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The Breivik Terrorist Attacks: Lessons in Crisis Communication

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Synopsis

The professional crisis communication of Norwegian officials and civil society groups in response to the 22 July 2011 terrorist attacks was the outcome of intensive preparation. This experience could pave the way for a debate about immigration and integration in European societies.

Commentary

THE TERRORIST attacks by Anders Breivik on 22 July 2011 in Oslo and Utoya, Norway, left 77 people dead, many injured and a whole nation in shock. Breivik was a radical who hated foreigners, especially Muslims, and feared that Europe could be “infiltrated” by foreigners and Islamised.

Although the initial response of the police was criticised as being slow, it is clear six weeks after the attacks that there is much to learn from Norway’s handling of the crisis and its communication. The government’s efforts to console Norwegians, motivating them to be resilient while praising democracy, liberty and unity were successful. They underscored the value of intensive preparation.

Preparation Paid Off

In October 2006, over 4,000 participants took part in a 30-hour terrorism simulation “Exercise Oslo 2006” initiated by the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and the Police. The drill was based on a scenario of a terrorist attack by a fictional group named MADI with ties to the fictional country of Tagistan. Explicit references to Islam were avoided, while the details of the scenario hinted to a violent background of the fictional attackers.

The participants came from some 50 organisations, including government agencies, city councils, civil society groups, the embassies of the United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Pakistan and the media. In fact, over 200 students and teachers from Norway and abroad participated in the “media game”, performing as journalists and editors to shed light on the needs of the media and their coverage of the events during the crisis.

The Norwegian government acted by the book, and three elements undoubtedly helped in overcoming the crisis. Firstly, communication by government agencies was well coordinated among them and with the royal family, which helped avoid contradictions. Both old and new media were used as communication channels. Moreover, Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg assumed leadership and acted as a calm chief communicator. Only the response of the Police to accusations that they had taken too long to reach Utoya and arrest Breivik were at

times overly defensive and not always in accordance with crisis communication best practices. Furthermore, their speculation on the number of victims also had to be corrected a few times.

Laudably, the Muslim community reacted swiftly as well. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, when the background of the perpetrator was still unknown, the second largest mosque of Oslo convened a crisis meeting attended by 50 members to react quickly to the attacks and give advice to their community.

Secondly, the messages communicated were clear and focussed. Recurring themes across official and civil society groups' communication were Norwegians' pride and resilience, as well as unity across religions and ethnicities, reminiscent of the hardship suffered and overcome during and after the Second World War. A commitment to democracy, liberty and humanity were praised as the right response to violence. These conciliatory messages emphasised inclusive unity without defaming some groups as outsiders. While parts of the international media hastily and wrongly blamed radical Islamists as the perpetrators, the Norwegian government did not speculate or blame any group prematurely.

Thirdly, the non-verbal communication also hit the mark. The images of the royal family consoling victims' families; officials' visits to mosques (the Prime Minister greeted the attendants with the words "salam alaikum"); the performance of a non-native Norwegian musician before 200,000 mourners who came together in Oslo; the march of the attendants of a funeral service from a mosque to a church; and many other events sent out strong signals of unity and solidarity among all Norwegians.

Short-Term vs Long-Term Objectives

Even though the 22 July 2011 crisis was different than the one exercised in 2006, the Norwegian government was able to apply the insights gained to the events at hand. Among the lessons learned were the importance of showing sympathy for the victims and their relatives, being forthcoming as far as information is concerned and how to make good use of an inter-ministerial information pool. This is a reminder that advanced planning and training pays off notwithstanding the nature of the actual crisis, as creative staff can apply insights to unexpected scenarios.

A poll conducted for the newspaper VG showed that 94 per cent of Norwegians thought that Prime Minister Stoltenberg performed "well" or "extremely well" after the attacks. Stoltenberg's Labour Party gained 11 percentage points after the attacks as compared to a poll conducted a month earlier. All in all, the government seems to have achieved its short-term crisis communication goals of consoling, reconciling and unifying the people.

While Breivik's radical position was not popular among Norwegians, experts claim that scepticism towards foreigners and immigration had been commonplace and increasing before the attacks. After the attacks, another poll for the newspaper VG showed that 26 percent had come to see "multicultural Norway" as "more positive". In total, 68 percent had positive views towards a "multicultural Norway", while only 13 percent considered it "negative". This momentum needs to be used by the Norwegian government to achieve its long-term objectives.

Window of Opportunity

Every crisis opens up a window of opportunity. As the Norwegians seem to be coming to terms with the atrocity, now would be the right time to initiate a national debate on immigration, integration and national identity. As in many Western European countries, nationality in Norway is still much determined by and perceived according to one's complexion. At the same time, Norway and other industrialised countries are in the race for foreign talents and bear their respective share of responsibility for asylum seekers.

This is a unique opportunity to initiate a national discussion on cultural and national identity during a period of globalisation. Immigration and integration need to be debated considering challenges, opportunities, and social and economic imperatives – all the while acknowledging and actively and openly discussing the fears and reservations of certain sections of the population. If this is done successfully, Norway may come out stronger than before the crisis, ahead of its European partners in fulfilling its social responsibilities, and ahead of its competitors in attracting foreign talents.

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