Means of information and information-seeking behaviour at times of threat and crisis

Survey assigned by the WODC
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summary

Background to and purpose of the survey

To be able to provide information effectively during crisis situations the government needs to know how citizens behave during impending and actual crises, and how they provide themselves with information. In order to list, and to extend as far as possible, the knowledge about the information-seeking behaviour and the use of means of information, the Dutch Ministry of Safety and Justice had a survey done by I&O Research and the University of Twente. The focus of the survey is both theoretical and policy-aimed.

1. Theoretically the project focuses on further development of the insight into individual and social information-seeking behaviour in times of threat and crisis situations. The survey builds on recent studies carried out by the University of Twente and looks at specific motives for searching for information and the preferences of individual citizens for specific means of information.

2. In accordance with policy the project is aimed at generating points of departure for tuning the information supply from the government to the citizens' need for information and their use of means of information.

This double focus is reflected in the set-up of the survey: a literature study and an empirical survey in the form of a poll by phone among 1,000 citizens. The most important results and conclusions of the two parts of the survey are listed below.

Conclusions of the literature study: theoretical knowledge about information-seeking behaviour during crises

A literature study provided insight into the scientific knowledge on information-seeking behaviour and the choice of means of information in crisis situations. The online database Scopus, which gives access to about 18,500 scientific journals in almost all academic disciplines, was used for this. The most important results:

- The area of interest in human motives for information-seeking behaviour (at times of threat and crisis) is still in its infancy. The emphasis in present-day scientific literature is on seeking information in medical situations.
- There is only a handful of studies on times of threat and crisis. In these studies the theoretical and conceptual approach is rather insignificant. However, an analysis of specific media or channels can sometimes be found, as well as segmentation of target groups based on demographic characteristics.
- One positive aspect is that the literature mentions some recent hypothetical models. These models make some use of the same concepts and their connection with each other. A future widely supported and empirically backed-up model will probably include a number of theoretical concepts, such as user experience with means of communication, opinions on the means of information, risk perception and individual involvement, workability and usefulness of the given perspective to act, and expectations from the social environment.

Conclusions of the empirical survey: behaviour of citizens in five hypothetical crisis situations

The behaviour of citizens in crisis situations was examined by means of an enquiry by phone among a representative group of 1,000 Dutch citizens. How they expect to behave in a crisis situation was measured by five examples of threatening situations: a fire on an industrial site, a bomb alert in a department store, a flood, hazardous material in the drinking-water and a food

infection. In each situation a specific perspective to act was given, such as 'do not eat uncooked vegetables' or 'close doors and windows'. After sketching the situation the enquiry continued with some questions about the interpretation of the situation and the expected behaviour in a real situation. The most important results:

Observing perspective to act and seeking additional information

- When confronted with diverse hypothetical crisis situations most of the citizens tend to follow the perspectives to act suggested by the authorities. However, some differences can be found between the sketched situations. The chance that citizens say they will observe the perspective to act is connected with the perceived workability of the advice (self-effectiveness) and the experienced usefulness (response effectiveness). Individual characteristics such as age, sex and educational level apparently do not play an important part in the explication of following or not following the advice given.
- A very large majority of the citizens said that, should such a situation really occur, after receiving the initial information about the crisis they would look for additional information. The chance that citizens seek information depends firstly on their perception of the risk they or their close relatives run. The greater the chance that people expect to experience the consequences of the crisis personally, the greater the chance that they will look for information. Expectations from the social environment and the extent people feel responsible for others also seem to influence their information-seeking behaviour. Moreover age and educational level are explanatory factors. Elderly people and the less-educated do not tend to seek information on crises in their vicinity as much as young people and the more highly-educated.

Choice of means of information during threats and crises

- Citizens who seek additional information in a crisis situation, usually use several methods for acquiring information. Internet is the most important source of information, followed by television, radio and personal contacts. Although the choice of a certain means of information depends on the situation, in all the crisis situations surveyed the Internet was apparently the most frequently mentioned source.
- The choice of the means of information is connected to a number of individual characteristics. Young people are much more oriented towards the Internet than the elderly while the elderly are much more oriented towards radio and telephone. Moreover it seems that less-educated people look for information on the Internet less often than highly-educated people.
- There is a strong connection between the day-to-day media use and the choice of means of information in crisis situations. People who make frequent use of the Internet will use this medium to try to get information in threatening situations. Frequent users of the television will tend to turn the television on, and people who frequently listen to the radio expect to make use of this medium in crisis situations.
- People who look on the Internet for information on the crisis or threat mostly use search engines, government websites and news sites. Social media are hardly mentioned as a first source to consult.
- How citizens judge the reliability and topicality of the means of information depends only in part on the nature of the threat or crisis. Seekers of information consider information from emergency services and government websites the most trustworthy. Information from other citizens and from the social media is usually considered to be less trustworthy.

Judging the means of information depends to a limited extent on the situation

- How far the citizens judge the means of information to be reliable and topical depends to a certain extent on the nature of the threat or crisis. Information on government websites and from the emergency services is considered to be reliable and topical in all situations, with hardly any differences per situation. Generally there is little confidence in local residents and social media as a useful source of information during crises.

Assessment and follow-up

This survey revealed the outlines of a model to predict information-seeking behaviour in crisis situations. The factors that explain the behaviour have been exposed. Still, it is clear that there has been little empirical research that could confirm any connections. In the present survey among a cross section of the Dutch people some connections have been found: firstly between the tendency to seek information and the individual involvement and risk perception, expectations from the social environment and the individual characteristics relating to age and education level. Furthermore there is a connection between the perception of usefulness, result and workability of the perspective to act and the chance that this perspective to act is followed up. Here there are fine distinctions because the present survey was focused on a limited number of hypothetical situations and intended behaviour.

Future surveys can build on the results of both the literature study and the empirical survey. There is a challenge for follow-up surveys. One of the subjects of the survey might be to what extent considerations of individual involvement and risk perception, as well as expectations from the social environment, are related to the use of preferred media.

In addition to the theoretical perceptions the conclusions show some practical clues for crisis communication. Our comments on these conclusions are:

- The choice of a specific means of information is only partly determined by the nature of the situation and much more by the use of media in everyday life. This means that in most situations the Internet is the most important means of information for people. Obviously this conclusion does not apply when there is a long-term breakdown of IT networks and/or electricity supplies. However, such situations have not been investigated.

- There is relatively little confidence in social media when reliable information on crisis situations is concerned. The reliability of certain sources of the Internet (especially the websites of the authorities) is valued more highly. However, the little trust in the reliability of social media is not a constant factor and therefore may change. Nowadays the social media are considered to be forums for individual citizens and companies and much less for the government. Social media offer space for both serious and less serious messages. When the government provides recognisable and confidence-building information through these channels the appraisal of the means of information might change. That will put the usability of these media in crisis situations into another perspective.