

The Role of Communication in Crowd Management and Crowd Control

Summary

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Summary

Major events pose considerable risks, as evidenced by the Love parade in Duisburg in 2010 and Pukkelpop 2011 in Belgium. A risky event is defined as “a foreseeable or unforeseeable event, which is accessible to a crowd of people, which takes place within a specific timeframe and on a specific location, which will likely lead to risks to the public order, public safety, public health or the environment, and requires the authorities to take measures or to allocate resources to mitigate the risk or to minimize its negative consequences” (NIFV, 2012).

Communication with the public is an important part of crowd management and crowd control in the case of risky events. However, the academic expertise in this domain is fragmented and difficult to translate into concrete recommendations; practical expertise is not documented in publicly accessible literature and often only implicitly available in the form of personal experiences.

This research aims to explore academic and practical expertise, to enable local governments, safety regions, and event organisers to effectively apply formal and informal communication in the context of major events.

The research question is:

How can formal and informal mass communication contribute to the prevention of incidents during major events and – in case something does go wrong – to control the situation?

To answer the research question a broad review was conducted of the academic literature on (mass) communication and mass psychology, including relevant infrastructural issues that can be applied in controlling the behaviour of large crowds. This broad conception of mass communication, comprising themes such as content and tone-of-voice, communication media, as well as “communication” by infrastructural measures, makes it near impossible to provide an all-inclusive overview. Consequently, the aim of this review is to provide a broad rather than complete overview of what science and practitioners have to offer in this respect.

The literature overview also focused on several well-documented case studies (namely Halloween celebrations in Madison, the “Vredeseenheid”, Project “X” Haren, the various New Year celebrations in the Netherlands, and festivals such as the Love Parade in Duisburg, 2010, Pukkelpop 2011, and Dicky Woodstock 2012). In addition, 16 expert interviews were conducted with event organisers, governmental organisations and emergency services, as well as some general experts. The interviews focused on their practical event knowledge and expertise. Major events that were discussed were: Zwarte Cross Festival, Appelpop (Tiel), Vierdaagsefeesten (festivities coinciding with the International Four Day Marches held in Nijmegen), Queen's Day celebrations in Amsterdam, and Serious Request Enschede.

The most significant difference between academic and practical expertise is the level of applicability and detail. The academic perspective provides general knowledge relevant to the effective application of mass communication. It is difficult to translate this knowledge into practical

recommendations. The expert interviews, however, mainly provided practical insights for the prevention or control of incidents. The interviews also provided suggestions and conclusions that go beyond the role of mass communication. In the report, these additional results will be identified as such.

Prevention

The analysis of major event science and practice indicates that it is important to *deliberately plan crowd management*. This involves risk assessment activities by those who are responsible (e.g., organisers, municipality, police and safety regions), as well as the development of contingency plans and mutual consultations before major events take place.

This assessment is the basis for decisions concerning means and measures. Part of the risk assessment in the crowd management context is the careful planning of communication activities, involving relatively new developments such as social media. The interviews conducted indicate that other issues in the assessment of communication activities are direct communication with the public, internal communication, infrastructural aspects (narrow passageways and staircases, et cetera), consultation of relevant commercial parties (catering, et cetera), consultation of transport companies (that transport the public to and from the event) and strategy regarding the press.

Planning of crowd management should also incorporate formation of expectations regarding visitor behaviours based on typologies. *Typologies* found in scientific literature distinguish between crowds on the basis of several characteristics, e.g., the public's goals and plans, the duration of an event, the size of the crowd, event locations and visitor movements between these locations, the general atmosphere of the event and the composition and size of various subgroups. The expert views articulated during the interview sessions show considerable overlap with these typologies.

The interviewees indicate that the public's *self-reliance* and the public's own responsibility are seen as more important than several years ago. This is also considered to be an important issue in literature on risk and crisis communication. Practical experiences indicate that visitors of major events are generally able to cope with situations that appear to go wrong, and that it is common for visitors to help each other in such situations. This view of participants as predominantly rational adults further stresses the importance of communication (as opposed to repression) as a means to inform participants and increase their self-reliance, self-restraint, and a shared responsibility for event safety. Pre-event communication with the public also facilitates self-reliance; it enables the public to adequately prepare for the event by clarifying "the rules of engagement" and the consequences of breaking those rules.

According to several of the interviewees, the procedures necessary to obtain licenses cause the organisers of an event and the government/emergency services to be the primary actors in the preparatory phases of an event (also regarding communication). Major events require a balance between a tight control (in the case of major municipalities and major events), the application of expert knowledge and intuitive decisions, and daring "to colour outside the box" (on the part of the organisers).

The use of media and communication channels. During an event a wide range of communication means can be applied, ranging from flyers and broadcasting systems to led displays and social media. In the present day new media draw considerable interest: dedicated event apps are developed, and social media (e.g., Facebook), micro blogs (e.g., Twitter), text alerts and websites are used. Nevertheless, the importance of traditional communication means remains undiminished, according to the experts.

The monitoring of new media and micro blogs prior to an event helps crowd managers to anticipate developments surrounding an event. The major benefit of social media is that several information flows may develop: from organisation to public, between members of the public, and from the public to the event organizers. Experts are somewhat critical of the use of social media, as their use by the public during an event is considered unclear, and a sensitivity to overload and technical failure is observed. This calls for the availability of alternatives, such as more traditional means of communication.

Control

Problems may arise when large crowds gather at places with little capacity, and moderators become operational that may endanger public order and safety. According to both the literature as well as the experts, relevant moderators may be operational circumstances (e.g., no show of performers), social tensions in the crowd (“us versus them”) or extreme weather conditions (e.g., thunderstorms). Adequate communication can ensure that such situations do not get out of hand and the event continues in a controlled manner. Both science and practice suggest that the attitude toward the public by the authorities also plays an important role in preventing escalation.

Management of style and atmosphere. Since the 1980s the police have approached the public at major events with more restraint than before. Both the academic literature and experts are aware that police actions and presence of special crowd control units (the “Blue wall”) can lead to public reactance and friction. The modern approach is to deploy regular police personnel with a friendly, open but nevertheless firm attitude that is communicated both verbally and non-verbally.

Guiding pedestrian flow. Infrastructural measures may influence pedestrian flow and other behaviour and communication may help to create or maintain an efficient flow. Examples of measures are the use of fences to prevent access to locations or the use of LED displays and the use of led displays to directly inform the public.

Way marking can enable the public to find their way. According to some of the interviewees it is an effective approach to simply inform where the public where they are and subsequently enabling them to continue their way to their destination with road maps and information panels. Adequacy of road signs and information panels implies the application of unambiguous information and universal symbols. The information must be accurate and up-to-date (and if possible in several languages, audible to visually impaired visitors and visible to auditory limited visitors).

Programming of activities and performances is a means to control the adequate transportation of visitors and to ensure the distribution of visitors across different venues.

Communication's tone-of-voice (e.g., a friendly tone-of-voice, welcoming the public, to build a bond with the public) can positively contribute to *the atmosphere* and to the likelihood that potential incidents can be contained. According to the experts, choice of words, and the attitude and demeanour of employees are of interest in this respect.

Technical aspects of communication. The number of visitors of a major event is difficult to assess, especially when no admission fee is applied. Monitoring and real time information about visitor flows provide insight into influx and bustle at certain locations. On the basis of this information it may be decided to inform the public (e.g., through led displays) or take infrastructural measures (e.g., place fences). Simulation models can predict pedestrian flow, but this requires accurate and real time input.

Optimisation

Based on the literature, we come to the following conclusions regarding the adequate and efficient use of communication:

- Generally speaking, in normal situations communication will be most effective when it is perceived as clear, consistent and reliable (by the public).
- In case of emergencies, the communication must be timely and reliable, and comprise a feasible and useful perspective for action by the public.
- To prevent selective exposure - in both situations - it is recommended to apply a wide variety of communication channels.

The expert's experiences provide several concrete operationalization of these general rules of thumb. To communicate "with one mouth" is important when a variety of communication means are applied so that the various messages are synchronised and transmit a similar message. Congruence in communication is a prerequisite for optimal use of various means of communication.

Experiences with previous major events and the proper evaluation of recent events also need serious attention, according to the interviewees. This refers to the learning capacity of organisations before, during and after the event. It is seen as essential that all parties approach these experiences with an open mind. Systematic evaluation of incidents and crises should make clear how the safety of major events can be further improved. It is also required to answer questions about facts and responsibilities. The results of an event evaluation may be useful locally, nationally and even internationally.

The report provides a list of concrete recommendations to enable local governments, safety regions and major event organisers to apply communication adequately in the context of crowd management and crowd control (chapter 5). In chapter 4, differences and similarities between science and practice are discussed and recommendations for future research are formulated. It is argued that systematic and controlled studies should be designed to establish the impact of communication on the behaviour of event visitors. These studies increase insights in the underlying (psychological) dynamics of event communication, enabling the optimisation of communication

strategies. The factors influencing the perceived trustworthiness of the providers of information (in the context of major events) need to be incorporated. Finally, it is argued that future studies should provide answers to authorities and event organisers on how to cope with the surplus of information that is available to major event visitors on their smart phones.

This study is the first attempt to explore the explicit and implicit knowledge and expertise that is available in science and through those involved in major events. The authors express their hope that this report will stimulate researchers to perform additional studies focussing on the added value of communicating with the public, to help create safe major events.