

New method for evaluation of crisis communication in exercises – involve the public

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) carried out a comprehensive crisis communication multi-sector exercise. To evaluate communication in exercises there is a need for involving the public as they are the primary target group in most crises. Systematically involving the public in evaluation of exercises has only been done a few times in Sweden and there are no known international attempts. We therefore developed a method where a representative sample of 2 000 persons was drawn from the Swedish population register and invited to assess communication during the exercise. The so-called “Public Network” finally consisted of 99 people who contributed extensively with 395 assessment questionnaires. This paper describes the method, the results and experiences. We encourage other organizations to involve the public in exercises for evaluation purposes. The results show that there is a willingness among the public to contribute to the development of crisis preparedness.

Keywords

Exercises, crisis communication, community, the public, evaluation method.

INTRODUCTION

The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) is responsible for organizing comprehensive multi-sector exercises in Sweden in order to increase societal capacity for handling emergencies and disasters. In May 2014 the cooperation exercise SAMÖ Fokus 2014 was carried out, with the purpose of evaluating the involved organization’s capacity of crisis communication. The scenario was a major nuclear accident causing large impact on southern Sweden. Around twenty Swedish agencies and other organizations were exercised.

Communicating with the public during emergencies and disasters is a central task for agencies and organizations. When exercising crisis communication in Sweden, persons acting like public, i.e. students, seniors, colleagues etc., are often involved. This played public act according to a set manuscript for the exercise. Their task is to ask questions to the exercising organizations, not to evaluate the response.

There is reason to believe that the played public’s opinion of the communication would differ from the real public. Aspects like age, background, occupation etc. might influence their opinions and thereby the results of an assessment. Additionally, their knowledge and interest about crisis management and the preparedness system might differ and thereby influence the results. The few examples known when public opinion is considered in exercises do not take the diversity of the public into account. That is, the public is often considered as a homogenous group (Walia, 2008). There is therefore a need to involve the real public in evaluating communication in exercises in a diversified way. A need for a group of people that can read, listen to and react on what the organizations communicate. Collecting demographic information on this group would enable an analysis of how communication is received by different people, which would be valuable when developing communication capacity.

Attempts to involve the public for evaluating communication in exercises have only been done occasionally in Sweden. Results from three previous exercises show that asking for volunteers from the public have proven to result in a group of people un-representative especially in terms of age and gender (Enander and Johansson, 1996; Enander and Hede, 2006 (2); Swedish Emergency Management Agency, 2008), however the value of public involvement in exercises for the purpose of improving crisis communication is undoubtedly expressed (Enander and Hede, 2006 (4)). The author of this paper is not aware of any international published documentation on exercises involving the public in evaluating communication.

Given this background, a method was developed in order to involve the public in the exercise. The concept of the method was to invite the participants to the so called “Public Network” through a random selection and invitation rather than having people volunteering. This was done in order to form a group that would be more representative than what had previously been achieved.

This paper presents a description of the method and descriptive statistics on those who participated in the Public Network, but also on those who were neither willing nor able to participate, and on those who chose not to respond to the invitation at all. Based on experience drawn from the results of the new method, recommendations are presented to enable for other agencies to invite the public for participation in exercises. A detailed description of the method and descriptive statistical results is provided in the report (Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2015). The method will be further developed and used in the even larger and more complex multi-sector co-operation exercise planned in 2016 (SAMÖ 2016).

METHOD

SAMÖ Fokus 2014 was a one day simulation exercise where most communication took place on MSB’s information system i.e. a specially designed Internet log-in portal called the Exercise Web. This portal included news articles written by journalists during the exercise, live transmitted radio, websites for the organizations and social media such as simulated Facebook (called Xbook, figure 1) and several blogs. Pre-recorded films and TV news with scenario information

were also available on the Exercise Web. In the exercise there were also several people playing public and asking questions to the exercising organizations over phone, e-mail and social media and they also wrote comments and spread rumors on Xbook.

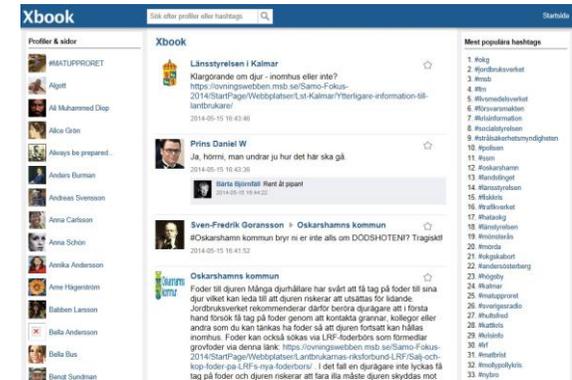


Figure 1. Simulated Facebook (Xbook) on the Exercise Web (in Swedish)

One large part of the evaluation organization of the exercise was the Public Network whose task was to contribute to the evaluation of the exercise goals regarding communication to media and the public.

The method of the Public Network was divided in two phases, the recruitment phase and the assessment phase. In the recruitment phase, Statistics Sweden was commissioned to draw a random sample of 2 000 people in the ages 20-79 years from the Swedish population register. Half of the sample was drawn from the geographic area near the nuclear accident and the other half from the rest of Sweden. The sample was representative according to age, gender, geography and country of birth. Demographic information such as age, gender, geography, marital status, education, income and country of birth on persons in the sample was received from Statistics Sweden.

The selected persons received an invitation from MSB in which they were asked if they were willing to participate in a public network during the exercise. The invitation consisted of a letter with information about the exercise and the

assessment assignment. The participants would receive no compensation and therefore it was important to attract them in other ways i.e. their contribution to the development of Swedish crisis preparedness. There was an additional message of reinforcing the value of their contribution by emphasizing that they had been chosen for the assignment and that they were important as representatives for the public. A questionnaire was included in the invitation where the persons could accept or decline. Questions on background information and open ended questions about reasons for declining were also included in the invitation.

Those who accepted the invitation received further information about the assignment as well as questionnaires to assess the communication.

During the day of the exercise, the Public Network was asked to follow the information on the Exercise Web and to fill in assessment questionnaires at five predetermined times during the day. There was a possibility to fill in fewer or a maximum of eight questionnaires. An opportunity was also given to do the assessment the same evening after the exercise was completed. The participants were asked to use the Exercise Web for searching information on available communication alternatives in the same way as in a real situation.

The Public Network could contact the exercising organizations via coordinators with the purpose of passing on questions to the exercising organizations.

Demographic information on both the participants, on those who were neither willing nor able to participate and on those who were invited from the original sample were collected and analyzed based on parameters such as age, gender, education and income.

The planning process for the Public Network started eight months before the exercise. The exercise took place in May 2014 and the analysis of the results of both the network and the general evaluation was finished five months later.

RESULTS

Response to the invitation

The invitation was sent to 1 999 persons (one person was not correctly registered in the population register). The results of the invitation are shown in figure 2. The

different groups are presented further in the sub-sections below.

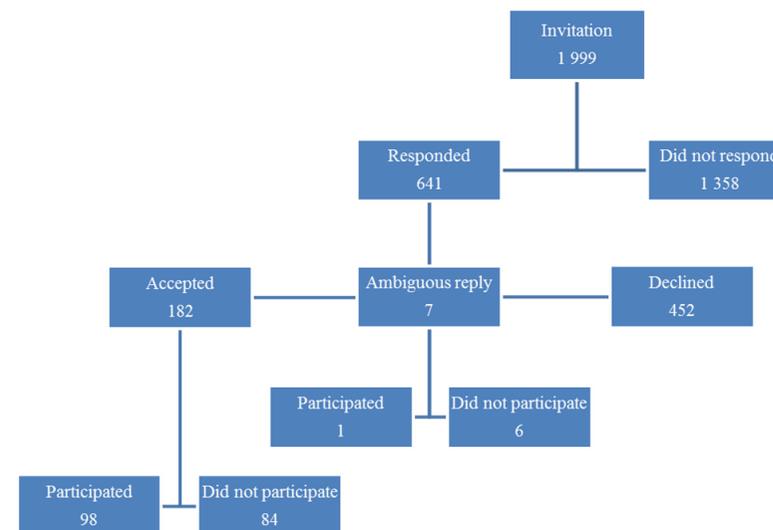


Figure 2. Results of the invitation divided into different groups

Demographic information was used to compare the persons who responded to the invitation (indifferent of whether they accepted or declined) to the persons that did not reply to the invitation at all. There were a somewhat higher proportion of women and persons who were born in Sweden among those who responded compared to those who did not. The most obvious difference was age and income. The largest loss of respondents was for the younger age groups whereas the higher the age, the higher proportion of respondents. There were also a higher proportion of people with higher income among the respondents.

Those who responded and accepted the invitation

A total of 182 persons accepted the invitation (9.1 % of the total sample). Demographic information was used to compare this group to the original

representative sample. The comparison showed that there were a somewhat higher proportion of men among those who accepted compared to the sample. There was a lower proportion of 20-29 year olds and a higher proportion of middle aged and elderly. A somewhat higher proportion of persons were born in Sweden. The most obvious difference from the sample was a higher level of education and income and having a higher interest for contingency matters. The difference in income is displayed in figure 3.

Several respondents made positive comments about the invitation and the opportunity to influence.

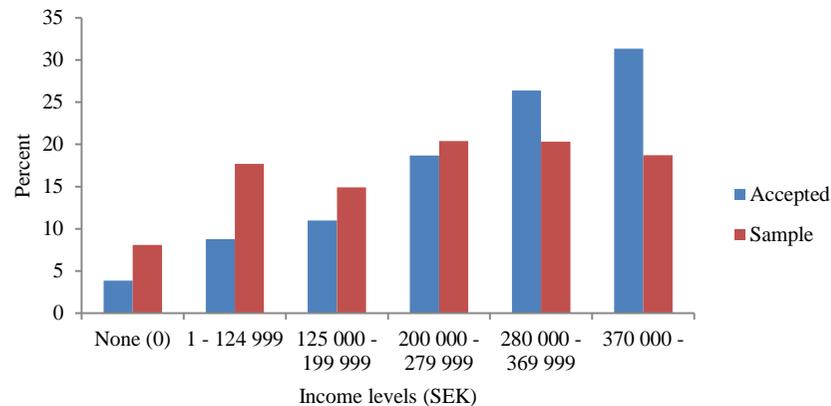


Figure 3. Distribution of income levels (in Swedish currency) for those who accepted the invitation and for the sample

Those who responded but declined the invitation

The group that declined the invitation consisted of a somewhat higher proportion of women compared to the sample. There were a higher proportion of people above 50 years of age who declined (figure 4). The proportion of persons with Sweden as country of birth was rather similar. There were a lower proportion of

persons with higher levels of education and income and they generally had a lower interest for contingency matters.

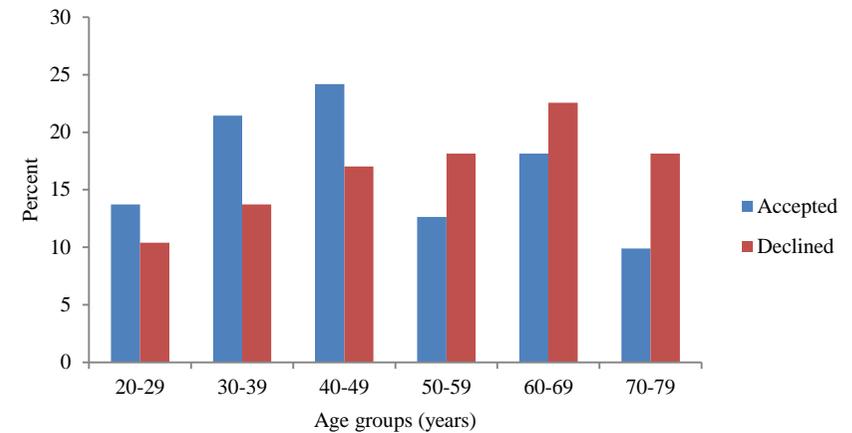


Figure 4. Distribution of age groups among those who accepted and among those who declined the invitation

Those who declined were asked to fill in the reason for their decision. The most common reason was that the assignment wasn't possible due to their work. The second most common reason was being out of town and the third reason was not having enough time. The fourth most common reason was not having a computer or access to the Internet. There were differences in age and gender distribution for this reason with a majority being in the age group 70-79 years and a majority of men.

There was generally a positive tone and very few negative comments left by the respondents declining the invitation. Several expressed that they appreciated the invitation although they could not participate.

Those who participated

It was not until after the exercise was completed that the real number of participants in the Public Network became known. The returned assessment questionnaires revealed that 99 persons out of the 182 that had accepted actually had participated. The reason for not participating was unclear for a majority of the loss.

The demographic characteristics of this group were similar to those who had accepted but they were more evenly distributed for men and women (51 % men, 49 % women), the most common age group was 30-39 years followed by 40-49 years. A majority was born in Sweden and the group had high levels of education (figure 5) and income and shown generally a high interest for contingency matters.

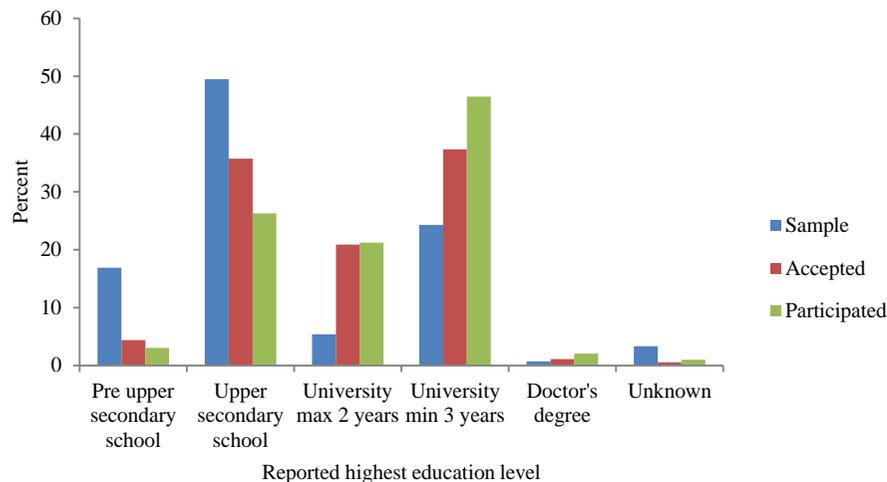


Figure 5. Distribution of education levels in the sample, among those who accepted and among those who participated

The Public Network's contribution

The 99 participants in the Public Network filled in a total of 395 assessment questionnaires. On average three questionnaires were filled in by every person. Barely half of the group followed the instructions and filled in five questionnaires at the set times. A majority of the questionnaires were filled in during the evening after the exercise was completed at 5 PM.

Only ten participants contacted the coordinators during the exercise with questions and a majority of the questions concerned technical issues with the Exercise Web. However three questions were forwarded to the exercising organizations.

The result of the assessment made by the Public Network has been incorporated in the final evaluation report of the exercise (Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2014). Their opinions strengthened what other evaluation results had shown and also complemented them in several matters. The Public Network made a significant contribution for example by identifying gaps, according to the need of the public, in the organizations communication. They also expressed valuable opinions about the language used, the communication channels and especially the use of radio and social media.

The Public Network's opinion on the different communication channels showed that they appreciated and trusted information transmitted by radio the most and that they missed TV news. The simulated Facebook and the blogs in general were seen as time consuming and confusing rather than helpful in gathering information. The need for access to radio, TV and traditional alternatives on the Internet when searching information was more generally expressed than the need for information on social media, which was more seen as a complement according to this study. There was however a clear difference in age between groups who preferred social media rather than more traditional channels. Preferences for searching information on the different alternatives on the Exercise Web is displayed in figure 6.

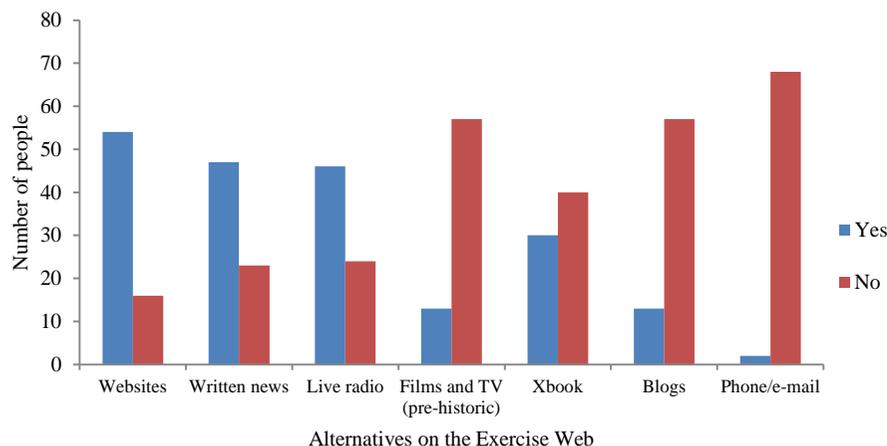


Figure 6. Whether the Public Network used the alternatives on the Exercise Web (analyzed at the specific time 1-3 PM)

In order to evaluate the new method of involving public in the exercise, the Public Network was asked to what degree their trust for the organizations had changed as a result of the communication they had taken part in. The result showed that a majority of the participants felt that their trust was unchanged, and more often an unchanged high trust rather than unchanged low trust, from being involved in the exercise. This implies that participating did not lower the public's trust for the organizations capability of managing the crisis, which is very positive for the method and for the involved organizations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The so-called Public Network consisted of 99 people, aged 20-79 years, of which half were men and half were women. Their assessments comprised a comprehensive and valuable contribution to the evaluation of the capacity to communicate to the public during the simulated crisis.

The concept of the method was to create a public network that would be as representative for the public as possible. The results showed however that it was difficult to form a completely representative network. It became more representative in terms of age and gender compared to the three previous exercises where the public had participated, but it differed from the sample concerning higher education, income and interest. In future exercises it is suggested that achieving representativeness might not be the sole purpose. A public network can be designed based on characteristics that are targeted in the goal of the exercise i.e. a certain age group or other target group.

The presented method was time consuming and resource demanding, however as it was the first time it was used, several experiences and conclusions were drawn for coming exercises when the method will be used again. We encourage other agencies and organizations to invite the public for evaluation purposes in exercises. The participation from the public was also highly appreciated by the exercising organizations as it made their communication exercise more realistic and valuable.

Contact with the invited persons shows that there is an ambition and willingness among the public to be involved and to have the possibility to influence the development of crisis preparedness.

The method presented can be used also in a lighter version. The following recommendations can serve as reminders when planning for public participation in crisis communication exercises.

- When planning a public network it is crucial that the planning i.e. of the assessment questionnaires is compliant with the purpose and goal of the exercise.
- It is recommended to involve experts in population statistics and questionnaires.
- The sample can either be designed randomly or for a targeted group such as young people. Sampling methods might change accordingly.
- Access to computer and the Internet as well as participating a specific day can limit the possibility of participation. Try to find ways of making it as easy as possible to attend.

- Provide documentation in advance i.e. recorded film or written text for the public to understand the scenario.
- Make sure to thoroughly test the technical tools, i.e. websites used in the exercise, in advance to avoid unexpected problems for the participants.
- Provide a possibility to contact the exercising actors during the exercise either through a coordinator or through a chat system or similar.
- When thanking the participants afterwards, also provide information about how to ask questions and where they could learn more about the result of the exercise and about the preparedness system.

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