

Integrating Real-Time Crisis Communications with Risk Communications

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ABSTRACT

Accurately informing the media and stakeholders about a significant oil spill which is controversial requires constant, real-time coordination and collaboration within the incident command organization. Stakeholders and the media may believe that the incident has environmental, health, and safety risks associated with the oil, burning and dispersants. Determining how to inform stakeholders about such concerns is the niche of risk communications.

External communications, including crisis communications, are traditionally the purview of public affairs. Risk communications, a form of external communications is a distinct way of communicating with the public in general and, in particular, specific segments of communities affected by an oil spill. Messages about perceived risks may not suffice because stakeholders, such as public officials, community, and academic researchers, sometimes question the source and content of the messages. Many stakeholders want to know additional details to form their own judgments about risks. Effective real-time communications during an oil spill, therefore, must also provide for the rapid integration of risk communications with crisis communications. This paper defines risk communications and proposes a process for integrating crisis and risk communications during significant oil spills within an incident command system (ICS) organization.

INTRODUCTION

Oil spills on coastal and inland waterways are usually covered by the media because the public cares about the resulting impacts on birds, marine life and their habitats. Sharing response information with the media has traditionally been the responsibility of communications specialists who work under the mantle of public affairs, public relations, external communications, or crisis communications. External communications may have multiple purposes including influencing public beliefs, opinions, and judgments about the incident. Risk communications on the other hand:

- includes actions, words, and other interactions that incorporate and respect the perceptions of the information recipients, intended to help people make more informed decisions about threats to their health and safety (Ropeik, 2008).
- is the interactive process of exchange of information and opinions among individuals, groups, and institutions concerning a risk or potential risk to human health or the environment. (National Research Council, 1989)
- means communication intended to supply lay people with the information they need to make informed, independent judgments about risks to health, safety and the environment. (Fischhoff, 1990; Gibson, 1985; Gow and Otway, 1990)

Risk communications for accidental marine pollution was the focus of European attention with the 2007 publication of an excellent risk communications report by AMPERA (European Concerted Action to foster prevention and best response to Accidental Marine Pollution) http://www.upf.edu/enoticies/0708/_pdf/ampera.pdf. In this report, AMPERA noted communication mistakes made during the Prestige oil spill in 2002:

1. Unidirectional communication (lack of interaction with audience).
2. Contradictory messages between different governmental spokespersons.

3. Unclear messages: ambiguous and confusing terminology.
4. Absence of an independent expert voice to justify the governmental actions.
5. No self-criticism in the message, minimizing the crisis and consequences.
6. No channels of direct communication with those affected in local area suffering from the accident.
7. Lack of online information and tailored to needs of media.
8. Crisis without a controlled end by the response authorities (no quick economical and environmental impact assessments).

Since every oil spill involves risks to the environment, applying risk communications principles to all external communications can be beneficial. There are many different approaches to risk communications. Some of them focus on improving the way external communications about risks are conducted, e.g., developing better messages, and some focus on the content of risk communications, that is, sharing technical information to support the assessment of the potential for risks. Using a method to prevent the mistakes noted by AMPERA is important for spill responses going forward.

RISK COMMUNICATIONS AND CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Risk communications specialists in the US, such as Dr. Vincent Covello and Dr. Peter Sandman, have experience in improving external communications with the public via the media and stakeholders. Their websites contain numerous publications which are helpful references. For example, Dr. Covello (<http://www.centerforriskcommunication.com/home.htm>) has published guidance materials for government agencies and other clients, to develop trust and credibility. Trust and credibility are central to effective communication about topics of high concern. His materials also include templates and recommendations to develop trustworthy and credible messages. Key elements in trust and credibility are shown in the adjacent figure.

Dr. Sandman (<http://www.psandman.com/index-intro.htm>) states that the most important fact about risk communication is the incredibly low correlation between a risk's "hazard" (how much harm it's likely to do) and its "outrage" (how upset it's likely to make people). Lack of clarity around controversial issues can lead to higher perceptions of risk and for stakeholders' to feel outrage. In fact, one of Dr. Sandman's trademark expressions is: Risk = Hazard + Outrage. Clearly oil spills have been known to elicit emotional responses with the potential to result in public outrage.

As noted earlier, sometimes people are not satisfied with the information they receive from the media – they may want additional details to address their specific questions and concerns. Stakeholders may want independent assurance about the potential for risk, assurance from someone they consider credible and trustworthy. The potential risk to seafood safety was also an issue during that spill.

The publications of risk communications specialists, and the fisheries guidance above, are useful references to consult pre-spill, during preparedness and contingency planning. As with any important and time-critical activity, advance planning is advantageous. Integrating pre-spill general information, like the above references, with the details of the specific response situation will provide a more complete understanding of potential risks. In addition, engaging with stakeholders is important to assure the risk communications address their actual questions and concerns.

REAL-TIME RISK COMMUNICATIONS

Real-time risk communications will not occur without an explicit requirement to implement this type of communications. Since risk communications are a specialty, technical specialists with appropriate backgrounds and experience will need to be activated and brought on scene, especially for oil spills which are likely to prompt controversy, and public outrage, e.g., when

specific oil spill situations involve seafood safety, dispersants and in-situ burning, and even the relative risks among cleanup techniques to remove spilled oil from the environment. When these situations arise, it is advisable to activate technical specialists to support incident-specific risk communications.

Risk communications needs to be specifically identified as an objective by incident commanders during the response when an oil spill results in significant perceived or actual risks to the environment. The objective needs to be sufficiently clear to enable the incident management organization to achieve success, that is, the organization should be able to define who, what, when, where, and how risk communications should be developed.

- Who – who is responsible for risk communications?
- What – what deliverables are expected from risk communications staff - press releases, talking points, fact sheets, meetings to achieve expert technical consensus?
- When – how soon and how often should risk communications deliverables be ready?
- Where – where should risk communications be delivered – academia, local level, and national level?
- How – what methods should risk communications employ – stakeholder engagement; traditional print, television and radio media; social media?

When risk communication specialists are activated (the earlier the better), they should develop a plan for carrying out risk communication activities, including defining a process to internal and external information flow. In an ICS-based organization, multiple parties have knowledge to contribute to risk communications.

The potential use of social media in implementing real-time risk communications warrants special mention. When an incident becomes a disaster in the public's view, the research of social scientists <http://www.jeanettesutton.com/uploads/BackchannelsISCRAM08.pdf> shows that

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Comment [1]: First sentence could be condensed.

members of the public leverage their own social networks to find and provide information outside the official response effort. It would be wise for the incident management team, including public officials with responsibility during the response, to actively consider how to align with peer-to-peer information exchange, i.e., social media, and to develop new conceptualizations of the information production and dissemination functions to facilitate stronger risk communications during response to oil spills.