

# Social links and communication actions: Let's think over the communication principles to be adopted in emergency situations

## Introduction: the need for a social concept

The theory maintained in this paper arose from a certain discomfort and a questioning on the application of emergency measures—specifically the lack of importance given to the voice of the victim and the democratic loss. Is it possible to get people to adopt a social behaviour with no reference to a social concept?

The return to normality often requires a shared in-depth social study that should provide a communication concept much broader than the transmission of authoritarian directives. The large number of disasters the world has encountered in recent years gives us a good opportunity to explore new directions in emergency situation communication.

The shocks are so important that we need to consider more than just the technical aspect. We have to go back to the basic concept. The social destabilisation created by emergencies stresses the importance of thinking over the social link and what it is made of. Because of its dramatisation process, emergencies may make apparent some fundamental mechanisms of society.

## Two important concepts: 'social link' and 'communication action'

The *social link* concept came a long way from notorious ancestors. Viviane Chatel (1997) relates this tradition in *Le lien social et l'inachèvement de la modernité*. On his part, Durkheim mainly studied the link between individuals and society. For Durkheim, social belonging follows a triad made of the individual, the group and morals. It is exactly with a will to share these morals that the sociability process is carried on. The individual moves from *It* to *we*. For Durkheim, belonging to a society is the result of a wilful and well-informed agreement to rational collective morals. Max Weber, another notorious ancestor, looked at the social link concept from a very different angle. The individual is a *decoder* of meanings within the society and the integration process is realised according to the principle of social action coherence. It is from the meaning that individuals give to their action that the social concept and the social link may be

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materialised. We must remember these elements when facing a period of social vulnerability, particularly while examining the role of the media.

However, the author who established a direct relation between social link and communication activities is Jürgen Habermas. His works (1987) on communication action give us a clear and precise study. For Habermas, the communication action is at the centre of the social link. Refusing the principle of instrumental reasoning, he does not accept the theory of a society based on technical parameters but suggests a society made up of individuals who are actors in their own story—informed individuals, subjects able to participate in a public discussion held according to the argumentation rules. This view carries a democracy ideal that suggests that political decisions must be submitted to all members of the society. This action, resulting from a consensus process, will lead to social emancipation. It is impossible to summarise these monumental writings but I will try to isolate some key elements suggested by Habermas.

- Individuals are the essence of society. These individuals are subjects. They can take part in public discussions. These discussions must be held under argumentation rules. This vision of society includes a democracy ideal that postulates that political decisions have to be discussed by all members of the society. The action resulting from this consensus will then have a social emancipation capacity.
- For Habermas, the first step is the shared decision. The consensus is the base of social action and of the social link. Communication action is opposed to strategy action. This type of action is not only shared in

the discussion process but in the consequences as well. This theory maintains that communication action is at the heart of social action in total cohesion with society by sharing the meanings freed from instrumental logic. Communication action requires that an inter-subject agreement be shared. An action, taken up in its decision process as well as in its consequences, must be defined from a common exchange between elements socially concerned and aimed at an agreement. Performance is not the subject here but a just process in expressing ideas—*inter-comprehensiveness*.

Obviously, inter-comprehensiveness requires the setting up of a number of prerequisites. The process of expressing ideas can only take place in conditions of shared knowledge where the *actor* is either a speaker, addressee or observer. Inter-comprehensiveness objects to any unidirectional or linear principles in the exchange process.

Another author, Putnam (1996) refers to *Social Capital* of a society just like others refer to GDP (Gross Domestic Product). The author refers to standards and networks of a civil society that make communication actions possible among citizens for mutual benefits, optimising the efficiency of political, social and institutional actions. We consider this to be a must condition. In modern liberal societies, whether we adopt, like Habermas, the *live world* concept or the *discours social commun* (from Fossaert) there are enough possibilities to provide the references needed for communication actions. The communication action concept must, however, be based on the *world's live actors* like social institutions, culture and individuals.

The democracy ideal brought up by communication action is made up of more than must conditions. It is bound to establishing ethics, validity requirements of the various categories of *social actors*. The learned world must bear a desire for truth; the community world must aim for a normative universe based on precision and individuals must show intentions to be authentic. Then, the communication action concept emerges from a program that sets

up the limits, determines the contents, the normative process of interpretation, conciliation and behaviours.

### A few words about methodology

In scientific literature (Weinberg, 1996) four integration locations of the social link are generally identified as *the family, the community, the work place* and *the state*.

From these integration locations we can study communication action in emergency situations. It is impossible to review all that has been done in this field in recent years. However, the most significant points can be underlined. This inference process is based on the analysis of emergency situations, the consulting of large scale simulation as well as on experiences in management, planning and intervention in exceptional situations. For the analysis, various types of emergencies (natural, technological and psycho social disasters) have been selected. In certain cases, access is available to first-hand information. For other cases, where the disaster was very important (e.g. an extremely severe flood in Saguenay, a region of Québec, Canada), data is used from other sources. Every integration area of the social link can be studied from the vulnerability level as well as the capacity to re-create the social link. An inductive and a deductive reading of these two inter-related logic axis will help us make difficult reports and identify tracks for our reflection.

### Integration locations of the social link in exceptional situations

#### The family

The family, as it is in our modern times (divorce, parental role etc.) may not really an ideal integration location of the social link. Let us state clearly that the family does not help the development of a culture of civil protection. The notion of personal scenario does not flourish and information on potential risks is not integrated into family life. It is easy to imagine the consequences of this situation. The *enlarged family* alone is given a function. It is then confined to act as additional help leaving behind prevention action and united actions in emergency situations. State contribution is to be later examined in another article; multi-risks information campaigns are not found in our country as they are in the Netherlands, thus reinforcing our observation.

We have a tendency to identify the lack of information related to potential hazards as one of the main reasons for that situation with many consequences. It is difficult to justify a personal scenario without having the right preliminary information. Without

adequate preliminary information, it is difficult to justify the creation of a personal scenario. Prevention, without foreseeable priorities could not establish the appropriate links to a credible and possible reality. Individual motivation development is also lacking a key element, the association process that can make the citizen directly concerned. The information on potential hazards is an essential element to the setting up of a valuable personal scenario, allowing for the relative sharing of personal and social benefits of the action. We are not convinced that municipal authorities and the business and administrative world are doing what they should in that field. There are many responsibilities and a good co-ordination is needed.

We believe the culture of civil protection could not exist without a significant change of attitude from these key actors of emergency situations. The family could not become a social cohesion location without the information needed to do so. We are now facing an essential notion, the theory of communication action that has to be brought up in place of the strategic action. The communication action requires a sharing of the information and, as a result, a sharing of power that comes with it. This notion cannot be set apart from the basic principle of our society, that is the upholding of a level of information that makes it possible for the citizen to be the judge of his life, his family and of his co-ordinated social actions.

We are now in the centre of the democracy process. For that principle to be respected in emergency situations, it is necessary to come to inter-subject agreements, prior to disturbances. These agreements can, of course, only be related to potential hazards. We agree with other researchers that a good number of persons have a socially coherent judgement in emergency situations. Even if it is impossible to foresee every hazard, it is quite possible to democratically anticipate protection and self-protection measures for individuals and their community. For these reasons, we disagree with the municipal authorities that doubt whether emergency planning is important or necessary.

The personal scenario is important to minimise the vulnerability of the family. To measure this importance, we need only to take a look at the amount of work that came to the community health centre in the case of the Saguenay flood. Too often, because of the will to maintain institutional and inter-organisation cohesion or in the rush for deadlines, we forget that the notion of emergency must take its meaning right

here. For the physical and emotional vulnerability of individuals within the family, we can feel the real sense of emergency. Apart from these parameters, there are only technical problems.

The duration of the emergency situation can be very hard on the family. This length of time can modify, in many ways, the conceptual diagram of the emergency action. For individuals and for the family, a crisis period may go on much longer than the recovering time accepted by administrators. We have observed that, at the moment the Government comes to the end of its emergency actions and while the media was reporting that things were going better, a family living a profound sadness while looking at its home burning because the damage where too severe. Family members also have been seriously disturbed by the delays involved in insurance claims. Emergency actions can become totally asynchronous with social time as lived by the family. This time difference makes it impossible to create or restore the social link. In such cases, communication, far from supporting social integration, may become an element that will separate and make more distant the expressed positions.

Other points, not often raised, that are also related to the duration and to the gravity of the emergency situation, are the actions undertaken during the recovery period. Emergency recovery measures can be felt like a crisis by a family that had not been touched at all by the disaster. After the flood in Saguenay, the rebuilding of some industries, with trucks and heavy equipment operating 24 hours a day, created an unliveable situation of noise and dust for some parts of the town. Public health and safety were also endangered by the large number of trucks loaded with dangerous chemicals going through. Because of the many damaged railroad tracks, hundreds of trailer trucks had to be driven in residential areas on roads that are not suitable for this kind of transportation. Apart from spill hazards in urban areas, this truck traffic was a real danger for young children used to a quieter area.

As it can be seen, the social link concept goes beyond all of the normal parameters of communication and calls for a reconsideration of the usual temporality of emergency situations, while redefining the actors. Known emergency phases may become asynchronous or even contradictory. Upholding the social link with communication puts the protagonists in diametrically opposed positions, their validity criteria being different. Although these problems are difficult, preliminary discussions may seriously reduce

consequences and help put up corrective or extenuating measures. Gregory Bateson taught us that coherence may only survive in paradoxical situations with recalling and sharing the logic order. The setting up of an authentic communication action needs to be well prepared and it takes some time. A consensus must be reached on the definitions of the reasons for the action, the representatives must be previously identified and the exchange conditions have to be accepted and shared by all.

The structuring of the social link in the family would be impossible without a cohesion with the other integration locations of the social link. Family is closely related to the State. As for the relation with the business and administrative world, we noted several problems in that sense.

For now, we are looking at the close relation between the family and the community during exceptional situations. Often considered as the *enlarged family*, mainly in rural areas, the community is the expression of the social link as well as a dimension of its materialisation measure. The integration of family activities in the community activities, during emergency situations, may become an expression of solidarity, an extenuation of the anxiety caused by the event because of the security feeling that the participating action can produce.

The State can also minimise the level of stress in the family by setting up some administrative or legal programs—compensation, unemployment insurance, lease cancellation etc. The relation between the family and the community has always been

organic but the relation with the State is quite different. One of the many reasons for this seems to be that the convention is not shared by all participants. When a citizen does not know the advantages of an emergency measure, if they do not know its adjacent parts and if they have never been consulted on its validity, it is quite possible that they do not understand it and they would not help put it up or accept it.

Communication in emergency situations is important. Making it possible is a *must*. Some people told us that the crisis had been negotiated between media and the decision makers. This statement illustrates well that the social link integration location set up in the family is not seen (or perceived) by individuals as a priority for the emergency situation actors.

However, it is very difficult to set up an authentic communication process. Perception of necessity is a problem, the level of authority could be another one e.g. the municipal level does not always share our view, nor does it have the time, money or knowledge to set up an adequate communication process.

As we said before, sharing information is also sharing power. However, it is impossible to imagine the culture of civil protection without the principle of the communication action.

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## About the author

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## Disaster events calendar (cont.)

### ◆ 12–14 August 1999 Seattle, Washington

#### **Fifth US Conference on Lifeline Earthquake Engineering**

Sponsor: American Society of Civil Engineers  
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For conference registration and logistics, contact:

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### ◆ 22–26 August 1999 Sydney, Australia

#### **The International Congress on Local Government Engineering and Public Works incorporating the 10<sup>th</sup> National Local Government Engineering Conference**

Co-hosted by the Institute of Municipal Engineering Australia, The Institution of Engineers, Australia and the International Public Works Federation.

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 IMEA Congress Secretariat,  
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### ◆ 30 August–5 September 1999 Melbourne, Australia

#### **'Rescue Down Under' International Road Accident Rescue Symposium and Expo**

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### ◆ 20–22 September 1999 Pretoria, South Africa

#### **International Conference on Integrated Drought Management: Lessons for Sub Saharan Africa**

Sponsor: UNESCO International Hydrological Program

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