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Having a boat before the flood  
strikes will save you. Having a sail  
will take you places.

*A qualitative study on how an effective crisis  
communication is impacted by intercultural  
competence, crisis leadership and social media.*



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# Abstract

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Thirteen qualitative interviews have been conducted with key individuals who have profound knowledge and experience in the subject of crisis communication. The thesis used a theory testing approach and highlights the main issues regarding the influence of intercultural competence in crisis information, and to what extent social media channels are used for crisis communication. Also, it covers how the leadership during crises affects the communication from the perspectives of the key individuals. In this empirical investigation, the analytical method of thematization has been used in order to select essential themes throughout the qualitative interviews. These themes have been compared to the relevant theories within the subject - *crisis communication*, *intercultural competence*, and *social media* in crisis situations. The emerging conclusions from this study were the importance of pre-existing relations between organizations and authorities in crisis situations, and the amplifications of crisis communication through crisis networks operating between organizations. Another conclusion was that proactive crisis communication plans need be of a concise and general design to be practical in crisis situations. Furthermore, one conclusion was that most organizations according to the interviewees were aware of the absence of intercultural competence, but due to lack of resources this was not prioritized. The last conclusion was that social media channels have a high interest level during crisis situations, but was seldom used to a large extent during crises.

## Keywords

Crisis, crisis communication, intercultural competence, crisis leadership, social media, qualitative interviews, proactive crisis communication.

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# Content

<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Extensive Previous Research	3
1.2 Definition of the Problem	5
<b>2 Theory</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1 Crisis Communication	7
2.1.1 Crisis Leadership	13
2.2 Intercultural Competence in Crisis Communication	14
2.3 Social Media and Internet Publishing in Crisis Communication	16
<b>3 Intention of the Thesis</b>	<b>19</b>
3.1 Research Questions	19
<b>4 Method</b>	<b>20</b>
4.1 Qualitative Interviews	20
4.2 Method Criticism	22
4.3 Research Ethics	24
<b>5 Empirical data &amp; Analysis</b>	<b>25</b>
5.1 Interviewees	25
5.2 Crisis Communication	27
5.2.1 Crisis Leadership	33
5.3 Intercultural Competence in Crisis Communication	36
5.4 Social Media & Internet Publishing in Crisis Communication	40
<b>6 Conclusion</b>	<b>44</b>
6.1 Theme – Crisis Communication	44
6.2 Theme – Intercultural Competence in Crisis Communication	45
6.3 Theme – Social Media and Internet Publishing in Crisis Communication	47
6.4 Further Research	48
<b>7 References</b>	<b>49</b>
7.1 Links	53
<b>8 Appendix</b>	<b>54</b>

# 1 Introduction

The emergence of crisis communication and crisis management in research institutes started in The United States during the eighties (Coombs, 2012), and thus one can understand how new this field of study is. Professor of communication, W. Timothy Coombs (2012) argues that crisis communication is what gives life and substance to crisis management. If the crisis communication is unsuccessful, so will the crisis management be. As a result of the intensive pace of globalization along with the development of new technology, crisis communication needs to be regularly updated and to follow the stream of the modern dissemination of information (Lustig & Koester, 2013). Almost every aspect of human communication has changed; the way we talk, write, and listen. Social media and internet publishing have created the space for every single person to be their own journalist and reporter (Falkheimer, Heide, Larsson, 2009).

Globalization has generated a multi-cultural society which in turn has generated a greater need for intercultural competence in the daily communication (Piller, 2011). Intercultural competence includes the ability to communicate, understand and decode the communicative interchange between different cultures. Cultural differences do not only exist between geographical borders, but also exist in the form of sub-cultures within a greater national culture (Lustig & Koester, 2013). Intercultural competence thus become a tool for a re-fined and adaptable way of communicating within a multi-cultural society. The most fundamental part of a culture is language. However, intercultural competence focuses not only on language but the ability to connect and understand all elements of culture, such as values, perceptions, attitudes, customs and behavior (Brinkmann & van Weerdenburg, 2014).

There are different kinds of crises. The ones otherwise called disasters - cause death, destruction of infrastructure and peoples' homes, and chaos. The other one is organizational crises, which translates into events that somehow threatens imperative expectancies of stakeholders (Coombs, 2012). Experts have long been trying to find a normative base to stand on when it comes to handle crises but since the entire spectrum of communication is significantly situational this has been difficult. Many elements and stages complement each other in creating a well-integrated crisis communication strategy, though experts and researchers are strict when it comes to the debate of separating these elements and stages (Mitroff, 2004). A successful crisis communication strategy involves every single element and an organization needs to work regularly with those elements. It is about daily communication, distinct dissemination of information and a well-developed and trusted leadership. There are often groups of people that are responsible for the communication during a crisis, which means there needs to be a direct leadership that can handle the pressure of an uncertain and worried consumer base along with a potential insecure employee base (Fors-Andrée, 2012).

Every crisis situation has its own peculiar problems, but who defines what constitutes a crisis? In modern society anyone is entitled to name a certain situation a crisis, may it be on Facebook, Twitter or the radio. Media will sooner rather than later define situations for various organizations if they are not quick enough to spread the information themselves. In some cases though, a situation can be interpreted as a crisis when the organization in question in fact is not in a crisis state (Coombs, 2012). This is why modern technology can both help and exacerbate a certain situation. Organizations today are in the need of finding a well-documented pattern of internal and external communication in order to be prepared for a crisis. Informational strategies that suit a specific organization's consumer base, which media channels should be used for different crises and when and where this information will be shared are examples that must be considered and practiced before a potential crisis occur (Fors-Andrée, 2012).

Our societal environment often presents organizations with crises – everything from an office fire to bankruptcy. No organization can state their immunity to crisis, hence, every organization ought to be prepared (Coombs, 2012). Crises naturally present enigmas within the organization, which must be addressed for the sake of the organization and its stakeholders. Often in this day and age, one looks for external expertise in the form of consultants. Although the organizational world attempts to be more proactive in crisis communication and crisis management, the traditional way of managing it reactively is still widely practiced. This creates a greater need for external consultants mentioned above. Reactive behaviour often suggests that organizations are not entirely, or at all, ready to face a crisis, in which a demand for expertise is being generated (Rombach & Ohlsson, 2013).

Professional communicators play a crucial part in crisis communication. For a better understanding of the title professional communicator<sup>1</sup>, here follows a definition – “a person who professionally works within the communicative business. The profession involves different roles, positions and areas of expertise. Communication is a multi-faceted concept that comprises all communicative disciplines” (Sveriges Kommunikatörer, 2015).

## 1.1 Extensive Previous Research

Coombs, defines an organizational crisis as follows: “A crisis is the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes.” (Coombs, 2012, p. 2). This definition is not to be looked at as the definitive truth because of a crisis’ perceptual nature; all of us can understand when an earthquake or a train crash is being labelled a crisis, but a crisis does in fact exist as long as stakeholders consider the organization to be in one (Ibid).

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<sup>1</sup> Kommunikatör

In order to fully comprehend the concept of an organization, we will be using the following definition: “An organization is a social unit of people that is structured and managed to meet a need or to pursue collective goals. All organizations have a management structure that determines relationships between the different activities and the members, and subdivides and assigns roles, responsibilities, and authority to carry out different tasks. Organizations are open systems – they affect and are affected by their environment” (Business Dictionary, 2015).

Previous research tells a story about how crisis communication has progressed from what is known as emergency preparedness. Historically speaking, the subject has covered numerous cases where organizations have been threatened somehow or another. Traditionally, crisis communication has been studied as the different phases of a crisis. The stages researchers talk about are pre crisis, event crisis and post crisis (Coombs, 2012). The overall consensus is that previous studies of crisis communication focus on different perspectives. It may be how organizations have been affected financially and troubled by a decreased number of members or customers. It may be how a region survived after a natural disaster. Modern research focuses on new specific parameters within the crisis communication spectrum, such as different kinds of leadership or a well-prepared proactive crisis group (Ibid). Due to the changing ways of spreading information and the rapid pace of a growing multi-cultural, multi-lingual society, researchers try to explore how these kinds of factors play a role in an effective crisis communication.

New studies also show a deep interest in complementing previous research with looking within an organization. This includes analysing how well-integrated an organization’s social media profile is, what kind of crisis leadership was practiced or how the crisis communication was strategically built for a multi-cultural target group (James & Wooten, 2010).

It is not implausible to state that crises have been occurring regularly for all of history although the subject has not been studied as intensively as of recently. This is partly due to the way today's media and organizations work along with how quick one can receive information. The acceptance of new technology has taken its time and many organizations still need to implement and integrate a well-functioning social media involvement (James & Wooten, 2010). It is also partly due to the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York City. That day in particular made organizations realize that crises outside one's own operational area can directly impact their organization (Coombs, 2012).

Some researchers in crisis communication have the perspective of looking at a crisis as of something of a positive change. Organizations can thus use a crisis to adopt new strategies or policies, increase credibility for employees as well as customers and members or even decide to choose a new path in order to move forward within the line of business (Falkheimer, Heide & Larsson, 2009).

## 1.2 Definition of the Problem

Every day, one can read or hear about crises from all over the world. Whether it is disasters or organizational crises does not change the fact that crises draw attention to media. As late as a few weeks ago at the time of writing this thesis, an earthquake struck Nepal and thousands of people were killed. Authorities have explained Nepal was in the process of preparing for another natural disaster but that lack of resources had belated that process (Public Broadcasting Service, 2015). This particular crisis is about human lives, which falls into the most complicated crisis category. Another example is the latest news about how the CEO of Storstockholms Länstrafik stole a wallet while in Hong Kong. He was found guilty by a court in Hong Kong and has now been set aside from his daily duties (Sveriges Television, 2015). A few days ago at the time of writing, 190 cabin employees at the airline company SAS decided to sue their own labour union. The reason was that the union had bargained away the employee's rightful pension money during a crisis settlement back in 2012 (Dagens Nyheter, 2015). These crises, however big or small, highlights organizations' different perspectives of what constitutes a crisis for them. This thesis focuses on crises in general, which naturally translates into how our interviewees define a crisis situation. Depending on their experiences, every crisis counts.

As one reads about crises in the media, one cannot help but notice that there are always people talking or making statements on behalf of an organization. What lays beyond what these people say and how they express themselves? And who is the person in charge of crises one reads about in the media? However, the examples of Nepal, the thieving CEO and the plaint against the union show that both minor and major crises happen regularly, hence organization's need for an effective crisis communication where being proactive can dampen the damage, save lives or even stop human beings from being hurt at all.

Crisis communication drew our attention early as we both heard detailed stories about crises during our internships. We have also been fascinated by the concept of how to apply the concept of intercultural competence to the field of communication. Thus, our idea of connecting a complex concept such as intercultural competence to an also complex area such a crisis communication was born.

Following this explanation, we strive to apply this specific concept in order to understand which path crisis communication needs to take. Our aim is to explain how the concept of intercultural competence increases the opportunities of managing a crisis effectively and thus, as a professional communicator, connect that with crisis leadership skills and the knowledge of advantageous social media and internet tools (Brinkmann & van Weerdenburg, 2014).

## 2 Theory

This chapter is divided into the thesis three interacting theories; *crisis communication*, *intercultural competence* and *internet publishing and the use of social media*. Crisis leadership is not a theory in itself, as it is embedded into the theory of crisis communication.

### 2.1 Crisis Communication

Governments, companies and organizations have a tradition of setting up emergency functions and develop various forms of situational crisis plans. In modern times the view on how this is performed has changed from detailed step to step guidelines, to modern planning that focuses more on flexible multi-purpose solutions. Modern research tells us that crises vary a lot, and must be managed situationally (Fors-Andrée, 2012). Therefore there is a contradiction between an organization's need to have detailed crisis communication plans and to remain adaptable for future unexpected crisis situations. The message about crises is most commonly delivered to us through a variety of media, newspapers, evening press, television or the internet. We are told daily about new crises occurring. Thus it is easy to believe that crises occur more frequently and to a greater extent today than before, and some researchers even say that this is the case (Falkheimer, Heide & Larsson, 2009). What we can concretely see is that we have an increased number of channels that distribute media content, in addition to an increase in media consumption about emergency and crisis events. Researchers accentuate that crises should not be seen as extraordinary events, but as a part of the organizations natural lifecycle. This also means that there are specific requirements in crisis preparation for a professional communicator in an organization, since communication is fundamental for all aspects of crises, and in all phases of crises (Ibid).

*“When preparing for a crisis, it is instructive to recall that Noah started building the ark before it began to rain.”*

*- Norman R. Augustine (Augustine et al, 2000, p.11)*

Preferably, organizations should attempt to prevent crises from happening, although due to the unanticipated nature of crises, planning is complex in most cases and cannot be done completely. Still, it is of great importance to work with risk planning and crisis communication exercises, to ensure a readiness within the organization (Skoglund, 2002). Traditionally, professional communicators get involved in the crisis during and after the crisis occurred. In these situations it is common to spread information about the crisis event through different media to reach mass media and other different targets. The work is also about giving warnings to and advice the public regarding how to act during a crisis situation with potential dangerous consequences. It is also important to participate in the management of the crisis and spread direct information. The work could also cover shaping communication strategies in a crisis event, an example could be to ask for forgiveness, declare empathy and even apologize.

Crisis communication is increasingly connected to leadership, and is used as a tool to control the consequences of an occurring crisis (Fors-Andrée, 2012). After a crisis, a professional communicator's work could also involve building up new relations and a new reputation, by spreading a coherent message to a variety of targets. Professor of strategic communication Jesper Falkheimer also stresses the importance of discussing the crisis internally in the organization and subsequently shaping new knowledge about how to possibly avoid similar situations in the future (Falkheimer, Heide & Larsson, 2009).

Crises can disrupt daily routines, and create a need for substitute resources. In these situations it is important to convey information, and quickly come up with functional substitute solutions. If the crisis is not managed effectively there is a risk that trust in the organization will deteriorate, and that dissatisfaction will occur (Tziantzi, Olmos, Portela & Vasta, 2012). This also applies to the information that organizations distribute during a crisis event.

Due to the unexpected nature of crises it is common that information is not available, and that the spokesperson at that moment cannot answer all the emerging issues caused by the crisis situation. Traditionally the way to handle crisis communication has been to primarily get a hold of all the information and then to communicate. Crisis communication author Jeanette Fors-Andrée (2012) describes how this is an outdated view on crisis communication, especially when it comes to crisis communication in modern times, due to that a majority have access to quick communication channels such as social media. Instead when it comes to crisis communication it is important to never wait, and instead tell that at this point of time there is no information available (Fors-Andrée, 2012). Obviously, to communicate correct information is of importance, but in situations when journalists are asking for a statement and the communicator does not have the information available, it is important to be open, and not abstain because this could be interpreted negatively. In these situations it is favorable to be active as a spokesperson and show that nothing is concealed, and that information will be communicated as soon as it is available (Ibid).

It is not possible to come up with a handbook in managing crises from beginning to an end, since there are no universal communication solutions on managing these kinds of situations. Falkheimer et al. (2009) describes that it is rather those whom encounter these situations frequently that should be considered the real experts. Solid knowledge is built through *trial-and-error*. However, it is not always apparent that this kind of knowledge and competence exists within the organization when a crisis arises. Crises are recurring situations, which is something organizations need to foresee. There is no way to ensure total security even with the most developed and well prepared crisis strategies. Sometimes crisis situations create fatal consequences for society, organization functionality and the people involved. Crises are extremely variable, but have in common a need for information and communication (Falkheimer, Heide & Larsson, 2009).

The word crisis communication describes the executed communication during a crisis event. The word *communication* is derived from the Latin word *communicare* and means “to do something together”. The word has since developed, and today the most common explanation is the transfer of information from a sender to a receiver through some kind of medium. Personal contact is considered to be the best condition for a good communication. The word crisis derives from the Greek word *krisis* and can be translated to “judgment” or “trial” (Falkheimer et al., 2009).

When describing the word crisis it is also of importance to explain the word *risk*. Risk is related to crisis and describes a potential threat, and that there is a possibility that something severe could happen. Risk is therefore the phase before the crisis occurs. We are always surrounded by risks, and the possibility that something could happen. Organizations often prepare for different kind adversities which are related to *risk planning* (Ibid). “An organizational crisis is a specific, *unexpected*, and a *nonroutine* event or series of events that create high levels of *uncertainty* and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization’s *high-priority goals*.” (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2007, s. 7).

The lapse of the crisis event is usually divided into three different phases. The proactive phase, the reactive phase and the sequel phase. The proactive phase is mainly focusing on minimizing the risk of accidents and disasters. The reactive phase is the beginning and duration of the crisis. The sequel phase focuses on getting the organization functional again and the recovery process after a crisis (Falkheimer et al, 2009). Crisis communication theory is divided into two different points of views. Traditional research believes that the sequel phase should endeavor to return to the previous organizational structure and routines. Professor of strategic communication Jesper Falkheimer also describes that crisis communication can be considered as an opportunity to reorganize and learn from previous mistakes. One example could be to start up a hotline that could be reached around-the-clock instead of only during daytime. The sequel phase is considered to be the most essential, and a lot of focus is put on evaluating and learning from prior mistakes (Ibid).

Often, a crisis affects a large number of people, depending on the size, and how it unfolds. It is common that organizations have a crisis team that works together during a crisis situation. When working in teams it is important to have a common goal in order to function, and that everybody is informed regularly regarding the situation. It is recommended that crisis teams train together, which can include practice with tools that are intended to be used during a crisis (Coombs, 2012).

Bertil Flodin, an active researcher on crisis communication, has written crisis reports for the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency<sup>1</sup>. The agency is under governmental rule and is responsible for national emergency and interstate crisis situations (Myndigheten för Samhällsskydd och Beredskap, 2015). Flodin stresses the importance of communication, and that crisis communication cannot be managed efficiently if the organization has not done the right preparatory work. Crisis situations can also reveal internal conflicts in an organization, for instance it becomes clear if the organization has a responsibility conflict. If no one in the organization acts as a spokesperson or leader, different versions of an event could be told. Flodin also mentions that in emergency situations an organization needs to be prepared to counter the increasing need for information (Flodin, 1993).

Media can be of great importance to organizations during a crisis since it portrays the situation to the outside world, which also implies that the way the media handles and receives information is crucial. Crisis theory authors Thomas Skoglund and Staffan Olsson describes (1995) how professional communicators and journalists have different motives in a crisis situation, and that this differentiation requires to have the ability to handle the media professionally. The general guidelines indicate that the most beneficial way to communicate is to be open about the situation and always tell the truth. It is important to stick to the practical information available at the time, and not speculate about consequences or impact (Ibid). Journalists often have good intentions but it happens that a difference in intentions occurs during a crisis situation between professional communicators and the media (Englund 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> MSB - Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap

Journalistic news often conflicts with crisis communication, and sometimes lacks the knowledge in crises and crisis reactions. This can create an environment where communicators and journalists have different perspectives on how to depict the situation (Brolin, Calleberg & Westrell 2011).

The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency acts as an umbrella organization over Sweden's governmental network of crisis communicators. The agency has developed similar guidelines on how to advantageously communicate when meeting with the media. The guidelines are designed as a business card, which has the purpose of being used by spokespersons, crisis leaders and professional communicators facing unexpected media encounters.

**When talking to the media do:**

- Take your time
- Think before you answer
- Keep to your own area and level of expertise
- Say if you don't know, cannot or may not answer the question
- Stick to facts
- Assume that everything is "on the record"
- Be firm, fair and honest

[www.msb.se/en](http://www.msb.se/en)

**When talking to the media do not:**

- Lie, guess or speculate
- Get upset or angry with the reporter
- Let yourself be stressed by the situation or the reporter
- Use expert language/jargon
- Discuss confidential information
- Use the expression "no comment"
- Talk about things outside your area of expertise

[www.msb.se/en](http://www.msb.se/en)

Order No. MSB500 – revised January 2012

(Myndigheten för Samhällsskydd och Beredskap, 2015<sup>1</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> Har givit tillåtelse att använda det här upphovsrättsskyddade materialet

### **2.1.1 Crisis Leadership**

Crisis leadership has become an important part of how to both plan and execute crisis management and communicating through strategy. To be a leader during ordinary times clearly differs from being a leader during a crisis. That said, a person with great leadership skills is very much able to handle a potential crisis. To understand crisis communication and crisis leadership one has to realize how young this subject is to the organizational world (Magala, 2005).

What is the difference between a manager and a leader?

- “A manager plans, organizes, and controls functions within an organization. A leader has vision and inspires others to grasp that vision, establishes corporate values, emphasizes corporate ethics and does not fear change.”

Which leadership style is the best?

- “The best (most effective) leadership style depends on the people being led and the situation. The challenge of the future will be to empower self-managed teams to manage themselves. This is a move away from autocratic leadership.”

(Nickels, McHugh, McHugh, 2002, p. 227)

The research on leadership has led to the conclusion that the concept is being suffocated and thus guided by tight theoretical frameworks. Studies on leadership should instead be more open to alternative interpretations and analyses because of the way leadership takes on different shapes for different situations. Whether a person uses a so-called cold leadership, preservation leadership or even hostile leadership style does not determine if it is good or bad. The quality of leadership is determined by the environment, the situation, and the people being led (Rombach & Ohlsson, 2013). Crisis leadership contains certain skill and knowledge depending on how various surrounding parts operate. To be a leader during crises means quicker decision-making ability, taking charge, direct delegation of tasks but also, and especially, intelligently handle the different methods through which media decide to depict the actual crisis.

It is not unusual that media try to communicate other information than what is being said by the crisis leader or crisis spokesperson and drive their agenda towards a different outcome (James & Wooten, 2010). While an organization tries to communicate the situation to the public; the media might take a different path and communicate something else. Crisis leadership means being prepared for such scenarios and the ability to turn it around and make sure the public receives the correct situational information (Mitroff, 2004).

The cornerstone of crisis leadership might just be the way a leader delegates different roles to their staff in preparation for when a crisis strikes. Crisis communication is about teamwork and knowing one's specific duty, as to why certain roles play a big part of the outcome. Knowing one's role as a leader and at the same time understanding the staff's roles is key to building a well-functioning crisis communication group (James & Wooten, 2010). In order to do this, the people involved need to have formed a working relationship and mutual trust. Without trust, crisis leadership falls apart from step one. A crisis situation is when one's ability to communicate effectively is being challenged to its limits. Having built a crisis group with a high level of trust between leader and staff will provide the needed tools to execute an effective crisis communication system (Skoglund, 2002).

## 2.2 Intercultural Competence in Crisis Communication

*“As inhabitants of this post-millennium world, you no longer have a choice about whether to live and communicate with people from many cultures. Your only choice is whether you will learn to do it well.”* (Lustig & Koester, 2013, p. 1).

As fascinating as this quote is, it particularly applies for people living in the Western world. Due to the quick globalization, the spectrum of communication has changed the way we operate and it has also put pressure on organizations to develop a broader communicative profile (Lustig & Koester, 2013). This naturally creates a vital need for intercultural competence, which translates into the understanding and knowledge for other cultures and their respective languages (both verbal and non-verbal), religious values and routines.

In the same way organizations can lose clients or members because of created misunderstandings due to a low level of intercultural competence, organizations can lose clients or members because their adaptation for intercultural understanding during a crisis does not meet the expectations of their audience (Brinkman & van Weerdenburg, 2014).

All organizations work in order to fulfil some kind of purpose, in which effectiveness plays some or greater part. Hence, intercultural competence works hand in hand with the ability to be interculturally effective – to be able to resolve problems and accomplish purposes together with people from other cultures, so to speak (Brinkman & van Weerdenburg, 2014).

The organizational world is filled with different organizational cultures. Organizations prioritize different kinds of values and strategies, use different kinds of code languages or are hierarchically set up differently. Many organizations are also benefitting from a wide range of diversity in personnel due to globalization. Irrespective of organizational structure, organizations in the modern world are somehow globally connected, either within the organization or through a culturally diverse customer base (Brinkmann & van Weerdenburg, 2014). Intercultural competence is a qualification starting to be taken seriously and definitely one that will be considered as central in the world of modern communication.

Few parts of this particular competence can be developed without one's knowledge about one's own culture, which often develops during interaction with other cultures. Intercultural competence is also about acknowledging your own culture's advantages and disadvantages in order to compare them to other cultures, understand different perspectives of values, behaviour and routines and what is being appreciated or not (Magala, 2005). Intercultural competence increases flexibility and ability to solve both minor and major problems. It also increases the flexibility of behaviour for a certain purpose or situation in order to have a successful outcome in a crisis situation (Brinkmann & van Weerdenburg, 2014).

## 2.3 Social Media and Internet Publishing in Crisis Communication

Many organizations use different kinds of social media in their ways of communicating, and when it comes to communicating crisis messages, the use of social media is increasing (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013). One example is the social media platform Twitter, that is expanding to a greater extent to be an interactive news source channel of information on actual events and during crisis situations (Spence, Lachlan, Lin & Greco, 2015). When it comes to communicating a crisis message, it is of importance to reach out quickly and have a steady channel of information to those affected by the situation. Social media gives organizations the ability to frequently update and communicate messages, as well the privilege for individuals to respond and establish a dialogue with the organization. (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013).

*“Using social media to communicate risk have several advantages. Because the audience chooses to engage in a conversation about the risk, their level of interest is high, and for care and crisis communication, that interest might translate into willingness to change behavior that improves health and safety.”* (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013, p. 125)

Social media is to a great extent involved in people’s daily routines, and is therefore a natural way to access information quickly and frequently (Westlund & Marina Ghersetti 2014). Social media is also a rapid way to communicate, and information continuously be updated. This creates a way to have an ongoing two-way conversation between stakeholders and the organization during a crisis situation (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013). A notable disadvantage when using social media in crisis communication is that in most cases social media pages requires the follower to find the actual page, and subscribe or follow to receive updated information. Using social media to communicate a crisis message is frequently used, although when it comes to crisis training and risk management training, instruction on how to use social media in an effective way rarely occurs (Freberg, Saling, Vidoloff & Eosco 2013).

Social media generally have three main purposes when it comes to crisis communication: share information, maintain a dialogue with stakeholders, and monitor how the perception of the crisis changes (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013). When it comes to sharing information in crisis events, relevant information from a third party source can be brought to stakeholders. During a crisis event it may also be necessary to reach out to a bigger crowd of people in an area. An organization can create posts and encourage stakeholders to share the information during a crisis situation. Social media researchers have different opinions when it comes to having an open comment section or not, due to the risk of negative comments influencing the page representation. Ideally an open comment section provides an opportunity to get quick feedback and creates a sense of credibility, but requires that a person is available to actively respond to incoming feedback (Ström 2010). Depending on the scale of the number of users, the comment field can also become unmanageable (Clapperton, 2009).

It is also important to have in mind that using a social media platform as a forum includes responsibility over what is being written in the forum. An organization is responsible, by the Swedish BBS-law (The Law on Responsibility for Electronic Bulletin Boards)<sup>1</sup> to oversee, remove, and to appropriately secure measures when it comes to offensive comments on one's own media platform (Forsman, 2011). Social media also gives the opportunity to ask questions, receive information and monitor changes in perception. An example of this is aid organizations that use Facebook as a way of collecting information regarding on what is needed during and after a crisis situation has occurred (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013).

Depending on the situation, it is in some cases important to take time to seek information regarding what people need, how they think or their perception of the crisis situation. Here, the use of social media could be beneficial, due to its accessibility to the public. In some situations it could be as easy as reflecting over how, and what in what way the dialogue is expressed in the comment section. It is also important to note that the majority of all people who visit the page do not leave a comment or take the time to give feedback (Clapperton 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> Lagen om ansvar för elektroniska anslagstavlor (1998:112)

In several cases the sender is never assured if the message arrives or not due to other circumstances, especially when it comes to emergency communication, which must reach the people that are concerned, this is a problem. All people are not always available, and even if the message reaches the recipient it is not always perceived as intended (Hallin & Hallström, 2003). Thus communications in these situations need a reply, to assure that the right information has reached the right person in the right way. Otherwise information is sent out, in the hope of reaching as many of the concerned individuals as possible (Ibid).

### 3 Intention of the Thesis

Through this research, we aim to highlight the knowledge from key figures within the Swedish network of crisis communicators, and compare the empirical data with established theories within the field. Our perspective will be on how crisis communication is affected by a multi-cultural and multi-lingual society. To further the study, we will add crisis leadership and the use of social media during a crisis as our sub-theories to crisis communication.

In light of our own research, we try to grasp the complexity that is crisis communication. Through our key figures expertise and experience, we aim to add undiscovered or undervalued elements to an effective crisis communication in order to broaden the organizational awareness of crisis communication. By going through previous research on the subject, our hypothesis is that crisis communication is still being executed reactively. That many organizations believe that a well-functioned everyday leadership can simply be applicable in a crisis situation. We think that organizations today believe themselves to have reached a stage of an effective crisis communication, where organizations feel prepared for a potential crisis in a multi-cultural, multi-lingual society. We also think that organizations use social media platforms to a large extent for an effective crisis communication.

#### 3.1 Research Questions

- What, according to the interviewed key figures should be included in an effective crisis communication, and how should an effective crisis communication plan be designed?
- To what extent is intercultural competence prioritized and necessary during a crisis situation according to the thesis key figures?
- According to the key figures expertise and experience, in which ways is social media platforms and internet publishing used for communication during a crisis situation?

## 4 Method

This chapter provides an explanation for the chosen methods employed for the thesis. An empirical investigation was made in order to be able to extract empirical data from thirteen profound interviews. A theory testing approach was chosen in order to be able to contribute to the theoretical knowledge within our field. The process of this thesis started by choosing to divide our thesis into three interactive theories that also functioned as our main themes. This decision was made to create consistency and clarity throughout the entire thesis, which made it possible to see contemporary issues regarding crisis communication.

### 4.1 Qualitative Interviews

The focus on the empirical gathering for this bachelor thesis was based on 13 qualitative interviews. The interviews took approximately one hour each, and the time was spent both speaking openly about crisis communication and delving deeper into the main themes of the thesis. Ten of the thirteen interviews were face-to-face meetings at the interviewee's office or workplace. The remaining interviews have been conducted through video link or telephone by request of the interviewee. The interviews were conducted with active professional communicators, and individuals involved in crises and crisis communication in different parts of the field. All interviewees had a crucial role when it comes to influencing an organization's communication in crisis situations. The interviewees work with crisis communication on a regular basis, and were therefore considered to have good knowledge in the subject. This has been done to be able to examine the different approaches to crisis communication in the different branches of society. We also hoped to be able to examine different cases that were brought up during the interviews, in which the interviewees had been active in. The interviews for this thesis were performed semi-structurally to provide the possibility of asking supporting following questions, and at the same time originated from a predetermined questionnaire (Alvesson, 2011). In this thesis, interviews were done with one interviewee at a time. It is usually one or a few individuals who is most suited for an interview and has expert knowledge of the subject in an organization (Ibid).

The reason the majority of interviews were done by face-to-face appointments with people at their own workplaces was to take advantage of the information that being on-site provides. It also provided us the opportunity to confabulate with interviewees both before and after the interview took place (Ekström & Larsson, 2010). This was an active decision since the thesis is based on profound knowledge from professionals who have worked with crisis communication and experienced several cases. To personally meet up with the interviewee for an interview created a more informative environment, and it is more natural for the interviewee to take time to think about the questions asked (Jacobsen, 1993).

There are multiple viewpoints on how qualitative interviews should be done, one of them is *new positivism*, which is an approach where the researcher structures interviews and values neutrality, and does not relate personally with the interviewee. A different view is *romanticism* that unlike new positivism values a personal connection to the interviewee. Believing that through genuine connection and interest to the interviewee, researchers can obtain more profound and relevant information. By establishing a situation where the interviewee can feel free and easy to talk, the interview can reach a deeper level (Alvesson 2011). This thesis was based on the viewpoint of romanticism, and has intentionally been executed in this manner due to the profound nature of the interviews. This also gave the possibility to make the meeting a genuine experience which lead to a deeper empirical return from the interviewee.

The interviews were divided into three different phases – the beginning, middle and the end phase. In the beginning phase the focus was on establishing a relation with the interviewee, and to explain what the interview was about in more detail. In the middle phase the interviewee got to respond freely to the issues and themes introduced by us researchers. Questions were based on the questionnaire and if relevant, following questions were asked to get a general understanding if additional themes were found (Ekström & Larsson, 2010). In the end phase, the interviewees were asked if they had something to add, and if they wanted to recommend someone else who could be relevant and could contribute with an interview for this thesis. This method is called *snowball selection* and is based on the interviewee's tips and advice about other people who are valuable to the research. (Alvesson 2011).

For this thesis, interviewees were partially selected through snowball selection, but also through own personal selection of relevant interviewees. As a result of the chosen method of finding interviewees, we came in contact with experts within both the private and public sector. We made an active choice not to make a delimitation of one specific sector due to the possibility of noticing differences between the two sectors.

The interviews were conducted with a recorder, together with a notepad to highlight the essential theme. This decision was made to not distract the conversation by simultaneously writing, and to have full focus on the interviewee during the conversation. Another benefit of using a recorder was to have the possibility to extract exact quotes from the interviewees afterwards. It was also beneficial to be able to listen through the interview again, if questions arose (Brinkmann & Steinar, 2015).

The interviews were conducted with the thesis main themes in mind. The analytical method has been thematization of the collected empirical data, where resemblances and differential themes have been found throughout the transcribed texts from the interviews (Ekström & Larsson 2010). All quotes were translated from Swedish to English. We also decided to erase any sort of spoken language and noise from the quotes that we considered irrelevant in order to make the text easy to read.

## 4.2 Method Criticism

One can argue that the total number of interviewees is too few but one also has to consider the range of different cases, individuals and organizations that were being covered during these 13 qualitative interviews. By conversing with professional communicators around the country, the research covered far more than only 13 specific crisis situations or organizations. There is no way to put an exact number of discussed cases of effective or ineffective crisis communication situations for the various organizations covered during the interviews. However, the range covered a broad field of both expertise and experience.

Due to the choice of snowball selection for interviewees we hoped to reach some sort of research saturation, meaning the interviewees mention people we either will have or wanted to interview. The same goes for where the research ends, meaning the point where we did not receive any new or unique answers from the interviewees – therefore, the research comes to an end when the thesis questions could be answered. One can argue that the choice of selecting Jeanette Fors Andrée as an interviewee while also using her own previous research as part of our theory is a conflict of interest. Motivating this choice was by acknowledging her status as one of Sweden's most prolific crisis communicators today. Her expertise as an interviewee did not interfere with how this thesis used her as an author of crisis communication theory. Nor did her answers affect the other interviews due to the fact that interview was chosen to be the last one executed.

The choice of writing this thesis in English was threefold. Primarily, the majority of previous research within this particular field has been written in English. Secondly, we wanted to challenge ourselves and immerse our linguistic knowledge. Additionally, more people will be able to read this thesis, thus we contribute new information to a broader audience.

We considered the risk of missing out on potential empirical data by dividing the thesis and interview questionnaire into three interacting themes before the interviews took place. However, by doing qualitative semi-structured interviews, we were able to cover a broad spectrum of information. The thematization functioned only as a guideline during the interview, but the conversations were never set to certain themes or theories. Therefore, our pre-determined themes did not force the interviews in a pre-desired direction.

As a result of the choice of snowball selection of interviewees, the writing of this thesis has included some travelling. This has meant visiting the cities of Kalmar, Malmö, Gotland, Stockholm and Oskarshamn. One can argue that too much time has been spent travelling, but in return, the thesis has been filled with people who live for crisis management and effective crisis communication. Also, in return, we hoped to learn a lot by visiting work places of professional communicators in different areas of the country.

We would also like to emphasise the importance of our non-existent relationship to our interviewees. In no way could our approach, interview questions or interpretations of the answers be challenged because of a pre-existent personal contact with the persons we have interviewed. This solidified our ethical behaviour towards our thesis by eliminating feelings and biases that could naturally interfere with our analytical work.

### 4.3 Research Ethics

As authors, we have been taking the research ethics guidelines from the Swedish Research Council<sup>1</sup> into account when writing this thesis. This has been done to create a bachelor thesis with high scientific quality, and to work in a research ethical way with the personal information that has been handled regarding the interviewees.

The interviewees have been informed on beforehand about the intention and the theme of the thesis, and that they are participating voluntarily, and have the right to call off their participation at any chosen time (Vetenskapsrådet, 2015). The thesis also takes into account whether the interviewee wanted to be anonymous or not be open about what organization he or she is working for. Since all interviewees wanted to be open about the organization or company they worked for, the thesis is open with this information for scientific credibility.

The people that participated in the interviews had independent right to decide how long, and in what condition they wanted to participate, and if there was a will to be removed afterwards it has not been questioned. As authors of this thesis we are aware that all information that we have been given regarding individual personal information that is vulnerable have been kept in absolute professional secrecy. All information in this thesis from the participating interviewees regarding personal information been kept unreachable from third party individuals. Personal information has not been extradited without the permission of the individuals own permission. All empirical data that has been collected has only been used for research purposes and not for other non-scientific purposes (Vetenskapsrådet, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Vetenskapsrådet

## 5 Empirical data & Analysis

This chapter will provide the results from the interviews along with our analytical views toward the answers we have received connected to the theoretical framework. Firstly, we will present our interviewees by name, organization and professional experience. Secondly, we have decided to divide this chapter into the three theories that form our thesis questions and present the results and our analytical viewpoints from the interviews in connection to the related theory. It is also of importance to note that all quotations from interviewees have been translated from Swedish into English.

### 5.1 Interviewees

- **Anna-Karin Härensjö**

CEO and Founder of *KR Gruppen - Intercultural Communication & Management consulting*. Fields of expertise: Special Intercultural Communication, Cultural Awareness and Leading Multicultural Teams.

- **Annica Nilsson**

Professional Communicator at Nyköping municipality<sup>1</sup>, and seven years of experience as a Professional Communicator at Nyköping Rescue Services.

- **Christer Stoltz**

Crisis Response Manager at Gotland municipality<sup>2</sup>.

- **Christina Karlberg**

Head of Department of Communications at Kalmar municipality<sup>3</sup>, and responsible for the connection between Kalmar municipality and Kalmar Rescue Services.

- **Christina Åqvist**

CEO at Elfa AB and Deputy Sales & Marketing Director and active CEO during the termination at Elfa AB in 2015.

- **Eva Norling**

HR Manager at Elfa AB, and active HR Manager during the termination at Elfa AB in 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> Nyköpings kommun

<sup>2</sup> Region Gotland

<sup>3</sup> Kalmar kommun

- **Inger Frendel**

Strategic developer in crisis communication and coordination at the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency – MSB. Previous experiences as Head of Section at Government Offices<sup>1</sup>.

- **Jeanette Fors-Andrée**

Crisis Management and Communication Consultant and author of crisis communication literature: “När drevet går – krishantering i praktiken” (2015), ”Praktisk kriskommunikation” (2013) and ”Modern kriskommunikation” (2012).

- **Kerstin Melin**

Process and communication specialist at Swedbank and a part of the Swedbank IT-department crisis management team between 1995-2012. Communication specialist during the fire at Swedbank in 2008.

- **Krister Kappel**

Reverend at the Church of Järfälla. Active crisis manager during the Tsunami catastrophe in 2004. Participated in the crisis management group during the termination at Elfa AB in 2015.

- **Lars Bäckman**

14 years of experience as Head of communications at The Country Administrative Board of Gotland<sup>2</sup>, and active Diocese communicator at Visby Diocese during the medial crisis in 2015.

- **Lars Olofsson**

Professional communicator at Oskarshamn municipality<sup>3</sup>, with experience from the Avian influenza and managing the media during crisis situations.

- **Pia Jansäter**

Communication and crisis expert at Jansäter Kommunikation AB.

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<sup>1</sup> Regeringskansliet

<sup>2</sup> Länsstyrelsen Gotlands län

<sup>3</sup> Oskarshamn kommun

## 5.2 Crisis Communication

As we have stated earlier, it is important to understand that crisis communication is vital for an effective crisis management effort (Coombs, 2012). The theory of crisis communication depends on several components in order to function effectively. During a crisis, the aim is to merge management and communication into a process where general guidelines complement improvisation and situational decisions (Fors-Andrée, 2012).

*“When I started working for the County Administrative Board of Gotland in 1999, we had a crisis communication plan that was very extensive. With a level of detail that was absolutely incredible. Predetermined rooms where we would sit, bunkers with included telephone lines, accessible computers, special software that we would use to communicate, and long telephone lists of people that should be contacted. When I finished 14 years later in 2015 the crisis communication plan was only three sheets of papers.”*

- Lars Bäckman, Diocese communicator at Visby Diocese

The quote emphasizes what Falkheimer et al. (2009), says about how modern crisis communication has developed from specific, detailed crisis communication plans into more general crisis communication plans. This development was also acknowledged by a majority of the interviewees. This change has been necessary due to a crisis situational character. One can wonder why an organization would need to develop an exact plan for a crisis, when every crisis has its own peculiar complications. As the progression clearly points to more general crisis communication plans, the development is going in the right direction, according to the interviewees perspectives on how to progress within the crisis communication area. As Skoglund (2002) describes the importance of planning and preparing for a crisis, it is worth noting that due to the unanticipated nature of crises the preparation cannot be complete.

One of our questions before this research started was about how or if one can speak in terms of normative character when it comes to crisis communication plans. The result showed an undisputed belief that normative terms can be used in the proactive stage of a crisis. General guidelines are very important in the way it ought to complement the following reactive decisions.

Elfa AB has been in the process of terminating the employment of 80 people, a decision that was made far in advance by the main concern. This is what CEO Chrisina Åqvist and HR Manager Eva Norling had to say about the pre crisis phase – “Because of the decision being made from the top and in advance we have had a lot of time for preparation. We have prepared through role-playing and by rehearsing potential scenarios between us and the employees. We felt well-prepared but in the end one can never know which questions are going to be asked or which new problems will arise. We focused on the most exposed groups of people and then started communicating there. We also had to communicate heavily with the labour union because it affected them a lot too.” Every single interviewee stressed the possible consequences of relying too much on a normative behaviour in the reactive stage. Detailed crisis communication plans are of no use at the time the crisis hit due to every crisis unique character. All interviewees explained how crisis communication and its shape being general or specific has changed historically. They all agreed crisis communication is a broad spectrum, some kept telling us about the complications of the so called organizational network. It could be the network of local organizations that co-operates before, during and after a crisis situation or it could be collaborations between the private and public sector, between authorities and local municipalities.

This is the stage of the interviews where the conversations covered what people call network. In the interviewees eyes, that is organizational networks, when organizations and authorities come together as a unit to overcome a crisis situation. The interviewees from the public sector were well aware about how serving this co-operation contributes to an effective crisis communication, exemplifying the importance of a healthy relationship with local sporting associations and different religious communities to name a few. In this network, one can find competence and information that often is of important use during a crisis.

One of the fundamentals of an effective crisis communication is external monitoring<sup>1</sup> (Falkheimer et al. 2009), which is not at all stated as a priority according to the majority of the interviewees. External monitoring has major advantages when it comes to understanding the situation and one's surroundings. The only interviewee who worked actively with external monitoring was Inger Frenzel at The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency. The most common reason for not doing external monitoring was either a lack of resources or time, especially on a municipality level.

The results regarding questions about the theory of crisis communication are broad, yet similar. Answers and opinions point to the importance of everyone in an organization knowing its basic values in order to react and respond in line with those basic values. This common understanding, said the majority of the interviewees, provides the ability to carry a certain role into a crisis situation with the feeling of confidence and security. This subject is being connected to the difference between internal and external communication, interviewees said. Basic value is being formed and sprouted within an organization, hence the importance of internal communication. According to the interviewees, external crisis communication relies on how well-developed the internal communication is.

Intercultural communication consultant Anna-Karin Härensjö said that if the crisis communication is written, it has to be simple and almost overly transparent. She also mentioned the importance of imagery and we quote her - "The Red Cross Organization was developing an imagery in order to explain the importance of vaccination for children. The imagery showed three pictures where the first one portrayed a sick child, the second one a hypodermic needle and the third one a happy child. The problem here was a lack of intercultural competence, hence the ignorant campaign in an area of Africa where most people are muslim. And how do muslims read? That is correct, from right to left. Do you see the problem?"

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<sup>1</sup> Omvärldsbevakning

For this particular problem, intercultural competence would have prevented such a huge misunderstanding. The general feedback from this campaign was utmost negative and started chaos within the area. This proves that even one of the largest NGO:s<sup>1</sup> in the world (International Federation of Red Cross, 2015) sometimes lack the basic intercultural competence for an effective crisis communication. This also indicates that basic intercultural understanding is missing in the most evident cases. Thus, one can understand the complications of developing a deeper intercultural competence within minor organizations. This problem also highlights the interconnection between an effective crisis communication and intercultural competence, and the fact that they are dependent on each other in modern societies.

A stage that is often forgotten in crisis communication theory is the sequal phase, where analysis and evaluation are fundamental routines for development. Only one interviewee was able to say that their sequal phase process was regarded as vital and that was reverend Krister Kappel. Another perspective was that the sequal phase often is ignored due to human behaviour and we quote professional communicator Annica Nilsson – “There is a sense of bad conscience when it comes to post-crisis work and evaluating the previous crisis management effort. Suddenly it is business as usual but we have to realize our responsibility here. I think someone needs to be in charge of this process alone but at the same time I feel it is human behaviour to move on after a crisis. You sort of want to forget because of the intensive pace during a crisis. Someone needs to be responsible for the sequal phase and both evaluate and analyse the outcome in order for the organization to implement new, improved routines for future crises.”

Both Falkheimer et al. (2009) and Fors-Andrée (2012) stresses the importance of the sequal phase of a crisis. Since it is during this particular phase when an organization ought to take the opportunity of evaluating and analysing the crisis communication effort. By ignoring this phase, an organization misses the opportunity of potentially see the crisis as something of a positive change. An organization also ignores what was being done ineffectively and if one does not learn from experience and thus implement the improvements, one will fail again in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Non-Governmental Organization (Icke-Statlig Organisation)

Crisis Response Manager Christer Stoltz describes that Gotland municipality uses what is called the Unified Message System, which is a communication tool that makes it possible to send out crisis messages to a geographical area through text messages based on addresses. Another information distribution system all professional communicators interviewed on a municipal level uses is EAS<sup>1</sup> (Emergency Alert System), which is a system to convey community information through traditional media channels.

Stoltz stressed that crisis communication plans needs to be general due to the unexpected nature of crises, a statement with which professional communicator Lars Olofsson at Oskarshamn municipality also concurs. Oskarshamn municipality also has a similar approach to media communication plans and uses the general guidelines from the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency when facing sudden media interruptions. Professional communicator Christina Karlberg at Kalmar municipality describes a change from specific crisis communication plans regarding crisis events like forest fires, oil spills, major fires and other specific events, to general crisis communication plans. The change was made after the Tsunami catastrophe 2004 which opened the eyes of the need for general emergency plans.

Case: In 2006, one of the major media topics was the Avian influenza<sup>2</sup>, also called “The Bird Flu”. A large media coverage focused on Oskarshamn after a bird watcher had discovered two dead wild ducks. Already the following day the issue drew attention to the media. During this event Olofsson’s role as a professional communicator for Oskarshamn municipality was to focus on delivering as truthful information as possible to journalists in Oskarshamn. Olofsson explained that this was easiest done with the reporters that had pre-existing knowledge of the situation, and did not speculate about the issue. Another event magnified the medial attention even more, when a dead bird was found outside the company Scania in Oskarshamn. This resulted in several articles in newspapers with headlines such as "In two weeks the infection reaches Stockholm", with attached images on rescue service personnel moving the bird in heavy protective gear in a cordoned off area.

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<sup>1</sup> VMA - Viktigt meddelande till allmänheten

<sup>2</sup> Fågelinfluensan

In both scenarios none of the birds actually were infected. Olofsson explained that media attention can develop rapidly, and because of only a few aggressive articles a medial domino effect can arise. Olofsson explained that the most important aspect as a professional communicator for Oskarshamn municipality during this media crisis was to re-address the journalists to specific spokespersons. By using expert spokespersons who have knowledge, and do not speculate about the issue, they were able to create a media image based on veracity.

As mentioned in the theory chapter, Englund (2002) writes that journalists often have good intentions but it happens that a difference of intention occurs during a crisis situation between professional communicators and the media. This aspect is also mentioned by Brolin et al. (2011), who describe how the media in most cases know less about the crisis situation in the reactive phase. Thus, a journalist can either chose to go with what the professional communicator says or to depict the situation based on looser facts.

Gotland municipality and Visby diocese co-operates together in a crisis network called GOTSA on Gotland, where they go through crisis communication and practice of crisis management, which also involves major organizations such as the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency.

Both Oskarshamn municipality and Kalmar municipality are connected through a nuclear district because of the nuclear power plant OKB in Oskarshamn. The network includes 12 municipalities, Kalmar County Council<sup>1</sup>, The Swedish Coast Guard<sup>2</sup>, The Swedish Armed<sup>3</sup> Forces and the private organizations EON and OKG. In the network, one of the branches is a team of crisis communicators that meets four times a year to practice, discuss proactively and to create a like-minded approach.

Olofsson stressed that it is easier to manage physical crises regarding informing the media, compared to crises based on trust. This was also confirmed by other interviewees, when they explained that crises based on trust creates a complex environment and can hurt an organization from within on a deeper level.

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<sup>1</sup> Landstinget i Kalmar Län

<sup>2</sup> Kustbevakningen

<sup>3</sup> Försvarsmakten

Case: In february 2015 a large trust and medial crisis hit Visby diocese. It occurred when the bishop made a decision in the cathedral chapter<sup>1</sup> that a priest once again should get back his priest collar to be able to exercise his priesthood (Svenska Kyrkan, 2015). His right to be a priest was removed 2007 after he was confirmed having sexual relations with two girls in the early teens, that he had been the leader of during their catechist period. The decision got immense internal criticism, medial attention in newspapers and on social media (Kyrkans Tidning, 2015). A major part of the criticism also came from within the Church of Sweden. The criticism was unexpected, and Visby diocese had to respond to the crisis situation while being completely unprepared. Bäckman stressed the importance of proactive work in these situations regarding the confrontation of potential criticism, and that in cases like this, crisis communication solely focuses on harm reduction. It is also important to face the internal criticism within the organization.

### **5.2.1 Crisis Leadership**

First of all, to be a crisis leader and a crisis spokesperson is not the same thing although it could be the same role in some organizations. As Fors-Andrée (2012) states in her book about modern crisis communication, leadership during crises is increasingly connected to an effective crisis communication. The interviewees spoke many times about leadership attributes and the majority mentioned that the crisis communication strategy starts with the leadership. Inger Frenzel, who works as a Strategic developer in crisis communication and coordination at the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, where specific roles during a crisis are very important, said this about crisis leadership and a crisis spokesperson – “We have a staff organization that is very strict, with distinctive roles and assignments that we rehearse on a weekly basis. Also, it is about how we co-operate within the management team. It is not enough having good leadership attributes if one is not prepared for a crisis. For example, Uddas (Lars-Göran Uddholm, Incident Commander during inter alia the Tsunami disaster and the Fire in Västmanland) becomes one with the audience and people trust him and what he says.

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<sup>1</sup> Domkapitel

Many times, crisis leadership is personally bound. To be humble, secure and combine that with an emphatic ability is extremely important in order to lead a crisis communication process. However, do not forget that an effective crisis leadership also lies in which preconditions one gives the leader to lead. Add to that the power of mandate, especially during the reactive phase of a crisis.”

When a crisis emerges organizations often need to find new approaches to manage the new situation. This often affect the allocation of roles during the crisis compared to normal organizational culture. Stoltz therefore stressed that the most important aspect when it comes to crisis communication is to rehearse frequently, and that it is through training that self-confidence is built up to cope with real crisis situation.

Olofsson emphasized that leadership during crises is alpha and omega, and due to this it is sometimes necessary to replace leaders during a crisis situation to provide the conditions for good communication. If so, it is important that this process is made instantly, and does not affect the trust for the “role” as a leader of the staff. Several attributes is important for a leader in crisis situations. Olofsson explained that a leader should be a good listener, be able to build trust, stick to factual perspectives and to be in the “centre” of the crisis communication team.

*“Decisiveness is not the same as to ensure that things happen, it is to control that the right things happen when the right things should happen.”*

- Lars Olofsson, Professional communicator at Oskarshamn municipality

Karlberg stressed that an advantageous crisis leadership has the attributes to be stress-resistant and transparent, while Bäckman stated that a crisis leader’s most important task is to see which groups that needs to be informed. Also, you have failed if the organization's own employees are forgotten. Bäckman therefore explained that internal crisis information is an important aspect of external crisis communication. As associate Professor Björn Rombach and Senior Professor Östen Ohlsson (2013) writes, being a leader during a crisis event requires a way of intelligently handling media.

Other beneficial leader characteristics are the ability to make quick decisions and take charge of the situation. It becomes evident that beneficial leader characteristics are several but distinct when talking to the interviewees. The tendencies we can see is that the general favourable characteristics that the interviewees mentions are to cope with unexpected situations and be able to see the whole organization from a helicopter perspective.

Case: In 2008 a fire started at Swedbanks IT department in Stockholm by unknown reason. The fire was difficult to extinguish and lasted for two days, due to the fact it was based in the attic of the building and because of the complex construction of the roof. The crisis affected approximately 1,000 employees at Swedbank who could not reach their workplace. Even though the amount of affected employees was high, the crisis only affected the company internally. Process and communication specialist Kerstin Melin who was part of the internal crisis management team at Swedbank described that the main issue for the crisis communication was to inform employees that they should not go to work. During this crisis, the internal crisis communication plan could not be utilized because no one in the crisis team was able to reach their workplace. In this case the organization had not planned for a crisis that hit their own building, hence the inability to reach their own crisis communication plan.

The team developed a temporary crisis office, where they set up an automatic answering machine which employees could call to get updated information regarding the situation. When the fire started, everyone in the crisis team was extremely committed, Melin said, but due to the team having no proactive training in crisis management shift work they quickly became exhausted after the first day.

*“When the fire started, the staff was so committed that they did not want to go home, and when you have worked for more than 24 hours it is difficult to think clearly and make the right decisions. The team leader was forced to order people to go home and sleep. An example was a man in the team that walked out of the building on his way home, and went in the wrong direction since he had lost his sense of direction due to the intensive hours of work.”*

- Kersin Melin, Process and communication specialist at Swedbank

### 5.3 Intercultural Competence in Crisis Communication

The concept of intercultural competence is a modern way of understanding, interpreting and analysing other cultural characteristics. It did not take long after our open question about this was answered with sighs, shameful regret and a distinct realization of its ignored importance. The immediate responses from the majority of the interviewees after their first reaction is to talk about language and the need for dissemination of information in more languages than Swedish and English. The reason for this becomes clear when some of them explained that the communication and messages in only a few languages in a multi-cultural society causes a major loss in reaching an organization's target audiences. One of the interviewees rhetorically asks if organizations or authorities should let people die or get hurt just because of their linguistic inability.

As stated in the beginning of this chapter, we interviewed one person with expert knowledge within the field of intercultural communication and competence in order to delve deeper into the intercultural aspect of crisis communication. Her answers differ a lot from the answers of professional communicators since her work assignments is about educating employees in intercultural competence. She explained in detail what the concept consists of and how it brings a new outlook on an organization's crisis communication.

First of all, an individual or a company needs to have a genuine interest and curiousness to learn and absorb knowledge about other cultures. Secondly, when one has learned and added new knowledge, the stages of decoding, analysing and setting up strategies come in. However helpful basic knowledge about other cultures may be, an organization's aim ought to be directed to the latter stages. This is where we saw the interviewees take different paths depending on their field of work. Interviewees who work within the public sector used words such as knowledge, language and simple messages while interviewees within the private sector used words such as profitability, adaptability, resources and strategy.

All interviewees within the public sector verified the complications of trying to develop a deeper intercultural competence while having very few resources. On the other hand, interviewees within the private sector were more inclined to spend money and time on developing a deeper intercultural competence in order to be more profitable. This was also confirmed by Härensjö, who has educated and lectured employees in intercultural competence in over 200 different organizations whereof half have been abroad. In order to reach the latter stages of intercultural competence one has to be able to draw conclusions from knowledge such as population, area, religion and so forth. How these components connect and determines different patterns for a certain culture defines the analytical stage, wherefrom one can set up, for example, a crisis communication strategy.

Without any hesitation, all interviewees confessed the necessity for a much developed intercultural communication and competence while stating the complications of adapting and adjusting information during the very short time frame that a crisis presents. Often, there is not enough time to elaborate or design distinct messages in the main language. A few interviewees then questioned the ability to customize information after language and culture. All interviewees were clear regarding the general interest for intercultural competence but somehow the conversation ended at the point where interest ought to transform into initiative and actually doing something about it. Evidently, the interviewees strongly believed that intercultural competence is a very important part of an effective crisis communication as the majority of them pointed to the multi-cultural society as of today.

In the end, many of them said, crisis communication in a multi-cultural society comes down to analysing and adjusting to cultural perspectives and intercultural patterns. Here, most conversations switched back to applying intercultural competence to the proactive stage of a crisis. There is simply no time for this concept when the crisis strikes, however it ought to be implemented and integrated into the everyday work process. In this case, the majority of interviewees said, organizations need to employ people who are scheduled to have these assignments as part of his or her work title. To add the development and education of intercultural competence to an employees already existing tasks will prove to marginalize an effective crisis communication.

A majority of the interviewed professional communicators at a municipality level explained that intercultural competence have not been prioritized during crisis situations or during crisis practice sessions. The main focus when discussing the issue is language barriers. The need for translated information is an internal debate when it comes to crisis communication since translated information in most cases takes more time due to the hiring process of third party interpreters. As someone who has worked as a professional crisis communication consultant, Pia Jansäter said this about the issue, and we quote her – “No, there is no time for adapting one’s crisis communication in the reactive stage due to the current multi-cultural society we live in. On the other hand I see organizations that have a multi-cultural employee base being more respectful to the concept of developing a deeper intercultural competence. Municipality organizations are very low-educated here och sometimes I hear that they have not even thought about it.”

No other quotation better reflects the interviewees answers regarding intercultural competence than when one interviewee said – “Oh, please. Do not ask questions about languages again.” Not only does this quote describes the exact path the interviewees go when asked about the concept of intercultural competence (the language path). It also describes that they are well aware of the problem and although they are working on developing it, they have not reached a satisfactory stage.

One of the biggest questions Oskarshamn municipality face regarding modern crisis communication is to find people who have knowledge in the needed language during a crisis situation. Olofsson expressed that groups that have special needs during a crisis are secondary prioritized, and when it comes to language barriers the problem is in most cases solved with relevant people from external organizations. Oskarshamn municipality have the closest interpreter service in Västervik, which means the crisis communication process will lose precious time. Thus, the interpreter service is seldom used during crises. For multi-lingual web-information, Oskarshamn municipality uses the tool Google Translate to translate the local authority information. This shows that the interest for multi-lingual information exists, but only to the extent of using free software.

Karlberg acknowledged that intercultural competence is important, and described that an absence of the needed knowledge exists within the organization. First priority for Kalmar municipality is the language barriers. When it comes to translating the information it is often problematic to get the same message in Swedish meaning the exact same thing in another language. An example Karlberg mentioned is the great difference between the messages "Do not drink the water" and "It is fatal to drink the water".

Case: The fire in Berga Centrum: In October 2011 a fire started with an arson in Berga Centrum, and then spread to central stores in the area that rapidly went ignited. The following day the fire could be extinguished by Rescue Services<sup>1</sup>, but Kalmar municipality chose to continue to provide information and be available on site because of the concerned citizens in the area, and an remaining need for information due to the arson situation. The fire affected a neighborhood in Kalmar which is to a large extent multi-cultural, which complicated the crisis communication for Kalmar Municipality that usually only provide crisis information in Swedish. Kalmar municipality has agreements with interpreters, but this process takes time and often delays the information. Kalmar municipality often collaborates with the Church of Sweden in crisis contexts, but seldom have interaction with other Religious Communities. Karlberg described that this may be due to that it is easier to follow the old communication habits.

Bäckman have during his fourteen years as Head of Communications at Gotland County Administrative Board<sup>2</sup> and during his time as diocese communicior at Visby diocese never experienced a crisis situation which reflected over the use of any other language than Swedish. Crisis situations which affects other groups than native Swedish speakers are reactively managed, subsequently as the need arises.

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<sup>1</sup> Räddningstjänst

<sup>2</sup> Länsstyrelsen Gotlands län

Melin at Swedbank was active during a change in the Crisis Communication Management Team at Swedbank. In the beginning, the team only consisted of native Swedish people, and developed to a multicultural team consisting of Baltic and Swedish employees working together. The process went effortlessly regarding language barriers due to the fact that the corporate language both before and after the change was English. The multicultural development at Swedbank revealed other clashes of cultures regarding leadership culture, and culture differences regarding information sharing. At that time Swedbank did not prioritize those issues. Differences concerning leadership style were connected to the decision-making process, where the traditional Swedish decision-making style was more divided between several employees, and the Baltic leadership were more based on a hierarchical structure. The information sharing differences emerged when employees had accidentally made an error, and in those situations cultural differences affected whether employees were open about the problem or not. Melin mentioned that Baltic organizational culture had a strong hierarchical structure, which led to the employees to chose not being open about errors they made. This culture clash can be connected to what Coombs (2012) says about the importance of having the same basic values within the crisis communication team in order to cooperate advantageously together.

#### 5.4 Social Media & Internet Publishing in Crisis Communication

When it comes to more serious crises regarding trust, Visby diocese does not use social media as a channel to reach out with information, due to social media's impression of not delivering reputable information in the same way as a press release.

*“When I started working as a consultant within the crisis communication area, many years ago, the management teams I worked with would themselves decide what was regarded as a crisis situation or not. Then, themselves would choose what information to disseminate. Today the rules are reversed because anyone can define a crisis in an organization. Therefore, it is important to expect that anyone, at any time, could take a photo, shoot a film or write something on the internet, and then the crisis are around the corner.”*

- Jeanette Fors-Andrée, Crisis Management and Communication Consultant

Case: Karlberg described how an extensive leakage broke out in the main water pipeline in Kalmar in 2013. It was a Friday when the leak broke out, and during the afternoon the corporation Kalmar Water<sup>1</sup> informed about the leak together with Kalmar municipality. During the evening the decision was made to not go out with information when the crisis team had realized the scale of the repairing process. This decision was made to avoid stockpiling of water by citizens when the water was about to run out. At six in the morning on Saturday, the information was released that the water would in fact run out in the water tower, which dramatically changed the water consumption. At 10:00, Kalmar municipality distributed emergency water tanks at several locations. In the evening, the local newspaper Barometern in Kalmar claims that disputes and disturbances had broken out among citizens at the outplaced water tanks. During the Sunday, more negative criticism arose from the newspaper Barometern regarding the municipality's way to manage the crisis, pointing to the withheld information. At the same time the municipality received positive feedback from affected citizens who also went against and disproved the newspaper's information, which led to the comment section on the web news article being removed.

As explained in the theory chapter, having an open comment section can create a sense of credibility to the website (Ström 2010), and removing the comment section due to strong negative feedback can portrait the newspaper in a bad light. During the water leak, social media was used as a communication channel to inform and to keep a dialogue with stakeholders and the affected inhabitants. By using Facebook, Karlberg was able to reach out much quicker to a larger mass of affected inhabitants in Kalmar, and together with the emergency services be able to answer emerging questions. Karlberg also described that the level of response and feedback on social media is high during a crisis situation compared to normal conditions.

Social media plays an increasingly larger role when it comes to modern crisis communication. This also leads to higher demands on professional communicators regarding social media monitoring, by making sure what opinions are emerging, and to quickly get a hold of the correct information to provide. Kalmar municipality is using Twitter for social media opinion monitoring, and Facebook as an interactive channel to their followers during crisis events.

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<sup>1</sup> Kalmar Vatten

Oskarshamn municipality instead uses Twitter as a channel for reaching out with information and to show to the public that the municipality is active, and would use Twitter as a channel during crisis situations. When it comes to monitoring changes in opinion on social media, Olofsson expressed that there is a potential for improvement, especially during crisis events. Gotland municipality uses a Facebook page that is managed by a professional communicator. The communicator is not a part of the crisis management team, hence using social media as a crisis information and interaction channel is secondary priority.

As described earlier, the social media platform Twitter is expanding to a greater extent to be an interactive news source channel during crisis situations, due to the simplicity in dialogue between individuals and organizations (Spence, Lachlan, Lin & Greco, 2015). On a municipal level the use of Twitter differs from being used as a monitoring channel, to a channel used to spread information during crisis events. When asking professional communicators at municipalities whether social media is used or not during crises, the most common answer was that if the person in charge of social media is included in the crisis communication team, information regarding the crisis is posted through social media.

Another advantage of communicating through social media during crisis situations is that the level of interest is high (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013). This is something that only a few interviewees acknowledged. A majority of the interviewees told about the so called “crisis attention window” during the reactive phase. This is when the crisis communication team has to move quick without making precipitant communicational decisions.

Frendel, who has actively worked with the crisis communication during the latest natural disaster in Nepal talked about the positives and negatives of the emergence of social media, and we quote – “Through social media you are able to create a dialoge and you have an incredible speed. You automatically reach other professional communicators and opinion-formers through social media, especially through Twitter. The disadvantage is the enormous flow of information. For example, during the reactive phase of the Nepal earthquake, there were about 1000 tweets a minute posted. How do we absorb or handle that amount of information? That means there are still qualms about how we are supposed to keep up, but we simply cannot stand outside looking in while new technology increases its power. If so, we have no future in effective crisis communication.”

## 6 Conclusion

This chapter will provide our conclusions connected to the appropriate theme of theory chosen for this thesis. The conclusions are based on the results and analytical viewpoints from the 13 qualitative interviews and will interact with as well as try to answer our thesis questions.

### 6.1 Theme – Crisis Communication

- *What, according to the interviewed key figures should be included in an effective crisis communication, and how should an effective crisis communication plan be designed?*

We can conclude that an effective crisis communication is strongly connected to an effective crisis leadership. Depending on the crisis, an adaptable leadership will result in the crisis communication being executed with a higher level of accuracy. Believing that an effective crisis communication can lean on an everyday leadership style might cause huge issues throughout the process. Therefore we can conclude that without a healthy and direct leadership, the crisis communication process falls apart. Another major part of an effective crisis communication is the access to relevant contacts in an emergency situation, which could be anything from necessary spokespersons to contact lists of both internal and external personnel. Finally proactive crisis routines play an important role by establishing useful communication habits, both within crisis communication networks, organisations and internal communication.

Crisis communication seems to lean on a mutual interacting relationship between organizations and authorities. While we can extract results of that some organizations have developed this relationship, the private sector still stands independently. Interacting networks between organizations that are actively maintained generate the opportunity of learning from each other and choose the best parts of different worlds. Co-operating also generates a feeling of assertiveness and readiness within an organization to execute the crisis communication.

When it comes to crisis communication plans, there lays great importance in the the design to be general and consise. This creates a dynamic approach to crises unanticipated nature, meaning the proactive strategy needs to be easy to understand in order to be useful. Extensive and detailed crisis communication plans are not often applicable since there is no time to study a crisis communication manual during an unexpected situation. In most cases it is often clear what needs to be done, and which approach that should be used. The crisis communication plans main function is to illustrate main guidelines, such as how to meet the media, who has information responsibilities (both internal and external), and essential information such as contact details etcetera. Many other aspects such as information regarding an organizations assets or which channels to use to communicate instead requires a habit of frequent crisis situation rehearsal in order to be useful in an actual situation.

*“The hardest part about crisis communication is to interconnect organizations and authorities no matter which sector they belong to. To learn from each other and cooperate in the same manner during both ordinary work and crises. That is the hardest part, but also the paramount way to reach the most effective crisis communication.”*

- Inger Frendel, Strategic developer in crisis communication at MSB

## 6.2 Theme – Intercultural Competence in Crisis Communication

- *To what extent is intercultural competence prioritized and necessary during a crisis situation according to the thesis key figures?*

Intercultural competence connected to crisis communication is without any doubts the most complicated area of our research. Results show an undisputed belief that intercultural competence is not an active part of an effective crisis communication today. Thus, our belief is that the concept is not respected enough, or that organizational crisis communication simply is not ready for it. That belief is somehow scary, yet human. The only way out of this ignorant behaviour towards intercultural competence is to think of it as something you ordinarily do when developing crisis communication plans.

Not only does a deeper intercultural competence increase the flexibility and ability to execute an effective crisis communication. It also strengthens an organization's understanding for its surrounding target groups during a crisis and its internal culture. Knowing your recipients' cultural behaviour and connotations beforehand simplifies both the decision-making and communicative process.

Unfortunately, a development of a deeper intercultural competence often translates into having resources to do so. Organizations within the public sector have our complete sympathy for how resources negatively impact their way of thinking. All interviewees want intercultural competence to be a cornerstone in effective crisis communication. However, our conclusion here is to take advantage of an already existent cultural competence in our multi-cultural society. On a municipal level, minor local associations represent people from many parts of the world. They also possess cultural competence in which organizations can use when a crisis hits fast. People of most ages and all kinds of leaders are right there to act like a consultant in an assisting matter during a crisis. So if the competence is not integrated within the organization, why not look outside the box instead of perhaps creating miscommunication between different cultural groups? In the end, effective crisis communication is about damage control.

If resources are available, an organization has no excuses for not regarding intercultural competence as a fundamental part of their crisis communication plan. Still, it does not seem to be very popular, although many organizations within the private sector have realized its importance. Ultimately, one cannot deny that our growing multi-cultural, multi-lingual society. It will not just stop. It will definitely not stop affecting how crisis communication needs to transform into strategies that adapt to its surroundings and different perspectives.

## 6.3 Theme – Social Media and Internet Publishing in Crisis Communication

- *According to the key figures expertise and experience, in which ways is social media platforms and internet publishing used for communication during a crisis situation?*

External monitoring connects with both crisis communication theory and the use of social media. Our standpoint is that a proactive external monitoring naturally reduces the heavy workload during the reactive phase of a crisis. By being aware of what is written about ones organization or knowing a crisis will hit and might cause damage is of utmost importance. In this way, an organization can use external monitoring in order to forecast different courses of events. Also, an organization will be able to prepare for different kinds of questions about the actual crisis.

External monitoring streamlines an organization's crisis communication. Since social media is the place where information travels the fastest, social media ought to be top of the list when organizations perform external monitoring. However, resources along with the communicator's work load come into place once again. Way too much pressure is being put on professional communicators (which many organizations do not have by the way) to have assignments in all stages of a crisis. This is evidently due to a lack of resources to employ people who work entirely with crisis communication. The theory of how positive social media is for an effective crisis communication does not impact organizations that do not have the resources to cover this new way of communicating. Thus, the use of social media (undeniably one of the communication channels most used today) becomes ineffective.

The approach from organizations today is that social media is something that the organization *should have* in order to keep up with the digital evolution. Do note the word *should*, which translates into it not being completely implemented. This approach to and lack of knowledge for social media can result in losing the purpose of using it for one's crisis communication strategy. If there is no objective or ambition to direct in which way the digital platform should be utilized, then the crisis communication suffers. Thus, new digital communicative channels are being ignored which naturally means some or greater parts of an organization's target group unwillingly avoid crisis information. Throughout this study it has been recognized that social media and the organization's own websites are only some of several channels the organizations use during crisis situations. Crisis information regarding trust issues can often be of sensitive nature, and is therefore not prioritized on social media platforms, especially if it is about one's own organization. As of today, crisis communication on social media platforms have a great potential to improve in both the external and internal line of communication, mind an increase in both interest and resources.

#### 6.4 Further Research

In order to elaborate upon this thesis, we suggest some paths that researchers can possibly take. The first suggestion focuses on the possibility of in detail comparing specific crises and their respective crisis communication plans. In order to do this, one can choose a quantitative empirical gathering to examine how general versus specific crisis communication plans affected different crisis events. To sharpen this potential study, one can choose to examine crisis events that focuses on one specific type of crisis.

Another idea for future research suggests a study based solely on qualitative interviews with people affected by the lack of intercultural competence in modern crisis communication. Through this potential study, one can possibly find specific answers to what in the crisis communication that created parts of the audience to be negatively affected. One can also hope to find answers in how to improve crisis communication strategies by acknowledging minorities in the society.

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## 8 Appendix

- Question regarding personal information of the interviewee.
- Explaining the research ethical principles, and the topic of the thesis.

### *First theme: Crisis communication*

- *What crisis situations have you experienced? How did they develop and what role did you have during the crisis?*
- *Was there any crisis communication plans involved? If so, were they useful?*
- *How do you or your organization work with crisis communication proactively?*
- *How is a favorable leadership performed during a crisis situation?*

### *Second theme: Intercultural competence in crisis situations*

- *Is it important for you, or your organization to communicate crisis information in more languages than Swedish?*
- *How do you see to cultural differences when communicating crisis information?*

### *Third theme: Crisis communication in social media and in internet publishing*

- *On what internet platforms do you communicate crisis information?*
- *What advantages and disadvantages have you experienced when using social media for crisis information?*
- *Has social media changed the arena for crisis communication, if yes, in what way?*

Lastly, questions were asked regarding if the interviewee wanted to add something, or recommend any further interviewee to the thesis.

