almost impossible to predict reliably the form in which crisis will be manifested. Common sense dictates that it is smarter to prepare a plan for reacting to crisis on time than to ask for help in panic. Logical question that follows is: how to prepare if we do not know what for; however, there is a simple answer to it: we should know the issue better so that we could be prepared.

The purpose of communication is flow of information and understanding people who communicate (Живковић, 2011). A common reason for ineffective communication is the lack of clear communication goals. Clear goals are a prerequisite for creation of key messages. The goal, as well as messages of support to it are a part of communication in cases of emergency and must be established before giving any declarations. Crisis messages can be written, audio or visual (symbolic), but they must be clear and unequivocal; it must include specific information about a threat, but not suggestions about recommended behavior. Behaving according to the model "it will not affect me", prevents planned preparation for taking action and messages in case of crisis.

In the absence of genuine information, people create their own picture of the situation, which may be wrong and thus, have unfavorable influence on the development of public opinion in the wrong direction. Each group requires and expects communication in the most acceptable way for them: someone needs to be addressed through electronic media; someone must be sent a fax or a phone call, while a large percentage of people only believe in information issued in printed form. This only confirms the necessity of selecting an appropriate communication channel taking into account that the address is made in an appropriate manner. It must be noted that there is still a misconception that crisis communication can rather disturb than calm target population. This error should be fought against, and people should be educated and informed, and not just warned.

Emergency communication is a two-way communication, so people should be given the opportunity to ask questions that concern them, to share their fears. The voice of the public should be truly and not only declaratively heard and the public should be addressed in genuine, personalized and simple language, with respect and attention we ourselves expect in communication.

After completion of emergency and ending the communication process in crisis, the analysis of implemented procedures is conducted. For instance, monitoring of media reports and their analysis are not conducted only during emergency communication in crisis for the purpose of immediate correction of procedures. Moreover, since people learn from their mistakes, communication in crisis situations is analyzed a posteriori, in order to achieve better communication in the future.

As stated above, successful resolution of crisis demands for a general plan elaborated in advance which consists of two equally important elements - the plan for resolving crisis and the plan for communication in crisis. Viewed from the perspective of efficiency, the first plan is more significant since urgent crisis resolution in its emergence or immediately prior to its occurrence (if there is an awareness of potential hazards) completely annul potential negative consequences on a larger scale, due to the fact that there are no external signs of crisis in that case and there is no media reaction to the crisis, so there is no emergency that would require emergency communication. However, if the first plan gives no results, well prepared emergency communication creates the opportunity for minimizing damage and consequences that may occur.

For successful communication during emergency, the most important thing is to control the event. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to fulfill three basic prerequisites: to have full information about the event, to be prepared in advance and to communicate proactively. The most important elements that a plan for emergency communication should contain are:

1. Crisis Committee (the first step to successful resolution of crisis is establishment of a crisis center that will collect all relevant information about the crisis and make key decisions after joint consultation of all members);
2. Internal communication in cases of emergency (in order to control the crisis, it is necessary to have information as much as possible about what exactly happened, when it happened and who participated in the event);
3. Appointing and training of PR persons or persons in charge of public relations (the choice of a person for this job is very important, because choosing a quality communicator provides a plausible interpretation of messages. The quality of interpre-

tation is achieved by practice, so simulation of planned crisis scenarios can be significant);

4. Preparation of crisis scenarios and simulations (positive practice examples show that designed possible scenarios of crisis in "peacetime" period, which were simulated and trained, gave better results during emergency communication due to the logic that it is much easier and faster to adapt to something familiar than to new and unfamiliar situations);

5. Determining the most effective methods of communication (depending on the type of emergency, target groups who will be informed at the moment must be determined as well as a form of communication that will be used);

6. Three basic questions to answer during communication (there is a need to explain what happened, what is being done on this issue and what remains to be done);

7. Analysis (by following media statements and their analysis it is possible to correct information, and draw lessons for the future after the crisis).

3   THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA IN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

The appropriate role of media is very important and indispensable element in cases of emergency and crisis, and without media these situations can not be controlled (Živković, 2011). If there is no public information about what exactly happened, then it creates fear, and then panic that causes emergence of rumors. Therefore, it is very important for the public to be correctly informed and thus understand circumstances and conditions that follow a potential emergency situation. That way the public is provided with the evidence of control over the event. The quickest and the most efficient way to inform the public about circumstances and details about an event is through the media.

Emergency management cannot be imagined without media. Information about critical events can be spread through several types of media, but one of the most important channels of communication for emergency information are modern mass media. Despite a certain amount of doubt about their ability to play an impartial role of the communicator, the media carry a significant part of information to the general public about the circumstances and dangers during emergency.

From the point of view of crisis management, emergencies often involve four phases of activity: decrease (alleviation), preparedness, response and recovery (Burkhart, 1991). While the media may play a role in all four phases, their role is the least important in alleviating disasters and the most important in the response phase. During preparedness phase, television and radio have a major role in issuing warnings, weather information, evacuation instructions and broadcasting official announcements. If the incident is starting slowly, the newspapers can also help in transferring information on preparedness. During the response phase, the media are becoming one of the most important sources of information on the crisis at local and national level. In addition to spreading information about emergency, the media can continue its role of spreading information seeking official data about what happened, how people can best respond to specific cases and also to provide advice and assistance to victims. TV crews can report from the actual scene to document efforts in providing assistance and

document damage caused to property and the number of persons in need of assistance. At this stage, radio and printed media can also help by publishing official instructions and other important information. In the recovery phase, the media can often document what the impact of disaster was and what actions were taken in providing assistance. In order to continue providing information and advice to victims and the whole public throughout the crisis, the media can use editorials and analytical columns, or some special purpose issues to make estimates on seriousness of emergency and efficiency of emergency services during interventions in assisting victims.

Modern electronic media have the ability to provide a large amount of information during an emergency. Radio and television can inform the public or communicate directly with victims and vulnerable persons, can provide information about what is happening and give advice on what to do in the situation. Printed media have certain disadvantages that are primarily related to their inefficiency for each communication goal. However, improvement of printed media, better promotion of their own unique values, i.e. things which print media are indispensable for, including modernization and improvement of content quality and synergy of print and online (printed and electronic editions), printed media emphasize their own advantages - availability, plenty of details in describing the event, possibility of re-reading and lending it to another person to read etc. According to statistics, most people believe what they hear on television and read in the newspapers.

We conclude that regardless of the form and type of media, the media play a key role in determining public response in cases of emergency. The media have enormous social responsibility to inform the public about crisis in a proper way, to promote good practices, to warn of defects, and to alert when there is a need for one. Finally, the media themselves need to strengthen their sense of responsibility, consistently work on reducing media partiality and increase the quality of information in order to minimize bad influence on emergency management.

4   CONCLUSION

Communication is the basis for emergency management. It is important to use procedure in order to define who, when and what information can be disclosed since uncontrolled release of information to the public could be the cause of panic, confusion, distrust, fear and so on. Incorrect information at the wrong time can have damaging long-term consequences, and proper information management can produce beneficial effects, even in negative situations.

In case of emergencies, the media have a special responsibility to inform the public in a proper way and to broadcast warnings, information and advice given by public authorities, as well as to participate in promoting values of social responsibility important for providing assistance to vulnerable groups in eliminating the consequences of emergency. It is important to provide the media with a clear message and broadcast it efficiently in order to make them more efficient in implementing heir role.

It is very important to leave an impression of the existence of control over the incident through communication. Establishing control is crucial for mitigating consequences and avoiding panic, where prompt and correct communication has a decisive role. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that there is a way and a possi-

bility to predict some emergencies and thus prevent possible adverse effects and events.

REFERENCES

[1] LABUDOVIĆ, B.: Pojam komunikacije u opštoj teoriji društvenih sistema Niklasa Lumana. Novi Sad: Protocol; Beograd: Fakultet političkih nauka, CM časopis za upravljanje komuniciranjem, 2007. God. 1, br. 1, str. 32-33.
[2] ŽIVKOVIĆ, S.: Upravljanje vanrednim situacijama - procedura za vanredne situacije, IV konferencija Dani primenjene psihologije, Niš, Tematski zbornik radova Ličnost, profesionalno usmerenje i radni kontekst, 2009, str. 132-142.
[3] PAVIĆ, M.: Informacijsko komunikacijski sustavi u kriznim situacijama. Zagreb: Državna uprava za zaštitu i spašavanje, 2007.
[4] ЖИВКОВИЋ, С.: Организација заштите од пожара. Ниш: Универзитет у Нишу, Факултет заштите на раду, 2011.
[5] ŽIVKOVIĆ, S.: Komunikacija u vanrednim situacijama, VII Konferencija Dani primenjene psihologije u Nišu, Knjiga rezimea, Niš, 2011, str. 10.
[6] BURKHART, F. N.: Media, Emergency Warnings, and Citizen Response. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1991.

Článok recenzoval:
Ing. Mária Hudáková PhD.