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## **Opportunities and challenges in managing crisis communication: Northern Irish perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

#### Aims and Research Questions

This research explored the relevance of crisis management to communications directors of sports organisations and public relations consultants in Northern Ireland. The topic is particularly relevant to Northern Ireland society and sport where factors like “‘risk and issue management’ and ‘crisis’ were daily concerns during the 30 years of conflict called the ‘troubles’”. Many of these issues remain in post-conflict societies here and in other regions within Europe. Within this setting communications managers have to deal with the added complexities of sectarianism, terrorism, violence and politicians using sport for political point-scoring. Within this presentation we will explore the experiences and opinions of directors and consultants with an aim of providing a model of best practice for communications within Northern Irish sport. The research questions central to this study were ‘how are Northern Ireland sports communications professionals engaging with crises?’ and ‘to what extent has crisis communications strategies incorporate considerations on new communications media?’

#### Literature Review

A number of previous studies (Brown & Billings, 2013; Bruce & Tini, 2008; Frandson & Johansen, 2007; amongst others) have examined cases of sport crisis by drawing on one or a number of crisis communications models to guide their analysis (Edwards & Usher, 2010). While these studies have provided the foundations of a sport-specific knowledge-base on the management of crisis, more research is still required, particularly from the viewpoint of serving practitioners. Additionally, the opportunities and challenges presented by new communications media posed rapid and global reaching lessons for issues management.

#### Methodology, Design and Analysis

The research adopted a qualitative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1999) to understanding the perspectives of directors and consultants who work, and possess significant expertise in sport communications. Using semi-structured interviews, we gathered the experiences from eight such individuals. Each interview lasted between 60-90 minutes and was digitally recorded. The data were transcribed verbatim immediately following the interview. We used Strauss and Corbin's (1999) coding procedure to manage the data analysis and reduce the data into manageable segments. The first step was to develop a number of open codes. This process began immediately following the first interview by creating a number of categories to organise the data and capture the data from resultant interviews. Axial coding followed this phase in an attempt to allow relationships to appear between the open categories. The final phase of selective coding drew abstractions from the data in order to bring together the relationships from the axial phase and provide theoretical conclusions to inform the creation of a localised best-practice model.

#### Discussion, Implications and Conclusions

From the data a number of themes have emerged. Currently there are similarities in the practice of crisis management in Northern Ireland with that previously discussed in the sport communication literature. None the less the uniqueness of the province's historical relationship with crisis presents some unique challenges. The size of the province and regional proximity of all the communications professionals facilitated many opportunities to share information on crisis planning however differences in the size and cultural orientation of some organisations presented ongoing challenges. A number of the directors and consultants stressed the need for planning, monitoring and if possible, controlling the information flow for the sport organisation (Edwards & Usher, 2010). While the control of information through new media communications channels was challenging some respondents felt that while the management fundamentals remained the same, the speed at which the story develops, and the difficulty in controlling the story have increased dramatically. A localised model of best practice is suggested, along with opportunities for further research in sport communication management.

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