Crisis Communication between the Authorities and the Media in the Event of Extraordinary Societal Situations

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Abstract

With the help of a study of the literature, I will argue for the need for research regarding crisis communication between the authorities and the media in the event of extraordinary societal situations. Such research is of importance (both practical and theoretical), because this type of crisis communication can affect the authorities rescue work, the journalists’ news reporting and the development of a societal extraordinary event into a crisis situation. The study is part of a forthcoming doctoral thesis which examines the interplay, the crisis communication, between the Swedish authorities and the media in connection with the Estonia catastrophe of 1994.

Since the beginning of crisis communication research, which, according to several scientists, was in connection with the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in the United States in 1979, two separate paths seem to have developed. One has studied crisis communication in the area of Public Relations within commercial enterprises, whilst the other has focused on crisis communication between different societal actors in connection with serious accidents, catastrophes and severe societal disturbances (i.e. studies within different disciplines).

But despite the substantial expansion of crisis communication research, beginning in the middle of the 1990’s, this vast field of research has not embraced crisis communication between authorities and the media. The expansive research, with focus on commercial businesses, certainly mentions the media but does not really show any more interest for the media than for other stakeholders. According to quite recent research, the original intention was indeed not to embrace the authorities’ crisis communication within this field. The aim was rather to focus upon corporate entities.

By the year 1980, American researchers had already noted that studies concerning crisis communication between authorities and the media were noticeable by their absence. Around 2010, Swedish scientists remarked upon the fact that relations between crisis managers and the media are still accorded low priority among international researchers.
Earlier research into crisis communication between authorities and the media (societal crisis communication) has mainly been from the perspective of the authorities. This means there is also a need to study crisis communication from a media perspective. Earlier research has also been characterized by the term “fast studies” (at least from a Swedish perspective). The need for basic research and the development of theory may well be a result of this fact. As an introduction: here is a presentation of three areas of research in close proximity to each other, mainly because of wide uncertainties about what the different areas represent.

1 Disaster research, risk research and crisis communication research

While the societal crisis communication research field is partly a development of the fields of disaster- and risk research (and there are uncertainties about the concepts), this literature review begins with a brief presentation of the research connected to disasters and risks. Next to be presented will be the research into crisis communication connected to organizations and the society.

1.1 Disaster- and risk research – parallel and early fields

Historically it was mostly disasters, natural in the main, which first interested the scientists. Events were described and peoples’ behaviour was studied. At the time, the importance of radio and the process of warning were both in focus. According to Rodriguez, Quarantelli & Dynes (2007) the Disaster Research began in the 1920’s with a systematic social- and behavioural scientific study in sociology, which described the social consequences of an explosion in the harbour of Halifax in Canada, when two thousand people lost their lives. Real expansion however occurred in the beginning of the 1950’s. A large part of earlier but also present-day disaster research can be traced to ”the Disaster Research Center (DRC)”, founded in 1963 at Ohio State University and moving to the University of Delaware in 1985. The activities of the DRC are built upon conducting field studies in connection with different types of disasters all around the world, and later making comparisons. From the founding of the DRC up until the year 2007, the Centre has carried out 650 different field studies. The general ambition is to study catastrophes in different socio cultural systems with the focus on how to mitigate damage in the acute stage, and to be able to do this, they cooperate with scientists all over the world.

Parallel with research into disasters, the risk research was begun. Already in the beginning of the 1900’s, the scientists for instance analyzed dangers in connection with technological development, and they learned how to deal with natural disasters. But it was not until the end of the 1960’s that the research area was established, mainly in the United States, and the research field of risk analysis was institutionalized. Risk analysis was looked upon as a way of handling anxiety when faced with the dangers. The researchers looked for acceptable measurements, made rational calculations, and from these, made decisions which had the function of reducing anxiety. (Lidskog, Sandstedt & Sundqvist 1997:87)
The scientists researching risks also studied people’s perception of risks, i.e. how people understood different types of risks - so called risk perception (Borodzicz 1996). “Risk perception” or “risk experience” has been defined as “intuitive” assessments of threat or danger in the context of, or in relation to an event or occurrence (Drottz-Sjöberg 1995:142). There are a number of studies about how people experience different threats or risks and how the experience can be measured and understood. The concept of risk has many facets, but is often defined in terms of probability and consequences. The probability concerns how great the chance is that a threat is realized, while the consequences refer to the aftermath if an event occurs. (Lidskog, Sandstedt & Sundqvist 1997:84 pp.; Drottz-Sjöberg 1991) From the area of risk perception has evolved the field of risk communication. This area has for instance developed because of the difficulty for laymen in understanding advanced technological information passed on by experts (Borodzicz 1996; Eriksson 2003). Risk communication theory focuses on the dialogue, or rather the lack of dialogue between experts and laymen (Borodzicz 1996). Risk information or risk communication has as its aim to avoid uncertainties and bring order to what otherwise would be chaos and the creation of worry. Many of the risks in today’s society are well known, and some of them we expose ourselves to voluntarily. On the other hand, other risks are unknown and we might not even know that we are exposed. Risk communication has as its objective to partly give us a realistic picture of a risk, and partly to prevent members of the society being exposed to that risk (Jarbro 1994). Another purpose of risk communication is to create acceptance for risk activities in the surrounding society (Eriksson 2003). The success of risk communication is directly affected by the confidence the involved parties have for each other (Warg 2000).

The risk research area can be said to embrace both everyday risks and the risk of disasters, where every type of risk can appear suddenly or gradually. Sudden risks in everyday life are for instance traffic accidents, violence, or accidents in the work place. Examples of risks which appear gradually can be the presence of radon in housing, or different types of addiction or psychic problems. Sudden disaster risks belong to what we often mean by “catastrophes”, i.e. different types of natural disasters or huge industrial accidents. Risks which appear gradually are those that we have begun to pay attention to recently, for example different forms of environmental pollution, such as the thinning of the ozone layer and global warming, or the depletion of fish stocks in the oceans. Studies of all of these areas can be found within risk research. (Drottz-Sjöberg 1995:142; Jarbro 1994; Lidskog, Sandstedt & Sundqvist 1997) Yet another area which can be said to belong to risk research is the area of risk and the media (Boholm 2008). Here the centre of interest is the relationship between risk perception and media reporting, the relationship between the content of the reporting and results of research into objective risks, factors which influence the news value of a risk, and how risks are being portrayed in the media.
1.2 Crisis Communication research – an introduction

Researchers’ interest in studying aspects of crisis communication began in connection with the nuclear accident on Three Mile Island (in the United States in 1979), because of serious problems concerning communication between the authorities and the media, and between the media and the public (Friedman 1989). After that, it can be said that two paths of investigation have emerged, one which mainly studies commercial entities (the organizational level and events such as embezzlement, rumours, bomb threats, fires, deaths), and one which focuses on crisis communication between different actors in connection with societal disturbances (the societal level and events like power cuts, snow storms, gas accidents, shipwrecks, nuclear accidents). But if one talks about levels, a third level can also be mentioned, and that is the individual level. On this level one finds the research area of traumatic stress (earlier called catastrophe psychiatry) which focuses on psychic crises (see i.e. Weisaeth & Mehlum 1997; Lundin 2003). Modern crisis theory (on this level) can otherwise be said to date from the beginning of the 1940’s (Conrah 2005). This area of research does not perhaps focus on crisis communication per se, even if people naturally communicate about their personal experiences. The research area is instead about different types of crisis situations that people are exposed to and to which they react differently. (Lundin 2003; Styrelsen för psykologiskt försvar 2001; Västra Götalandsregionen 2008). The individual level is different from the societal and the organizational level, but is also mentioned here because the concept of crisis is used on all the three different levels. All three levels can meanwhile be of importance in connection with a serious societal disturbance.

1.3 Crisis communication research connected to organizations – a nearby area to the research of crisis communication on the societal level

The research into crises, crisis management and crisis communication connected to organizations (mainly commercial entities) began back in the middle of the 1980’s. The crisis communication research was first in focus however, in the middle of the 1990’s. (Johansen & Frandsen 2007:65) The research into crisis communication and the crisis communication process has since the late 1990’s expanded largely (as well as the research of crisis management). But it is very fragmented and tremendously difficult to oversee because it is so widespread. (Coombs, W. T. 2011)

Crisis communication has often been studied within the area of Public Relations. The subjects of study have therefore in most cases been commercial entities (Coombs 2011; Johansen & Frandsen 2007). Falkheimer & Heide (2006) even suggest that risk and crisis communication is at the core of public relations practice and theory. Within the research field the media is mentioned, but not really more than as other stake holders. This vast research area connected to commercial organizations does not embrace the crisis communication between the authorities and the media. According to Johnson Avery, E. & Lariscy R. W. (2012) the original intent has never been to embrace the authorities’ crisis communication, instead the
aim has been to focus on business organizations. Schultz & Raupp (2010) also argue that insights into crises within corporations cannot easily be transferred to the authorities’ crisis communication, because of the structural differences between the two spheres (different levels of bureaucracy, publicity, stability, types of events and power in comparison to profit). The same researchers however seek integration between the micro, mesa and macro levels, which could then be fruitful (regarding for example the content and the construction of reality), to crisis communication for both the corporate world and the authorities.

Johansen and Frandsen (2007) argue that earlier research about crisis communication from an organizational or corporate perspective can be divided into two traditions, one text oriented or rhetorical tradition, and one context or strategic tradition. These two traditions of research can also be connected to two dimensions, one descriptive/explanative (theoretical) and one normative (practical) dimension. The tradition focusing on the text is interested in what an organization actually says or writes when in a crisis situation. Within this area the apologia research can be found, which studies rhetorical defense strategies (reactive actions). The context tradition is focusing on the context - the situation and its influence on the actual crisis communication itself. The situation can explain how the crisis communication is formed. Coombs is clearly a representative of the strategic or the context tradition within crisis communication research (ibid. p. 202, 229).

Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer (in Falkheimer, Heide och Larsson, 2009) make a similar partition of earlier research about crisis communication. Also here the first line is called research about apologia, but with the addendum impression management. Both types of research aim to improve the image of an organization after a crisis. The other line refers to issues management and to risk communication, with the purpose of achieving a better understanding of how the role of issues management can prevent a crisis evolving, already in the preparedness phase before a crisis is realized. Falkheimer, Heide & Larsson (2009) put forward two more general traditions of research connected to crisis communication: the traditional and the late modern tradition. The traditional research has, according to the scientists, a positivistic starting point within which the reality is objective and can be measured. The late modern tradition begins in social constructivism with its focus on the idea that conceptions of reality are socially (in common) constructed.

When it comes to research about crisis communication connected to commercial entities, I would also like to mention the model by Johansen & Frandsen entitled the rhetoric arena. This model is based on Benoit’s theory about crisis communication as image restoration, and on Coomb’s theory of crisis communication as “relationship management” (Johansen & Frandsen 2007: 251 pp.) The rhetoric arena consists of two parts: 1) a context model that is sociological communication, and which introduces the multi-voiced contribution. This is mainly about the actors. 2) The other part is a text model, rhetorical and socio discursive, which introduces three instances and
four parameters. The parameters consist of context, medium, genre and text. These parameters will always mediate the crisis communication (Johansen & Frandsen 2007; 252, 281, 284 pp.)

1.4 Crisis communication on the societal level

Crisis communication between the authorities and the media is a relatively sparsely researched area. Already in the 1980’s it was known that the research about the authorities and the media lagged behind. Gary A. Kreps (1980) postulated for instance that although considerable interaction between mass media and other organizations takes place during and after a disaster, not much research has been presented on these relations. Wenger & Quarantelli (1989) have a similar understanding, and they are of the opinion that the interactions between media and emergency organizations need further analysis. After having scrutinized fifteen years of editions of "Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management" (1997-2012) (the journal that mostly concentrates on crisis management in the society), I did not find a single article that focused on crisis communication between the authorities and the media. In a research study almost thirty years later (Larsson 2008) about societal crisis management/crisis communication, once again it is put forward that communicative aspects of crisis management in general receive limited space within today’s disaster research, and that the authorities’ relations with the media is still an area of low priority among international researchers. Schultz & Raupp (2010) mention only a few studies which have analyzed the authority’s crisis communication in later years.

In Sweden since the end of the 1970’s we have conducted sporadic research studies connected to crisis management and crisis communication. Most of these studies were initiated by our authorities, i.e. Styrelsen för psykologiskt försvar (SPF), Överstyrelsen för civil beredskap (ÖCB), Krisberedskapsmyndigheten (KBM) and in later years Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap (MSB). Studies have in principal been conducted only when extraordinary events have just recently happened. There is therefore Swedish research about the authorities and the media’s crisis communication with each other, if only limited research. Below I will present an example of the existing research, with a certain focus on the Swedish research.

1.4.1 Crisis communication between the authorities and the media

Regarding the existing research about crisis communication between the authorities and the media, the research is mainly descriptive and normative, and in general from the perspective of the authorities. That the research is normative is logical, because studies about extraordinary events have as a goal to learn from earlier events, with the aim of constantly improving the behaviour. The focus on the authorities means that there is a need to know more about journalists within this area (see i.e. Englund 2008). There is also a lack of basic research and development of theory, probably owing to the fact that many of the studies made were so called fast studies. From the time
of the Chernobyl accident in 1986, and since, the interplay between the authorities and the media has been the focus of the Swedish studies. In the Swedish studies to which I mainly refer, crisis communication has been studied from three main perspectives: from the authorities, from the citizens and from the media (Nohrstedt & Tassews 1993; Flodin 1993; Jarlbro 1993; Nohrstedt & Nordlund 1993). The methods used in the Swedish studies are for instance: personal interviews, interviews by telephone, surveys, document analyses and focus groups (see i.e. Amnå & Nohrstedt 1987; Engblom, Rylander & Sundin 1996; Jarlbro, Sandberg & Palm 1997; Larsson 2004; Leivik Knowles, Nohrstedt, Pettersson & Skoglund 1995; Nord 1998; Palm 1996).

The interplay between the authorities and the media is however only marginally considered. These studies are mainly mappings and summaries of the research made in the 1980’s. In three Swedish reports the research about disasters, risks and crisis communication is mixed, and there is no consensus between key concepts in the different studies. Neither can a difference be seen between crisis management and crisis communication. There is also a clear normative perspective. Suggestions for new research are put forward however, i.e. the need for a theoretical framework, learning and research into crisis communication between the authorities and the media.

Continuing with a description of the theoretical perspectives often used in earlier research.

The often used theoretical starting points within earlier research are: the process perspective, conflicts between the authorities and the media, and learning in organizations. These starting points are briefly presented below.

**Equilateral triangle with actors of the society (two-way crisis communication between the authorities, the media and the citizens)**

This ideal model considered for societal and crisis communication from a democratic perspective is the most used model in the Swedish studies, for example in nine studies about the Chernobyl accident (Amnå & Nohrstedt 1987), in seven studies about the Estonia disaster (see Larsson & Nohrstedt 1996 for example) and in the study about a large fire in a discotheque in Göteborg (see e.g. Larsson & Nohrstedt 2000).

**The process perspective**

The process perspective originates from American research about crisis management (Flodin 1993), and is frequently used in international studies (Comfort 1988; Fearn-Banks 2007; Mitroff 2001; Mitroff 2004; Johansen & Frandsen 2007). The crisis management area has developed from a number of different scientific disciplines, for instance from geography, sociology, political science, psychology and business administration (Lagadec 1993). The process perspective from the area of crisis management with various partitions, but with a core of the phases before, during and after – has been, from a Swedish perspective, present more or less explicitly in most studies of extraordinary events since a major electrical power cut in Härnösand,
Sweden, 1973 (see i.e Törnqvist & Aggefors 1973). These extraordinary events have included the murder of a minister (Larsson 2004), a nuclear disaster (Amnå & Nohrstedt 1987), a mud slide (Lundgren 1978), a major fire (Larsson & Nohrstedt 2000), gas accidents (Edwall & Olsson 1985; Nord 1998; Jarlbro, Sandberg & Palm 1997), snow storms (Flodin 1980; Engblom, Rylander & Sundin 1996), the arrival of boat refugees (Leivik Knowles, Nohrstedt, Pettersson & Skoglund 1995), and polluted water (Palm 1996).

Conflicts between the authorities and the media
One of the first studies which thoroughly examined conflicts and has put forward theoretical discussion, was a Norwegian public investigation (NOU 1986:19). This study was the result of criticism facing Norwegian authorities regarding their information to the society in connection with the Chernobyl disaster. The criticism was because the public’s and the media’s need for information was not met. One conclusion in the study is that in situations with a great demand for information, conflicts are normal. These conflicts can be interpreted as personal, but are really the result of the differing contexts of the authorities and the media and their often opposing structural interests. These conflicts are also common during so called normal situations, but sharpen during crises of information. Reported conflicts in the study were: time-, source-, responsibility-, knowledge-, expert-, priority -, and the trustworthiness conflict.

Learning in organizations
One perspective that gradually has become more and more evident in studies about crisis communication between the authorities and the media (and crisis management), is the field learning in organizations (Larsson & Nohrstedt 2000; Larsson 2008; Leivik Knowles 2005; Leivik Knowles, Nohrstedt, Pettersson & Skoglund 1997). To improve, a highly complex system of crisis management, with many actors, a high degree of insecurity and different daily functions and cultures, some sort of systematic learning function must be developed where evaluation and reflections are important ingredients (ibid. 1997).

This aspect of learning has always been implicitly present in the research. In other words, most studies about crisis communication (and crisis management) have been about learning from earlier events. "Single-loop-learning" and "double-loop-learning" are examples of two types of learning on the individual and the organizational level. "Single-loop-learning" refers to an organization correcting its mistakes regarding lesser disturbances connected to goals for instance, or values, basic assumptions and ways of working - so called adaption targeted learning. "Double-loop-learning" is about reformulating and reflecting basic patterns of values, frames of interpretation and rules of acting - so called development targeted learning (Argyris & Schön 1978; Leivik Knowles, Nohrstedt, Pettersson & Skoglund 1997; Jacobsen & Thorsvik 2008).
Continuing with a description of the empirical knowledge that exists and the empirical knowledge which is missing.

First a presentation of different examples of opinions regarding crisis communication between the authorities and the media, including a description of earlier research about conflicts. The paper will finish with a description of gaps revealed in earlier research, and a short summary.

The negative opinions of the authorities concerning the behaviour of the media
In many studies, scientists have noted that the authorities often have negative opinions about the behavior of the media. The opinions have been that the media is a source of inconvenience (Edwall & Olsson 1985; Flodin 1980), they are troublesome and annoying (Leivik Knowles, Nohrstedt, Pettersson & Skoglund 1997; Sood, Stockdale & Rogers 1987) and they are aggressive (Raittila 1996). The authorities complain about a lack of warning from the media that they are on a live broadcast (Lundgren 1978; Syrén 1981) and that journalists push their way in, they nag, force barricades and disturb the rescue work (Hiroi 1996; Lundgren 1978; Nord 1998; Raittila 1996; Syrén 1981). In connection with terrorism the media´s constant coverage has also hindered the isolation the police wished for (Scanlon 1989). Sometimes the journalists also conduct interviews in a way which shows a lack of respect for the sorrow of the victims (Hiroi 1996). Reporters have also been perceived as being the cause of stress and aggressive behaviour among rescue personnel (Raittila 1996).

The authorities´ criticism concerning expert knowledge not coming out very well on TV
Scientists have also made clear that there are opinions among the authorities that the presence of television cameras can have a direct effect on how the authorities can control a crisis situation. From the police it is said that they often lack control when they function as a source on TV-news for instance. The media´s choice of angle e.g. dramatization and simplification, can cancel out the expert knowledge of the professional police, when the police really only want to tone down the situation by explaining it. To be reflective doesn´t suit a TV-interview, and can make the interviewee look indecisive or confused. (Crelinsten 1994)

The authorities´ positive opinions about the media
Scientists have also noticed that the authorities sometimes have positive opinions about the media. These opinions refer to the fact that the authorities most certainly need the media in the event of serious accidents, especially regarding the communication towards the public and the victims (van Oostveen 1996; Engblom et al. 1996). It has even been said from the perspective of the authorities, that it is impossible to conduct crisis management without the help of the media reporting. The media send warnings, alert and inform, and help to handle collective stress and make clear for the authorities that they have the responsibility. (Crelinsten 1994; Rosenthal & van Duin 1996; Raittila 1996; Hiroi 1996; Larsson 2002)
Regarding the media and their opinions about their contacts with the authorities, the opinions mainly focus on criticism of the information, especially the handling of the information and the content of the information. We can also find criticism towards the authorities’ press conferences. Below here are examples of these opinions.

**The media’s criticism towards the authorities’ handling of the information**

The researchers have found extensive criticism from the media regarding the authorities’ inability to deal with information in connection with serious societal disturbances. The criticism has been aimed towards their inability to spread information or that the information was delayed. (Friedman 1989; Hiroi 1996; Larsson & Nohrstedt 2000; Nord 1998; NOU 1986:19). Criticism of the lack of an organization for how the authorities should communicate with the media also exists. (Friedman 1989; Palm 1996).

**The media’s criticism towards the content of the authorities’ information**

Several studies have also shown that the media is critical of the authorities’ inability to provide sufficient information (Edwall & Olsson 1985; Flodin 1980; Hvitfelt 1986; Hvitfelt 1988 b; Leivik Knowles, Nohrstedt, Pettersson & Skoglund 1997; Nord 1998). Often heard criticism from the media is also that information coming from the authorities is sometimes contradictory. (Ammå & Nohrstedt 1987; Edwall & Olsson 1985; Flodin 1980; Friedman 1989; Lauristin & Vihalemm 1996; Nord 1998; Raittila 1996)

**The media’s criticism concerning the authorities’ press conferences**

The researchers have also found that press conferences conducted by the authorities sometimes receive criticism from the media, e.g. because press conferences are delayed or are badly prepared, or have nothing new to say or because written material is missing, in English for example. (Leivik Knowles, Nohrstedt, Pettersson & Skoglund 1997; Raittila 1996)

**Conflicts**

Another area of research has been into conflicts between the authorities and the media, a theme that is rather limited, I may add. These conflicts can mainly be referred to as occurring because of the opposite goals of the actors. A study of media activities in connection with five American natural disasters between 1979 and 1984 showed that the media and the local authorities sometimes came into conflict when each of them tried to achieve their varying goals (Sood, Stockdale & Rogers 1987). Similar phenomena have been seen in Swedish studies, e.g. the incident with a submarine on Hårsfjärden in 1982, when, as a result of too little information from the authorities, the media went in and listened to the military’s secret radio traffic (Hvitfelt 1988 b). Another example is the arrival of boat refugees on Gotland 1992/93, when the police hindered the media from doing their jobs (Leivik Knowles, Nohrstedt, Pettersson & Skoglund 1997). Starting with the Estonia catastrophe in 1994, researchers mean that disastrous situations can produce many different types of conflicts. For instance, the conflict between the journalists and the authorities, when the authorities prioritize securing the rescue work and protection for the victims (Raittila 1996).
Continuing with a description of gaps discovered in earlier research.

**Studies of the meaning of the explicit interplay are rare**

That the interplay between the authorities and the media is important has been noticed in earlier research, even if studies of such interplay (where the importance of the interplay has been focused) between the authorities and the media in general are rare, is an observation I have made. Three aspects of the interplay have been seen: the significance of such interplay for the management of a crisis together with the media’s reporting, the significance of the interplay in the preparedness phase, and the actual interplay in connection with extraordinary events (in the emergency phase).

The more effective the interplay is between the authorities and the media, the greater the chance that the disturbance or disaster will be dealt with in a positive way. However, a well-functioning interplay requires that the authorities have a well-structured organization and disseminate accurate information to the media. If the authorities divulge correct information to the media, the chances for accurate reporting will increase, which in turn will further increase the possibility of the public being given a relevant picture of the event. The interplay can therefore be the foundation of the public understanding of a disturbance and also be of importance for the citizens’ reactions to that disturbance. Put simply, news reporting is a result of complex relations in the news process. (Amnå & Nohrstedt 1987; Fischer 1996; Hvitfelt 1986; Nohrstedt 1999; Raitilla 1996; Sood, Stockdale & Rogers 1987; Wenger & Quarantelli 1989)

In connection with the Chernobyl accident in 1986 one could see that, as a result of the authorities’ control over the flow of information, the media ceased to scrutinize, to clarify, and made no attempt to "dig further" (Findahl & Lindblad 1987). According to Hoff (1996) the authorities ought to cooperate with the media since the journalists want to report facts – quickly, correctly and in depth. But when the journalists don’t receive any information, and are not able to talk to witnesses, or survivors, or families involved, or the authorities, then they cannot perform their function. The problem is that the lack of official information doesn’t stop the media. Lack of information from the authorities can instead lead to incorrect reporting by the media.

Some researchers think that the media ought to cooperate with the authorities already in the preparedness phase, and thereby gain an understanding of the importance of the part they actually play when reporting and spreading information to the public about a societal disturbance (Fischer 1996; Raittila 1996; Rosenthal & van Duin 1996; Scanlon, Alldred, Farrell & Prawzick 1985). If the authorities and the media reach an understanding, then the media could be given an explanation as to why certain information must be withheld, but that full disclosure will rule once the crisis is over. By keeping openness not only during a crisis but also when normality returns, the authorities can maintain credibility in the eyes of the citizens, even when they are forced to sometimes act under secrecy. (Crelinsten 1994)
However, on several occasions the media has in fact cooperated with the authorities during the emergency phase, for example by not reporting certain facts because that was what the authorities wished. It has also occurred that newspapers have published “false” front pages when dealing with kidnappers, and that TV-stations have broadcast special news designed with the help of the police (Scanlon 1989). In connection with an ammonia accident in Kävlinge, Sweden, in 1996, when 9 000 people had to be evacuated, a freelance journalist was brought in to help the rescue services with their information to the press (Jarlbro, Sandberg & Palm 1997).

Initial actions on the individual level and contacts between the actors we need to know more about

Extraordinary events are usually being presented with the focus on the actual course of events. In this process, initial actions are often described, but mainly from an organizational perspective (i.e. the authorities and the media did this and did that). We therefore need to know more about initial actions from an individual perspective. In connection with the course of events it is also customary to mention the contacts between actors, and sometimes also where these have taken place. However, in earlier research contacts between the actors have not been systematically presented from the point of view of actual contacts, geographical places and forms of contacts. On the other hand, we have knowledge about the experiences of such contacts (Amnå & Nohrstedt 1987; Edwall & Olsson 1985; Engblom, Rylander & Sundin 1996; Flodin 1980; Jarlbro, Sandberg & Palm 1997; Larsson 2004; Larsson & Nohrstedt 2000; Leivik Knowles, Nohrstedt, Pettersson & Skoglund 1995; Lundgren 1978; Nord 1998; Palm 1996).

Strategies for information are only marginally represented

Strategies for information (regarding the authorities and the media) in the context of crisis communication, are sparsely represented in earlier research. Strategies like openness, informational concentration, secrecy, censorship and total silence as well as the consequences of information withheld, can however be found, from the authorities’ perspective, in a Finnish study of the Estonia disaster (Raittila 1996). Regarding the media, the situation is not totally clear, with the exception of the large foreign media organizations’ strategies for collecting information (for example aggressive strategies).

In connection with the Estonia disaster (Raittila 1996), it was said that the information strategy of the Finnish state, was to be not officially connected with the accident. On the other hand, Finnish authorities which were in contact with the media were in principle for a policy of openness and a concentration of information (they wanted to collect all information in one place), but also availed themselves of secrecy and censorship. Secrecy was used for instance in withholding details about the emergency schedule of the rescue helicopters and their movements on their way to the site of the accident. Neither did they offer information about the Coastguard’s radar control technology, underwater surveillance, or radio traffic. Details regarding the debriefing of the survivors by the Central Criminal Police, and the recording of the last communication between Estonia and Silja Europa, are more examples when secrecy was applied. Censorship was used when
the authorities limited interviews with survivors because of health reasons, and for ethical reasons also restricted the photographing of sick people. A question from the journalists to the authorities about the remaining mines in the Baltic (estimated at ca 50 000 from the Second World War) was not answered at all. Secrecy and silence led to and strengthened rumours, for instance regarding the radio traffic before the Estonia sank. In the same study about the Estonia from the perspective of the media, we are being told that ethical and other decisions in connection with the news reporting were made by reporters on the spot. What those decisions were, however, is not mentioned. In contrast, journalists from the large foreign news agencies showed a more aggressive strategy.

Studies of patterns of communication and levels of dialogue are missing

Studies that in a systematic way have examined patterns of communication between actors do not exist. Only in a few cases are concepts like one-way communication and two-way communication mentioned (see i.e. Jarlbro, Sandberg & Palm 1997). Studies regarding levels of dialogue (different grades of engagement in two-way-communication situations) are completely lacking, at least from a Swedish perspective (see for example the following sources: Amnå & Nohrstedt 1987; Edwall & Olsson 1985; Engblom, Rylander & Sundin 1996; Flodin 1980; Jarlbro, Sandberg & Palm 1997; Larsson 2004; Larsson & Nohrstedt 2000; Leivik Knowles, Nohrstedt, Pettersson & Skoglund 1995; Lundgren 1978; Nord 1998; Palm 1996).

Earlier research about the Estonia Disaster

From a hundred studies about the Estonia disaster (Libris 2008) one can find Finnish studies (of an investigative character), two Finnish dissertations, one German investigation, personal observations (by survivors), and for debate, books and articles, by journalists and authors in which the accident itself is targeted from a fictional perspective. One can also find Swedish investigations about the accident by different kinds of authorities (i.e. Haverikommissionen, Analysgruppen, Överstyrelsen för civil beredskap, Rikspolisstyrelsen, Socialstyrelsen, Stockholms läns landsting, Statens Räddningsverk, Statens Offentliga Utredningar et al.), as well as some scientific studies, e.g. the reports about the Estonia by Styrelsen för psykologiskt försvar. There are also smaller independent studies from a journalistic perspective.

From the studies about the Estonia disaster mentioned above, for instance the seven reports from the Styrelsen för psykologiskt försvar, only one study is focusing on the communication between the authorities and the media. That is the study by Raitilla (1996). In this report, information from the Finnish rescue workers, and other authorities, is studied together with the activities of the journalists. A lesson from this study which can be connected to the interplay between the authorities and the media is that the information service to the media ought to be relocated to places other than the headquarters of the rescue operation.
The authorities should also have considered how best to utilize the ability of the media to quickly collect information, and their skill in formulating messages which are both credible and easy to understand. From a media perspective the problem was how to keep the situation under control (and be a part of the crisis information machinery), and at the same time maintain their critical attitude towards the performance of the authorities. If the journalists were acquainted with the rescue authorities beforehand, and had already established good relations, then it would be easier to get information and to cooperate in an emergency situation.

1.5 Summary and conclusions

To summarize, the investigation of existing research regarding the interplay and the crisis communication between the authorities and the media shows that for a long time there has been a general need for research (including studies about the Estonia disaster, from a Swedish central perspective). The development of theories is also regarded as lagging behind. The studies that do exist within this field mainly focus on the actors’ opinions regarding how that communication has functioned. The conclusion of the literature study is therefore that we need to know more about what crisis communication de facto means, in connection with societal extraordinary disturbances in general and the Estonia disaster in particular (because of the rarity and magnitude of the disaster). The following questions need to be answered:

How can the initial actions of the authorities and the media be described (from an individual perspective)?

Which strategies for information (disseminate information) have the authorities used in their interplay with the media, and which strategies for information (collecting information) have the media used in their interplay with the authorities?

Which patterns of communication can be found in the actors’ strategies for information?

On which levels of dialogue can the actors’ patterns of communication be found?

From which theoretical perspective can the authorities’ and the medias’ crisis communication and interplay be explained?
References


