

## COMMUNICATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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### #01. SELLING THE CONCEPT OF INTERCULTURALITY: THE NEED TO THINK DIFFERENTLY

If you don't communicate something, it doesn't exist. And if you communicate it in a formulaic way, there is little chance of it cross-cutting into public opinion or getting through an institution's doors. Taking it further, when communicating aspects of interculturality the difficulty level soars. Because whether we like it or not, this is a theme that has failed to attract media attention from the outset. All the more so when highlighting positive policies that promote integration, coexistence and mutual recognition: we live in fast-paced times in which conflict, polarisation and stigmatisation come first.

When reporting activities carried out by people from other countries, the media has a tendency to create noisy, alarmist headlines. When the intention is to stigmatise, immigration sells. In contrast, when the intention is integration, sales flop. This is the current landscape we are working in, and in spite of the challenges, we need to spend time identifying the glimmers of light coming in through the cracks, in which we can present the policies a number of local governments are implementing to promote interculturality.

What challenges do local governments face in terms of better communicating interculturality?

1. Do not be afraid. Being afraid leads to self-censorship, and we then avoid communicating some of the things we believe in.
2. Broadening perspective and championing creativity.
3. Joint working. It requires joint working between the technical experts who manage interculturality policies on the one hand, and communications teams on the other.



## 1. Do not be afraid.

All of us who work on promoting interculturality need to make an important assumption: the system will typically resist our accounts of the actions we implement. What we must never do is create those barriers ourselves. We must never engage in self-censorship. When might we be vulnerable to making this mistake? When the pressure of ‘what everyone will say’ (whether political rivals, the media, our own team or citizens themselves) is overwhelming.

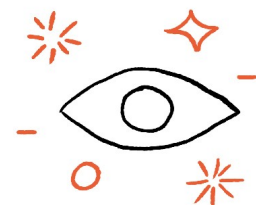
Therefore, the first step we must take to get interculturality in the media - and at the heart of any local government’s internal policies - is to fearlessly demonstrate all the actions we implement in our everyday work. As a sensitive, headline-grabbing topic, there will always be someone who uses it against us and goes for an easy headline. Destruction has always been simpler than construction. We need to change tack and think differently.

Combat rumours with evidence-based information, shared transparently, giving recognition to the parties involved and with proof. Because vilifying, criticising and labelling is always simpler than constructing, recognising, questioning and listening.

## 2. Broadening perspective and championing creativity

Local governments are implementing a number of intercultural policies that could potentially be of interest to the media. And frequently, it doesn’t even cross our minds that there might be space in the media for them. We have tunnel vision, filtered by our own prejudices, based on deeply embedded experiences whereby we repeat to ourselves that ‘planting’ our topics in the media is much more difficult than stories on a different theme. Maybe there is some truth to this feeling, but we cannot - and should not - let it drag us down.

We need to broaden our perspective, in the broadest sense. In other words, closely observe any policy or project that might draw the attention of the media and think about how we can ‘sell’ it. We need to think more about selling stories than writing press releases. Journalists receive endless press releases; ‘buying’ one from us is much more complicated than us presenting them with an interesting report. Be that as it may, a press release tends to be less complicated than having to stop and think differently, and more creative in a bid to garner media interest.



Our challenge lies in working on changing this paradigm. If we succeed, journalists will see us as a relevant source of information they can turn to. Interculturality requires courage, creativity and relativity.

### **3. Joint working.**

It is essential that RECI local governments have an awareness of – and involvement from – communications departments in terms of disseminating everything related to interculturality. The cities in question should make a clear and concerted commitment to explaining exactly why they decided to join the organisation, what being part of it involves, and what they learn each year from sharing experiences and projects with other cities with common interests. In other words, putting interculturality front and centre in their policies is essential if we want to reach further than our own niche. Is there the will to do it? Asking ourselves these questions is crucial insofar as finding out where we are and where we want to go in terms of communications strategies in these areas. The answer will tell us which resources are available to us and align the expectations of all the local government departments involved. And more involvement means more media impact and more internal commitment.



## #02. CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS: PREVENTION, ORDER, EMOTIONS AND DANGERS.

Opportunity, nerves, danger, pressure, embargo, timings, conflict, urgency, consequences, media, mistake, transparency, interests and changes. These are the words that often come up in working groups with technical experts or policy-makers when we ask them to talk about concepts associated with crisis communications. It is always the same: at first glance, you can see that these words convey much more negative concepts than positives. Only afterwards do other, more neutral words emerge.

Frequently, the main concept that should form the very basis of any organisation's (whether local government, public or private institution) strategic communications doesn't appear at all. The concept? Prevention.

In everyday life, it is clear that we actually generate the majority of crises ourselves. The majority are avoidable (with exceptions such as natural disasters), if only, for example, there was a clear commitment to work on communications from a perspective of prevention. Investing in prevention is not a cost, it is clearly of major benefit. But institutions fail to dedicate time and resources to prevention. It is not given the attention it deserves. Conversely, when an institution is in crisis and it is escalating fast, the dreaded haste sets in.

### First inside, then out.

Crises are often caused by malpractice, inappropriate comments, unethical or irresponsible actions, concealing relevant information, lying, etc. If we take this as our starting point, working from the perspective of prevention in communications is key. Creating a communications policy based on transparency, both inside and out of the corridors of local government. There is often an obsessive focus on external communications, whilst internal communications are neglected. The order of these factors always alters the 'product' being communicated. If we want the staff in our local government to have a higher level of commitment to interculturality policies, it is crucial to inform them first, and then the media.



## The forgotten ones: emotions.

When we need to manage a crisis, what is the oft-overlooked key element? Emotions. When a crisis unravels, what is the first thing to blow up? Protocols. Why? Precisely because emotions come into play, and if they are allowed to dominate our management of the crisis, we will never get it right. At times like these, fear is the main emotion that affects us. And this fear puts us on the attack, making us defend ourselves.

If we are overwhelmed by fear (whether or not we are aware of it, and to what extent), it makes us react instead of respond. And when we react – without exception – we make mistakes. Therefore, in spite of everything we may know about what to do in a crisis situation, one factor is especially decisive: how we manage our own emotions, as well as those of the policy-makers and technical experts around us and anyone else managing the crisis. This is the only way we can arrive at a point that we can act quickly, without being too hasty. It is one of the key elements of emerging from a tricky situation unscathed.

## The fears around us.

If we need to tackle a crisis, the main fears we should avoid in order to lessen tensions are:

- Political rivals (opposition or government members).
- Others in their party.
- The media.
- Their own weaknesses in managing the situation.
- Losing their job.
- Their reputation being questioned.
- Attacks on social media.
- Potential errors to make.

Organisations with a better mastery of each of these aspects will have many more options when it comes to effective crisis management. These aspects should be spelled out, so we can check how they influence us and correct ourselves every time we realise that we are giving them more attention than they merit.



## The dangers to avoid.

As well as our fears, there are dangers all around us that can cause us to make poor decisions. This is where the art of knowing how to manage your environment comes in:

- The pressure of the environment.
- Fake news.
- Social media.
- Decisions being made too quickly.
- Letting ourselves be led by non-specialist people.
- Not listening to experts, technical experts or specialists when managing a crisis.
- Not paying attention to internal communications.
- Forgetting about the victims (if there are any).

We live in a hyper-accelerated, hyper-connected society. Where everything happens at speed, everything is intense and everything is urgent. These elements will always have a negative impact on our ability to manage any dangers crossing our path.

We often put the onus on ourselves to give an immediate response to any event. Giving a response is important, but as we said before, the key is to give a quick response, without being too hasty. Because haste increases the risk of making mistakes. What's more, being in a constant rush runs the risk of what we call the 'centrifugal effect'. Everyone in local government sees the crisis in the same way, from the same perspective, and often tainted by a victim mentality, thus triggering defensive communications. When this happens, our tunnel vision switches on and we can only see the crisis from a perspective that makes it impossible to open up space for dialogue or alternative solutions. We are dominated and limited by our emotions.

This is why it is often important to take an external viewpoint; one that poses different questions enabling the people involved to see things from a different, more creative, more cross-cutting, and less visceral perspective. These are what we call cold showers. In other words, getting the organisation to stop and disconnect from everything around them, engage in calm analysis, and make improved decisions.

## The importance of knowing how to manage the media well.

Staying loyal to the organisation and yourself, and gaining journalists' respect are key to forging trusting relationships with the media. In times of crisis, the media will treat us just as we have treated them in calmer times. Of course, media outlets have owners who in turn have their own interests, but we are ultimately dealing with the people who write stories. The healthier the relationship we have with them, the better served the interests of the organisation we work for. Thinking of journalists as the enemy and throwing punches at them is a grave mistake, and one that will only get negative results. That is a fist fight we cannot win. It is much more sensible to be strategic, to be capable of engaging in a quick-fire round of chess, in which we predict certain potential scenarios and prepare answers for each one of them. The following points are important in our dealings with the media:

- Dedicating time to nurturing relationships with the media (without taking it too far).
- Not making distinctions between different media outlets.
- Not concealing any information.
- Encouraging the leaders within our organisation to meet journalists.
- Maintaining boundaries with them where necessary.
- Always responding to them.
- Preparing an argument/defence prior to speaking to them.
- Not attempting to make friends with them.

Finally, the following five key points are crucial in crisis management:

1. Controlling the timings and the story.
2. Having a clear holding statement.
3. Being proactive and transparent.
4. Managing emotions well.
5. Controlling the surrounding noise.

