

Hannele Seeck & Heidi Lavento & Salli Hakala

Crisis Management and Communications: The case of the Nokia water crisis

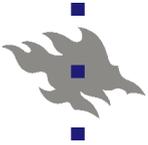
(Publication in Finnish)

Research Findings

The water crisis in the town of Nokia in southwestern Finland showed that crisis management and communications cannot be separated. If communications fail, crisis management cannot be a success. The Nokia water crisis lasted an exceptionally long time, 6,000 people were taken ill and the everyday life of thousands of residents was made difficult for several months.

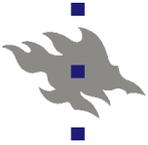
Crises can be examined from the viewpoints of crisis preparation, crisis response and post-crisis activities. The town of Nokia had drawn up the statutory contingency plans for crisis preparation, conducted exercises to test the plans and formulated risk management plans. However, some of the contingency plans had not been updated, they had not been understood nor were they accessible to a sufficient number of people. The role of a contingency plan in a special situation deviating from the norm was not understood, nor was it considered necessary to implement the town's contingency plan. Still, the contingency plans contained a list of warning signals that should be monitored to detect a water epidemic. The authorities failed to draw the right conclusions from the various warning signals received, as officials only kept track of information received by their own organization. This gave a fragmented and false picture of the situation, which caused serious problems with crisis response. During different phases of the crisis, there were serious flaws in cross-administrative communications and, therefore, information was not disseminated to child day-care centres, schools and other local government work places.

Two emergency response teams were set up to handle the Nokia water crisis. For the work of the first team, several actors in the town's administrative centre, the communications officer and especially persons working with local residents, were not given a full picture of the



situation. Information on the situation was first put up on the Internet and communicated to the media, but not directly to responsible personnel, local residents, or to any greater extent to interest groups or elected representatives. There were problems with the timing, contents and accessibility of information, and with telephone services and the language rights of residents. Due to bureaucratic practices, action and communications were slow. Particularly during the first week of the crisis, greater communications competence, better planning and more human resources should have been available. The strategic role of the communications officer was not understood. There were significant differences in the practices of the first and the second emergency response teams. The work of the second team, the extended management group, crossed organizational borders, divided responsibility based on expertise, rather than power, and took better account of actors central to the crisis than the first team. At first, distressed residents contacted Nokia Waterworks, the monitoring unit of the region's environmental health service, and the online discussion forum of the Aamulehti daily, and Aamulehti soon brought the crisis to the headlines. The wideranging, expeditious actions of the media helped authorities to disseminate information and bring forward the views of local residents. Especially the active, uninterrupted dissemination of information by the local media, the Nokian Uutiset and Aamulehti dailies, which lasted for the duration of the crisis, served the information needs of local residents. In addition, Aamulehti provided a public discussion forum in the paper's printed version, and it also set up an online Nokia drinking water discussion forum on its Web pages. Aamulehti also organized the first major debate for the town's residents and others interested in the crisis. The local media took an exceptionally active role in this crisis.

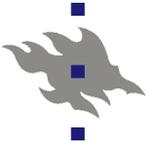
The national media took up the Nokia water crisis with delay, after five days had passed since the eruption of the crisis. The coverage followed the usual epic news coverage, looking at the causes and effects of the crisis. The visual presentation of the water epidemic proved to be difficult for the media. Compared to other crises, the Nokia epidemic lacked elements provoking empathy and sorrow which could have been used to appeal to the emotions of readers. The online material provided by the media consisted of fact-based journalism, which also served other media in the rapid dissemination of information. From the viewpoint of crisis management, the inactivity of management and the absence of political actors in the



crisis were prominent in the media. Before the national media's critical coverage, no one accepted responsibility for the crisis.

To sum up, there were problems with all three phases of crisis management: crisis preparation, crisis response and post-crisis activities. It was particularly problematic that the warning signals were not understood, and that the pieces of information received from local residents could not be put together. Information given on the water crisis was not in compliance with the instructions on official communications of the town of Nokia. The timing and the contents of the information disseminated by the town during the first days of the crisis failed. Communication directed at local businesses was more successful than that directed at residents or the municipal personnel. Hardly any information was targeted towards interest groups, and follow-up communications were scarce. The water epidemic emergency response team as a crisis organization remained alien to the media and local residents. In the Nokia water crisis, the information needs of residents could not be met. Communications were slow and dependent on only a few persons. This was partly due to bureaucracy, especially during the first days of the crisis, but also unclear responsibilities, lack of co-operation between interest groups and an insufficient system of warning signals were to blame. They all contributed to a false perception of the situation and, consequently, inadequate action. It is striking in the Nokia water crisis that the authorities failed to see the psychosocial distress of local residents conveyed by the media, the Internet and by feedback from residents.

Key words: crisis management, communications, co-operation between interest groups, media publicity, online publicity.



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[Crisis management and communications. The case of the Nokia water crisis \(pdf, incl. English summary\)](#)

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Contact: Heidi Lavento, heidi.lavento(at)helsinki.fi