Inter-Organisational Crisis communication

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The authorities and the media together have the important responsibility of informing the citizens in the event of extraordinary situations. The authorities and the media are dependent upon each other to be able to fulfill this duty (the publics´ use of social media most certainly does not replace the journalists need for facts from the authorities). The interdependence in being the source and the channel can be described as an interplay between the actors. Their dependency, but also the diametrically opposing tasks and the differing operational circumstances, will lead to a more or less constant tension in the relationship. The authorities and the media´s inter-organisational crisis communication is important to study because the interplay can have an effect upon the rescue work of the authorities, it often lies behind the media´s coverage, and can be the reason for how an extraordinary event develops into some kind of crisis situation. A consequence of the interplay between the actors can result in lives being saved and damage to both people and property being mitigated. Research into the inter-organisational crisis communication between the authorities and the media has for a long time been in demand, the theoretical development also lacks behind and new theories and explanatory models are missing.

In this paper I will mainly argue for the advantage of using the system theoretical perspective whenever studying inter-organisational crisis communication between the authorities and the media. This perspective involves the notion that organisations are complex open systems, with a need for interaction between the different components/parts of the organisation and with the surrounding society – in order to survive. Three aspects describe system components: a hierarchical ordering (super system, system, sub system), interdependence (one component in the system is dependent upon other components in the system), permeability (both the system and the system component have borders that are possible to force, which make influence possible between the components in the system).

The authorities and the media do therefore need an exchange between the inter-organisational parts, i.e. between units and departments, working groups and individuals, as well as with the surrounding society, for instance with other groups in the society. In other words, the authorities and the media´s respective organisations, constitute contexts that influence the respective actors´ behavior, because the systems and the borders of the system components are possible to force.

The different organisations of the authorities and the media thereby influence the inter-organisational crisis communication between the actors, while the organisations can be looked upon as systems within a super system (the society), which constitute yet another context of influence. But also extraordinary events or
situations that occur in the surrounding society (in the super system) can be expected to influence the organisations of the authorities and the media, if one relates to the hierarchical ordering.

From the inspiration of mainly the system theoretical perspective, I have developed a system model, which will make it possible to explain the inter-organisational crisis communication between the authorities and the media in combination with extraordinary events. The model consists of: the surrounding society/situation (external-organisational component), profession, preparation, emotion (internal-organisational components), and relation (inter-organisational component).

The Estonia catastrophe, through its magnitude and complexity with a lot of different actors involved, is an appropriate case on which to apply the system theoretical approach. The empirical material is built on qualitative interviews. The study is a work in progress, therefore no results or conclusions will be presented. The focus in this paper will be on a presentation of the developed system theoretical model for inter-organisational crisis communication.