fi®st mɤñd@¥

PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ON THE INTERNET

Crisis Communication and the
Internet: Risk and Trust
in a Global Media

by Hans-Juergen Bucher

Abstract

Risk is one of the main features of modern societies. With the Internet a new media has appeared, which on the one hand has increased the risk associated with information: free accessibility, interactivity, globality, and connectivity of personal, economical, political and media communication have all led to a loss of journalistic control over the information market. On the other hand Internet-based communication has increased opportunities to secure information in a manner that has not been available up to now. In terms of crisis communication this leads to the question: does the Internet increase or decrease the risk of a communication breakdown? It has been demonstrated that trust is one of the features in complex modern societies which compensates for risk. So does the Internet increase trust in global crisis communication? The questions concerning the interrelation of risk, trust and crisis communication are seen in a much broader context: does Internet communication force a structural transformation of the public sphere?

Contents

The Internet in Crisis: Communication in the Case of September 11th

If there is one event which gave us the proof and sharpened our awareness, that we live

in a global risk society, it was the September 11th 2001 attack on the cities of New York and Washington, when four planes were hijacked, two of them slammed into the towers of the World Trade Center, one into the Pentagon and the last crashed in a field near Pittsburgh. The hidden risks of globalisation as poverty, unemployment, environmental damage and cultural conflicts became apparent and evident at a glance. The pictures of the burning towers of the World Trade Center made it clear that globalisation is not a one-way street starting in the industrialized countries and ending in the developing countries. Rather globalisation is a kind of network effect for which communication plays an important role. Even the symbolism of the attacks, which hit the military and the economical centres of American culture, demonstrate a kind of communicative impact.

How crisis communication on a global level via the Internet works could also be observed very clearly in the coverage and the worldwide communication about the September 11th events. From a special point of view, the communication of these events, and the subsequent Anthrax attacks, is a paradigm in crisis communication - and especially in crisis communication where the Internet plays a crucial role. I will therefore use this case to show some aspects of the interrelationship between crisis communication and the Internet.

Very soon after the September events headlines, like the following, appeared:

- Media critics see Web role emerge
- Internet matures as news source
- Internet performs global role, supplementing TV
- From Niche Site to news portal
- Anthrax fears send visitors to Web

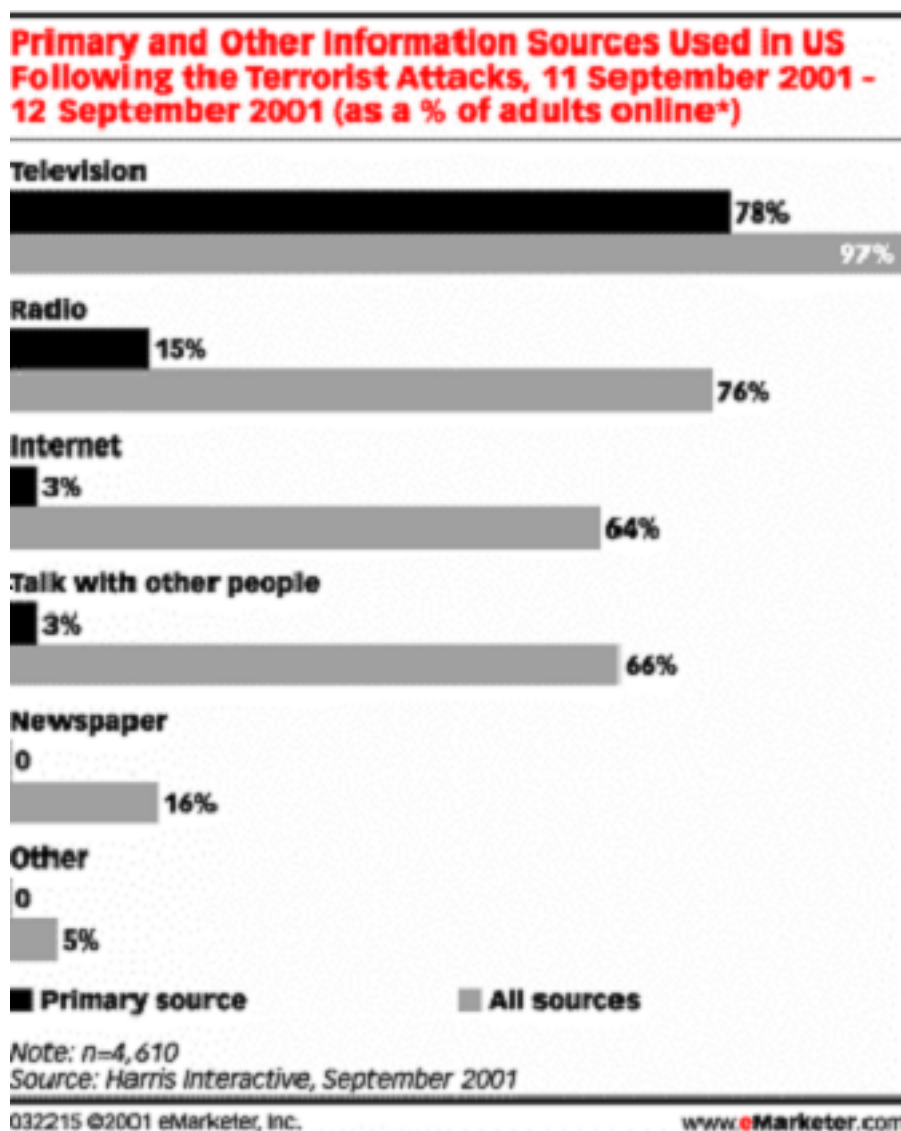In an editorial of the leading Internet survey service NUA, it was stated on 17 September:

> "In the past week, the Internet was more than it has ever been before. Not only were those of us at a distance able to read first-hand, up-to-date reports of what was happening, but those survivors who were caught up in the chaos were able to email and send instant messages to family, friends, and colleagues to reassure them. When the phone system collapsed, the Internet came through" (Foley, 2001).

And the *New York Times* commented on 12 September 2001:

> "More than news, what people all over the world craved in the wake of yesterday's terrorist attacks was connection to each other, and many of them found that most easily achieved by going online."
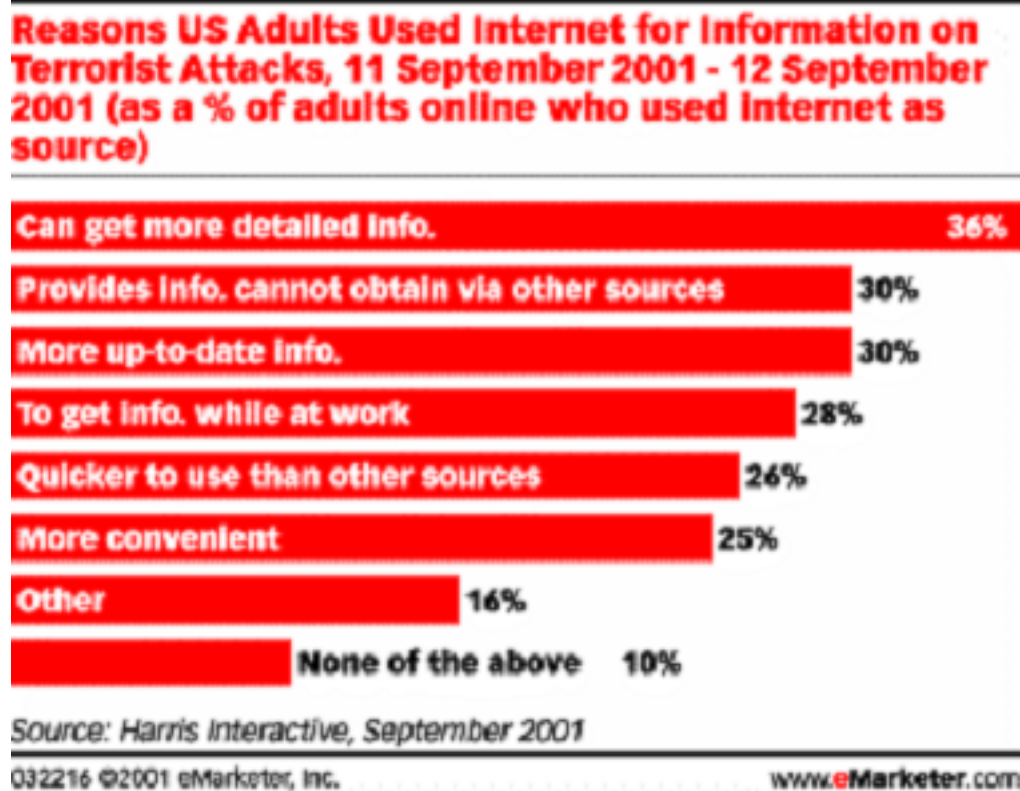
Data from log analysis and polls show that Internet traffic increased heavily after the

terror attacks.

Primary and Other Information Sources Used in US Following the Terrorist Attacks, 11 September 2001 - 12 September 2001 (as a % of adults online*)

Television
78%
97%

Radio
15%
76%

Internet
3%
64%

Talk with other people
3%
66%

Newspaper
0
16%

Other
0
5%

■ Primary source ■ All sources

Note: n=4,610
Source: Harris Interactive, September 2001

032215 ©2001 eMarketer, inc. www.eMarketer.com

Figure 1

Traffic to U.S. sites from other countries doubled during the weeks after the attacks from six million visitors to about 12 million on a weekly average. Sixty-four percent of Americans used the Internet to find information on the attacks. They went online to find more detailed information, to find information they could not get elsewhere, to find more up-to-date information, and to find out what was happening while they were at work. The Internet was also an important secondary source of information, whereas television remains the most used primary information source.

Reasons US Adults Used Internet for Information on Terrorist Attacks, 11 September 2001 - 12 September 2001 (as a % of adults online who used Internet as source)

Can get more detailed Info.	36%
Provides Info. cannot obtain via other sources	30%
More up-to-date Info.	30%
To get Info. while at work	28%
Quicker to use than other sources	26%
More convenient	25%
Other	16%
None of the above	10%

Source: Harris Interactive, September 2001

032216 ©2001 eMarketer, Inc.   www.eMarketer.com

Figure 2

More than 17 million users visited the CNN Web site. The number of German online surfers who used American Web sites doubled between the 10-16 September.

Traffic to the Web site for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention surged by more than 118 percent during the week of 7 October, according to Nielsen/NetRatings, a Web audience measurement company. The Web site drew about a half million visitors, and more than 250,000 looked up pages containing information on the symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of anthrax.

As a result of September 11th, there were not only increases in overall Internet traffic but the traffic became more international and more intercultural. And that is maybe the most interesting aspect of the whole issue.

Normally, empirical research on linking patterns on the Internet for the year 2000 indicate that "national cultures continue to exert a substantial influence on how transnational connections are made" (Halavais, 2000, p. 22). So normally 90 percent of links on U.S. Web sites are directed to other U.S. sites and in European countries about between 60 and 70 percent of the links refer to Web site locally or nationally. If European Web sites point to sites across national borders, 70 percent of the links from Europe are directed to U.S. Web sites.

Information habits after September 11th changed.

Information from Hitwise, which tracks traffic to the most popular news sites, demonstrated that traffic to sites such as the Islamic Gateway, Dawn.com (national newspaper of Pakistan), ExpressIndia.com, HindustanTimes.com, and Haaretz.co.il (Israeli newspaper) grew noticeably in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. The biggest increase in traffic was that of Afghanistan Online, which jumped more than 11,000 places in the Hitwise rankings. Traffic to Al Jazeera.net, the site of the independent Middle East television station, also soared.

The online edition of Germany's most influential news magazin *Der Spiegel* covered a story, in which they portrayed some of the online news sites from Islamic countries, to support German online user in searching foreign news. The regional newspaper in Minneapolis, the *Pioneer Press* presented its readers the same service of portraying some of the Arabic and Islamic Web sites.

What became rather clear from this facts: research on crisis communication of today cannot ignore that the Internet has become an important source and mode of communication in times of crisis, especially, when they are of global character. But the *decisive question* remains:

Does the growing importance of the Internet contribute to an improvement in international crisis communication and crisis journalism or is it just another channel for distributing the same old stuff in the same old pattern of news coverage, dominated by exactly the sources that should be objects of the coverage?

Some Remarks on Risk, Trust, and Crisis

To get a better grasp of crisis communication on the Internet I will use some terms or concepts introduced by Anthony Giddens in his analysis of the consequences of modernity: the terms of risk and trust. Concerning the concept of risk he relied heavily on the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, who declared that risk is the main feature of modern societies. But risk is not an objective quality, risk is a construction, which means that we have to deal with the perception of risk rather than an objective feature of the world. If a construction is public and is part of a common knowledge, this could be analysed as a result of public communication: we know what others know only if we take part a the same communicational exchange. So risk perception could turn into a common view of the world, if this knowledge is communicated.

In term of knowledge we can define crisis as a situation of uncertainty: we don't know enough to understand what happens and we are lacking knowledge about a way out or a

loophole. That means we are always acting under the risk of making a wrong decision. The more complex a situation is, the higher that risk. As Beck demonstrated risk is a characteristic feature of modern society, as complexity on one side makes it difficult to find adequate solutions, and in turn, decisions are irreversible. According to Beck:

> "The discourse of risk begins, where trust in our security and belief in progress end. (...) The concept of risk thus characterizes a peculiar, intermediate state between security and destruction, where the perception of threatening risks determines thought and action" (Beck in Adam, Beck, and van Loon, 2000, p. 213.).

Risk is, in words of constructivism, a "construct of the observer". Risk and trust are not objective categories but subjective categories. And they are subjective in a deep sense: neither you can command a person to trust in you or someone or something nor can you command a person not to feel uncertain or risky. Risk and trust are built up in communication.

Media communication has a double connection with risk. First, media should transfer knowledge that helps us to minimize uncertainty. Second, media itself has become a risk, a risk of information.

As Anthony Giddens remarked in an interview:

> "... the old Enlightenment assumption that uncertainties were dissolved by the acquisition of knowledge is increasingly giving way to the realization that the present production of knowledge produces uncertainty. A lot of the uncertainties of the world come not from ignorance, but from knowledge. If you consider the new risk environments, they come from scientific breakthroughs as much as from a lack of them." (Giddens in the *New Statesman* for 1 October 1997).

One can add that they come from media coverage and information outlets as much as a lack of them.

Characteristics of Internet Communication: The Most Disembedded Medium

We need another term to get a better understanding of the role of the Internet in crisis communication, the term of disembedding, which was introduced by Giddens. Disembedding means "the lifting out of social relations from local contexts of

interaction and their restructuring across indefinite span of times" (Giddens, 1990, p. 21). From this point of view all media communication is disembedded, as it leaves behind the direct face-to-face-communication. But the Internet is the most disembedded media as it is the most removed from face-to-face-communication.

In Internet communication we *first* do not have the limitations of space: there are no borders for circulation and there is unlimited memory space for content. This dimension of disembedding constitutes the globalisation of the medium.

Second, we have no time limitations, which means messages can be posted at any time, communicators do not have to wait for datelines of publishing. Coverage can happen in real-time, without any delay for production and distribution, and as one should add without any quality control.

Third, we have no limitations on the roles of communicators and participants: whoever has the technical capacities to receive messages with a computer is also able to send them. He can do that without restrictions on his or her role, be it as a commentator, a reporter, a businessman, citizen, or a politician.

Finally, on the Internet there are no limitations of content. "All the news that fit to print" is no longer a limitation on Internet content. Content can take many forms on the Internet, videotaped, audiotaped or visualized. "News" can take many forms from text to games to letters.

This high degree of disembeddedness makes Internet communication highly risky, because disembedding always means loss of control: control over sources and their reliability, control over selection, control over verification. We have to cope with the problem of informational risk and of communication collapse. Trust is normally a means to compensate for our lack of knowledge in handling complex systems. Trust reduces uncertainty. It does not make up for lack of knowledge, but it allows us to believe and act as if we were in a state of full and certain knowledge.

Hence the Internet plays a double-edged role in crisis communication. On the one hand, it increases the risk of information thanks to the loss of traditional journalistic controls over the information market. We no longer have an expert system to which we can assign management of information quality. On the other hand, the Internet extends the possibilities of getting information in a manner that has not been available up to now. It strengthens the informational self-determination of the audience and make them more independent of traditional media.

The Double-edged Character of Internet

Communication

Before I draw some consequences, let me illustrate this double-edged character with regard to the September 11th events. In the media, it turned out very clearly that the Internet from one perspective improved crisis communication while on the other side the Internet made it more difficult, more risky.

Generally, the dark side of the Internet in crisis communications is mirrored in

- limited access to certain kinds of information;
- Rumours and hoaxes;
- False information; and,
- Bias.

These factors all affect informational uncertainty. Examples abound from the events of September 11th.

In a leading article, with the headline "Information please", the *New York Times* stated:

> "Fear has been fueled by the fitful and sometimes contradictory flow of information from the government and by the sometimes sloppy and slow response on the ground. (...) The frequent lack of specificity in the government's warnings and information has also heightened public fear. On Thursday, the Justice Department warned of imminent terrorist attacks, as soon as the weekend, but said it had no information about where the new threats might come. They did not link those warnings to anthrax."

And the *Christian Science Monitor* remarked:

> "In this war against individuals, where intelligence matters more than numbers of troops, tanks, and bombers, the administration is restricting information to a much broader degree than in previous wars.
>
> Americans know only the bare bones of what's happening in Afghanistan, and perhaps that's not surprising. But they also, for "security reasons," aren't being told what antibiotics are being used to treat the Anthrax cases in Florida. And for days now, they haven't known the whereabouts of their vice president, who has been in a separate, secret location from the president. "The extent of the clampdown seems a lot wider than it's been in other wars," says historian Alan Brinkley at Columbia University in New York."

On the other side of this lack of information we find an information overflow related to

September 11th, an information overflow which increases uncertainty first by rumours and false information, second by informational politics, and third by bias.

Rumours

The following rumors show typical aspects of Internet communication: they were spread with high speed and globally; they induced notice by all types of media; and, they were countered by online information:

- a Nostradamus prophecy anticipated the attack on the World Trade Center;
- a coded message predicting the attack was found in Microsoft's "Wingdings" graphics font designed long before the recent events;
- 4,000 Jews were warned against going to the World Trade Center on the day of the attack;
- photos of the burning buildings reveal the face of Satan in clouds of smoke;
- another wave of terrorist attacks was planned for September 22;
- a man caught in the explosion of one of the WTC towers rode bits of the falling building down to safety;
- an unburned Bible was found in the smoldering wreckage of the Pentagon.

Bias

One of the most striking example of bias in international coverage related to video images, broadcast by CNN, which indicated that some Palestinians were celebrating the September 11th events. The suspicion that the video was shot ten years ago was raised by a student in Brazil in a newsgroup; very quickly this message was spread through the internet. CNN reacted via its Web site: "There is absolutely no truth to the information that is now distributed on the Internet that CNN used a 10-year-old video showing the celebrating of some Palestinians in East Jerusalem after the terror attacks in the U.S. The video was shot that day by a Reuters camera crew". The CNN statement ends with the plea, to e-mail it "to anyone you now".

Improvements and changes

On the *positive* side, the Internet was one of the main channels for communication after the attacks in New York, especially as a substitute for broken telephone connections. But the function of the Internet in terms of crisis communication was much broader:

> "Individuals have become part of the media flow as never before, as
> emailed articles, letters, rumours, investigative reports, personal stories,
> photos and videos fly around the Net. The free, open publishing system
> of the Independent Media Centres and alternative press aggregators like
> Alternet spread news and perspectives often absent from the mainstream
> press. Peace advocates are developing their media strategies. Online

communities, including MediaChannel's new Forum, are hosting insightful and often heated discussions." (From the mediachannel.org).

Lets look more closely at how the Internet changes and improves crisis communication. One can differentiate between the following forms of change:

1. *Decentralization of crisis communication.*
   Crisis communication becomes multi-directional, more intercultural. If you compare coverage of the Gulf War and recent events in Afghanistan with the coverage of Kosovo war the differences are obvious: the lack of Internet resources in the first two cases was caused by a television-centered crisis communication with a high dependency on military information. In the case of the Kosovo war, there were Internet-based information sources right where the war was occurring, from e-mail to Web sites, all of which reported as private correspondents and eyewitnesses. This multidirectional form of crisis communication allowed the audience to compare and evaluate different sources and to understand better the biases of official information.

2. *Qualification of journalism.*
   Media communication is supplemented by personal communication personal journalism. See, for example, Smiljana Antonijevic's article on the use of the Internet in Belgrade, as a communications tool and news filter.

3. *Acceleration of crisis communication.*
   The disembeddedness of Internet communication relative to time means that there is a continuous flow of information; news spreads without temporal boundaries. The network characteristics of the Internet enable distribution to an unlimited audience. For example, only minutes after the first plane hit the north tower of the World Trade Center a message about that event appeared on a newsgroup (slashdot.org) together with a query to the group community for further information. The Internet also accelerated the distribution of several rumours, but also permitted clarification and correction (as in the case of CNN's aforementioned video).

4. *The Internet has become a watch dog of official and journalistic crisis communication.*
   We have different examples of sites examining the coverage of the crisis between Israel and Palestine. For example, the pro-Israel site HonestReporting define its task as:

   > "There are many factors that influence our perception of truth. Perspective is one of the most significant: one man's 'terrorist' is another man's 'freedom fighter'. (...) While in the world media there exists bias against both sides, our concern is purely with anti-Israel bias - though we do believe that any bias is ultimately

counter-productive for all involved" (From HonestReporting.com).

Much of the information that I have mentioned in the course of this paper has been analysed and repaired by Internet communication, such as the different rumours on the September 11th attacks.

5. *The Internet becomes a global archive of crisis communication.*
   Much of the Kosovo coverage is still archived on the Web; for example, see the Global Policy Forum's Kosovo archives. In case of the September 11th events, Web sites around the world created archives as a kind of virtual memorial for those killed in the event; see for example September11News.com. For research in crisis communication these archives provide unique opportunities to compare different events and cases.

6. *The Internet creates global virtual communities.*
   These communities are different from those invented by traditional media and political interests. In these communities, individuals expressed their emotions and asked urgent questions often on a highly sophisticated level.

> "Because all of America was affected by the events of Sept. 11, the Internet and 24-cable news shows quickly assumed the role of electronic town halls. But if those forms of communication initially brought the country together in displays of public grieving - through broadcasts of memorial services and Web site tributes to the victims - they have more lately become national forums for the expression of anxiety." (From the *New York Times* of 20 October 2001).

The September 11th events demonstrated very clearly that media communication is inextricable interwoven in the crisis it self. Media reporting about the crisis shape the picture of the crisis, and is itself a factor in the dynamics of the crisis. Much has changed since the earliest newspapers of centuries ago, where months would lapse between events and their reporting in the media.

Today, thanks to real-time coverage, the event and the image of the event nearly fall together. That means that no one can deal with a crisis without taking into account its images. Indeed, the Spetember 11th events demonstrate a high degree of staging for the media. Because of the symbolism of the attacks, it was obvious that the events would draw the full attention of all media. As Mark Danner noted:

> "The 19 men who changed the world on Sept. 11 used as their primary weapon not box cutters or jet airliners but something more American and much more powerful: the television set. The box cutters and the planes were tools in constructing the great master image, the Spectacular; the

television set was their delivery vehicle. In an instant, the spectacular altered the terms of debate, creating a sense of pervasive and unprecedented vulnerability among Americans, a sense revivified by each new report of anthrax, each fresh incident of a deranged assailant on a plane or a Greyhound bus. And the Spectacular thereby transformed American foreign policy, heretofore a matter of disregard among most Americans, into a vital question of their own security, a matter of their own life and death" (Mark Danner in the *New York Times* of 16 October 2001).

Consequences

1. The integration of the Internet in crisis communication **alters the role of journalism and undermines the power of communication of official sources.** What we can state is a loss of information control by journalists and official sources. As Jim Hall draws the consequences from the Kosovo crisis communication: "One of the roles of journalism in this ocean of information is to help readers negotiate the various impasses that arise around bad and contradictory information, even from reputable sources" (Hall, 2000, p. 393). Journalists are no longer only the **gatekeepers** of information but they must become **guides for global information space.**

2. **Media** which communicates the crisis **becomes a factor of the crisis itself.** We learned already from the Gulf War coverage that satellite TV can become a factor for the dynamics of the crisis itself - an observation we could make in the September 11th crisis as well. For example when George Bush and Osama bin Laden used television for their messages, this was expected to influence the development of the crisis. But in a deeper sense this became true for the Internet: the terrorists used Internet communication to plan and to coordinate their attacks, made possible by the disembeddedness of the medium and the corresponding lack of communication control.

3. We have to consider in crisis communication that there are **tendencies towards a global public.** Satellite TV like CNN or Al Jazeera are the starting points of a global public. But with the Internet this becomes much more apparent. So whoever communicates in a crisis, which is of international relevance, has to be aware of a global audience. Of course one has to take into account that the access to Internet communication is far from a fair distribution in the different regions of the world. But from that, one gets an argument for setting the new world order of information on the public agenda again.

4. **There are multiple perspectives on crisis communication:** This multiperspectivity of course includes all the errors, rumours, hoaxes, and false information. But on the other side stands an enrichment of public communication from more sources than just journalistic ones. "The Internet has been a godsend during the Kosovo crisis. As a library, a specialized message board and a distribution method for dozens of non-traditional sources of information the medium has begun to fulfil its ballyhooed promises" (Welch, 1999).

5. **The single citizen is much more responsible for his level and quality of knowledge** than ever before. As trust and risk are, as stated above, subjective categories, the individual has to care for his or her information security. In a global information world, citizens can no longer delegate the risk associated with information to journalists and other professionals. Every citizen has to become a professional in information security. This is not meant as a kind of neo-liberal statement according to the message that everybody is responsible for his own fate, independent of his capacities. It means that in particular the media has to care for the improvement of the competence of their audience. And Internet is a good tool for this task.

6. **There is an important difference in crisis communication depending on where the crisis happens.** If you compare the picture of the exploding South Tower of the World Trade Center to the MSNBC picture of U.S. attacks on Kabul (Figure 3 and 4), the difference is apparent at once. A crisis in the middle of a media society guarantees the full attention of all media causing a completely different dynamic of crisis communication. This relates to for example the quality of the information, the density of the information and also the emotional concern of the audience. So even the chances of crisis communication are very unequal if one compares the media potential in a developed media society with the potential in a undeveloped or developing country. ▪M

About the Author

Hans-Juergen Bucher is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Trier in Germany. His research interests include examining the Internet in terms of globalisation of communication, audience research and usability.
Web: http://www.medienwissenschaft.de/
E-mail: bucher@uni-trier.de

References

Barbara Adam, Ulrich Beck, and Joost van Loon (editors), 2000. *The Risk Society and Beyond: Critical Issues for Social Theory.* London: Sage.

Ulrich Beck, 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a new Modernity.* Translated by Mark Ritter. London: Sage.

Kathy Foley, 2001. "There are no words," 17 September 2001, at http://www.nua.com/surveys/analysis/weekly_editorial/archives/issue1no195.html, accessed 31 March 2002.

Anthony Giddens, 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Alexander Halavais, 2000. "National borders on the World Wide Web," *New Media & Society,* volume 2, number 1 (Winter), pp. 7-28.

Jim Hall, 2000. "The First Web War; "Bad Things Happen in Unimportant Places"," *Journalism Studies,* volume 1, number 3, pp. 387-404.

Elihu Katz, 1992. "The End of Journalism? Notes on Watching the War," *Journal of Communication,* volume 42, number 3 (Summer), pp. 5-13.

Matt Welch, 1999. "Kosovo Highlights Failings in Journalism," *Online Journalism Review* (9 April), at http://ojr.usc.edu/content/print.cfm?print=146, accessed 31 March 2002.

Editorial history

Contents Index

URL: http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue7_4/bucher/index.html