



PPN WORKING PAPER

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS AND MANAGEMENT: DISCUSSION DOCUMENT ON DEVELOPING MORE EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES (OCTOBER 2009)

A. Introduction:

The purpose of this discussion paper is to examine how good practice can be sought, developed and shared in relation to managing and communicating effectively on critical issues that are often considered to reach crisis situations in the relationships between government and their respective Muslim communities. Furthermore the added value dimension of the PPN being a cross governmental platform allows for some collaborative thinking around European positions and perspectives on such issues.

This document captures some of the most prominent cases of communications management involving Muslim communities, but it is only the start of the process. It is envisaged that PPN members will add to this very preliminary write-up and help the process to gather more details and experiences. Four “mini” case studies are presented here.

Over the past 30 years as Muslim communities have grown and also begun to settle within the EU a number of prominent ‘flashpoints’ have arisen - often resulting in a negative impact on integration and the relationship between Muslim communities and their governments (and wider society). Events such as the Satanic Verses affair in the UK, ongoing debates around the scarf and veil in France, the cartoons in Denmark and the murder of Theodoor van Gogh in the Netherlands have all, in their own ways, produced important strains in each of those countries. But more recently we have also seen that such strains have been used to feed into the ‘single narrative’ of radical movements to emphasize victimhood and false dichotomies between Muslims and their European nations.

By definition much of crisis communication will deal with unexpected and often very negative scenarios that create strain on relationships and reputation – but it is also possible to envisage that the best examples of crisis communication and management can also result in opportunities for furthering good relations or at least creating ways of limiting support for ideas and perceptions that feed into the single narrative. The handling of the incidents around the film, *Fitna*, by the Dutch government is an example.

In order to be effective, crisis communications needs to move away from being a purely reactive process to becoming something that operates on a pro-active basis. The Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU), a cross departmental body set up by the UK government, is probably the most developed example of a specialised cross-departmental communications unit, and it may be useful to examine this experience further and look at this as a case study.

B. Case Studies:

Following up on our discussions at the Berlin PPN meeting, three “mini” case studies are presented here to look at recent prominent issues, the way they were handled and some of the lessons for that can be learnt the future:

1. Danish Cartoons

Contrary to general perceptions, it seems the cartoons affair was initially propelled by state actors rather than civic groups associated with mosques or transnational Islamist networks. The whole issue was set to become a global public debate within ten days of the publication of the twelve cartoons on September 30, 2005. This was when the government of Egypt decided to make an international issue of the cartoons and the Danish government refused to respond.

Shortly after the publication of the cartoons, eleven ambassadors representing Muslim countries in Copenhagen sent a letter to Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen protesting against what they described as “an on-going smearing campaign in Danish public circles and media against Islam.” The letter highlighted “the demeaning caricatures of the Holy Prophet Muhammad,” but it also cited comments made by a radio station run by a far-right group and a parliamentarian elected from the Danish People’s Party, and by the cultural affairs minister in Rasmussen’s cabinet. The government was urged “to take all those responsible to task under the law of the land.” The ambassadors also asked for a meeting with the Prime Minister.

Within two weeks a similar letter arrived from Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, the secretary-general of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and Egypt and the Arab League conveyed identical complaints via diplomatic channels.

The diplomatic corps usually communicates with the foreign ministry but the ambassadors addressed their letter to the prime minister because they considered the complaints a matter of domestic policy. In consequence, the prime minister's office controlled the response. Ironically, a stronger role for the foreign ministry and its diplomats in the handling the crisis may have produced a different response.

"Freedom of expression is the very foundation of the Danish democracy," Rasmussen responded the OIC and the diplomats in his response letter. "Danish society is based upon respect for free speech, religious toleration, and all religions are treated equitably. Free speech is the basis of our democracy. Free speech is far-reaching, and the Danish government has no influence on what the press writes." He agreed that dialogue between cultures and religions is essential and invited the diplomats, their governments, and Professor İhsanoğlu to participate in a Danish program promoting democracy in Muslim countries.

The request for a meeting from the ambassadors was not entertained and no official meeting between Muslim diplomatic envoys was held until the trade boycott, five months later. Egypt complained to the United Nations and drew in other Muslim governments in early November, three weeks after the ambassadors' letter was dispatched. An OIC communiqué passed at the organisation's summit meeting in early December 2005 marked a turning point in the controversy over the cartoons. It broadcast the news throughout the bureaucracies of the fifty-six member states and ensured that the states joined the movement.

The communiqué gave the green light to the Saudi Arabian and Egyptian religious authorities to become involved. The summit also put Islamophobia and blasphemy at the centre of the continuing debate. At the end of 2005 the Muslim intergovernmental organizations endorsed a trade boycott against Danish goods, which began around Christmas 2005. In February 2006 came the riots.

1.1 Lessons Learnt

Communicating to a global audience is difficult because the audience(s) want to hear different things. The lack of engagement in diplomatic channels early on displaced the conflict to the public arena and invited the escalation to a trade boycott. At that point, the general Muslim public was inevitably involved which changed the language required for crisis control.

Even some Danish diplomats (speaking off the record) believed a timely diplomatic action would have altered the course of events, and forestalled the boycott of Danish goods in the Middle East.

2. The cancellation of Deutsche Oper's "Idomeneo"

On September 25, 2006, Deutsche Oper in Berlin cancelled a planned production of Mozart's "Idomeneo" because of a scene depicting the severed heads of Muhammad, Jesus, the Buddha, and the

Greco-Roman god Neptune. The management cited fears of reprisals from Muslims. The opera had been staged the previous November—before the eruption of the global protests against the cartoons— but the manager explained at a news conference that press coverage of the sensational staging had made it too risky to restage the opera. The Berlin police had advised to cancel the production, basing its assessment on what happened after the publication of the Danish cartoons. However, no threats had been issued against the opera house.

The cancellation caused an uproar. The culture minister objected that if the mere possibility of protests lead to cancellations, free speech and democratic culture were endangered.¹ "Self-censorship because of fear is intolerable", Chancellor Angela Merkel declared. Berlin's Muslim associations also issued protests against the decision of the opera house, which they described as groundless.

The opera was placed back on the calendar and staged in December under the protection of riot police. The audience included the Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble and nine members of the Deutsche Islam Konferenz.

Muslim leaders played an important role during the conflict, first by protesting the cancellation and then by asserting everyone's right to disagree and turning the issue of the opera into a matter of personal choice. Kennan Kolat, the head of the union of Turkish workers, remarked that the cancellation constituted "a slap in the face of art." Mounir Azzaoui, from the ZMD, declared he had never been to the opera and was not interested. Iman Mazyek, also from the ZMD, explained to Al Jazeera: "It's part of the concept of freedom of opinion and thought that you also have the right to say you are not going."²

2.1 Lessons learnt

Although this incident was perhaps of the lowest profile among the "mini" cases considered here, it shows that without a proper discussion of the potential harm or offence of a publication or event, such as this opera, mistakes can be made in presuming offence and thus leading to an over-reaction. The crucial question here is to calibrate the response to any potential crisis accurately and appropriately. And communicating with multiple audiences, including those that may be offended, is key to this. The incident also shows that some form of coordinated action where government and Muslim leadership are able to stand side by side can have a mitigating effect.

3. Geert Wilders' Fitna

¹ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,439393,00.html>

² <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/europe/2006/12/2008525125811305741.html>

In March 2008, Geert Wilders, a Dutch parliamentarian, released a much-hyped sixteen-minute short film that compared the Koran to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Wilders also embraced the Danish cartoonists' cause and proclaimed months before the anticipated premiere that he intended to insult Muslims because learning to accept insults is part of the acclimatization process needed to turn Muslims into proper Dutchmen and women.

His attempt to generate pre-release publicity backfired. The Dutch government learnt from the lessons of the Danish cartoons. It apologized in advance and in principle in letters to the OIC and the Arab League, but avoided speaking about specifics. If the film violated Dutch laws against racism and hate speech, the Dutch prime minister announced, Wilders would be subject to an investigation and possibly brought up on charges. Dutch amateurs flooded YouTube with spoofs of his peculiar self-presentation.

Wilders was unable to find a Dutch broadcaster for his film. The public networks turned it down, and although a private network agreed to take it on, it asked that Wilders pay for security expenses in connection with the film's release. This Wilders rejected, claiming a lack of funds. In the end, the film was released on a London-based Internet site. Prior to the release, the Pakistani government hired a Malaysian company to close down Internet access in Pakistan to YouTube, where Wilders was expected to post his film. (It is reported that the company accidentally shut down access to the entire Internet for clients across the Middle East and South Asia.)

The British web site LiveLeak took down the film after forty-eight hours, when a tabloid published the identities of the site's staff. The film was put up again on the Internet briefly on March 30 but removed after the Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard sued Wilders for a copyright violation for using his iconic cartoon of the bomb in the turban. A new version of Wilders' film omitting the cartoon was posted on April 6, 2008.

3.1 Summary of events leading to the release of *Fitna*:

- On 29th October 2007, the leader of PVV (Freedom Party), Geert Wilders informed the NCTb of his intention to make a film about the Koran. He appreciated that by making the movie he was taking a risk with his own personal safety and asked for protection from the State. He shared details of the content of the film so that appropriate measures could be taken. The Ministers of Interior and Justice were informed.
- 7 November 2007: Ministers of Justice and Interior met with the PVV-Leader
- 28 November 2007: there is publicity of the film in *Telegraaf*, a national newspaper.

- The Justice and Interior ministries had started to prepare for the release and the expected impact using the Danish cartoon experience. Potential outcomes and scenarios were discussed with partners. Wilders obviously appreciated the attention and from 28th November when he started to publicise the video became an increasingly visible public figure in political terms.
- 27 March 2008: *Fitna* published on ‘liveleak’.

3.2 Context – national and international

- **Fear of terrorism:** *Fitna* was released at a time when people in all European countries, but to a greater extent in Western Europe, feared terrorist attacks and were wary of large Muslim communities. The film gave the Netherlands prominence amongst extremists. *Fitna* was released at a time when there was a fierce debate on the position of Islam both as a religion and as being representative of the Moroccan and Turkish Diaspora in Dutch society.
- **The debate on Islam is both societal and political.** Since the Ayaan Hirsi Ali dispute in parliament, the debate has become impassioned and certainly not diplomatic. It was in this tense atmosphere that *Fitna* was released.
- **Globalisation and internationalisation** has also had an effect. People are afraid of further globalisation, shown by the rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in a referendum in 2007 against the EU. There is a **crisis of confidence and identity** in the Netherlands that has been mirrored by increase in religious activity that stands in contrast to trends of secularisation during the 1960/70s onwards.

3.3 Issues at stake

- **Integration of religious minorities:** Wilders attempted to create dividing lines in society between Muslims and the rest of society. In the film Muslims were defined as outsiders and incapable of integration.
- **Government public relations:** Whatever position the government took it risked losing support from one section of society.
- **The Netherlands’ position as a member of the international community:** the government was worried of the potential that the Netherlands’ reputation within the international community would be damaged.
- The contradiction between civil liberties and other societal responsibilities and legal restrictions.
 - What are the limits to freedom of expression in relation to hate speech?

- Differences in the international arena between the Dutch position and other states.
- **Legal measures in a globalised world:** Is there any realistic legal option as anything banned/restricted in Holland is found on YouTube and available globally?
- The **theological substance of religion** is normally viewed as a matter of private conscience and is not usually discussed as a **political issue**; Wilders changed that. There was a worry that the Government would not know how to react and deal with such a taboo topic.
- **Division between church and State:** The Government is not supposed to interfere in the substance of religion but when religion is placed on the political agenda, the government has a problem. Government doesn't officially have an opinion on the substance of any religion.

3.4 Role and position of government

- The Government had to ensure **both the protection of freedom of religion and freedom of speech**: government took its official position on the movie before it was published; no one had seen it, people only had indications, but nobody knew the exact content of the film.
- To promote **social cohesion**, good societal relations and participation.
- To **conduct dialogue** with religious organizations.
- The government would take no responsibility for statements of the PVV leader.
- **Learning from the Danish Cartoons case** by attempting to diffuse the freedom of speech issue by talking about **empathy**, the limits to what can be said in a democracy and the necessity to take into account sentiments and feelings.

Because this **empathetic position was taken, Muslim communities in the Netherlands felt supported by the Government**. The Government became 'their' Government, which had an enormous effect. The Government also used active outreach by the Department of the Interior through formal and informal networks. The Government used these networks to express their disagreement with Wilder's position. Muslim groups made a coordinated, reasoned, statement before the movie was released.

3.5 Lessons drawn from the Danish Cartoons case

- Recognised the strong relationship between **national and international actors/issues**.
- **Communicated with the right people** at the right time with a clear and unambiguous message.

- Talked to Denmark which was happy to openly discuss the lessons learnt.
- Understood the **need to communicate** with all actors, relevant people and international organisations in the first instance. The Government ensured that there was a **constant stream of information**, monitored internet media, consolidated facts and communicated effectively with embassies, international actors, municipalities and other organisations to ensure that all were working with the same facts and therefore could produce a coherent message.

3.6 Activities

- **Consultations/crisis structure**
 - Danish Cartoon Working Group: A crisis structure was organised directly after the Danish cartoons crisis. This experience was later used in the case of *Fitna*.
 - The preparation for the *Fitna* crisis included other representatives and other faiths. The response was broader, instead of a focus on one group, solidarity amongst different religious groups was encouraged by the Ministry of Justice which organised meetings with different religious groups and communities to discuss *Fitna*.
- **Communicate central message.** The message was clear from the beginning and was not changed. There was no doubt about where the government stood.
 - Effective communication is an important instrument to control crises;
 - Communication strategy must have a central message;
 - Dilemma:
 - Must guard against a possible government overreaction (which then may exaggerate any effect and become a self fulfilling prophecy);
 - Must guard against political and media misinterpretation/alteration of communications.
 - The communications strategy had a positive effect as *Fitna* was modified by Wilders, making it less contentious, on the basis of the public outcry. For example, in the build-up to the release of *Fitna*, Wilders indicated that the film would show him tearing pages of Koran, which would have been very offensive to Muslims, but this did not occur in the film.
- Maintaining a **public information flow** was very important

- Information needed to flow to foreign countries through embassies;
 - Used religious groups/organisations;
 - Civilians and economic actors/private sector were used as they had better contacts in Saudi Arabia;
 - Used European partners and multilaterals.
- Enormous numbers of **contingency measures** were examined including evaluating the evacuation plans of troops, Shell representatives and Government staff in different cities and countries around the world.
- **Crisis Preparation**
 - The police provided information on the ‘temperature’ in the cities. Information was also received from Kabul and other embassies, who were prepared for a possible crisis following the Danish cartoons crisis.
 - Asked embassies to develop strategic contacts within countries with key Muslim leaders (not necessarily official) and to have these contacts ready in case they were ever needed. This started after the Danish cartoons.
 - Ambassadors identified key figures in Indonesia and started discussions on relevant issues. So when it happened, contacts were already in place.
 - Developed contacts with key communities and leaders in the Netherlands so that they could be brought around the table. For example, the Netherlands had strategic contacts in the OIC.
- **Domestic Measures**
 - The government analysed the legal/criminal ramifications of *Fitna* before and after publication of the film.
 - Protection of Wilders was increased.
 - All possible legal routes of banning *Fitna* and analysing their consequences were explored through discussions with communities between October and March. These discussions always focussed on the legal aspect.

▪ Exterior Measures

- Moroccan groups travelled to Egypt and Saudi Arabia to explain the Dutch legal system and the freedoms that they enjoy. Wanted to stress that they did not want to lose those freedoms through interference from external groups.
- Informed and involved international organisations and Dutch embassies.

3.7 Lessons Learnt

- Interference of other national or international issues;
- Instruments include legal possibilities;
- Forward planning: there was a six month time period to prepare for the crisis; the government had time on their side because they were aware of when the movie would be released.
- Stipulation of standpoint vs limited action;
- It is important to ensure that there is a division of roles between government and societal actors; societal actors are crucial as responses of this kind cannot be effective if only the government is involved. The government can play a facilitating role, but not necessarily lead the response.
- Communications is vital:
 - The message was translated into 20 different languages and the government could gauge effectiveness through press monitoring.
 - It was very important not to change the message, as this would be noticed.
 - Through monitoring, the government was able to see where more communications emphasis had to be placed.
 - It was important to plan the reaction of the media, but not try to manipulate it. In this way, the government could monitor the response in media terms, analyse reactions and pinpoint where a government response was required.
 - Messages were not as successful in international arena where Al Qaida focussed on *Fitna* and Van Gogh.

4. UK handling of Gaza Crisis

Conflict in the Middle East escalated on 27th December 2008 and continued well into January 2009, creating a significant impact within the UK and management of relations between the government, and Muslim and Jewish communities. From the strategic point of view, **RICU (Research, Information and Communications Unit) coordinated government communication** between the Foreign Office, Home Office and Communities and Local Government by providing ministerial oversight at **a weekly security meeting**. RICU is based at the Home Office, but is a cross-departmental Unit that works across the three departments mentioned.

4.1 The impact of the Gaza crisis on the UK

- There was a **significant emotional response** from communities to events in Gaza as everyone expressed empathy for ordinary Gazans.
- There was a need to clarify the government's position on Gaza including:
 - What was its official foreign policy position?
 - What are its development policies?
- **Communications** came in a **variety of forms**; the various government departments communicated within their jurisdictions including a letter from the Foreign Secretary to mosques, meetings with Jewish and Muslim communities, correspondence and materials were sent to local authorities to enable them to communicate with effectively with Muslim communities. The media also published ministerial articles.
- The government worked closely with a range of people at different levels, including representative organisations, academics, think tanks, the Muslim Advisory Group, and national advisory groups. The government did not push them to speak out in opposition to the use of violence. Instead, it informed them of events and the Government's position so that they could better inform the debate.
- There is an important impact of global media on such crises. Channels such as Aljazeera, as well as domestic UK minority will present different perspectives adding to the coverage and often with more graphic imagery.

4.2 Observations and lessons learnt include

1. The government was **initially slow to identify and collectively respond to wider implications on the Prevent agenda**. Departments responded effectively but were not initially coordinated. RICU, being tasked with coordinating response, worked well within its structure.

2. At the start of the crisis, **messaging was not effective enough** in portraying either empathy or British foreign policy. There was a delay in producing materials for delivery partners and communications channels were largely limited to traditional media and were not able to exploit the digital media.
3. The government monitored ethnic media to try to identify potential grievances. The government line didn't get into the media as quickly as it should have.
4. There is a need for **mechanisms to allow feedback** on the impact of communications quickly.
5. The **collaborative approach with local partners** did start to produce benefits but the structure needs to be refined and the gaps filled. This was illustrated in this instance by the large number of Muslim communities willing to speak out in alignment with the government's position, but at the same time a lack of large numbers of key credible actors willing to do this.
6. The crisis showed how quickly international events impact on the domestic population and events.
7. The impact of direct communications, especially through traditional channels, was limited, and there was not a sufficient capability to more effectively communicate on digital media.
8. Gaza provided a stark illustration of the difficulties of direct government communications gaining traction in communities where there is widespread opposition to the policy position of the UK.
9. It is important to be realistic about expectations from communications and engagement in a crisis. Grievances will remain. But Government policy can be better heard and needs to be seen to be listening
10. The **Prevent central, local and stakeholder communities** were mobilised creating an effective response and channelling anger into democratic means.
11. It is important at first hand to manage the conflict or crisis in such scenarios, but the experience of the Dutch handling of *Fitna* also shows that **such events can be turned into potential opportunities** for more positive interaction with communities and indeed, integration.

Recommendations following the Gaza crisis:

- **Crisis trigger**—leader of RICU to coordinate; take lead in coordination of communications with Ministers.

▪ Response to key findings:

1. More work is required to **develop infrastructure** and underpin ongoing engagement that can be ramped up in crisis situation.
2. Need to **increase crisis monitoring** which the media does not provide.
3. Need to investigate how the **digital media** can be used more advantageously to deliver government communication strategy more effectively in similar situations.

5. Overarching Lessons:

The “mini” case studies explored here, and indeed the further examples present within the experience base of the PPN, show that many rich lessons are there to be learnt and shared within the network. These four case studies give an initial base for a number of collective lessons that can be generated from their analysis pertaining to the mechanisms and procedures of how government can handle crises:

1. Globalisation of crises – global communications now mean that crises are rarely left to the domestic level alone, but could become catapulted onto the international arena. This also means that global diplomatic channels, as well as wider global stakeholder engagements are important.
2. Channels of communication with domestic communities need to be established for the long-term; and long before an actual crisis occurs, so that mutual trust can be nurtured.
3. Communication and consultation at the time of early signs will also help to shape a more nuanced strategy for dealing with a potential crisis, rather than rushed reactions. Early consultation can also bring greater buy-in and communities themselves can play an ‘ambassadorial’ role within the crisis.
4. The scenarios are often so complex that they will cut across the remit of multiple government departments, which means that cross-departmental collaborations and coordination will be required.
5. Another element of effective crisis management and communications is to develop the capacity to respond rapidly to crises as they develop and also crucially to be able to communicate at high volume and through multiple channels. In an age of emerging new media, alternative forms of communication beyond the traditional means are also vital.
6. Despite the fact that a crisis communications strategy must focus on given crises, there could also be a connection with wider communications issues that are not only crisis driven for example

highlighting the aid / development initiatives of European nations especially in Muslim countries, humanitarian interventions, etc. And arguably, there could also be better and more effective communication around arrests and the level of the terror threat.

But ironically, while PR is an integral part of the solution, purely seeing crisis communications through a PR lens, will probably exacerbate the problem and raise accusations of ‘spin’. Management of the crisis must therefore also heavily involve not just a communications strategy, but also engagement and discussion so that key stakeholders and actors are brought into the conversation. Aside from the importance of the engagements process in the overall crisis management and of long-term trust building, which is essential to effective rapid responses, the engagement with stakeholders can also provide a key feedback mechanism for real time evaluation of the effectiveness of the crisis management process.

The discussions at the PPN should therefore focus on some of these crucial points and help in developing a systemized approach to identifying best practices. Aside from the issues raised above, a number of further technical and procedural questions could also be raised to help this thinking process and to move it forward:

- What is the threshold level for a ‘crisis’? When does a difficult situation become a crisis?
- How best to identify crisis triggers?
- What feedback mechanisms work?
- How can new media be used more effectively in crisis communications?