

## 9

## THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

The first notice came from the border patrol manager at the international boundary between the United States and Canada. The local Department of Emergency Management (DEM) was notified and the volunteer Information Officer was alerted and activated. The situation: Someone had stopped a large motor home at the border crossing and a cloud of steam or gas was escaping from the air conditioning unit on the top. When approached by agents, the driver ran off and escaped on the Canadian side. The agents on the scene suspected it was a bioterrorist attack and the gas escaping contained a toxic substance, possibly anthrax. This occurred 4 p.m. on a Saturday afternoon.

The Information Officer was home mowing his lawn when he got the call. He quickly went to his home office with his computer and broadband Internet connection. The local DEM

public information site had been prepared for just such an eventuality. He opened up the “dark site” and filled out the templates for public notices and press information. The incident dark site had been prepared in advance and was available on the Internet for immediate public launch, but was not visible to anyone except the communication team.

Using the internal message center and chat room functions built into his communication management system, he confirmed some of the latest information and completed a draft of the initial statement. The ICS was just beginning to be implemented and the local police chief was serving as Incident Commander while other agencies such as the FBI and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police were notified and activated. The Incident Commander approved the draft public notice and press release and the Information Officer pushed another button, posting the approved documents to the incident site, and then clicked another button to launch it as a public site available to anyone.

He also then reviewed the contact names contained within the system. He selected all the reporters in the immediate area and some of the major media reporters in the region, then he clicked a button to send the release. He decided that this release would go out via email and telephone. The system automatically converted the text of the release to voice, and across the region reporters began to receive telephone calls with the information. At the same time, the press release popped up in their emails, and if they didn’t have email, their fax machines were humming with the startling news.

The Incident Commander said he wanted all agencies involved to be kept informed of the event and the unfolding response and activities. Simultaneous with the release of the press information, the Information Officer selected prepared mailing lists of community leaders, as well as local and state government officials. They also received emails or faxes with the news, as did the local hospital, the Red Cross, the local and state health departments, and every police and fire agency in a 30-mile radius.

It was now 4:30. Reporter calls were coming in, but many of the reporters were following the advice offered on the release, indicating that the best way to submit questions would be through the media inquiry function on the public Web site. The Information Officer monitored the inquiries coming in even while he activated the JIC team of volunteer and agency information professionals. He activated them using the system to send a simultaneous email and telephone message. He monitored their involvement by seeing who had “signed in” to the password-protected intranet site that served as their common desktop. He decided given the urgency and time, it was best they operate a “virtual JIC” for a couple of hours. They would operate from their homes or offices until a command center with sufficient computer resources was established nearer to the scene. He assigned one of the JIC staffers as Assistant Information Officer External and redirected calls coming in to his busy cell phone to the new Assistant Information Officer’s home phone. The assistant grabbed a couple of other JIC volunteers and assigned one to handle local media, public, and government inquiries, whereas the other was to take state, national, and international inquiries.

The inquiries coming in by phone were captured by the team entering the relevant information into the communication system. Other inquiries coming in via the public Web site would show up on the “uncompleted inquiries” list. To complete the inquiries, information responders would answer the question and click a button to automatically email them, at which point they automatically moved into the “completed” category. Inquiries were shifted among team members by another click of the button. Meanwhile, the Information Officer could observe all this activity from his home office and send messages to responders when they were getting off track or weren’t using the latest approved information. Using the internal email and secured chat room to communicate among team members meant they never needed to leave their common work platform, the intranet site, and the New Message button would light up when a message was directed to them.

The Assistant Information Officer Internal was given the duty of keeping up with the rapidly unfolding events and pre-

paring the needed updates. One person was sent to the scene to be the liaison on scene with the Unified Command. A computer was now available at the scene so he used this to keep a running update of the rapidly unfolding situation. Multitiered access levels allowed key members of the information team as well as leaders of the responding agencies to review this minute-by-minute document online, whereas others on the team, such as those responding to inquiries, were not granted access to this “raw” information to prevent inadvertent release of unconfirmed or unapproved information.

An hour into the event, the hit counter on the crisis-capable server was moving into the hundreds of thousands of hits, but it was built to withstand millions of hits so it was in no danger of crashing. Members of the public, the media, and the government who were not on the initial release list were now taking up the offer to get automatic email updates and were adding their names by the hundreds to the mailing list available on the public site. The next email update was sent to all those who had just signed up. A press conference was scheduled and all reporters, including those who had added themselves, received an email notice as well as a phone call alerting them to time and place. An additional and connected Web site was established, this one without public access. The Information Officers for the response agencies were given passwords for this private site so that their agency leaders and top U.S. and Canadian government officials could get immediate access to the most complete information before it was released to the public. This site was launched and managed by the Information Officer, still operating from the vast high-tech control room that used to be his daughter’s bedroom.

Did this event happen? No, but an international bioterrorism drill playing out this scenario did happen in August 2000. Called Northern Exposure, this drill brought together more than 40 federal, state, provincial, and local agencies from the United States and Canada in a table-top exercise to prepare for just such an event. I served as the Information Officer and the technology just described was available. If the drill had not

been a table-top exercise, the communication technology could have been implemented in much the same way as described.

The new media environment requires that today's executives and communicators have a different picture in their heads about communicating with the public and the many stakeholder audiences. The old picture revolves around sending out press releases by broadcast fax and holding a press conference or conducting media interviews. The new picture is more like managing a control room in a highly complex industrial facility where multiple processes are occurring at the same time and everything needs to be carefully managed and controlled. Such a complex operation cannot be managed by sending runners out to check on this unit or that operation and having them report back to the office. Complex process management, in which speed is the driving element, requires all aspects to be networked together, with monitors displaying real-time information about what is happening.

New communication management technology provides the means to manage the most challenging issue or crisis situations. Even a relatively small team can manage the quickly escalating demands of multiple audiences wanting immediate, direct, and individualized information. This technology is entirely Internet-based, providing universal access. However, it is highly secure and controlled with multiple levels of user access. The most important advantage of using the new breed of communication management technology is that it puts the full potential of the Internet as a communication tool in the hands of executives and communicators and removes control from technicians, Web programmers, and IT managers who understand technology but don't understand the communication demands of the instant news world. You might note that in the scenario just described, not a single programmer or technician was part of the information team and there were no delays or additional steps required to make use of any aspect of the Internet.

The term *communication management* must be distinguished from the now commonly used term *content management*. There is a critical difference. Content management is

focused on allowing a group of users with password access to jointly manage and control content on a Web site or Web sites. Communication management incorporates the content management function but goes considerably beyond it. Content management is aimed at “pull” communications, where viewers come to your Web site when they want and view or download information that they are seeking. Communication management incorporates interactive communication and “push” communications. Interaction involves the give and take, input and response, of most human communication. *Push* means directing the information to specific individual users via email or other more traditional means such as fax, telephone, or mail.

The many tasks to be managed by the communication team can all be supported by currently available technology. We'll break these tasks into various elements, understanding that in an instant news event, they flow seamlessly and simultaneously together.

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## INFORMATION DEVELOPMENT

If we look at the task of the communicator as getting the right information to the right people, right now, the first facet is the right information. Information development involves collecting the facts, data, comments, images, and all other elements needed, and then drafting those elements into an appropriate form such as a press release, backgrounder, fact sheet, or other type of document. Normally, the draft needs to go through a review process. The more important it is in terms of the company's or organization's reputation and credibility, the more thoroughly it will be reviewed. The editing process might put it through many hands and eyes, with a variety of people marking changes. It is not uncommon for people outside the organization such as attorneys, consultants, or communication professionals to be consulted or to actively participate in this process. Finally, it must be approved. A communication manager might have approval authority over most such docu-

ments but when the company's present and future rests on what is said, the CEO or another top executive might be the final approval authority. In a crisis situation, this is most frequently the case, and if the ICS is implemented, nothing can go out without the approval of the Unified Command.

All this can work relatively smoothly using today's common computer and Internet tools, such as word processing software and email programs. Documents are stored on network servers, outsiders participate via email, and their changes are incorporated back into the drafts on the server. The problem with the normal way is the need for speed. In a crisis situation, the normal way of doing things is almost always too slow. The instant news environment and the expectations of Internet users require a process that takes just minutes rather than days or hours. The urgency of getting it out is matched by the urgency of getting it right because no other releases or documents might be more important to the viability of the organization than the first few releases going out after a major event has occurred. Equally important is the development and distribution of information inside the organization to employees, managers, and families.

The only viable solution today is to place the process on an Internet platform. Document and information development needs to be accomplished completely on a common desktop made possible by the Internet. Team members can participate regardless of location, provided they have password access. Current technology provides for intranet sites specifically designed for this purpose. Drafters can create new documents in advanced Web editing tools that present a word-processor-like functionality. These same advanced editors provide those used to common word processing software the tools to place images, design pages, and fully control how they want the information to look.

Images and files can be uploaded for placement in documents or on a public Web site simply by browsing for the file on a desktop or network server. Each person with appropriate password access who signs into the intranet site can then see which drafts are available for editing and what changes to earlier drafts

have been made by other editors. Designated “approvers” are established by the intranet site manager, and only they have the approval buttons on their screens allowing them to move the document forward, posting it to the public site or sending it for automatic distribution via email, fax, or telephone.

The very significant speed versus accuracy issue can only be effectively resolved by having a team prepared to work together instantly and providing a platform that makes that possible. Having document creation, editing, and approving set up on a universally available but highly secured intranet site is the only practical solution for this problem. It has proven its worth in numerous crisis situations, demonstrating that it is possible to resolve this difficult dilemma.

In addition to providing an Internet platform for document creation, more companies and organizations are also preparing for the demands of the instant news world by preparing incident *dark sites*. These are fully prepared Web sites that are not available to the public but can be made available in very short order when launched to provide the information that the public and the media are looking for about an event. These sites are exceptionally helpful in getting a headstart in providing information, and they provide an important opportunity to get ahead of the information curve.

However, most of these sites are built with common static Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) technology, which means they are dependent on technicians or programmers to keep them updated as an event unfolds. This might not be a problem for an event that has no changing information, but such events are quite unlikely. By building dark sites on a fully dynamic communication management platform, a company has a better chance of staying ahead of the curve. Drafting, editing, and approving information online is one critical element, as is the ability to instantly post existing digital documents without technical assistance. The option, of course, is to have an exceptionally efficient and responsive Web team able to keep up on a 24/7 basis for an indefinite period of time. The cost and inefficiency of this suggests that the technology platform is a more suitable solution.

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## INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION

Information distribution remains one of the most challenging aspects of high-speed communications. Many professional communicators rely on their email program to manage media contacts and in the event of a crisis will email releases from their desktop, faxing them to people who might not have email addresses. Others rely on outside news distribution services for distribution of all releases. These solutions represent significant problems in the event of a crisis.

Crises rarely occur during business hours when you are sitting behind your desk looking for something to do. If you are away from your office, accessing your contact list might delay the release of information from minutes to hours or even longer. As we have discussed, these delays can be very consequential. Additionally, in a crisis, many of the reporters and others seeking information (e.g., a U.S. Senator or local state representative) might not be in your database of contacts. A large number of names, phone numbers, email addresses, fax numbers, and so on, will need to be added. The new additions need to be kept in a place where multiple members of the team can access them. Using an outside service invariably means that although the service will distribute to their previously developed lists, the important names you collect during the event will need to be managed independently.

If you take the reasonable approach that these predeveloped contact names and the ones captured during the crisis should reside on a server within your LAN, you still have the very real issue of the access of team members to the LAN. Will they always be in a position to access that critical data? Unless you have developed a means of capturing names from the public site and automatically having your LAN-based database updated, there is an important manual step that must be included in your planning and execution.

The rather obvious solution to this, just as in the document creation issue, is to put the contact database on an Internet platform. Having the contact database available to all team members via password access enables any team member, any-

where, anytime, to get at the contact names. When integrated with other Internet-based communication management functions such as inquiry management and automated distribution, the data management element becomes much more manageable and contributes to the speed of response.

Standard data management capabilities need to be available if the data resides on the Internet. Communicators without technical skill beyond that required by basic word processing software need to be able to sort, find, organize, and set up sublists of all kinds within databases. The data management system should also be able to easily accommodate not just media, but all potential stakeholders and audiences who might seek information, including shareholders, employees, executives, neighbors, elected officials, and so on. In other words, the data fields need to be flexible to handle the different types of data you might want to collect on each of these types. This is one critical difference between a system such as this and the many wire services that many communicators use. To use only a media list and not an integrated list including all key stakeholders is strong evidence of operating in the media world of the past and not the instant news postmedia world. Managing these contacts must be simple enough so that communicators can “slice and dice” the data on the fly without requiring a database programmer or technical help that might not be available at 3:30 a.m. when you are trying to prepare and distribute information while on vacation in Bora Bora.

With both document preparation and data management available on the same intranet site, the real power of the Internet as a communication tool becomes accessible. The Internet is the best platform for getting the right information out quickly to the right people. Current technology allows you to take the press release you created and approved online and distribute it instantly to databases of reporters and stakeholders managed within the same intranet site. With a click of a button, the document is simultaneously posted to the public Web site and instantly emailed to the mailing lists you select. It is a simple one-step process.

Faxing is accomplished in the same way. Currently available technology enables you to automatically fax the same document to any name you select that does not have an email address attached to it. If you prefer, for safety's sake, you can both email and fax to each name on the list.

A third automated distribution option is also available: text-to-voice conversion and automatic telephone messaging. Voice engines take written documents prepared on the private intranet site and when approved, convert the words to a synthesized voice. The phone numbers on the list are dialed and when answered either by a person or an answering machine, the system delivers the text message in a remarkably human-like voice. Voice options include male or female, with even regional accents as options.

The implications of this kind of currently available technology are quite significant. Fence-line neighbors, for example, want and have a right to know about activities within a plant that might affect their safety, security, and peace of mind. The telephone notification system makes it possible for a communicator to quickly type up a message and distribute it via mass telephone calls to the neighbors surrounding a plant. That message or a modified version can simultaneously be emailed, faxed, or telephoned to reporters or anyone else needing the information immediately. In an earlier chapter we discussed how expectations and demands for information change when it is understood that technology makes needed information available. What becomes possible becomes demanded. The commonsense reality of this situation means that every company and organization now needs to become aware of the technologies others are using to see what standards are being set and how that is adjusting the expectations of their audiences.

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## INTERACTIVITY AND RESPONSE

The two-way nature of communication is often given lip service but not seriously addressed. Admittedly, most of the focus in this book has been on quickly getting messages out to

specific people and audiences. However, the ability to listen is also greatly improving with technology and there is much evidence that, similar to the demand for information, the individual's demand to be heard also corresponds to his or her realization that the technology exists to facilitate listening. The surprising popularity of radio talk shows is one example of how in this media-saturated environment, people are longing to be heard.

At the most basic level, a communication system today must allow interested people to register their interest, and the easier and more inviting the method, the better. A Web site that has no contact button or no email address to send questions or comments to or does not encourage response is a Web site that subtly communicates "We don't care much about you." If a system is used that places the contact databases on a Web platform, it is very easy to have dynamic and automatic database development from the public Web site. This is done more and more, and it helps eliminate double entry of names. More important, it helps communicate that you are eager to communicate with your audience. When this technology is used, visitors to a public site are encouraged to register themselves and those names are automatically added to the database managed within the Internet-based communication management system.

A second level of interactivity is facilitating questions, comments, and inquiries. A government agency found itself in the middle of a sizable public controversy. It offered an toll-free number for citizens to register complaints or comments. I asked how incoming calls were managed. I was told, somewhat sheepishly, that they were gathered on an answering machine that could handle 60 calls. I asked how many calls they had received. The answer was 1,400. When the machine was filled, they erased the calls and reset it to receive the next 60. If the public calling in had an inkling that this was how their efforts to communicate to their government were being handled, their anger would have increased.

Because we live in a mixed-media world, inquiries and comments can and do come from a variety of different media:

telephone, fax, email, and even mail once in a while. Email is now one of the most important means of interaction, but it also represents significant management issues. In 2001, it was reported that Congress received more than 80 million email messages and that the burden of those emails was simply beyond managing. Personal experience in attempting to contact federal elected officials confirms that although they might have the automated response down, they do not yet have the ability to manage the email messages they receive. This same problem will plague any company or organization finding itself in the news.

Although some email management technologies currently exist and no doubt will emerge to help address this significant problem, one of the best ways to manage inquiries today is to incorporate them into the communication management system. This is done by providing an inquiry function on the public Web site so those inquiries are managed on the team intranet site. Aside from the technology, which is becoming increasingly common, reporters and members of the public or other key audiences must be directed and encouraged to use the inquiry management system available on the public site. A public site inquiry form should ask the person inquiring to indicate if he or she is a member of the media or a member of another identified audience group (e.g., elected officials). It should also provide a convenient form for indicating the topic; the specific question; the time the response is needed; what company, media, or organization the individual is with; and other pertinent information that will help build a valuable inquiry history.

An inquiry that lands on an intranet or private communication team site without some notification is trouble. What if no one checks the inquiry list? Current technology alerts the communication team or designated members that an inquiry has been registered. As a user of such technology, I receive an alert on my text pager whenever inquiries land on client communication sites that I am managing.

A third level of interactivity is more directive listening. Questions can be directed to public site viewers or can be sent

directly to specific individuals via email. Current technology facilitates this by providing simple survey-building tools and a viewer survey or poll on the public site, with the results monitored and analyzed on the private intranet site. Communication managers can select whether to share results with the public on a real-time basis or keep all results private. This technology also enables surveys to be published to lists managed within the system. Examples of this include use by government agencies or elected officials to get snapshot views of public reaction to new proposals or controversies and by companies to gauge public reaction to new initiatives, proposed actions, or even just to get a sense of how they are doing in communicating to key audiences.

Interactivity also includes tracking what reporters write or present. There are many technologies currently available for media tracking from a variety of vendors, both as packaged software and as hosted Internet applications (sometimes called Application Service Providers, or ASPs). Integrating these functions into a comprehensive communication management system means that a single system can complete the communication management circle.

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## INQUIRY MANAGEMENT

Inquiry management can make or break a communication effort. Earlier I quoted a frustrated communicator who spent two days responding to reporters. However, the company was criticized in news accounts for being unresponsive simply because the stretched communication team couldn't get back to everyone in a timely manner. You also read the disturbing story of neighbors near a plant that had experienced an explosion and fire emailing the company to find out if they should evacuate, only to have their emails answered two weeks later. The best of communication efforts will fail in the minds of those people who have asked a question and not received a response.

Technology has a very important role to play here, as do training and communication policies and plans. Technology

can provide the means to collect, organize, track, and report on inquiries. Technology can facilitate getting the appropriate responses to the right people and also help a communication manager or company executive monitor the effectiveness of the response in real time or in detailed reporting after the crisis has passed.

With the communication management technology now available, inquiries are captured from the public site and by members of the communication team recording telephone calls or email inquiries and adding them to the inquiry list maintained inside the private team intranet site. By having all inquiries recorded and available on this site, all team members can work in concert to manage inquiries, even if it is 2 a.m. and they are scattered around the globe on vacations or business trips. An effective inquiry management system will show which inquiries have been completed and which ones have not. It will also allow a communication manager to act as a sort of air traffic controller, directing specific inquiries to the most appropriate member of the team. It will enable each member of the team to see who is working on each inquiry, whether they have responded, and how they have responded. It will also allow a communication manager to view all inquiry activity to determine the nature of the questions, to see if rumors are arising, and to evaluate both the speed and effectiveness of the responses. The system will also enable communicators to write the responses, forward the drafts to others for review, and send materials directly from the system via email to reporters or inquirers without having to exit the system.

In a large organization, such as a global manufacturing company, the communication team might be responsible for handling inquiries on a wide variety of issues from around the globe. Reporters are known to develop direct contacts with several members of the team and go from team member to team member asking the same question. The problems for the communication team are the risk of inconsistent answers and having multiple team members spend time on the same question. The only way to improve efficiency, quality, and consistency of response is to have communication management technology that allows every team member to share the infor-

mation in real time. Today, that reality essentially forces the technology onto the Internet because of its accessibility; it also requires that the communication system be highly secure.

Another advantage of this available technology is record keeping. Where drills are required by law (e.g., in the oil industry), the documentation of drills can be very significant. In drills where this technology was used, the complete record of all communication activities, including all inquiries and their responses, was prepared simply by requesting a report from the system. The resulting printout recorded the full communication activity during the drill, including details on each inquiry and their responses. Even more so than in a drill, such automated record keeping can be invaluable as part of a debriefing after a crisis and can supply highly useful training material for the communication team to better prepare for the next event.

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## WEB SITE CONTROL

The Internet is arguably one of the most powerful and flexible communication tools created. Yet for most communicators, that power remains largely leashed. With the current content and communication management systems available, it is quite surprising that more communicators and communication managers are not protesting the restrictions that artificially limit their ability to make use of this vitally important tool. To gain control of the Internet means more than being able to fully and completely manage the content of public Web sites. However, that is a basic starting point that the vast majority of communication managers have yet to get to. The company's public site is one of the most important faces the company puts forward in a time of crisis. To be forced to go through even one layer of personnel or policy to control that site, let alone multiple layers—as is now quite common—makes the Web a tool with limited usefulness to the communicator when it is needed most.

With the many options for commanding Web content available today, there is no policy or security reason that should prohibit communicators from taking command of the content. It should be clear when I say “taking command” that I mean being able to fully control, including changing or adding content without requiring the involvement of any technical resource, even if the communicator is only able to perform the most basic of word processing functions. Today’s Web content management technology allows this; the question is whether or not the company will allow it. That is a matter of understanding the critical role the Web will play in a crisis.

This role is better understood when executives understand how a reporter reacts to initial information about a story. The first and natural reaction now is to hit the organization’s Web site. It is the fastest, most convenient source of basic information about the company, including location, what it produces, number of employees, size, and so on. Knowing that this is the behavior pattern of reporters will lead forward-thinking executives and communicators to realize that the telling of the story that is unfolding can be best facilitated through the company’s public Web site.

That is not to say that the public site used by the company for general information or for conducting routine business should be used in crisis communications situations. There are two good reasons why a separate site should be used: to avoid the dual problem of obliviousness and overreaction, and to take the burden of public information traffic off the normal business infrastructure.

Let’s say you are a food manufacturer that has a serious problem with a batch of product, requiring a public recall. When the news breaks, the reporters will hit your Web site, as will many customers or consumers looking for details about which products have been recalled. What will they find? Business as usual? Nice statements about how long you’ve been in business and your long-standing reputation for safety and quality? That’s obliviousness. It communicates a powerful message that the company just doesn’t get it. This is scary for people and serious for the media and people directly affected

by the product's problems. On the other hand, if the Web site is totally subsumed by huge warning messages and all other information is lost in the information about this one particular product, the damage to ongoing business could be much greater than necessary. I went to one well-known national food manufacturer's Web site without knowing anything about a product recall. The site was completely dominated by safety warnings and the product recall information. If I had been a customer looking for some basic information, it would have given me serious pause.

A related problem is the issue of traffic. In a major public news crisis, there is very great potential for heavy traffic. Most companies' public sites are not designed for crisis communication traffic. A site that works well managing hundreds of thousands of hits will likely crash under the burden of millions. Even if it remains operational, significant slowing can result in viewer frustration and the use of other means to communicate, such as picking up the phone. Then, one of the most important and efficient tools will have gone silent both for ongoing business and for communicating about the rapidly evolving crisis.

The solution to both of these problems is to have crisis communications managed on a separate site hosted on crisis-capable servers. This is the direction more companies are taking, despite the very serious obstacles raised by many IT departments. IT departments face the uncomfortable dilemma of committing precious, limited budget dollars to building crisis server capabilities or altering their policies to allow outside services to host these special-purpose Web sites.

Having a separate site on separate servers manage the public communication provides the opportunity to divert traffic from the public site for both appearance and infrastructure benefits. An objection might be raised that people will go to the public site anyway and therefore you don't avoid the hits by having a separate site. The answer to that is when the initial information is submitted, it needs to include a Web address specifically for the public information site. An increasing number of organizations are securing domain names to be

used in the event of a major crisis. For example, XYZP Consulting Services might have a regular domain name of *www.xyzpconsulting.com* and set up a domain name such as *www.news.xyzpconsulting.com* or even a simple *www.xyzp-responds.com*. Those receiving the initial information will know which site to go to; those who haven't—the majority—will go to the main company site looking for information. A link on that site directing them to the specific incident site should be clear and unmistakable, but it need not dominate the site or significantly detract from the company's ongoing operations. Two problems are thus solved—the organization is seen as neither oblivious nor overreactive, and the Internet infrastructure of the business is protected.

The topic of incident dark sites was mentioned earlier. These sites are prepared in advance specifically for this purpose. If they are built on the kind of Internet-based communication management platform described in this chapter, they not only fulfill the public Web site function, but offer fully integrated communication management. However, to meet "now is too late" instant news demands, these sites need to be able to be launched by an executive or communication manager anytime, anywhere. To activate a Web team or to get the IT staff moving in the middle of the night to activate a Web site is not kind, practical, or necessary. Today's technology provides for launching such sites at the touch of a button by authorized staff with the appropriate passwords.

This ability to launch new and specific-purpose Web sites is one important element of taking control of the Internet. Today's well-appointed press rooms have all the functional capabilities described in this chapter. They are fully loaded with background information about the company; releases can be drafted, edited, approved, and posted online by clicking the right buttons. Information prepared in the press room can be instantly distributed to infinitely flexible contact lists via email, fax, or even telephone. Databases of contacts are built at least in part automatically by users registering on the public Web site, and inquiries are recorded and fully managed within the system. Now a crisis hits.

As an example, we'll say it is a legal issue involving a top-level executive. The story is not going to go away. No incident or dark site has been prepared for this particular eventuality. The communication manager launches a new site based on the existing press room site. She selects all the existing information to be transferred and all the existing databases. The new site is then built and launched. The horde of new reporters and other audience members who register on this incident-specific site are captured in that database and do not taint the original press room database. Information specific to that incident is created, approved, and posted to that public site. Team members like attorneys who need access to that site are not given access to the inside of the press room site. The incident's communication activities can be managed and controlled much easier through a specific site dedicated to the incident. The ability to launch, transfer data, and independently manage this "spawn" or subsite is a key part of today's communication management technology that is being effectively used by a number of companies, agencies, and organizations.

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## GROUP COMMUNICATION

Web sites are not just effective for public communication. Group communication or semipublic sites are growing in popularity. Communicators might wish to use Web browsers and Web sites to communicate with specific individuals or groups while keeping the public out. Some public relations managers prefer to keep media communication from the public (although in my mind the policy is questionable because knowing the information is also available to the public helps reporters treat the information carefully). Group Web sites are appropriate for associations, private communities, or internal communication. Communicators need to not only be able to launch and completely control the content of all of these sites without technical assistance; they also need to be able to determine whether or not they want these sites to be public, private, or semipublic. The communication management tech-

nology available does allow communication managers with the highest levels of security to determine if each site they control is to be public, available to a limited group, or kept private for authorized users only.

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## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

One of the most discussed items coming out of the events of September 11, 2001, was the need for effective internal communication. Many companies became very concerned about what systems and policies were in place to inform employees within the organization about what was going on, provide instructions on what actions to take, and locate employees to make certain they were safe. Even minor events such as the Nisqually earthquake in Puget Sound in February 2001 demonstrated that the cellular phone system is easily maxed out. In the first hour after that event, only fortunate users were able to check on family or friends by either land line or wireless phone. The Internet remained very much intact. Company officials from the rest of the country resorted to email and internal Internet communication, such as through the communication management system, to ascertain the condition of employees and operation of the facilities in the area impacted by the quake.

Internet technology needs to be part of the comprehensive plan for employee and leadership communication in case of large-scale internal or external crises. The Internet-based communication management system described earlier can play a key role because of the ability to launch new sites on the fly and the ability to control access to any site. An internal-only site can be launched to keep employees informed and a different site can be launched exclusively for the management team. One user of such a system uses a site specifically for employee information related to weather conditions. During bad weather, employees can check the site to determine if there are changes in work locations or work hours or if they are just to stay home. Of course, they

need not check the site for the information because the same information can be instantly pushed to them via email and telephone.

It is becoming common practice among users of such systems during drills and actual events to establish secured documents on the private site for executives only. Different security levels can control who can see which documents, so that incident status reports containing raw information not yet confirmed can record events as they unfold. Images such as helicopter overflights or photos or videos of the activities can be loaded and retained for internal use only. As executive leadership is increasingly dispersed in this global economy, making use of these communication tools simply to provide management with the information needed to make fast and effective decisions is extremely important.

One user of the technology described here is the communication manager for a global oil company. A large tanker carrying gasoline ran aground in a sensitive environmental area on the East Coast of the United States. The incident occurred after work hours at night and the communication manager launched a site using a prepared incident dark site from his computer in a spare bedroom. Built within that system was a database of more than 1,800 reporters. He used a template to complete an initial statement release that described the grounding and what was being done. The information site used a special incident response domain name that was registered in advance for just such eventualities. Company executives in London were able to view this site from their homes or offices and keep up with the very latest information. A widespread release was never sent because the tanker, a new double-hulled ship, was floated off the bar at high tide and no gasoline or anything else was spilled. It was a potential nightmare that ended happily, particularly for the communication manager who demonstrated to executives in the company that he was exceedingly well prepared to manage communication not only with them, but with the entire world if needed.

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## USER ACCESS

References have been made to multiple levels of user access in such communication management systems. There are a couple of different business models used by suppliers of Internet-based communication tools. Many providers of Internet-based software price their service on a per-month, per-user basis. They sell what is sometimes referred to as *seats*. This limits the number of users who have access to the tools appropriate for routine day-to-day communication activities. A problem arises when a sizable incident happens because at that point a number of people from the CEO or chairman to outside contractors might be quickly pulled into the communication team. In that case, the model used by other providers is more suitable: A license fee is paid monthly or one time for the system and unlimited users are allowed access.

Because a large number of users can be provided access does not mean that you want all functions of the communication system to be accessible to all users. Certain functions, such as signing in new users, assigning passwords, creating secured documents, posting information to a public site, and launching whole new Web sites need to be accessible only to the highest level communication managers. These communication management systems accommodate this by providing multiple levels of access, in some cases providing grids of functions that can be assigned to specific users, in other cases assigning functions to multiple levels of access codes. A user assigned access Level 1, for example, might only be able to view and edit certain documents or view and respond to inquiries. A person with access Level 10 can launch new sites, assign system administrators, change basic site information, and manage other such high-level uses.

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## HOSTING

All Web sites, including private intranet sites, must reside on a server somewhere. Hosting of communication manage-

ment systems is an important element of the infrastructure. This issue is one of the most common reasons communication managers who want to implement the functionality of these advanced systems within their companies or organizations are prevented from doing so. IT policies might prohibit outside hosting, and even though the software might be available for licensing on company servers, the company servers typically are not suitable for crisis communication applications.

The ability to absorb a heavy traffic load is the essential element. Traffic really consists of the number of people attempting to get information from the site and the type of information they are viewing or downloading. One user viewing streaming video will absorb much more server and bandwidth capacity than a number of visitors viewing static pages. Companies and organizations today need to be serious about their ability to take the hits and deliver the information. IT departments and executives alike must be informed, probably by their communication managers, that in today's instant news environment in which the Internet is moving us into a postmedia world, communication ability depends on servers. Whether ultimately they take the approach that they will absorb the cost themselves by building crisis-capable server capacity or decide to share costs by using outside hosting services, the decision needs to be made to provide for the potential demand.

How many hits? The heaviest hit load on Web sites in early 2002 measured in excess of 10 million hits per day. In 2002, Internet access among the American population hit 50 percent, with an additional two million users being added every month. Hit loads are increasing significantly. A company or organization with any potential for creating national or international news probably needs to be prepared to absorb at least five million hits. That number will likely increase at a rate of 10 percent to 20 percent per year until Internet access has reached the saturation point around the world.

Earlier we said that there were three important elements to effective communication in the instant news world: policies, people, and platform. The technology platform exists to enable communicators to take much greater control over the Internet

than ever before. The issues come down to people and policies: Are the people prepared to make use of these technologies? This question is more about willingness to change than about technical ability. Resistance to change and ignorance about the changes in the world are the biggest obstacles to implementing the necessary changes.

Most significantly, does the company policy encourage or prohibit the use of such technology to enhance the ability of the organization to communicate quickly and accurately? As we have seen, there are many obstacles within organizations that prevent the changes that are needed. Leadership is the key. Leadership must recognize the new demands and be willing and able to push through the obstacles to put into place the policies and technologies needed to protect the organization's future.