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# TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

## KEY LEARNING POINTS

- AVOID AN INFORMATION VACUUM
- SPEAK CONTINUOUSLY
- UNDERSTAND THE EMOTION
- MONITOR SOCIAL MEDIA
- BRING OTHER VOICES IN TO SUPPORT

## WHAT HAPPENED?

In early June 2026 disturbances and rioting broke out across Belfast, Northern Ireland following a serious attack. The police responded and made an arrest, but the situation led to angry scenes on the streets on following days. The disturbances spread from Belfast to other parts of Northern Ireland. An arrest was made but there was graphic footage of the incident that spread quickly across social media platforms.

The unrest moved quickly from the incident stoked by anti-immigration narratives that were being spread online and offline. The Police Service of Northern Ireland declared the situation a 'critical incident' as masked groups set fire to vehicles, a bus, and properties in several towns and parts of Belfast. Significant police resources had to be deployed including armoured vehicles and as the situation continued, a water cannon was used.

Police, political leaders and community organisations faced pressure to provide accurate information while trying to calm tensions and counter misinformation. The family of the man who had been the subject of the attack also called on people not to continue the unrest.

## What can communication and business learn from the situations?

Details of the initial attack were circulating on social media a long time before the traditional media reported about what had happened.

This allowed a narrative that the information was being withheld by authorities to circulate. There was a lot of discussion and requests for information to be provided despite the fact a legal process was underway as an arrest had been made.

The incident and subsequent disorder was extensively publicised both in the UK and around the world. Reporters interviewed people who had been made homeless because of attacks on properties as well as others caught up in the disturbances.

Leaders from across Northern Ireland's political spectrum condemned both the knife attack and the subsequent riots.

Counter-protests were held in Belfast and Derry, with participants carrying messages such as "Belfast stands against racism" and "Riots don't speak for Belfast". But throughout the incident and aftermath social media, particularly X, continued to fuel the disorder.

This was a situation with a significant amount of political interest and scrutiny. Alongside that was a need for authorities to reassure communities and to maintain trust.

### What do we need to remember in these situations?

- Fill the information vacuum quickly – with a lack of official information it allows rumours to develop and fill the space. Providing statements early can help to establish trust.
- Monitor social media continuously – the online narratives started on the night of the initial incident and had taken hold before any action was taken to try and manage the situation.
- Don't rely on the media – the media were slow to report the incident which added to concerns about information being withheld or a 'narrative' being shared to try and manage the situation.
- Work with others – when situations deteriorate whatever an organisation under attack does will be seen as a defensive response so work with others who can share information and may be more trusted.
- Go where audiences are – there has been an exodus of organisations from social media platforms, but this may be where your key audiences are so don't expect them to find you, ensure you find them.
- Understand the emotion – there were many people struggling and needing reassurance. This was a high stress situation and updates needed to take account of the fear, uncertainty and concern people had.
- Speak continuously – going quiet is an action because it allows others to become vocal and for challenging narratives to gather momentum. Keep a flow of information even when it is restating the position and action being taken.
- Build trust before anything happens – organisations need to be trusted and have a positive reputation before an incident occurs. It is challenging to build trust in the middle of responding to an incident.
- Gather the facts and recognise what is not known – communicators need to be clear about what are confirmed facts and what information is hearsay or not confirmed. Maintaining credibility throughout a crisis is vital.

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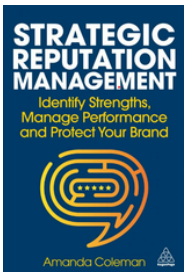


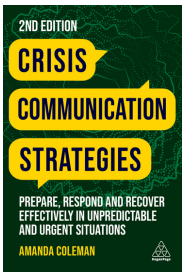


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