

# Crisis Communication and the Norwegian Authorities

## *22 July and the Chernobyl Disaster: Two Catastrophes, Dissimilar Outcomes*

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### Abstract

The present article examines how crisis communication after catastrophes can strengthen society or undermine trust, credibility and confidence between the authorities and the general public. The two cases examined are the Norwegian authorities' communicative response to the Chernobyl power plant disaster on 26 April, 1986, and the terrorist attacks on the government complex in Oslo and the Labour Party youth camp on the island of Utøya on 22 July, 2011. The analysis compares the initial phase of crisis communication. A serious communication crisis arose between the authorities and the public after Chernobyl, while communication during the early days after 22 July was successful. The difference is explained by the concept of rationality; crisis communication after Chernobyl was based on technical rationality, whereas communication after the terror attacks was grounded on the rationality of caring. The theoretical framework originates from Heidegger's existential phenomenology with special focus on the existentials *Being-in-the-World*, *State of Mind* and *Care*.

**Keywords:** crisis communication, Heidegger, existential phenomenology, ontological security, instrumental rationality, rationality of caring

### Introduction

How can the authorities communicate adequately to the public after national catastrophes and deal with the distress and basic needs of citizens in an appropriate manner? How should they address citizens after a devastating disaster that has never occurred in the country before? The present article analyses crisis communication after two severe catastrophes that caused great distress in the Norwegian population: the Chernobyl power plant disaster in 1986 and the terrorist attacks on the government complex and the Norwegian Labour Party youth camp on the island of Utøya on 22 July, 2011. The focus will be on the communication during the initial phase of these two catastrophes, the early days of the atrocities.

## **Case I: The Terrorist Attacks**

On 22 July, 2011, the 32-year-old right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik detonated a car bomb outside Norwegian Government buildings in Oslo, housing the offices of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Justice and the Police and several other important state agencies. Eight people were killed in the explosions and over 200 were injured from the blast, shock wave and debris (NOU 2012:14). From Oslo, Breivik drove to the island of Utøya, where the Norwegian Labour Party Youth Association was holding a summer camp, and killed 69 children and young people and wounded over a hundred youths, many of them seriously. The terrorist attacks were the deadliest atrocity in Norway since World War II. Over a million citizens participated in the “rose ceremonies” throughout Norway after the terrorist attacks; in Oslo more than 200,000 people attended the ceremony on 25 July. The terrorist attacks created a mass assembly of mourning. Flower and torchlight processions, concerts and church services reflected cultural and social rituals and symbolic actions to cope with the tragedy (Stormark 2012). The government, with Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg at the head, addressed the country immediately after the national tragedy, while King Harald and Crown Prince Haakon urged the nation to unite. The report from the 22 July Commission pointed out that the government’s crisis communication to the public in the initial phase was good (NOU 2012:14). However, ongoing research projects will examine the extent to which this is true in the later phases of the crisis communication.

## **Case II: The Chernobyl Disaster**

The worst nuclear power plant explosion in history took place at the Chernobyl Power Plant near Kiev in Ukraine on 26 April 1986. The explosion released large quantities of radioactive contamination into the atmosphere that also spread over Norway and had severe consequences, mainly for fauna and flora (NOU1986:19). We still today see the after-effects of the accident, for instance chromosome mutations in reindeer calves. The radioactive fallout from Chernobyl comprised a worst-case scenario from a crisis communication perspective. The Norwegian authorities were confronted with a task for which there was no adequate planning. A few experts and authorities lacking any experience in crisis communication were supposed to communicate with the public about unfamiliar issues in a language that was difficult to understand. Communication between the authorities and the public periodically collapsed owing to unclear responsibilities and poor co-ordination. Conflicts arose between the authorities and the public due to misleading, insufficient and unduly slow provision of information. The authorities were accused of twisting, manipulating and withholding the truth, and were even accused of unequivocally lying and keeping information to themselves. The public suspected that the authorities were not revealing their strategic motives, i.e. calming people’s fears, by hiding the truth about the consequences of the radioactive contamination (Vettenranta 1998).

## **Critical Notes**

Any attempt to empirically compare these two examples presents analytical problems due to some fundamental prerequisites for crisis communication in the two cases. In the initial phase after the Chernobyl explosion, the authorities primarily understood

their task as providing knowledge, information and advice to people on how to protect themselves against radiation during an ongoing disaster. In the case of the terrorist attacks, from the very outset the authorities mainly concentrated on managing the trauma after the national catastrophe.

The second challenge is the difference between the crisis communication actors. In the Chernobyl case, the main actors represented Norwegian experts and authorities, while in the terror case the Norwegian Prime Minister and two representatives of the Royal Family were front and centre. At first glance the actors do not seem to have comparable roles in these two disasters. However, both groups represent the establishment. The main focus in the present analysis is on the characteristics of crisis communication used in these two cases to respond to the basic needs of the public immediately after the catastrophes, not on which actors specifically served as mediators. The problem is that immediately after the Chernobyl disaster, the national leaders and the Royal Family stayed in the background, and a few experts and authorities were appointed to be responsible for crisis communication. In the second case, during the first days of the Utøya tragedy, the arena of action was immediately taken over by the Prime Minister and the Royal Family. The experts and other authorities came to play a role afterwards.

Nevertheless, the two cases have similar traits that make the comparison plausible. Covello and Allen (1988) have described factors that influence the public's perception of risk, and these factors were present both after Chernobyl and after the terrorist attacks. Both catastrophes gained *immense international media focus* and *enduring media attention*. Furthermore, there were *dreaded effects* that will haunt the people involved the rest of their lives. The catastrophes were also *unfamiliar* and *uncontrollable* so that citizens could not take advantage of their previous experiences and coping strategies. They were *involuntarily exposed* both to the terrorist attacks and to radioactive fallout, either as witnesses or victims. Both tragedies caused *irreversible* and *delayed effects* on *future generations*. When *children and young people* are among the victims, the agony is intensified. In both cases there was an *inequitable distribution* of harm to innocent people: After the Chernobyl disaster the population in Norway was stricken by an inequitable distribution of radioactive contamination where the south Sami reindeer herders, farmers and vegetable growers in particular areas were especially affected (NOU1998:19, Vettenranta 1998). On the island of Utøya, the youth division of one political party, the Norwegian Labour Party, was attacked (NOU2012:14).

However, these two catastrophes do differ on one important point: *lack of trust in the responsible authorities and institutions*. After Chernobyl, the public's confidence in the involved authorities was very low. The great loss of credibility and trust in the main authorities, the Directorate of Health and the National Institute of Radiation Protection, dominated the crisis communication. The lack of openness, misleading, condescending or withholding of information and hidden agendas on the part of the authorities have all been documented (Vettenranta 1998). The situation after 22 July was different: the Prime Minister, the Minister of Justice and the Royal Family entered the scene immediately, showing a caring attitude and inspiring confidence in the people who were experiencing anxiety and shock. Ongoing studies will show how the situation changed in the longer term.

## Key Concepts

Before analysis, it is necessary to define some basic concepts. The key terms are ambiguous, and the definitions have been the topic of much discussion among scholars. The concept of *crisis* can be defined as a collective stress situation in which conflicts emerge between parties. A crisis may occur at individual, organizational and societal levels. It demands redistribution of the resources in society and impacts the political status quo, public opinion and power structures. Crises are unpredictable and therefore detrimental misjudgements in communication are unavoidable. The concept of *disaster* refers to a sudden incident that causes substantial damage and leads to the disruption of the social structure. A *risk* is an anticipation of a possible threat, often defined by either probability or consequence. There is an awareness that a long-term latent or statistical potential threat, or an acute threat, could lead to situations harmful to individuals, groups or the society in general. A *catastrophe* is a situation in which an acute, often an unexpected occurrence creates immeasurable harm to people or property. It threatens communication practices and often leads to a massive loss of control. Both crises and catastrophes can threaten communication practices. The relation between these concepts can be described as a dynamic process: A risk of increasing magnitude and extension at a specific point may turn into a disaster, and if the disaster produces increasingly severe consequences, it may initiate a collective crisis. However, there are social crises that are not related to disasters and, conversely, even huge disasters that do not develop into crises. Some scholars have suggested that there is a step-by-step process from the first alert of growing risk to a situation in which the danger then develops into a disastrous incident and eventually into a social crisis (Nohrstedt & Tasew 1993, NOU2012: 14, Vettenranta 1998).

Generally, the main distinction in risk research is found between *natural* and *man-made catastrophes*. Natural catastrophes may be *telluric* (earthquake, flooding), *meteorological* (hurricane), *parasitic* (insects) or *epidemic* (cholera). Man-made catastrophes may be either *technical* (explosion, aeroplane crash, ship sinking) or *armed conflicts* (war, terrorism). Man-made disasters often occur as a result of human error, intentional evildoing or due to malfunction of a system designed by man. Both Chernobyl and the terrorist attacks were man-made, although Chernobyl developed into a huge environmental disaster as well (Hodgkinson & Stewart 1991). Natural disasters are immediate and the damage is visible. On the other hand, technological or man-made disasters (e.g., Chernobyl) often involve invisible dangers (Cantor 1992). Moreover, the survivors of man-made disasters experience more devastating after-effects than do people who survive a natural disaster. It is far more difficult to rehabilitate and rebuild the society if the disaster is a result of human error or cynicism. It is easier to accept a catastrophe caused by nature than one caused by man, because nature is never “evil” (Hodgkinson & Stewart, 1991).

Intentional evildoing was a prominent trait in the actions of the terrorist Breivik. The attacks in Norway represent a worst-case scenario from a rehabilitation perspective. The assaults on the government complex in Oslo and on the Labour Party youth camp on Utøya were also attacks on the state and one of the leading political parties, causing a wound that penetrated deep into the core of Norwegian democracy. The original unsuccessful plan, to decapitate the former prime minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, known as the “mother of the nation”, underlined the terrorist’s wish to attack the constitution. The fact that the perpetrator was a native Norwegian and not a Muslim terrorist, as initially anticipated, accentuated the feeling that the age of innocence in Norway was over.

## Heidegger's Three Existentials

Beck (1992) argues that modern society is a risk society that can no longer be interpreted according to traditional concepts in the social sciences, and that therefore we need to use cross-disciplinary analytical tools if we are to understand it. The author developed this insight when analysing the informant transcripts in the Chernobyl study (Vettenranta 1998); traditional social-science theories seemed to be inadequate when it came to explaining the holistic picture of what was occurring in crisis communication between the public and the authorities. Therefore, Heidegger's (1993) existential philosophy and phenomenological analysis seemed more appropriate in an endeavour to understand the interaction between parties. Using Heidegger's *existentials* as tools of analysis after the two terror attacks also appeared to be suitable for trying to understand the crisis communication between the authorities and the public. Although the catastrophes differ in many ways, they both represent man-made catastrophes that caused severe consequences for Norwegian society for many years. The two cases can help to explain how the different approaches to crisis communication used by the Norwegian authorities after two major catastrophes have influenced the reciprocal relation between them and the public.

The theoretical frame of reference in the present analysis is Heidegger's (1993) existential phenomenology. He deals foremost with the structures that constitute human existence. These structures are *existentials* that explain the conditions of governing what it is to be a human being. The three existentials that seem to be the most relevant tools in the present analysis are: *Being-in-the-World*, *State of Mind* and *Care*.

*Being-in-the-World*: For Heidegger (1993), the basic structures in the existential *Being-in-the-World* are the concepts of *Being-with* and *Being-for-one-another*. He argues that one of the distinctions of a human being is existing and sharing the same world with others. The experience of others and how individuals interpret the traits and actions of other human beings are the basic parameters of human life. The forms are determined by one's *Being-in-the-World*, which can be inauthentic or authentic. Inauthentic being represents an unconcerned, alienated, exploitative or distrustful attitude towards others, while authentic being is characterized by togetherness and a desire to help others. A crisis (e.g., a nuclear power plant disaster or a terrorist attack) that threatens the ordinariness of everyday life can be regarded as dread about the coherence of *Being-in-the-world*.

*Care*: This existential embodies all of the phenomena of concern. Dreyfus (1994:239) points out that the connotations of Heidegger's term *Sorge* in German suggests "the cares of the world", while the term *care* in English has connotations of love and caring. Heidegger (1993) distinguishes between "to take care of" and "caring for others". The first mode is connected to taking care of economic and practical objects and things and the environment. Caring for others refers to the relationship with each other. It is obvious that the first mode characterized the crisis communication after Chernobyl, while the latter mode predominated immediately after the terror attacks.

*State of Mind*: For Heidegger (1993), the existential *care* is a distinctive trait regarding what it is to be a human being, and this concept becomes more explicit in his analysis of anxiety. His basic *state of mind* or *mood* that imparts a holistic experience of being is anxiety. He distinguishes between anxiety and fear. Fear is a different form of the existential state of mind, and in contrast to anxiety it has a concrete object; one is afraid of something specific (e.g. a nuclear power plant explosion or a terrorist attack) or of losing one's life. The anxiety experience shows that *Being-in-the-World* stems from

the principle of caring; being anxious is just a form of caring. We are anxious about not existing, but we do not become attentive until we face the possibility of nothingness, as the examples from the Chernobyl accident and the terror attacks show (Heidegger 1993, Vettenranta 1998).

Heidegger (1993) rejects the view that moods are only private feelings that one projects to the world. He points out that the public can also have moods, such as shock, outrage or mourning. The Norwegian atmosphere after the terror attacks can be understood as just such a collective mood of mourning. Public moods must be understood as dimensions of existence that differ from private feelings. This public mood of mourning was an overall disposition, an “umbrella” under which the private feelings of sorrow and grief could be sensed, for instance after the terror attacks.

## Anxiety and Fear

For Heidegger (1993), the fundamental questions in existentialism are anxiety and fear. Fear is a response to a specific threat and therefore has a definite object (a terrorist attack), while anxiety is a universal state of the emotions of the individual (concern for the life-world after radioactive contamination). The quality of consciousness in a fear experience differs from that in an anxiety experience. Fear is based on caring about something, one’s own life or the lives or property of others. In fear, the frightening object or the terrifying situation is in principle avoidable, and the dreadful object can be removed or made harmless, thus eliminating the fear. However, looming anxiety is still present. A perpetrator can be imprisoned or locked in a mental hospital, but it does not remove people’s feeling of vulnerability and anxiety, as both cases show.

Both the nuclear power plant explosion and the terrorist attacks threatened the condition that Giddens calls *ontological security*. This concept also deals with Being-in-the-World at the level of practical consciousness that is incorporated into the continuity of everyday activities. Practical consciousness is the anchor connected to the tacit character of everyday life, “a sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individual” (Giddens 1991:243). He claims that anxiety must be understood in relation to the overall security system of the individual, rather than as a specific phenomenon connected to particular risks or dangers.

Practical consciousness and daily routines help us to cope with anxieties. Contamination from the nuclear power plant explosion hit while people were going about their daily activities, and the aim of the terror attacks was to threaten and violate people while they were occupied with their everyday duties at the workplace or the summer camp. The perpetrator struck when it was most unexpected. A terrorist attack or an explosion of a nuclear power plant threatens the ordinariness of everyday life and can be regarded as dread about the coherence of Being-in-the-World. From such a point of view, the murderous terrorist attacks were ingenious in their design.

## Conventional Crisis Communication

According to Krinsky and Plough (1988), the concept of risk communication has both a *conventional* and a *symbolic* definition. This dichotomy can also be applied to crisis communication. The conventional approach neglects cultural themes and symbolic



meanings, which may be of greater importance to the reception of communication. To understand the symbolic meaning of crisis communication, it must be studied in its social and historical context. Symbolic communication differs from the conventional view because the symbolic definition includes cultural contributions, while conventional communication is reductionist, focusing on quantifiable variables.

After Chernobyl, the authorities and the experts trusted the conventional crisis communication, involving a quantification of dangers, while after the terrorist attacks the communication from the Norwegian Government and the Royal Family used symbolic and cultural messages that were a better fit to the public's needs. Communication after the Chernobyl disaster was based on scientific concepts (i.e., roentgen, curie, Becquerel, sievert, grey). The general public could not understand the concepts; they wanted to know if the radioactive contamination was harmful to their family and children. In the following, two examples of different forms of crisis communication are represented. First, we will look at an excerpt that illustrates the conventional approach:

**TV reporter (R):** Director Baarli at the National Institute for Radiation Hygiene, does this mean that large parts of the country have been covered by a dangerous radioactive cloud?

**Baarli (B):** I would not call this cloud *dangerously* radioactive, because after all there has been a relatively small increase in the radioactivity we find everywhere in nature around us. But still there is an increase, an artificial increase, in the radiation that can get on people, and we must try to avoid such things. And this is why we are taking various preventive measures in this connection.[...] The first thing we have done is to intensify our readings, but we have not yet had these readings analysed, so it is too early to say what this radioactivity consists of.

**R:** What consequences will such an accident we are now hearing about from the Soviet Union have for Scandinavia?

**B:** It will require that we are more prepared for dealing with radioactivity pollution and that we ensure that our preparedness is in good order, and we will have to initiate a program for how we are to counter any subsequent harmful effects. [...]

**R:** So there is no cause for alarm?

**B:** Absolutely no cause for alarm, no. (NRK *Dagsrevyen* April 28, 1986)

Many of the statements made by the authorities to calm the public actually confused and angered them instead. This contributed to feelings of insecurity and confusion among the public and reduced credibility and trust, which in turn reinforced the information crisis (Nohrstedt 1990, NOU 1986:19). Two news transcripts from the NRK in the initial phase of the accident illustrate this:

**TV reporter:** Can you, as Director General of Health [Mork], guarantee that people who eat meat and drink milk in the coming days will not be harmed in any way?

**Mork:** Based on the information we have on the radioactivity over Norway now, I can guarantee that there is no reason to change daily habits in any way. (May 1, 1986)

**Baarli** [Director at the National Institute for Radiation Hygiene]: They [the people] are wondering about whether it is dangerous for them, and then I can say that the risk to a person is *absolutely* minimal. It can be disregarded *completely*. (May 6, 1986)

## Symbolic Crisis Communication

A completely different approach can be illustrated by two excerpts from speeches<sup>2</sup> given after 22 July, the first by Prime Minister Stoltenberg during the “rose march” in Oslo on July 25:

Thousands and thousands of Norwegians, in Oslo and across the country, are doing the same thing this evening. Conquering the streets, the town squares – the public space – with the same defiant message: We are grief-stricken, but we will not surrender. With torches and roses we are sending a message to the world. We will not let fear break us. [...] Evil can kill a person, but it can never defeat a nation (Stormark 2012: 420).

Among the speeches after the terror attacks, Stoltenberg also made an emotional speech at Oslo Cathedral on 24 July, referred to collective memories of the nation that, together with the choice of national music and poems for the “rose ceremony”, were aimed at strengthening solidarity and community spirit. This might have bolstered the national feeling of togetherness and contributed to the collective memory. The following excerpt is from Crown Prince Haakon’s appeal at City Hall on 25 July:

We have chosen to answer cruelty with intimacy. We have chosen to counter hate with solidarity. [...] We are faced with a choice. We cannot undo what has been done. But we can choose what this does to us as a society and as individuals. We can choose that no one shall stand alone. We can choose to stand together (*Mitt lille land* 2011).

## Technical Rationality versus Rationality of Caring

The different ways of tackling crisis communication in the two cases can also be explained with reference to the concept of rationality. While communication after Chernobyl generated a serious crisis in trust and confidence between the authorities and the public, crisis communication during the initial phase after the terrorist attacks on 22 July created an atmosphere of solidarity and togetherness. The first relation was marked by instrumental rationality, while the latter was based on the rationality of caring. Plough and Krinsky (1987) define *technical rationality*, or *instrumental rationality*, as reasoning that is based on explicitly defined scientific norms and the quantification of risks. Technical rationality trusts scientific methods and explanations and appeals to the authorities and experts, while *cultural rationality* appeals to folklore, peer groups, traditions and trust in the political culture and democratic processes. Risks are more personalized and the emphasis is on the impact on families and communities. Plough and Krinsky (ibid.) argue that technical, instrumental rationality underestimates cultural factors. A limited and reductionist concept originates from the risk-management tradition. Techni-



cal rationality depersonalizes risks and ignores the symbolic aspects of a catastrophe.

The following quotes shed light on technical rationality. Two main actors, the Director General of Health, Torbjørn Mork, and Director Johan Baarli at the National Institute for Radiation Hygiene answered questions from a TV reporter at NRK about radioactivity during the initial phase after the Chernobyl accident:

**Mork:** We feel that it will be impossible to measure the health risk at all. The kind of injuries we are talking about here could mean extra cancer cases in the double digits in the lifetime of the people who were exposed to this. And that is very little when you consider that we have approximately 16,000 new cancer cases per year on a normal basis. This is the only harmful effect that the experts say there is any theoretical basis for expecting. (NRK *Dagsrevyen* 27 April, 1986)

**Baarli:** There is a whole set of detailed information that we must use when evaluating the health risk in this connection, and we *cannot* release all the details because they have to be evaluated collectively according to a particular principle for finding an effective dose equivalent, which is a measure for the amount of harm to people. (NRK *Dagsrevyen* 6 May, 1986)

According to Skjøsberg (1995), Heidegger's phenomenology has led to the concept of *rationality of caring* as an alternative concept for *instrumental rationality*. Rationality of caring represents a holistic understanding where co-operation and mutual responsibilities play a constitutive role in relation to others. In contrast to instrumental rationality, rationality of caring has an ethical dimension: to care for the integrity and the prospect of life for the members of a community. While they are alternative ways of understanding reality, these two rationality forms are not necessarily mutually exclusive; while the rationality of caring is inclusive and long-term responsive, instrumental purposive rationality is partial and short-term responsive. This is an alternative way of understanding reality, marked by co-operation, mutual responsibilities and taking care of others (cf. Vettenranta 1998). It seems obvious that Heidegger's (1993) *existential Care* has inspired this rationality type.

The authorities' caring attitude for the civilian population is crucial in a severe crisis situation. The Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg found the right words at the right time; his attitude was inclusive, fatherly and emphatic. The first example from Stoltenberg's speech at Oslo Cathedral on 24 July and the second at a press conference on 22 July illustrate his role as an anchor in the rationality of caring:

It's still about looking after each other. Caring for each other. Talking with those who suffered the most. We shall be a community. Across religions, ethnicity, gender and social position. I am impressed by how much dignity, care and solidarity I have seen. We are a small country, but we are a great people. We are still shaken by what hit us, but we will never surrender our values. Our answer is more democracy, more openness and more humanity. [...] Our enemies shall not destroy us. They will not be allowed to destroy our democracy and our commitment to making a better world (Stormark 2012: 345, 399-400).

After Chernobyl, the radiation experts and health authorities spoke in an authoritative and arrogant tone and displayed a top-down attitude towards the public (Vettenranta 1998). In contrast to this, after the terror attacks, the Norwegian Government and the

Royal Family climbed down from their pedestals, showing care and concern for the people. Comparing these two approaches could make it easier to understand why the lack of concern after Chernobyl gave rise to anger and hatred against the authorities in 1986, while in 2011 the caring attitude from the authorities fostered solidarity and togetherness during the early days of the tragedy.

It is obvious that both the Norwegian Government and the Royal Family constructed the crisis communication after 22 July in the frame of cultural rationality. They created a collective space, and they shared with people the examples of caring, selflessness, even heroism that took place on the island of Utøya. They appealed to the unity of the Norwegian people. Technical rationality is often connected to institutional rationality. The government, the ministers and the Royal Family are institutions, meaning that by virtue of their position they should represent technical rationality. After the terror attacks, the authorities stepped out of the traditional rationality frame and acted as individuals and fellow citizens, thereby representing the rationality of caring.

In contrast, when it comes to the Chernobyl case, the authorities did not share the common stock of knowledge with the citizenry, even though the public understood that it was their right and obligation as citizens to be given this knowledge. The withholding of crucial information from those who felt they were entitled to have it shared with them seriously undermined the reciprocal relations (Vettenranta 1998). A male informant expressed this in the following excerpt:

I was provoked by how they [Baarli and Mork] made light of the dangers and how they with no basis in factual information dared to tell the population that 'This isn't dangerous. Relax. Carry on as you were. Drink all the milk and water you want. Don't take special precautions because of this'. And then only a few days later they were saying 'OK, so it may be a bit dangerous' [...]. Because then people eventually felt that they were tricked and people felt that they were *kept* in the dark. And that really is the way to go if you want to destroy credibility. They made all the mistakes it's possible to make. At the time I felt cheated as a common citizen of this country (Vettenranta 1998:201).

A female informant was equally harsh when judging Baarli's and Mork's bearing in the TV news:

The faces of Baarli and Mork when they were explaining that everything was quite in order when it wasn't [...] It was very interesting to see how they managed to convince themselves to lie [...] They had this stamp of credibility, because they have official faces, and you are accustomed to thinking that those people who represent public bodies, they speak the truth. But ... I *knew* they were not speaking the truth, I saw the lie, and it was interesting to observe those faces. Like, they're looking down a bit and they appear a bit odd, fumbling for words more than necessary, to appear sufficiently convincing (Vettenranta 1998:199).

The authorities made a few hopeless attempts to show caring rationality after Chernobyl, but these attempts were doomed to fail. Some informants in the study (Vettenranta 1998) were merciless; utterances such as 'patriarchal comforters who patted our heads' illustrate the responses from them. One female respondent said:

Their business was just saying 'OK, kids, just take it easy [ironic laughter] and you will see that everything will be all right. Be good, don't panic [ironic laughter].' It was this from-the-top-down attitude that did not agree with me at all. I wanted information, not comfort.

This respondent represented instrumental rationality, and for her being given accurate, neutral information from the beginning was more important than the caring inauthentic attitude. However, most informants tended towards the rationality of caring. The possibility that more unambiguous and accurate information would have given the same feeling of security, even though it was not empathetic for some individuals, cannot be excluded. However, during crises the public need more than accurate information, they need a feeling of togetherness and ontological security. Therefore, correct information alone can never be sufficient during a national crisis, as the study showed (Vettenranta 1998).

### **No Hunting for Scapegoats**

After Chernobyl many of the Norwegian authorities engaged in an internecine quarrel. The most serious conflict occurred between the Directorate of Health and the Geological Survey of Norway, where the National Institute of Radiation Hygiene also became involved. The parties accused each other of deceit and dishonesty (Vettenranta 1998). In contrast, during the first days after the terrorist attacks, Norwegians were marked by a unique selflessness, sorrow and solidarity (NOU 2012: 14). In order to avoid severe and disastrous conflicts, criticism of the authorities and party politics were also put aside through a tacit pact made between the establishment and the media during the first weeks after the attacks (Vettenranta 2012). The Prime Minister appealed to the collective spirit instead of the media's hunting and society's need for scapegoats, as was the case after the Chernobyl disaster. Stoltenberg had this to say at a press conference on 22 July:

This evening and tonight we are going to look after each other. We are going to comfort and console each other, talk together and stand together. Tomorrow we are going to show the world that Norwegian democracy becomes stronger when it is put to the test. I maintain the belief that freedom is stronger than fear (Stor-mark 2011: 393).

Instead of hunting for scapegoats and exchanging mutual accusations, as was the case immediately after the Chernobyl disaster, King Harald expressed his thanks to the involved authorities in his speech at the national 22 July memorial ceremony:

I also want to thank the Prime Minister, the government and the ministries. The Prime Minister has, in an impressive way, managed to be a secure national anchor in the worst of times. At the same time, he and the government system have managed to keep the wheels turning under very demanding conditions. The local authorities have been there in an impressive way and the political parties have shown solidarity – with each other, with the people and with those directly affected (*Mitt lille land* 2011).

However, a feeling of community cannot be created in a time of mourning if the premises for such a feeling are not already in place. That is why we can say that crises and catastrophes expose the social conditions within a nation. After the terror attacks, the

authorities made a serious effort to restore the dignity of the citizens – dignity that the terrorist had deprived them of by making them instruments for his extremist ideology.

## **Concluding Remarks**

In Norway the relationship between the general public and official institutions has traditionally been strong. Nonetheless, the authorities' loss of credibility in crisis communication after Chernobyl bears witness to the thin ice on which this trustworthiness rests. The long-term consequences of the dramatic collective experience of the 22 July terrorist acts remain to be seen. There are several on-going projects looking into the after-effects of the terror attacks in Norway that may give us better insight into this.<sup>3</sup>

The media environment has also changed considerably between the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 and the terror attacks in 2011. Social media did not exist during the first catastrophe, while Facebook and Twitter were actively used both by the authorities and the general public in 2011. The media climate is also different; reality TV has introduced emotions to the media arena so that it is now "allowed" to show feelings on the television screen, and this includes the authorities.

Crisis communication creates an "interdiscursive space" in which different actors, and various social groups and institutions – the media, the authorities, press groups, political parties, experts and social networks – struggle over the definition and construction of social reality (Gurevitch and Levy 1985). A crisis threatens communication practices and disrupts the social structure. During a crisis, ethical values, social problems, political power plays and economic dimensions enter into the communicative arena and the circumstance that caused the crisis often becomes the object of symbolic struggle (Vettenranta 1998).

The interaction between the authorities and the public is put to the test in an unpredictable and chaotic situation where the deceased, severely injured and their families must have the first priority. However, it is essential to understand that major catastrophes provoke existential anxiety in the public, not just immediate reactions of fear. When the authorities fail to recognize this, they approach crisis communication mainly from a technical rationality angle that does not take into account the public's fundamental need for communication that is grounded on the rationality of caring.

Whereas the authorities were unsuccessful with their Chernobyl communication, in the initial phase of the 22 July tragedy, the authorities and the Royal Family succeeded in satisfying the public's communication needs in a more appropriate way. In the first case, the authorities concentrated on the public's experience of fear and tried to deny the risk or gave false, calming information. Important requirements for crisis communication, such as honesty, openness and mutuality, were not fulfilled (Vettenranta 1998). Nor did the authorities recognize the people's overall anxiety for the life-world, which is fundamental in Heidegger's (1993) *existential Being-in-the-World*. In the latter case, the authorities contributed to relieving the collective suffering of the people after the terrorist attacks by understanding the need to build a protective "cocoon" of solidarity and community, which are basic elements of Heidegger's *existential Care*. Future research will reveal whether the caring attitude was a studied response based on instruction from communication experts, or whether it was ethically rooted in the intuition originating from the authorities' practising of a rationality of caring.

Nohrstedt (1990) suggests that problems arose because the information from the authorities after Chernobyl was contradictory and difficult for the public to interpret. That is partly true, but qualitative in-depth interviews (Vettenranta 1998) showed that the researchers had overlooked the more fundamental needs the public had on a more existential level. These needs did not emerge in quantitative surveys, predesigned by scientists who did not imagine that such a dimension would be an issue. Furthermore, the authorities and experts did not recognize the “State of Mind” of the public after the catastrophe (cf. Heidegger 1993).

The foremost indicators for Heidegger’s (1993) State of Mind are anxiety and fear. Both Chernobyl studies (cf. Vettenranta 1998) and early studies on terrorist attacks (cf. Thoresen et al., Wollebæk et al.) indicated substantial anxiety and uncertainty among the inhabitants. In the first case, a large group of citizens experienced that their lives were in the hands of a technocratic elite. Anxiety was partly based on the inability to comprehend and take advantage of information. The citizens felt that they were completely dependent on the information, assessments and recommendations emanating from the authorities and experts. This led also to increased suspicions regarding hidden agendas (Nohrstedt 1990, Vettenranta 1998). After Chernobyl, the authorities also tried to communicate with the public under the assumption that they and the public shared a common conceptual and cultural understanding about crises. This false assumption led to severe communication failures and conflicts. It is a mistake to expect that improved crisis communication will always reduce conflicts. The fundamental problems often derive from the structure of the political and administrative system, and these problems cannot be solved by improved crisis communication (Vettenranta 1998).

## Notes

1. NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation) is the main public service TV channel in Norway.
2. The drafts of Stoltenberg’s speeches were written by parliamentary secretary Hans Kristian Amundsen (cf. Stormark 2012).
3. See the list at: <http://www.etikkom.no/Vart-arbeid/Hvem-er-vi/Koordineringsgruppen-for-22-juli-forskning/Prosjekt/>

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