COMMUNICATING IN THE DARKNESS

Advice for communicators dealing with power blackouts

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COMMUNICATION

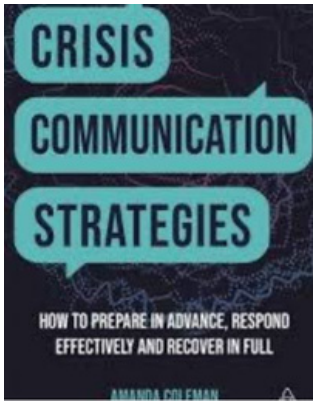
BACKGROUND

For anyone around in the 1970s you will be familiar with the thought of a power blackout and all that it brings. But the difference 50 years on is that so much more of our daily lives is reliant on electricity. This means we need to carefully plan and prepare for how we personally will manage if there are power outages over the winter. More than that for PR and communication professionals there are additional considerations.

If there is no power, how are you going to get messages out to your customers, service users and employees? Are there other systems in place that you can use to share vital updates, and do you understand what critical systems may be affected?

Communicators grasped the opportunities of new technology but may also have lost connection to the pre-digital era.

This guide aims to give you and your communication team some advice about what to consider and how you can be prepared ahead of any power outages. If you need more help and advice, get in touch with Amanda Coleman at amanda@amandacolemancomms.co.uk



THE RISK

The Chief Executive of the National Grid in the UK has warned people that during winter months there could be blackouts with the risk greater in January and February 2023. John Pettigrew said that the outages could happen on ‘really, really cold’ weekdays between 4pm and 7pm. This action will be linked to reduced gas imports from Europe.

The UK Government has remained of the opinion that blackouts were extremely unlikely and even cancelled a public information campaign that would have focused on how to conserve energy. The BBC, however, has already developed a series of information messages that can be used in the event of power outages.

The European Commission has developed two scenarios. The first has a small number of EU countries affected which leads to others stepping in to help. In the second scenario many EU members are affected which requires a ‘strategic reserve’ to be used to help. The International Energy Agency has said Europe was facing ‘unprecedented risks’ because of reductions in Russian gas imports.

So, what does this mean for communicators? It is important to be prepared for the possible.

INFORMATION FOR THE PUBLIC

In the absence of a national information campaign what is the advice that we can give to people? The 10-point plan below has been developed from advice provided by a range of energy providers and international risk management organisations. It could be used publicly and with concerned employees.

1. KNOW YOUR TECHNOLOGY

Understand what critical technology you may have such as medical equipment that you need to use and have a plan in place to ensure you can continue to use it. Alternative power sources can be put in place such as power banks that can support phones, laptops and Wi-Fi hubs.

2. HAVE A TORCH HANDY

Torches are safer to use than candles. Have a torch and some extra batteries to ensure it can continue to be used. Solar lights can also help providing additional lights. Don't rely on your mobile phone torch and always take care if you are using candles and never leave them unattended.

3. LISTEN TO THE RADIO

A battery operated, solar or wind-up radio is a helpful addition to the household. It will help you to keep updated about what is happening and will save the power in your mobile phone for any calls you need to make.

4. KEEP TECHNOLOGY CHARGED

If blackouts seem likely ensure that laptops, mobile phones and other items you may need to use are fully charged. This will give you connectivity to what is happening for some time, and hopefully power will have been restored before they run out.

5. HAVE WARM CLOTHING READY

Keeping warm during the winter is important and without power it is important to have blankets and some warm clothing ready to use.

INFORMATION FOR THE PUBLIC

6. KEEP FRIDGES/FREEZERS SHUT

This will keep the food as cool as possible for longer. Have non-perishable food handy to be able to use if you need it during the blackout.

7. KEEP DOCUMENTS SAFE

Don't rely on online copies of key documents. If the power outage lasts for some hours, you may need to access key documents so paper copies are handy to have available.

8. HAVE FUEL IN YOUR CAR

Blackouts will affect fuel pumps so having some fuel in your car will give you the ability to move to other locations if needed.

9. UNPLUG NON-ESSENTIAL ITEMS

Unplugging items will avoid a power surge when the electricity is reconnected. However, leave one light on so you know when the power is reconnected.

10. AGREE A CONTACT PLAN

Agree how you will keep in contact with friends and family, particularly with any elderly or vulnerable family or friends.

THE COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE

Communicating during a blackout brings with it some distinct challenges. There will be patchy availability of technology, social media and access to traditional media outlets. Many of the systems that are regularly used will not be functioning.

It requires a clear focus on who you need to communicate with and what the most critical messages are. The work to develop a business continuity plan should be helpful at this point providing details of what the critical services are and how they can continue to function when under pressure.

Keeping communication flowing to customers and service users is vital and was identified as a significant challenge in the reports that reviewed the response to Storm Arwen in winter 2021/2022. The checklist on the next page should help in considering the steps that need to be put in place by PR and communication teams.

PR AND COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST

HAVE A BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLAN

Think through the communication services that are critical to the business and those that may be the most severely affected during a blackout. Ensure there are actions outlined including moving to an area unaffected by the blackout.

CREATE A BLACKOUT COMMS PLAN

Think through the channels that you may need to introduce to connect with employees or key contacts including customers or service users when there is no power.

DEVELOP KEY MESSAGES

Focus on what both the public and employees can do to both protect themselves and ensure the business continues to function.

MORE THAN DIGITAL

Many people may not be able to receive updates through social media, radio and news updates. Consider what additional channels you can put in place to support critical aspects of the business. For public sector organisations this may include a return to loudhailers being used in the street or having a network of key contacts that can share messages face-to-face. Whatever system you use ensure that it is planned, and that people understand what it means and the role they have to play.

PR AND COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST

CONSIDER VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers can help to share messages. One such group based in the UK is a voluntary communication service provided by licensed radio amateurs to help communities. You can find details at RAYNET-UK

SOCIAL MEDIA REMAINS IMPORTANT

People will take to social media if they have power in their devices so ensure that regular updates are provided on all available channels. Also, have details of social media passwords so that others in the communication team can access systems if needed to provide vital updates.

HAVE AN IDENTIFIED SPOKESPERSON

There will be a need to get someone to speak about what the business is doing to continue to run vital systems and services. Have an identified person, or preferably three people, that can be brought in to quickly become the spokesperson for the blackout response. Train them ahead of the critical winter period.

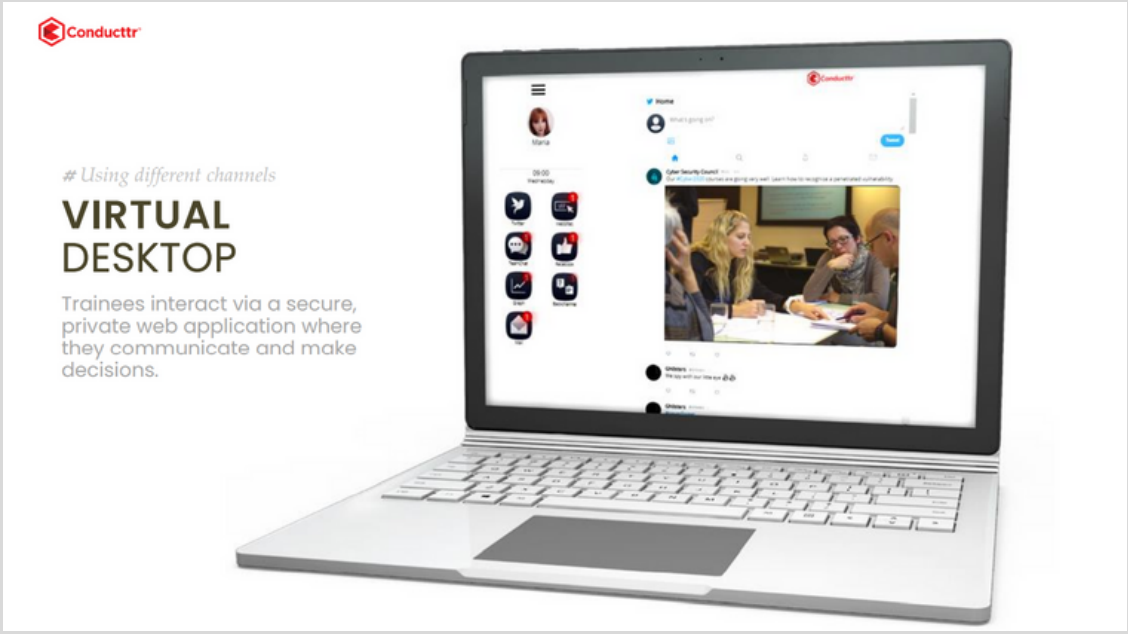
TEST THE PLAN

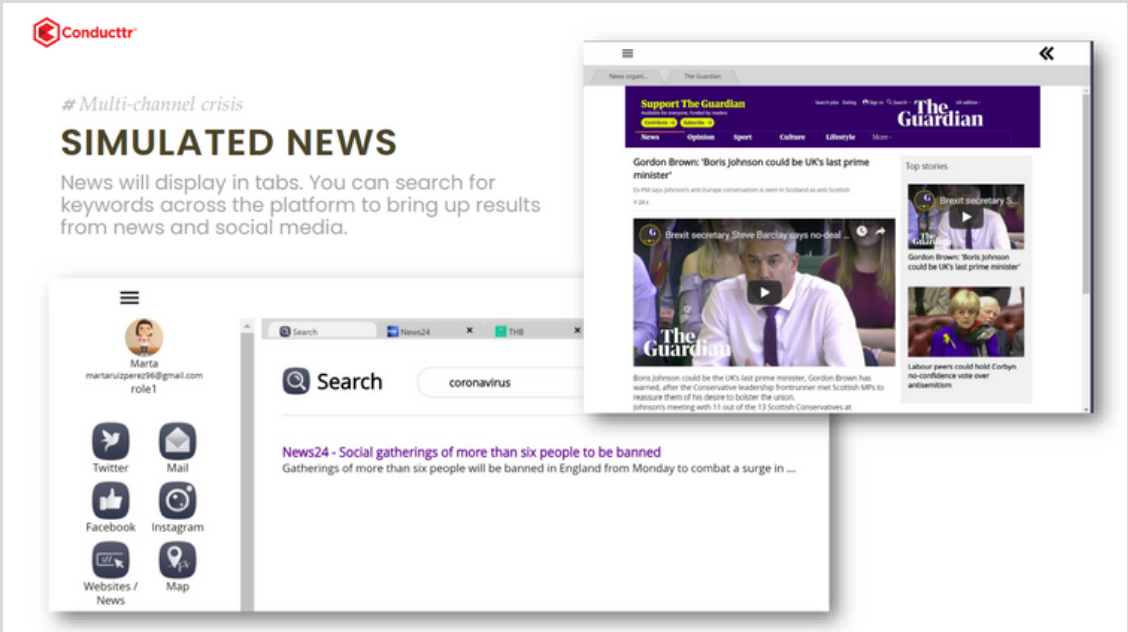
Once the work has been undertaken and the plan has been developed it is vital to test it. It has been many years since blackouts were in place and most people in the workforce will not have experienced it so understanding what it means will be critical.

NEXT STEPS

Blackouts are not guaranteed but are a possibility however remote. The key will be to have thought things through, have a plan and be ready to put it into practice if it is needed. Remember once this work is done it will be there for any similar problems in the future.

If you would like to develop a crisis communication exercise based around blackouts get in touch with Amanda Coleman Communication. Simulations can be developed using the Conducttr software or through table-top scenario training.





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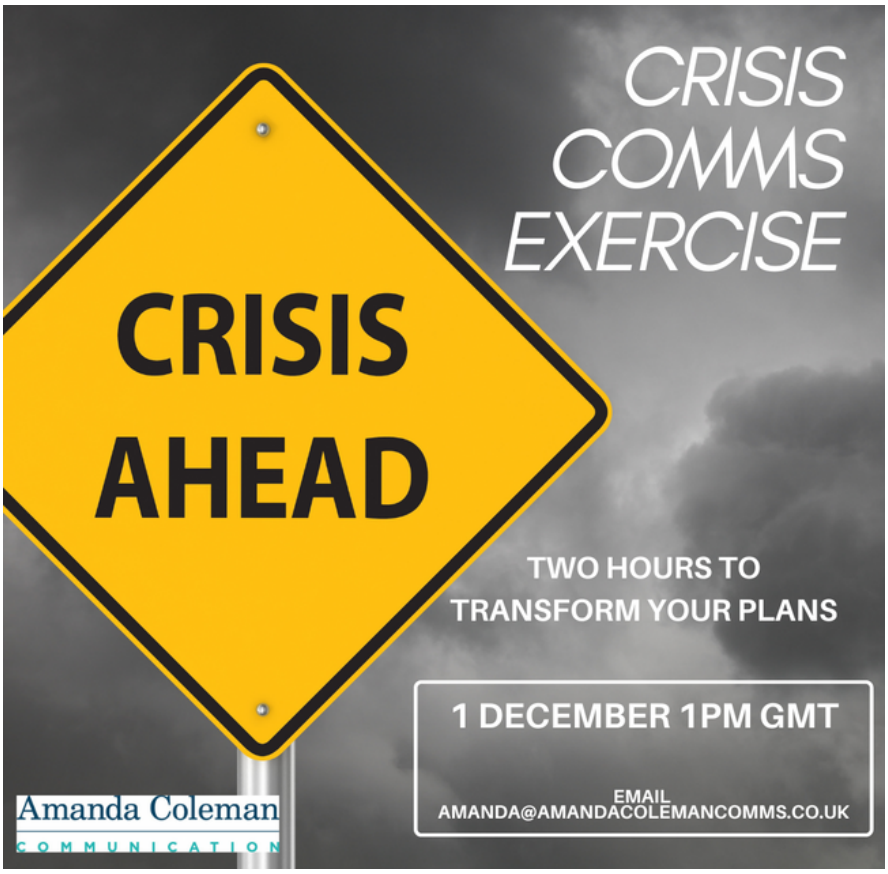

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Crisis Comms Exercise for any PR/Comms professional.

Spaces limited.

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