Trusting the Media : Island-based Radio Stations in Emergency Situations

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Abstract

Although the Croatian public seems to have a low level of trust in the media and media contents, there seems to be a relatively high level of trust in local radio. It is relatively stable and there have been no major downfalls in that regard, even in circumstances of the internet being increasingly used as the primary source of information. This distinguishes local radio from all other mass communication media and prompts the need to study it as a specific phenomenon. The issue of trusting the media becomes particularly important in emergency situations when their activity is essential for the public. In that sense, the position of local radio on populated islands, as very specific areas, is especially important. In that regard, this paper studies and strives to identify the interrelation between the relatively higher level of trust in local radio, especially in view of its choice as the primary source of information in an emergency situation, and its inherent, communicational and communicological advantages in relation to the other mass media. This serves to indicate its communicological, communicational, political, social, socio-psychological and safety potential, particularly in emergency situations where communication is essential and here radio seems to play a crucial role in quickly providing information on the emergency to the inhabitants of a populated island as a specific local area. Special attention is paid to the aspect of coordinating activities of collective and individual actors of the crisis-management system in protecting the affected social groups from danger in emergency situations.

Key words: *trust, local radio, crisis and crisis management, crisis communication, emergency situation, local public*

INTRODUCTION

From the aspect of the perception of media impact, trust in the media refers to, primarily, their credibility, that is, how accurate and reliable media contents and information are. In other words, trust in the media is about the media audience's, i.e. readers', listeners', viewers' perception of the media's honesty. This trust is, first and foremost, based on the credibility of a (particular) medium throughout longer periods of time. Therefore, trust in the media — as channels of public communication and major means of mediation of public opinion — is essential for the functioning of the public sphere where the public opinion is formed.

A good crisis communication network is about systematically managing communication with the key public domains by the crisis subject, and it includes the period before, during and after the crisis. In a period of crisis, an effective and timely communication with all the key domains of the public is essential. Within the framework of

public relations, the most significant aspect of communication is that with the media. It is exactly the media that carry the message an individual or organization generates during a crisis, and the media transmit them further to the other key domains of the public. This cycle of interrelated communication processes marks the present and the future of crisis communication.

Crisis management, as a specific scientific discipline, was recognized some twenty years ago when the notion of "disaster risk reduction" was introduced into policies and guidelines about acting in case of disaster. In history, civil protection developed from the efforts aimed at protecting civilians from war destruction. During the 1950s and 60s, civil protection focused on the protection from natural disasters, first and foremost floods and earthquakes. Very soon, it became evident that when a disaster hits, the overwhelming needs for preserving human life, taking care of the injured and evacuating those whose homes have been destroyed cannot be handled either at the local or at the national level alone.

The main task of this system is to inform all the inhabitants of a certain geographic area, as quickly as possible, of the possibility of a crisis situation. Therefore, such situations demand the engagement of competent workers trained in crisis management. At the same time, the characteristics of today's crisis situations call for a well-thought-out management system where the communication system plays a key role. In fact, it is the basic precondition for an efficient operation of all the structures responsible for the elimination of causes and consequences of a crisis. With time, there emerged the need to make crisis management highly centralised. This was particularly prompted by the dynamics of solving the observed problems, the need for a fast response and decision making as well as for resource management. Hence, the system of crisis management is becoming more and more like a military organization system. In that context, a communication system is central to supporting the management, reporting and dissemination of information and data (Kljaić & Dujak, 2009, pp. 3-4). However, there are several communication systems which include public media services (state radio-television system), local radio and TV stations, as well as land and mobile phone lines, specialised state communication systems which include mobile radio communications (military, police, rescue service, ambulance, fire squad), as well as the network of private citizens band (CB) radio transmitters.

The term "emergency situation" denotes a crisis in society, where the usual, normal relations and the operation of a part or all social subsystems are disrupted. However, this notion is relatively broad and encompasses several different crisis social conditions. In the context of this research, the notion of an emergency situation or crisis condition is used in the sense of decreased public safety, threats to people's lives and property, and aggravated functioning of social subsystems and the system as a whole, which is a consequence of some of the disasters mentioned above. Another important issue that must be mentioned here is the threat to the physical and mental health of a large number of citizens, which is a typical feature of emergency situations resulting

from a disaster. Such cases have shown that it was exactly the impossibility of evacuation and informing people early enough that caused additional fatalities in situations that involve a lot of panic. Therefore, the focus should be on emergency evacuation and informing the population in crisis zones, that is, on a well-thought-out and efficient crisis management.

One of the important factors of successful crisis management is the communication concept itself, which includes the following issues: who should be informed and when? Who should provide the information? What do we want to ask for and from whom? A good communication concept includes all the recipients of information, documents when and how the information was received, and determines when and which recipients will continue receiving information, and how will they receive it (Osmanagić-Bedenik, 2003, p. 211). Effective crisis communication, alongside encompassing the targeted public domains, depends not only on the content of the message, but also on the choice of the communication channel, that is, on the choice of the most appropriate means of communication, primarily the mass media. The media are the key to and the indispensable means of mass communication, hence the relationship with the media, that is, the use of the media in crisis communication, is of profound importance. Media relations are the primary activity of crisis communicators. This is primarily due to the ability of the mass media to disseminate a large number of messages to a wide audience in the shortest time (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2003, pp. 36-37). In fact, the mass media can be decisive in designating a particular event as a crisis (Zaremba, 2010, p. 27). Of course, this pertains to a possible crisis in an organization or institution, whereas disasters which affect the entire community are, due to their extent, crisis situations per se.

RADIO

Radio has a key informative, communicational and socio-psychological function in the period immediately after the first, sudden and unexpected disastrous event, be it a natural disaster or war, that is, during an emergency situation when information via no other media is available or not as efficient as the information communicated via radio, especially in isolated local areas affected by any form of crisis situation, such as islands. In that context, local radio makes it possible to emphasize and repeat important notifications, simultaneously communicated to a large number of people. This minimizes the possibility of disinformation and, since the human voice is the carrier of information, its intonation and articulation also indicate the importance of the content, which cannot be achieved by any other (non-audio) media. This is where the basic communicational feature of the radio medium, especially the local one, is manifested. In fact, the basic form of radio communication is the human voice which has a specific socio-psychological effect on the recipients of radio messages. Information conveyed by voice has its intonation, diction, accent and tone, which can give special meaning to the content. It reflects much more than its content alone, it (consciously or uncon-

sciously) involves the speaker's (radio host or reporter) emotions and mood, which is recognized by the audience who use it as a guideline in forming their impression of the content of the message, that is, of the reported situation.

The voice on a local radio station is recognizable, it is "local" and very close to a large number of people, so by listening to the radio, the citizens affected by a disaster develop a strong subjective impression that they are not alone or left to their own devices. Listening to the voice that conveys the information in perilous and dangerous situations prompts a feeling of intimacy and trust in the listener. In many examples, to many citizens who found themselves in difficult situations, the radio voice conveyed not only information but also instruction, encouragement and stimulation to persist and act. It is easier to overcome even very difficult and hopeless situations while listening to the programme on local radio. Voice, as the characteristic feature of the radio media, somehow humanizes the content of information and has a calming and rationalizing effect. In the conditions of an emergency situation, it is extremely important and can contribute to alleviating the psychological consequences of a disaster (panic, fear, disorientation, disorganization, depression, paranoia), both at the individual and social levels.

Due to all the above-stated reasons, local radio seems to be the most flexible and the most efficient media of communication in emergency situations taking place in a very specific and locally specified area, such as a populated island. It has a special place in the crisis management system, in coordinating the actions of institutions in eliminating the consequences of a disaster and/or to prevent the causes of a disaster, as well as to help in the (self)organization of the local population in preventing more serious consequences. It has a particularly important role in collecting, transferring and communicating, in a timely manner, information specific for a local community and the emergency situation that has affected it, in which respect it is unrivalled by any other medium. This makes local radio a contributing factor in efficiently reducing the risk of casualties, as well as other negative consequences of emergency situations. There are numerous examples of this that can be found in recent Croatian history. It is a known fact that the radio programme meant a lot for the citizens of Vukovar, Dubrovnik or Zadar when they were under siege and heavy attack by "the Great Serbian" aggressor for months during the Croatian War of Independence. Bearing in mind the significance of local radio for maintaining a high morale among civilians and the members of the army and for defending the besieged cities, it was no coincidence that the aggressor put in every effort to destroy the local radio stations and the facilities of the radio diffusion system in general (Mučalo, 2010b, pp. 304-306). Similarly, in many natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes or volcanic eruptions, the affected population primarily relied on local radio programmes for support and guidance on how to act in emergency situations they were faced with. Almost every disaster and emergency situations control plan published by competent institutions, both around the world and in Croatia, among other special instructions, regularly indicates listening to the news on

a local radio station. By doing so, they clearly refer the public to local radio as the main source of information in a local emergency situation. This also reflects the specific social function of local radio in emergency situations which significantly exceeds its role in normal social conditions.

TRUST IN THE MEDIA — LOCAL RADIO

The radio, like no other media, is expected to play a key role in emergency situations in view of meeting public needs for information (news), exactly because it is practical and can be used in almost every situation, even in the most severe crises such as natural disasters or wars. This has been confirmed by numerous examples, both worldwide and in Croatia, where the largest number of citizens relied exactly on the information mediated by local radio stations.

Local radio is extremely flexible in conceptualizing its programme, both in terms of content and structure. Thus, the regular programme, when an emergency situation arises, is commonly replaced by a special programme adjusted to a continuous monitoring of the emergency situation by covering all the events in the field and reporting on them promptly, which is especially important in the early stages of a disaster (Hindman & Cole, 1999, pp. 11-12). This includes live reporting from the field, messages from the audience and direct witnesses. Local radio functions as "an open door" in the dissemination of key information crucial for the functioning of the local community in emergency situations (Sood, Stockdale, & Rogers, 1987). The function of "an open door" is a two-way street because information from the local community interchanges on air with the information issued in the form of instructions and orders by officials from the competent institutions in charge of organizing the local community. Radio communicates information quickly because, by doing so, it follows in real time all the sudden changes and enables a rapid response of all the stakeholders.

Radio opens up to listeners' calls, so the listeners and their information become the key source of information and provide insight into the overall situation and events in the affected areas. Moreover, the information provided by the listeners can faithfully depict the atmosphere that prevails in certain parts of the affected area. Since the use of roads, as well as other types of transport, is very often limited (or even blocked), local radio eases the feeling of being cut off, and also functionally connects the actions of various actors participating in the rescue, defence and protection of human life and property. In addition, local radio tends to focus on personal experiences shared by the callers on air with the entire audience. This again makes it possible for the audience to relate the experiences of others to their own, that is, it contributes to the feeling of togetherness and solidarity without which efficient collective actions — which are necessary in such situations — would not be possible (Garner, 1996). In local communities that went through disasters in which local radio helped them achieve togetherness, there is often a prolonged feeling of solidarity among their members even long after the danger had passed and the consequences of the disaster had been dealt with. This
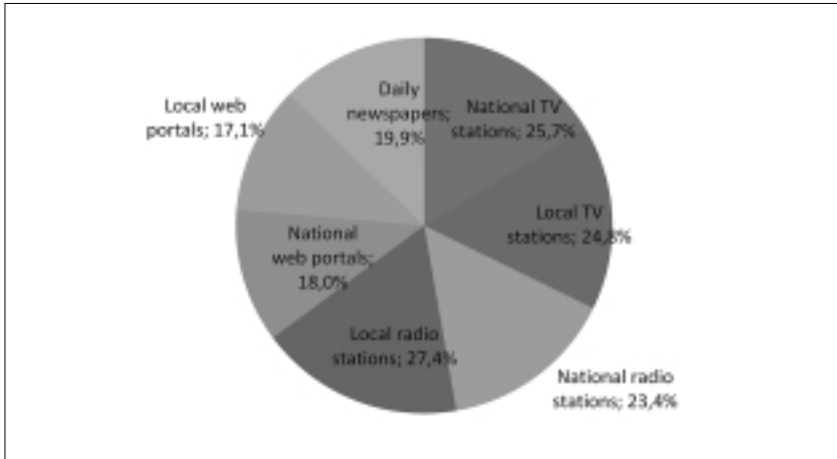
To what extent do you trust the following types of media in case of reporting in emergency situations
such as earthquake, flood or a terrorist attack that might happen in your local area?
(N: 713 Agency: Ipsos Puls)

solidarity, which includes an increase in mutual (interpersonal) trust, is reflected in an increased level of voluntary activities involving a larger number of people, or, to put it differently, in increased participation (Philips, 1986). When added up, all of these reasons contribute to the relatively high levels of trust expressed by the citizens towards local radio. This trust is primarily manifested in the selection of local radio as the primary source of information in emergency situations in local areas. The above-mentioned characteristic features of local radio and its social function in the conditions of an emergency situation are some of the strong indicators of a relatively high level of trust in local radio, so this basic assumption and its predictability in relation to the levels of trust will be carefully studied and verified in an empirical research laid out in the next chapter.

The study of public communication in a situation of a possible crisis in a local area (natural disaster with significant infrastructural damage) shows that, in view of mass communication and essential public information in the first hours of a crisis, local radio is still indispensable as a medium. Research shows that the choice of local radio as the source of the most important information in a crisis is directly connected to the trust in local radio stations (27.4% of the respondents highly trusted local radio). From this it is possible to deduce that local radio is the first medium the affected public turns to in case of an emergency situation (24.6% of the respondents).

CONCLUSION

The conducted research indicates the need to realize that an emergency situation is at the same time a psychological category. Therefore, informing the public in real time actually relies on the public's trust in "what" they receive and "from whom" they re-
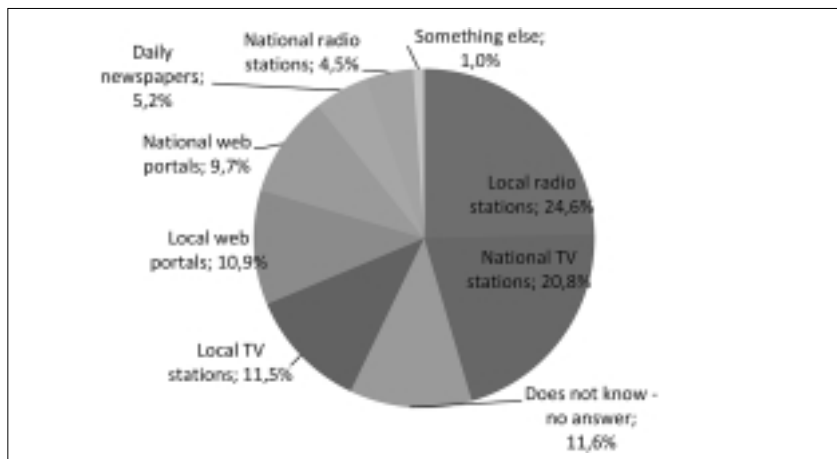
Which media will you turn to first for information?
(N: 713 Agency: Ipsos Puls)

ceive the information and on their frequent identification with the "known" media (a lot of respondents indicated that they had been listening to those "voices" for years on local radio). Moreover, an emergency situation encompasses the entire population of the affected area, and due to this, while bearing in mind the "educational structure of the overall Croatian population" it is at the moment impossible to expect them to be fully educated and have the comprehensive knowledge and skills necessary for using new media. Finally, radio is, as a medium, extremely flexible in case of possible or even the worst-case scenarios of infrastructural destruction of the existing resources, which then enables it to restart broadcasting in a relatively short time. This is, in turn, critical for suppressing panic (in the first 24 hours of a crisis).

Therefore, it can be logically expected that a study and paper, such as this one, based on the mentioned premises (but more comprehensive and more concise, of course) in the near future should prompt a wider portion of the population and competent authorities to bear this in mind when designing a system that would provide answers to the asked questions and encountered issues. At the moment, unfortunately, there is no such system.

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