



COMMUNICATING CRITICAL CITYWIDE INFORMATION IN AN ERA OF MIS AND DISINFORMATION

Date: November 18, 2024

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KEY EVENTS

On November 18th, 2024, Ms. Heather Hastie presented *Communicating Critical Citywide Information in an Era of Mis and Disinformation* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the rupture of the Bearspaw South Feeder Main, challenges experienced by The City's Crisis Communications team, and how effective communications can drive necessary behaviour change despite the prevalence of mis and disinformation.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Ms. Hastie's presentation reviewed the communications strategy used by the City of Calgary during a critical rupture of a large water feeder main. Amidst declining trust in municipal government, key channels used to share important information and analyze public sentiment regarding the crisis included social media, traditional media and web. The increased presence of online trolls and bots during the crisis posed security challenges in information sharing and the spread of disinformation.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

The failure of Calgary's Bearspaw South Feeder Main occurred on June 5, 2024 when a large rupture of this water pipe impacted the supply of potable water for approximately 1.7 million people across Calgary, Airdrie, Chestermere,

Strathmore, and Tsuut'ina Nation. A key challenge of the crisis was that the threat to the water supply was immediate but not highly visible to the public. This situation required extensive communications to foster understanding and compliance with critical water restrictions. Furthermore, the scope of known damage increased upon inspection, extending the critical repair phase to an entire month. This contributed to distrust among some citizens who felt that The City had not been transparent. Furthermore, Ms. Hastie remarked that citizens who did not believe in climate change assumed that the call for reduced water use was a precursor to mandatory water restrictions that would become permanent. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has left a lasting impact on Calgarians, with many citizens sharing sentiments that government is attempting to restrict and control citizens. Overall, these sentiments reflect a broader loss of trust in governments by citizens around the world.

To deal with the crisis, the Calgary Emergency Management Agency stood up the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) and activated the Crisis Communications Team. The team consists of 100-plus communicators trained in specialty communications roles including social media, web, graphic design, marketing, media relations and issues management who rotate through the EOC while it is activated. The team was tasked with communicating that it was necessary to reduce water demand to below 450 million liters per day to stay within the safe parameters of adequate water supply while the feeder main was out of service. This reduction amounted to approximately a 25% decrease in typical water use.

The City's communications strategy was to use its website as a single source of truth where critical updates were posted to allow citizens to access the most current information. Citizens were directed to the website through social media posts, the media and advertising as soon as new content was available. A crisis summary allowed visitors to learn who was affected, what actions to take, and important updates. To enhance trust in the web content, updates were dated to establish a timeline of when information was released. Additionally, a consistent supply of photos from the repair sites helped citizens understand the gravity of the situation and the phases of repair. Simple and empathic language helped communicate and acknowledge the difficulty of the situation. All content was designed to display correctly on mobile phones, given that approximately 70-90% of citizens access information on a mobile device during times of crisis.

Social media was likewise a key component of communications during the crisis. Graphics and other images helped tell the story. Ms. Hastie presented an example

graphic that showed how the size of the impacted feeder main was much larger than a typical water main, and its corresponding impact on moving water through the system. The graphic helped combat the conspiracy theory that water restrictions were a method of government control by demonstrating that the threat of running out of water was real.

When the crisis began, all non-related and paid social media was paused to create space for crisis information to be absorbed by the public. Social media listening was used to track sentiments regarding the crisis, which highlighted a significant increase in the presence of online trolls, hate speech, and profanity. Hateful posts were reported, when possible, although Ms. Hastie noted the importance of not blocking users except in extreme circumstances, such as soliciting for cash, to avoid drawing further attention from negative actors.

Spikes in overall comments were correlated with key events of the crisis; the largest spike occurred on June 15, 2024, when The City declared a local state of emergency. Another spike occurred when The City shared a photo from the San Diego Water Authority that showed pipe it was providing to Calgary for repairs. Paid social media was used to cut through online algorithms, allowing more citizens to see the information. This helped address misinformation and disinformation by penetrating echo chambers that algorithms tend to reinforce. Information was also translated into the top five languages spoken in Calgary other than English, including Traditional Chinese, Simplified Chinese, Spanish, Punjabi and Arabic.

Communications during this event had the desired effect; there was a sufficient reduction in water consumption that allowed The City to complete the necessary repairs without running out of water. Over 9 billion litres of water was saved through the period of restrictions. Key lessons from the crisis highlighted the importance of flooding channels with a steady stream of easily accessible facts to counter the effects of mis and disinformation. Another key learning was to maintain perspective when reviewing critical comments on social media, as Ms. Hastie cautioned that they don't necessarily reflect the true sentiment of an audience. A survey of Calgarians conducted after the crisis period found that 74% of citizens considered City of Calgary information to be trustworthy. Saturating channels with a single source of truth matters in helping to dispel myths and drive necessary behaviour change to address a crisis.

Question and Answer

What was your engagement with commercial sectors - agriculture, finance sector, livestock, transportation? Any lessons to share with those types of clients?

A customer service team dealt with different industries that needed to use water. This was very challenging, especially for the landscaping businesses in the summer. The lessons learned included the need to keep communicating on a one-on-one basis with an appointed representative and regularly letting them know what was happening. Of course, they will still articulate their needs to the media because they were in a difficult spot and losing business, but at the same time it could not have been allowed to use all of the water that they would normally use because the city would've simply run out. Another key learning is to communicate directly and try to get across the gravity of the situation as best as you can.

Calgary is an international hub of commerce and also a diplomatic consulate-General. Did you have any engagement from the international community? How did you loop them into the announcements?

In terms of the water restrictions, the focus was on communications channels that could reach Calgary's citizens. There was a conference for municipalities across Canada that happened at the same time that we were putting out emergency alerts, so anybody that was in Calgary who was not necessarily a resident would have understood that there were water restrictions and we were under an emergency situation. However, the local government doesn't usually connect with international audiences because that's not our role as a municipal power.

When does misinformation and disinformation reach the legal threshold?

It is essential to hold people accountable when they put out disinformation - stuff that is factually wrong. I know that can trample on freedom of expression and we've got to figure out what that threshold is. If you are putting a narrative out there that is factually wrong, Canada may consider moving towards holding people to accountable for that, especially for people who are habitual spreaders.

What are good practices found elsewhere in the world with regards to public education and ways the government can help social resilience against misinformation and disinformation?

The humanities curriculum needs to include these topics. Teaching critical thinking is important; getting children to understand how someone could be

manipulated by what they're hearing, or what a particular ad is trying to get its viewers to do. Challenging children through education to understand that this is a problem and teaching examples of misinformation and disinformation is key.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- The rupture of the Bearspaw South Feeder Main on June 5, 2024 occurred with no warning and posed serious restrictions for water users.
- The Crisis Communications Team implemented numerous strategies through social media management and marketing strategies to share critical citywide information and combat rising disinformation.
- The use of empathic language, photos, videos, and translations of materials across communications was essential to build public trust.
- Social media comments provided a critical view of the level of misinformation, disinformation, public trust, and general sentiment that stemmed from the crisis and how they evolved in severity over time.

FURTHER READING

- CASIS-Vancouver. (2021). Water Security as an Emergent Opportunity in Canada. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 2(2), 117–121. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v2i2.1063>
- City of Calgary Media Relations. (2024, September 22). *Update Sept. 22: Critical water main repair affecting city-wide water usage*. The City of Calgary Newsroom. <https://newsroom.calgary.ca/update-sept-22-critical-water-main-repair-affecting-city-wide-water-usage/>
- Schuster-Wallace, C. (2024). Local Water Security. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v7i2.6738>



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