

Recommendable Practices for Effective Nuclear Crisis Communication

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1. Introduction

“Crisis communication” refers one of the activities done by the Nuclear Regulatory Organizations (NROs) in order to protect the public and the environment from the possible harmful effects [1]. As denoted by the BMU, German NRO, crisis communication is not only ‘public information’ or ‘information for the public’, but also communication between authorities in order to guarantee that public information is consistent [2].

This study proposes some recommendable practices for developing a guideline of well-prepared nuclear crisis communication system, including its management framework, and for introducing good insights, based on the study of international aspects provided by relevant OECD/NEA WPGC (Working Group on Public Communication for Nuclear Regulatory Organizations)¹ working group.

2. Crisis Stages and Associated Actions

There are different kinds of crises that NROs may experience and take different actions in each situation. Actions are classified as one of the following:

- Proactive (carried out at the pre-crisis stage)
- On the run (launched during the crisis)
- Reactive (post-crisis)

A more general classification would entail consideration of the related field of the crisis itself: nuclear safety; radiation protection or health impact; security; natural disaster; pollution, among others.

Since all crises are different, departments or teams in charge of public communications should react to them accordingly. NROs also should design different kinds of communication actions in preparation for a crisis. It is also needed to be prepared to respond to crises by developing pre-crisis measures, either at national or international levels, because anything “nuclear” is of particular attention to the media and the public.

New channels of communication, like social media, are extremely quick to provide information that may not always be accurate. Therefore, it is needed to respond quickly and accurately to avoid misinterpretations or misinformation.

Post-crisis measures, which are a result of the crisis’ impact on public perception, often involve correcting misinformation. In a few cases, they also entail safety improvements. Finally, it is beneficial to assess how a crisis was managed.

3. Responsibility and Timing

We have to look at how NROs confront crisis situations and provide some insight into the way they build their public communication response in time and form, according to their capacity (staffing, organizational) and regulatory framework.

Most NROs believe that their first public reaction to a crisis should be within two hours of the event’s confirmation. A challenge faced by NROs is that reaction time in terms of communication does not always depend on the national regulator, rather, it depends heavily on the relevance of the subject.

Information shared with the public has to be accurate, timely and structured. Decisions are mainly made ad hoc, on a one-by-one basis, as not all crises require the same reaction. However, they all need to be addressed in one way or another, following the organization’s practices of transparency and openness.

NROs’ communication experts play an active role during any type of crisis, ranging from mere managers of information requests to strategy-makers, supporting the lead authority as a primary source of technical advice and being part of the core emergency team.

All NROs agree on the importance of identifying and training spokespersons who are able to deliver consistent and clear messages. They must have reliable communication skills and technical expertise in order to convey clear and understandable answers to the public under significant pressure.

4. Information Dissemination

Also, we have to look at how NROs communicate with the public, the procedures they follow to deliver messages and the channels they use to disseminate information.

Templates for both internal and external messages are useful to cover the early stages of an emergency situation. So, regulators should have pre-drafted messages (ready-to-use templates) in order to expedite communication flow during the early stages of a crisis.

During a crisis, press releases are NROs’ primary source of communication, followed by press conferences (depending on the relevance of the subject). Depending on the event and its degree of social relevance and media attention, NROs should use a mix of channels to inform the public throughout the course of a crisis.

In addition to the traditional ways for information dissemination as shown in Figure 1, all NROs rely heavily on the Internet and e-mail to disseminate their messages. New technologies are an important communication tool, and websites help provide a quick

response during an emergency. The majority should include public information about radiation monitoring, risks, countermeasures, etc. Sometimes, it may be necessary to have special areas in the website, password protected or separate, to share specific technical information with authorized users (not media) during crises.

Knowing what is actually being reported in the media at all times may be useful for the nuclear emergency management team during a crisis, providing a good idea about the information needed to be given to the media and the public. It may be necessary to assess the potential role of emerging media as an effective crisis communication management tool.

It is noted that accuracy is important any time an organization communicates with the public or the media refers to it. False information or unconfirmed rumors not only contribute to generating public alarm, but also damage the organization's credibility. Bearing this in mind, many nuclear regulators should train their press officers to manage misunderstandings with the media skillfully when a crisis occurs.

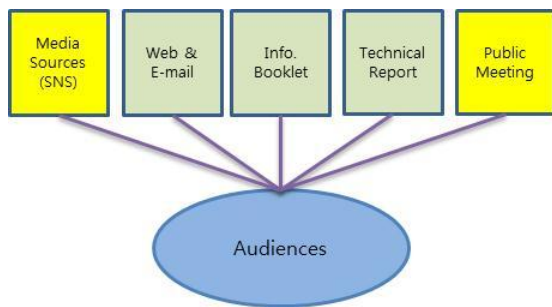


Figure 1. Diverse Ways of Information Dissemination

5. Organizational Coordination

We have also to look at how NROs are organized and structured in terms of dealing with emergencies and how they collaborate with other organizations to provide specific information during crises. In addition, it is needed to survey how NROs undertake exercises and drills, whom they invite to them and which lessons have been learnt from these experiences. Finally, the role of NROs in notifying others of a crisis at the international level, communicating crisis to the media and the public and providing advice to public authorities should be also analyzed.

Concerning the NROs' emergency structure, it is worth mentioning that staff members in most countries should be trained in communication or in public affairs on a professional level. NROs should have direct and secured communication channels with emergency centres.

Normally, the regulator will be the first to inform the media, the public and other authorities. Shared responsibilities among the local authority, the licensee, the NRO and the government regarding crisis

information should be always clear and commonly understood.

It is identified that coordination and sharing of information between the different organizations involved in a crisis is the main challenge to ensure the delivery of a consistent message from all agencies and increase credibility, because failure to coordinate messages can reduce credibility and cast doubt on the ability of the responding organizations to manage the situation.

In most countries, NROs are responsible for providing advice to public authorities in case of an emergency. It is a good practice to prepare an analysis of the situation for the designated emergency management bodies, which are required to inform public authorities. NROs may advise public authorities in areas that include radiation.

Lessons learnt from emergency exercises and drills undertaken by NROs include the need to improve transparency, communication and coordination among different organizations. As language is very important, it is critical to be empathetic and to use lay terms; therefore, there is a need to train staff in media skills as well as in responding to public concerns in an understandable and sensitive fashion. In addition, a crucial aspect of communication is to monitor what media publishes and to promptly correct any false information or rumors.

6. Conclusions

This study primarily summarized a lot of practices about crisis communication, as surveyed by the international expert's working group. Considering current situation caused by the Fukushima Daiichi accident of Japan, we can point out great importance about associated actions, responsibility, timing, and sharing information to public, as well as coordination with other organizations, for doing effective risk communication against a national-level nuclear crisis.

REFERENCES

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ⁱ Currently, Yeonhee Hah, Co-author of this article, is chairing the WGPC group.