Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency

RESEARCH

# Crisis communication and Trust in the Multi-Public Society

**Crisis Communication and Trust in the Multi-Public Society**

Year: 2017–2022
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Summary: Between 2017 and 2022, the research team has studied societal crises to examine how societal trust among various groups influences crisis communication, and how crisis communication affects trust in the short and long term. The project has employed various research methods to collect data on crisis communication, focusing on citizens' information-seeking, media usage, knowledge, attitudes, and crisis reactions. It has also included media content analysis and interviews with journalists.


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# Content

# Introduction

Human interaction is built on trust, even if we sometimes suspect that others have hidden agendas and that we thus have good reasons to distrust their messages. Nevertheless, human relationships, and communication in particular, are built on trusting the other person. Sometimes trust is described as a "leap of faith," that we trust someone else and a message without knowing for sure. In crises, the need for information increases, and it is therefore even more important that recipients can trust the information being disseminated. Trust is a cornerstone in crisis communication, and even if we live in a society saturated with disinformation and propaganda.

## About the research project KRISAMS

The overarching aim of the research project *Crisis Communication and Public Trust in a Multi-Public Society (KRISAMS)* is how public trust among different groups is affected by crisis communication, and how crisis communication influences societal trust in the short and long term. The project's point of departure is that the relationship between crisis communication and public trust must be studied from the perspective of a multi-public society, i.e., a society where individuals and groups of citizens are more or less affected by various crises, have varying levels of public trust, but also have different ways and habits of obtaining and understanding crisis information. However, trust is not only important to study in direct connection to crises. Since trust is often said to be easy to ruin but takes a long time to build up, it is important to also study trust and crisis communication when the acute crisis phase is over.

The project's focus is on societal crises, crises that have affected the whole or parts of society, its inhabitants, and organizations. More specifically, events in Sweden which have received significant attention in the news media, nationally, regionally, or locally, were examined. The crises studied were events which occurred during the past decade, and naturally, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a focal point. However, other events, such as the Stockholm terrorist attack in 2017, the fires following the unusually dry summer of 2018, and analyses of the refugee crisis in 2015, form the basis for the conclusions drawn in this report. In some cases, the time perspective is even longer.

Given that events have been central to our operational definition, the analyses focused on unforeseen crises. Crises with slower progressions thus fell outside the scope of the project's analyses, except when they received extensive media coverage, such as when the climate crisis became apparent due to prolonged drought and forest fires in 2018. Neither have crises affecting healthcare or education been included in the project, as these concern more structural issues rather than event-based crises.

Methodologically, the analyses primarily build on various forms of surveys, survey experiments, and panel studies where citizens' perceptions and opinions were requested regarding crises of various kinds. The Citizen Panel and the Residence Panel, managed by the SOM Institute at the University of Gothenburg, served as the main source for most studies. The Citizen Panel comprises respondents from across Sweden, while the Residence Panel was a special initiative to examine the migrant dense suburbs of Bergsjön and Hjällbo in the city of Gothenburg. Additionally, within the framework of the project, rhetorical analyses of leaders' speeches were conducted, and both manual and automated content analyses of Swedish news media were examined. Furthermore, surveys were distributed, and interviews conducted with journalists to address questions concerning journalistic workflows, organization, and journalism ethics.

In this final report, we seek to condense what the research findings have demonstrated, their implications, and the consequences for how we conceptualize and plan communication when a crisis strikes. The report is based on extensive empirical material and at the time of writing, three books, nine articles in international scientific journals, seven chapters in international edited volumes, and ten reports have been published. The reports have been released by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, KFI, Department of Journalism, Media, and Communication, and the SOM Institute. In 2024, additional studies will be completed that are based on the data material of the KRISAMS project.

# Results

## Sweden, a high-trust society

Research – both in the KRISAMS project and other studies – indicates that trust is crucial for successful crisis communication and crisis management. If you do not trust those communicating the crisis message to have your best interests at heart, if you do not trust them to know what they are talking about, or if you believe they have failed in previous crises, the authorities have a steep hill to climb.

But in a country like Sweden, where most people trust both authorities and each other, crisis-communicating authorities are well-positioned. High trust characterizes the entire society, from the authorities' trust in the citizens' willingness and ability to understand instructions of crisis information and act accordingly, to the citizens' confident assurance that the authorities will help if a crisis occurs. Researchers have even identified Sweden as a state-oriented risk culture, a society where inhabitants imagine that crises and disasters can be avoided, and the role of the state is to plan so that society and its citizens can cope with a potential crisis as well as possible. There is also strong belief in authorities' ability to come to the rescue in the event of a crisis. KRISAMS's analysis of the pandemic also showed how the authorities consistently ranked highest in terms of assessed responsibility for managing the crisis, far above the responsibility attributed to both politicians and the citizens themselves. Overall, trust remained stable throughout the pandemic. Swedes seemed – at least on an overarching level – to adhere to the belief that the authorities have the greatest responsibility during a crisis. Swedes trust that the state will take care of them.

### The resilient trust

Although it is often stated that trust can easily be eroded and is difficult to rebuild, KRISAMS's results do not demonstrate such simple mechanisms. Instead, the results indicate that societal trust, particularly concerning authorities and other institutions, remains surprisingly stable and resilient. If we trace the lines from the 1980s up until today, trust in societal institutions is largely intact. While the economic crises of the 1990s had dramatic consequences for trust in the banks, it is only in the last decade that clear signs of changes in the general societal trust have emerged. After the refugee crisis in 2015, a somewhat weakened trust was observed, along with increased polarization, likely reflecting broader societal changes. So, even though the general picture of Sweden's high-trust society remains, there are some things to reflect on, some cracks in the social contract that are specifically related to the multi-public society have become visible, which was the project's starting point.

## The dynamic trust

Despite this overall stability of institutional trust, the results in KRISAMS exhibit some dynamics. During crises, there are examples of both strengthened and weakened trust in authorities. However, the dynamics vary depending on which phase of the crisis is studied and the type of crisis. Looking at the pandemic, for example, there were initially strong tendencies towards so-called rally-around-the-flag-effects (or rally effects), with broad increases in support for both authorities, political leaders, and traditional news media. Even interpersonal trust increased during the spring of 2020 when COVID-19 hit Sweden. In research, rally effects are partly explained by the fact that people in times of uncertainty and vulnerability turn to authorities believing someone else has an overview and control and can point out where we should go and what to do. People simply tend to follow leaders in a crisis, often with a sense of patriotism attached to their own country, region, or community. The phenomenon is also explained by the fact that serious crises create a void in public debate where conflicts between politicians are set aside and a bipartisan spirit prevails. In such a situation, governments and even leading authorities will receive significant media coverage (often without critical voices being heard), which may explain the increased support. A reasonable interpretation is that the sense of patriotism is the cause of the phenomenon, and that the lack of contested leadership in the public sphere makes it persistent.

However, rally effects are typically relatively short-lived, and since the KRISAMS project could track the developments during the pandemic through recurring panel studies, we also observed clear declines in trust during the later stages of the pandemic. For most societal institutions, the levels returned to where they were before the crisis. Government parties – in Sweden and other countries – had the same trust levels after the pandemic as before, and the same applies to central crisis management authorities and even traditional mass media. It should be noted that while the surge in trust was temporary, levels were not lower after the pandemic than before.

Our analyses of both the pandemic and other crises suggest that initially, people set aside ideology at the onset of the crisis, but gradually begin to view the world through ideological lenses again. KRISAMS' analyses of how rally effects diminished over time demonstrate how trust in the government initially reflected perceptions of crisis management, but over time, assessments became more influenced by ideological affiliations. Similar phenomena were found in relation to the refugee crisis, where the image of the drowned child Alan Kurdi spread worldwide and generated significant engagement. KRISAMS' analyses of people's reactions to the image showed how support for liberal refugee policies increased regardless of ideological perspective immediately after exposure. However, over time, as people had the opportunity to reflect on the political implications, they began to process this highly distressing image through their ideology.

Rally effects are strong, but usually short-lived. During the pandemic, there were exceptions of this public opinion pattern. Healthcare, along with other institutions, enjoyed a surge in trust. However, unlike others, healthcare did not witness a decline in trust ratings after the initial wave of the pandemic in spring 2020. In essence, there are variations in the dynamics of rally effects. It's not a given that support will wane after the initial spike. One interpretation is that the drop in the rally effect stems from how people perceive crisis management; healthcare during the pandemic received more favorable evaluations than the government and other crisis management authorities. In essence, a rally effect can become enduring if the crisis is handled successfully, meaning if the public perception and people's experiences reflect effective crisis management. Analyses of other crises, such as forest fires and car fires in suburbs, corroborate the notion that people's evaluations of crisis management authorities are influenced by how crisis management is depicted. A negative portrayal in the media also prompts a more critical outlook and a loss of trust. However, such effects are typically short-lived.

Another crucial lesson from the pandemic was that high trust served as an airbag for authorities during the crisis. In research, this phenomenon is termed the halo effect, and during the pandemic, we observed that the trust citizens had before the crisis was actually more important for their perceptions of authorities than evaluations of their crisis management, although assessments of crisis management also influenced trust. The importance of having high trust before a crisis, therefore, should not be underestimated.

## The low-trusters

Rifts in the fabric of society is the politicized trust in authorities. There has always been some ideological leaning in opinions on trust in authorities. However, in recent years, there has been a growing systematic distrust towards authorities. Primarily, individuals leaning ideologically rightward are responsible for this mistrust. Analyses from KRISAMS also reflects this in perceptions of the authorities' crisis communication. It should be noted that the rally effects mentioned earlier were widespread, and even those with low societal trust (low-trusters) increased their trust during the initial phase of the pandemic. However, the increase was not enduring, and the diverging opinions became apparent quite soon. Results also showed that low-trusters even were skeptical about whether the authorities disclosed all they knew about the virus, and they questioned the motives of the authorities. They assumed that the authorities might lack competence and perhaps covered up for the government. Additionally, low-trusters were characterized by lower education and were young adult men. This is challenge to all crisis-handling authorities. Further, distrust in authorities is greater among this group and is further fueled by an information environment where alternative media influences perceptions of the world. Nevertheless, the challenges of reaching out should not be overstated. Research has generally downplayed so-called filter bubbles, i.e., everyone receiving personally tailored information depending on how we search for information online and which media we engage

with. But even though we do not all use the same news media, everything indicates that crucial information reaches the vast majority, especially during a major crisis. KRISAMS results also show how the combinations of channels people use (information-seeking repertoires) to search for crisis information almost always include traditional news media, even among low-trusters. The problem with low-trusters is not primarily reaching out but rather reaching in. They hear what you say, but they don't believe you.

## The outsiders

Although multiple aspects of the multi-public society have been incorporated into the analyses in KRISAMS (such as experiences of crises, generational disparities, gender dynamics, etc.), the primary focus has been on groups less integrated into the majority society, commonly referred to as marginalized groups. Studies of immigrant-dense suburbs have yielded substantial insights into the complexity and challenges of both outreach and engagement. Interviews with residents of these suburbs have provided a nuanced depiction, challenging certain assumptions. For instance, contrary to widespread belief, trust in authorities was not as low as often assumed; at least, this was not reflected in KRISAMS' findings. However, disparities from the majority society exist in other aspects, such as many residents having limited proficiency in Swedish. In our interviews, between 20 and 25 percent spoke either no Swedish or only rudimentary Swedish. Many residents face constrained economic resources, and for most, religion plays a significantly larger role in their lives and identities than in other parts of Sweden. Yet, it is crucial to remember that suburbs are not homogeneous environments, and the relationship between "Swedes" and "immigrants" may not be the most central among residents. Rather, a multitude of ethnic groups with their own networks and organizations shape the milieu. In fact, many have no interactions with ethnic Swedes except in official capacities, where the public sector retreats after office hours. Over time, results indicate a decline in the area and living conditions, although many also emphasize their contentment with their current residence. While some believe society should do more, many residents feel a significant personal responsibility for their circumstances. As stated above, the landscape is complex.

The ways in which individuals seek information and news differ from that of the majority society. KRISAMS analyses revealed that a significantly larger portion opt out of mainstream news media altogether, favoring instead news sources from their home countries and social media platforms, particularly during non-crisis periods. Language barriers and a lack of identification with Sweden further widened these disparities from the majority society.

It is also worth mention the considerable challenge of investigating conditions in vulnerable areas using conventional social science tools, it is therefore likely that trust in authorities is lower and information-seeking behavior more divergent than indicated by results in KRISAMS. In other words, there are significant impediments to reaching marginalized groups, those who do not naturally engage

with Swedish news or official information channels. Moreover, even when efforts are made to reach out, success is not guaranteed, as there may be a general skepticism towards governmental assertions or a preference for alternative voices. During crises, however, the challenges of outreach appear to diminish. Despite finding disparities compared to the majority society, Swedish news media nonetheless constituted a central component in the repertoire of information-seeking channels during the pandemic in Swedish marginalized areas. Most individuals simply combined Swedish news with other sources, although consumption may have been lower compared to that in the majority society. At least, this was the case during the pandemic crisis.

# Communicating a crisis

## Reaching out with crisis communication?

The distinction between reaching out and reaching in, as previously highlighted, is central. But does crisis communication reach out? "Yes, it does", is the somewhat simplified answer. The phenomenon of news avoidance seems to be relatively uncommon – both among the general population and among minorities – at least when the crisis is acute. However, as the crisis subsides, the interest wanes among those who typically show less interest in news. Yet, in times of crisis, when people become anxious, they seek information. And in today's media environment, information dissemination is fast. In the aftermath of the terrorist attack in Stockholm in 2017, half the Swedes already knew what had happened within an hour of the attack. Two hours later, the corresponding figure was 85 percent. When something occurs, information spreads rapidly. It is worth noting that traditional news media still play a central role in disseminating crisis information, even though social media is part of the media repertoire and is more important among the young and those born outside Sweden. However, even in today's media environment, traditional news media still function effectively in crises, especially through push notifications and constant online updates. Another central channel for spreading crisis information is personal contacts; people share important news with each other, although the primary source is, of course, usually the news media.

What KRISAMS studies have also revealed is that differences in people's media habits – at least partially – were blurred when the crisis struck. Firstly, people used the sources they typically relied on much more during the crisis, and secondly, they accessed channels they usually did not use. Those who were not typically interested in news suddenly became more inclined to seek news. When KRISAMS analyzed where people searching for information about the virus and the pandemic, the results also showed gaps between the young and the old – which is a classic divide in media usage – were largely narrowed. Young people began consuming more traditional news, while older individuals sought information on social media. This finding is also corroborated by other studies, both in Sweden and internationally. In other words, we become more similar in our media habits when a crisis strikes. Additionally, research also indicates that we tend to gather

around traditional news media, and both trust in and use of public service broadcasting increased significantly during the initial year of the pandemic.

## Reaching in with crisis communication?

Figures from KRISAMS and other studies indicate that adherence to the advice and recommendations communicated during crises was high. This was particularly evident during the pandemic, as people adjusted their daily routines and subsequently vaccinated themselves to a significant extent. Also, during the Stockholm terrorist attack, it appears that people followed the communicated advice. Here, once again, the advantage of high-trust societies for crisis communication is accentuated. Instead of expending efforts on building trust and presenting the best arguments, people will tend to do what authorities instruct them to do without needing extensive explanation. Low-trust individuals? They are best reached by having the information sender deemed credible within their own group. For instance, during the pandemic, vaccination coverage in vulnerable areas posed a challenge. Therefore, various local leaders were utilized to persuade residents. Additionally, other actors such as vaccination guides, individuals with strong local networks employed by authorities, proved effective in disseminating information about the vaccine.

Though trust is a valuable resource, it is also something that must be handled with care. Since people trust authorities, it is extremely important that the information disseminated is accurate. The significant power of trust was evident in KRISAMS' investigations into the use of face masks during the pandemic. While face masks in public settings were mandatory in almost all other countries, they were not in Sweden. Analyses of face mask usage in Sweden also clarified how high-trust individuals disregarded face masks to a greater extent, while low-trust individuals were more likely to wear them. Additionally, it was interesting to note that individuals with broader media repertoires, who regularly consumed foreign news media, wore face masks more frequently than others. The debate on face masks is likely to continue, but one thing is certain: trust is a superpower in crisis communication which can influence people's behavior, especially in a high-trust country.

## Citizens' reactions – the relevance of proximity, ideology, and emotions

It is often assumed that those closest to an event react most strongly in a crisis, with those at a distance being less affected than those near the event. Nonetheless, the results from KRISAMS analyses are not so straightforward; rather, quite the opposite. In studies of the terrorist attack in Stockholm, people reacted in the same manner regardless of their location in Sweden. This is a finding that actually contradicts previous research. Whether concerning trust, which issues were deemed important, or emotional reactions – primarily anger – these were consistent regardless of whether the respondents were close or distant from the terrorist attack.

In the acute stage of a crisis, individuals are often highly upset and experience strong negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and sadness. An important lesson is that different negative emotions correlate with different behaviors. In crises where there is an evidently responsible actor, such as a terrorist organization, it is common for people to become angry and generally not seek detailed information. They are unable to absorb lengthy texts or engage with complex reasoning. When recipients experience anger, it is crucial to avoid complex information. Like nearly all emotions, anger also serves a function, and for the organization that desires swift action, it is advantageous to recognize that if anger is channeled appropriately, significant progress can be made in a short time. Angry individuals are inclined to take action, as evidenced particularly in demonstrations and other forms of political behavior. Angry people do things.

When it comes to anxiety, another common emotion during crises, the picture is somewhat reversed, particularly concerning information. Anxious individuals have an immense thirst for information. Crisis, anxiety, and the need for information are so closely intertwined that crisis researchers often mention them in the same breath. In the initial stages of a crisis, it is nearly impossible to provide too much information, and many of the individuals seeking information are anxious. A natural assumption is that anxious individuals who eagerly seek more information also learn more about the crisis. However, the research is not unequivocal; it may be that anxious individuals do not benefit at all and instead become increasingly anxious as they consume more information over time.

## Crisis News

Crisis news is breaking news. In the onset of a crisis, it is not difficult for authorities to disseminate their message. On the contrary, there is a scarcity of information, and the media report extensively, relaying all available information. However, along with this comes the risks of inaccuracies or ethical principles being compromised. The media enters a state of so-called "breaking mode," setting aside all else. Journalism at the beginning of a crisis is a race against time, and news outlets work to disseminate information to the public as swiftly as possible. Typically, they are very fast. On Friday, April 7, 2017, at 2:53 PM, a call was made to SOS Alarm reporting a truck driving into pedestrians on Drottninggatan in Stockholm, Sweden. By 2:57 PM, the first police officers were on the scene. One minute later – at 2:58 PM – the tabloid Aftonbladet published the headline "Attack on Drottninggatan in Stockholm: 'Several dead' and large number injured" on their website. Shortly thereafter, all major media outlets had posted the news on their websites and commenced reporting that continued over several days.

However, foremost was Twitter; at 2:57 PM, the post was made: "What the hell is happening??? A truck apparently plowed down people along Drottninggatan." Social media now consistently takes precedence; one could argue that journalists have lost their news privilege. Eyewitnesses who previously chose to inform newsrooms about events now prefer to film, photograph, and post what they

witness on social media in real time. On July 22, 2011, at 3:25:22 PM, Anders Behring Breivik's bomb detonated in the government building in Oslo, Norway. At 3:25:45 PM, 23 seconds later, the tweet was published: "Holy crap. Oslo just exploded?" No news medium can be faster than that. Therefore, newsrooms utilize algorithms to swiftly capture if activity on social media "intensifies," i.e., to identify if something of potential news value has occurred.

Both the Stockholm terrorist attack and the pandemic have been significant news events, but COVID-19 was unique. Never before has a news story displaced everything else for such an extended period from the news agenda. Despite being much more extensive, the coverage of the pandemic nonetheless followed a recurring pattern in crisis reporting. During the initial phase, the focus of news media is on disseminating information, and the news angles align with the priorities of authorities, although alarmism may dominate more than crisis communicators practitioners might desire. Experts and government representatives are given significant space, and politicians remain united, which explains why the media narrative is characterized by consensus and unity in the face of an external threat. Leaders' speeches contribute to the atmosphere, although our studies show that the tone and rhetorical style of speeches vary somewhat among leaders in different countries. Since State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell became the primary communicator regarding COVID-19 in Sweden, Swedish pandemic rhetoric focused on information and rational language. In other countries where politicians played a larger role in communicating the pandemic, the rhetoric was instead more emotional. Sweden had primarily a rhetoric of experts surrounding the pandemic.

Although there has been criticism of Swedish COVID-19 reporting, KRISAMS findings do not confirm the portrayal of an overly consensus-oriented news coverage. Examining the actual journalism reveals hardly any excessive government or authority loyalty in the news during the spring of 2020. There were critical voices, a wide range of issues/perspectives in reporting, and moreover, there was almost complete balance in perspectives on how Sweden's COVID-19 management was handled in the coverage. Later on, criticism and scrutiny increased, entirely in line with what we can expect from how crisis journalism typically functions. One can certainly question crisis journalism but compared to previous pandemics (such as the swine flu), journalists likely performed better this time. They were hardly the government's megaphone in the same way as during the swine flu in 2009, but instead offered a more nuanced picture of the situation in Sweden and extensive comparisons with other countries. If anything is to be criticized, it would be that the Swedish strategy was not immediately scrutinized. Certainly, critical voices were heard, but the scrutiny mainly focused on how well the Swedish strategy was implemented, not that it was inherently wrong. Nevertheless, overall, according to this interpretation, Swedish COVID-19 journalism still receives a positive rating, as confirmed by both journalists themselves and citizens in studies conducted by KRISAMS.

## Ethics and quality in journalism

Crisis journalism, like all journalism, raises questions regarding journalistic ethics and quality. Although the general assessment of how Swedish media has covered crises is satisfactory, the picture is more complex. The lack of information can lead to the spread of rumors, as happened during the Stockholm terrorist attack in 2017. Incorrect information was disseminated in the media about shootings taking place at Fridhemsplan, which is a square situated approximately 2 kilometers from Drottninggatan where the terrorist attack took place. No such shooting had occurred, yet major media outlets still reported the news. Journalism always operates in the tension between the demand for truth and the precautionary principle. Information disseminated must be accurate, but on the other hand, crucial information must not be withheld as people's lives and well-being during a crisis may depend on it. For example, what would have happened if the media had not reported on a shooting due to uncertain sources, and it turned out to be true? The KRISAMS project studied the consequences of journalism's handling of uncertain information. In the case of Fridhemsplan, analyses show how the erroneous reporting negatively affected people's trust in the media. In other words, disseminating inaccurate information can harm. One way for journalism to manage the risk of disseminating inaccurate information, or at least mitigate it, is to use disclaimers such as "unconfirmed reports suggest...". However, the question arises whether people, the recipients of the information, understand such disclaimers or if they are overlooked. KRISAMS analyses indicate that (extreme) clarity is required for people to perceive disclaimers, and when emotions are heightened, it becomes even more challenging. Furthermore, the choice of wording does not seem to matter. Whether "uncertain" or "unconfirmed" information is used as disclaimers makes no difference. However, people better understand uncertain information if the communicator also explains what uncertain/unconfirmed actually means. A study from KRISAMS focusing on news push notifications also showed how people tended to become more anxious the sparser the information about the event was, and when they did not receive further information about what had happened, recipients felt a greater need to seek more information. In other words, the importance of being clear, or even overly clear, about what has actually happened cannot be overstated. Otherwise, there is a risk of both excessive anxiety and increased spread of rumors.

However, media ethics is broader and encompasses other aspects besides factual claims. Media ethics also concerns the naming of perpetrators and victims as well as the methods journalists should/should not use in their professional practice. In the analyses of the Stockholm terrorist attack, both the general public and journalists were generally satisfied with media ethics. Journalists were more restrictive regarding naming individuals than the general public, but, on the other hand, less critical of live broadcasts with eyewitnesses and the publication of erroneous information about the shootings at Fridhemsplan. Journalists who themselves participated in covering the terrorist attack were also more inclined to accept ethically sensitive publications than colleagues who were not present. Even

more critical were journalists from media outlets that did not cover the event at all. The differences were not significant but clear. Journalists who were directly involved in the coverage thus showed greater acceptance afterwards for the ethical decisions made than those not participating. In simplified terms, proximity leads to greater acceptance of certain journalistic methods. Those who are distant are more critical.

In several of KRISAMS' studies, experiences of newsrooms in covering crises have also been examined, with interviews conducted with editors-in-chief and news editors afterwards. The analyses have shown how crises affect the newsroom organization. An example concerns the daily press conferences held by the Public Health Agency of Sweden, which were broadcast live at 2 p.m. during the pandemic. A question was raised about the lack of critical questions from Swedish journalists. KRISAMS' analyses showed that, as is customary, journalists primarily chose to ask their critical questions in individual interviews after the press conferences. Usually, press conferences are a matter between journalists and their sources, but during COVID-19, they became a public event where all viewers could note that critical questions were not being asked. In hindsight, newsrooms have realized they cannot behave as usual when press conferences are broadcast live. Even though the exclusivity of their own questions disappears, they must be asked to maintain the public's trust. Other lessons learned were the need for the news organization to be prepared for truly significant news events that require rapid updates, the increased importance of live reporting, and the need for greater transparency about how journalism works and its truth claims. Crisis journalism during the pandemic entered a new era, where journalism's narrative about the crisis was questioned in a completely different way than before.

## From crisis communication to risk communication

Crisis communication and risk communication are often mentioned together – as synonyms – and naturally, they have many similarities. Both forms of communication are about conveying information so that people can protect themselves – in the short or long term. But there are differences. Crisis communication primarily concerns acquiring new knowledge: What has happened? What should I do? Who is responsible? Risk communication also involves dimensions of information transmission, but it is equally concerned with convincing people to act on the basis what they already know. This is much more complicated. We know a lot of things we shouldn't do, but we still do them. Ignoring a life jacket at sea, exercising too little, and not having an emergency kit at home, to name a few. Crisis communication primarily relates to cognitive learning, whereas risk communication also involves motivation and social norms. Another difference is that during a crisis, everyone is aware of the uncertainty of the situation, that no one really knows what will happen next. It is easier to change behavior when daily life is disrupted. Risk communication, on the other hand, is about changing our everyday behavior to minimize risks or avoid threats and dangers that may arise in the future. Wearing a bicycle helmet, not smoking,

recycling, or wearing a life jacket at sea. Vaccination campaigns also usually fall under risk communication. However, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the campaigns fell into a gray area because the pandemic was already ongoing when we were encouraged to vaccinate ourselves.

KRISAMS analyses also demonstrate how it is easier to reach out during the most acute phase of a crisis. When the crisis strikes, we search for information everywhere, discover new channels, and gather around established institutions. However, we may not be as good at handling things emotionally in a crisis situation. We may miss information and generally be less proficient at critically evaluating information and discerning nuances when stress sets in. Nevertheless, we all essentially do what is expected of us, at least if the information is clear. When the crisis is over, or when its intensity diminishes, we become less inclined to seek information. We revert to our habits, making it both harder to reach out and to reach in. It is important to note here that channels used for risk communication are not necessarily the same as those people use during the acute phases of a crisis. Just as the crisis is an extraordinary event, our behavior is different when the crisis hits. We are not quite ourselves.

The difference between crisis and risk has consequences for how we communicate. For example, during COVID-19 there was a vast difference in communication during the spring of 2020 compared to later phases of the pandemic. In the fall of 2020 and later the quest was no longer about disseminating new information but about persuading people to act in accordance with previous knowledge. To continue practicing social distancing, staying home when sick, and so forth. Other communicative strategies were needed to encourage people to persevere, much like it hardly affects many people to refrain from drinking alcohol on a boat by simply pointing out its dangers. There is a need to break through the barriers of motivation, and in risk communication, scare tactics and humor are different strategies often employed. Another approach is to work with various types of rewards. This could involve offering money or perhaps a lottery ticket. However, the reward could also be symbolic, such as the desired behavior earning one the status of being "cool," belonging to the "in-group," or perhaps being considered "good." In other words, it's a classic use of the distinction between in-group and out-group. Another variation is not to "nudge" or incentivize rewards, instead, the motivation factor is the fear of social isolation. This can function both as a stick and a carrot. We feel ashamed if we don't go out for a jog after telling everyone around us about our New Year's resolutions. And perhaps we skip the candy if no one else in the family is eating it. We are social beings and tend to follow the crowd (hoarding in crises being the negative side of the coin). Appealing to both "doing right" and inducing shame in those who do wrong has been part of pandemic rhetoric, especially in neighboring countries where terms like "Samfundssinn (Community-mindness)" in Denmark or "Dugnad" (Voluntary work) in Norway were common rhetorical devices, or when the Swedish PM Stefan Löfven in his speeches emphasized "taking responsibility" and not being laid-back with the recommendations. Access to

information combined with motivation is thus crucial. First, we need to receive information, internalize it, and assess the behavior as desirable and beneficial. This is a form of conviction – that I believe in it. Then we need to be motivated to do the right thing and maintain the behavior. This is where social norms come into play. Additionally, it should be easy to do the right thing. The more cumbersome a behavior, the harder it is to sustain. Moreover, it's beneficial if it doesn't cost too much. Take the example of having an emergency kit at home. If there are cheap emergency kits available for purchase at IKEA or perhaps even better, at major grocery store chains, resistance is drastically reduced. However, we should be honest and acknowledge that the effectiveness of in-group and out-group rhetoric is still quite understudied, both by the KRISAMS project and others. Practitioners have tested it, but we actually don't know how effective it truly is. More research is needed in this area.

# 12 lessons learned about societal trust and crisis communication

If we are to summarize the key learnings from KRISAMS, we can formulate them as 12 lessons learned:

1. Crisis communication is easier in a high-trust society like Sweden – communication reaches the citizens and is well received.
2. Information spreads rapidly in today's media environment saturated with social media – but traditional news media are still central for crisis communication.
3. People's information-seeking becomes broader and more like others in the acute phase of a crisis.
4. Crisis information must not be inaccurate – people follow the advice.
5. Nuances and details are difficult to communicate in a crisis – clarity is key.
6. Societal trust tends to increase dramatically at the onset of a crisis (rally effects) – across all segments of society.
7. The credibility that authorities have before the crisis affects public trust more than the assessment of how they have handled the crisis – ensure high trust when the crisis starts.
8. Rifts in the fabric of society 1: low-trusters – they receive the information but do not believe it. They more often use alternative media in combination with traditional ones and mistrust the ability and intentions of authorities.
9. Rifts in the fabric of society 2: the outsiders – harder to reach with information, even though it is easier during crises. However, problems with reaching them exist even among the outsiders who have partially different information-seeking repertoires, difficulty understanding Swedish, and are more susceptible to misinformation.
10. In the later stages of a crisis, political opinions and ideological stances matter more for how people assess crisis information and crisis management.
11. As the crisis continues, interest in the crisis wanes, among both news media and the general public. Trust, media usage, and interest in seeking information and following recommendations decrease.
12. Societal trust is nevertheless stable, usually remaining at similar levels after the crisis as before – but it is unwise to take chances.

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