

# “Striking the right balance”: tensions in municipal risk communication management for preparedness

Tensions in  
municipal risk  
communication

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The aim of the study is to deepen the knowledge about municipalities’ risk communication for preparedness. This objective was pursued by analyzing how risk communication functions were organized in municipalities and by scrutinizing tensions in risk communication management.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study relies on 19 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with communication practitioners in Swedish municipalities. The sample was purposive and included Swedish municipalities varying in number of inhabitants, geographical location, degree of urbanization, size and risk profile.

**Findings** – Risk communication is seen as a sub-field of crisis communication in municipalities’ communication management. The task of initiating risk communication activities and campaigns is frequently assigned to the municipalities’ safety units or emergency coordinators and is normally not part of communication practitioners’ duties. Municipal communication practitioners often face challenges in trying to demonstrate the significance of the practitioners’ role in risk communication and other risk-related activities within the municipality. The practitioners’ work is characterized by four categories of tensions that are identified as follows: constitutional/legal, organizational, cultural and technological.

**Practical implications** – The identified tensions in risk communication are important for reflexive practitioners to consider, and the paper suggests three steps that municipal communication managers can take to handle them.

**Originality/value** – The study contributes with novel knowledge about municipal communication management in a context of risk communication. The study challenges the existing and dominant risk communication research and offers a more contextual and reflexive understanding of actual risk communication processes in municipalities.

**Keywords** Risk communication, Public sector, Crisis communication, Communication management, Communication practitioner

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

In recent years, risk communication has risen on the political agenda. The reasons are manifold: climate change, pandemics, cyber-attacks and geopolitical concerns. In this study we define risk communication as information and communication about potential future damage and associated dangers intended to enable concerned parties – for example municipal inhabitants – to take measures to mitigate the risk and/or prepare for them

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(Granatt, 2004). Hence, risk communication is seen as increasingly essential in preparing society for dangers and making them more safe, secure and resilient. In Sweden, as in many other countries, the responsibility for managing and preparing for crises largely lies at the municipal level. Risk communication in local public organizations in turn includes different professions and organizational functions, such as emergency and safety experts and functions concerning risk and crisis issues (Boholm, 2019). However, the management of risk communication is argued to be of growing importance especially for communication practitioners, according to both government policies and programs (e.g. FEMA, 2019) and public relations research (Palenchar and Heath, 2007).

Despite the crucial position that risk communication seems to have in “making” the global and local community resilient, few studies thus far have focused on communication management and municipal communication practitioners’ work and perceptions (Frandsen and Johansen, 2009; Johnston *et al.*, 2020). Risk communication work also comes with challenges and it is by no means a straightforward activity in municipalities (Boholm, 2019). Municipalities are both political institutions and administrative organizations; they comprise different functions, professions and formal obligations. In addition, an increasingly digital population is exerting pressure regarding how risk communication should be organized and conducted (Janowski, 2015). Because citizens are increasingly familiar with digital communication and digital technologies, they also expect more of the municipalities when it comes the communication of risks and crises (Eriksson and Olsson, 2016). Such pressures might lead to communicational tensions – understood as a “clash of ideas or principles or actions” (Stohl and Cheney, 2001). For instance, when communicating risks, municipalities can both encourage risk acceptance and risk avoidance among citizens respectively. Risk communication can also be designed to make people accept risks and forget about them, whereas other measures can be intended to make risks more salient to encourage people to take preventive actions. Municipalities can also be open and transparent about local risks, or they can withhold information due to secrecy concerns. Our research questions are as follows: (How) is risk communication integrated in municipalities’ communication management? What communicational tensions are involved in municipal risk communication?

The research questions are warranted because the existing research on risk communication is highly dominated by psychometric studies of citizens’ risk perception. The research primarily adopts a linear and one-way model of communication, with its interest in the diffusion of risk messages to create knowledge and behavioral change in citizens in accordance with needs identified by the senders of the messages (e.g. Gurabardhi *et al.*, 2004). Although existing risk-communication studies provide us with valuable insights into how isolated risk and emergency messages and individual government and municipal preparedness campaigns are received and interpreted by different groups of citizens (e.g. Frisby *et al.*, 2013; Johansson *et al.*, 2021), they do not inform us about the communication practitioners’ own perceptions of such preventive and internal work (see also Lemon and VanDyke, 2021). With some exceptions (e.g. Johnston *et al.*, 2020; Dharmasena *et al.*, 2020), we also know surprisingly little about the internal processes and organization of risk communication in public sector organizations in general and municipalities in particular. Furthermore, the dominating psychometric risk communication paradigm has long been mired “in operational theories where technical advice in problem solving is seen as most important” (Otway and Wynne, 1989). On the contrary, this study aligns with innovative ideas about the importance of reflexive communication in the fields of communication management and public relations (see, e.g. Holmström, 2018; Falkheimer *et al.*, 2016). The reflexive perspective focuses on creating meaning through a frame of reference that takes into account the complexities and tensions that can arise in the communication process. This approach prioritizes the exploration of these complexities and tensions over simply disseminating risk messages. Considering this emphasis on reflexive communication, it would be valuable to further investigate the tensions and complexities that professionals in the field of risk communication encounter in their work.

*Theoretical approach*

*Risk communication and crisis communication in a public context.* Risk communication activities tend to include (1) informing and educating, (2) creating behavioral change and protective behavior, (3) warning about emergencies and disseminating information and/or (4) solving common problems and conflicts (Covello *et al.*, 1986). As Johansson *et al.* (2021) rightly argue, risk communication and crisis communication are two different and distinct communicational activities: Whereas risk communication can be “controlled and crafted,” crisis communication is more spontaneous and oriented towards the here and now (*ibid.*). As a management function, risk communication deals with things that might go wrong. Crisis communication deals more with situations after an event has actually occurred (Ulmer, 2019). Risk communication is “designed to speculate about what might happen, whereas crisis messages are in reaction to an event that did happen or is happening” (Johansson *et al.*, 2021). Lofstedt (2003) sees risk communication as an open process in which information and risk assessments flow back and forth between experts, authorities, interest groups and citizens. Risk communication in public organizations often deals with wicked problems where risks are related to diffuse, societal-level challenges “embedded in complex systems in which solutions can continually engender new, uncertain, and often unforeseen consequences” (Rickard, 2021). Furthermore, many challenges facing public organizations are not technical ones with straightforward solutions. Instead, they are political and “wicked,” and their solutions are accordingly imperfect and often temporary.

Municipal risk communication is faced with many of the same difficulties as public communication in general, such as the impact of politics and politicians, a focus on serving the public, legal constraints, media and public scrutiny, lack of managerial support for public relations and lagging professional development (Liu and Horsley, 2007). Nevertheless, the spatial responsibilities related to municipal communication as well as the internal complexity of the municipal organization are distinct features of municipal risk communication.

Dharmasena *et al.* (2020) argue that Public Relations (PR) practitioners can play an important role in supporting local resilience and preparedness, particularly by developing networks and communication. In brief, professional roles concern the expected function of a member of a particular profession (Tench and Moreno, 2015). Public communication practitioners’ different overall roles and responsibilities at the municipal level have recently been attracting increased research interest. For instance, Fredriksson *et al.* (2018) identified seven basic principles and aims for municipal communication departments: organizing, positioning, alerting, unifying, integrating, servicing and interacting. Based on this, there are reasons to expect that communication practitioners’ work with risk communication is not a significant part of municipalities’ communication work, even if such activities might be covered in the aim of organizing and alerting the public about crises and emergencies. Moreover, Fredriksson *et al.*’s (2018) description of municipal communicators’ mixed and many-sided roles and functions ties in well with previous research on communication practitioners in public organizations (e.g. Palttala and Vos, 2011; Vos and Westerhoudt, 2008). This general portrayal of public communication management as highly multi-functional, might lead to a situation where risk communication for preparedness is weakly integrated in communication management, because so many other tasks and functions are part of the portfolio. Still, the growing awareness and focus on crisis communication (e.g. Avery, 2017; Frandsen and Johansen, 2009) might spill over onto risk communication functions as well, leading to greater internal prioritizing.

*Tensions embedded in municipal risk communication for preparedness*

The term “tension” is defined by Stohl and Cheney (2001, pp. 353–354) as referring to “the clash of ideas or principles or actions and to the discomfort that may arise as a result.” Tensions can take different forms, including paradoxes, contradictions, dialectics and ironies

(Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004). Tensions also concern elements that individually seem logical but are inconsistent and even absurd when juxtaposed (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Trethewey and Ashcraft (2004) see tensions as discomforts, clashes and irrationalities that have come to characterize contemporary organizational life. Cooren *et al.* (2013) argue that tensions are unavoidable because they are inherent in any organizational form and hence can never be completely controlled or resolved.

Only a few studies explicitly address tensions (or interrelated concepts) in crisis and risk management and communication. Otway and Wynne (1989), for example, identify paradoxes arising from the actual process of communicating risks to citizens. As opposed to tensions, paradoxes are difficult to fully resolve. A core assumption, however, is that risk communication efforts involve two partly contradictory processes, as they encourage both risk acceptance and risk avoidance. Moreover, a “reassurance arousal” paradox arises from the contradiction between reassuring stakeholders that they can forget about risks but in emergency phases having to create the opposite belief, namely that the risk is not negligible. Otway and Wynne also identify an “information culture” paradox related to the source of information and argue that the even if different entities are collaborating in response to the same communication requirements, the source of information can shape its very meaning. In a municipal context, where different units and departments contribute to risk communication, this tension can be particularly apparent. Hence, it matters where the risk communication takes place. Finally, because informational channels are inconsistent, Otway and Wynne discuss the potential discrepancy between official (well-organized, structured) information on the one hand and informal and often tacit organizational “body-language”, on the other. There is reason to expect this tension to be particularly important in municipalities. For instance, official information about risks and dangers tends to be idealized and suggests a sense of order and control over uncertainties (e.g. Pang *et al.*, 2006). Nevertheless, this official information will always be surrounded by rumors and other communication initiatives from the municipality to communities which, in turn, can emphasize vulnerabilities and uncertainties. Liu and Horsley’s (2007) discussion of communication in public organizations ties in with this. They argue that tensions sometimes arise between “what is considered to be public communication and what is considered to be advertising” (Liu and Horsley, 2007, p. 379). In their case, USA public agencies are prohibited from spending public funds on advertising. In the Swedish case, however, such restrictions do not apply. Still, focusing on promotional communication on the one hand and risk communication on the other, can provoke tensions.

In reviewing the research on risk and crisis communication and management, it becomes clear that there are numerous inconsistencies and discrepancies involved in how risk and crisis communication can be designed. For instance, McConnell and Drennan’s (2006) study identifies several inconsistencies between what can be labeled as ideals of pre-crisis preparedness and the actual reality of preparing for the unpredictable. Specifically, McConnell and Drennan recognize that while crises are low-probability events, they still place large demands on resources. Moreover, there is a tension related to the fact that contingency planning requires plans, coherence and structure. They argue, however, that risks and crises cannot be “packaged in such a predictable way.” Furthermore, the planning phase requires integration between networks, organizations and professions, although contemporary organizations tend to be characterized by fragmentation.

Johnston *et al.*’s (2020) study highlights a so-called “paradox of the positive.” This relates to how government agencies use PR to highlight the government’s capacity to serve the public. Hence, it might lead to cementing the municipalities’ image as community protectors. A tension arises when municipalities simultaneously should tell the public how to enact their own safety measures, as well as how to take personal steps to prepare. Furthermore, Liu and Horsley (2007) identify a “legal constraint” in how government communication designs PR in a public sector context. They argue that although “the public good” often guides government actions and communication, legal constraints limit the possibility to communicate fully and openly.

This constraint may conduce to communicative paradoxes. Looking at the Swedish case, for instance, municipalities are obligated to follow the principle of public access to information. The principle of public access means that the public is entitled to transparency regarding public sector activities (Ministry of Justice, 2020). However, secrecy provisions place limitations on the public's right of access to official documents (cf. Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act). For instance, some information in official documents can be classified as *secret* and the public's right to view these documents is accordingly restricted. In other words, although municipalities adhere to the principles of public access to information and transparency, they might be prohibited from disclosing parts of the information.

Although there is a growing body of research on communication practitioners' role during and after crisis (e.g. Avery, 2017; Frandsen and Johansen, 2009), comparatively little attention has been paid to communication work in the preventive stage before a crisis has occurred. Even though studies such as Otway and Wynne (1989), McConnell and Drennan (2006), Liu and Horsley (2007) and Johnston *et al.* (2020) have highlighted important tensions (or interrelated concepts) in risk and crisis communication process, none of them specifically addresses risk communication work in preventive stages and the challenges faced by municipalities. Therefore, to bridge this gap, this study aims to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the specific tensions involved in organizing and implementing municipal risk communication.

#### *Sample, methods and analysis*

Nineteen communication practitioners were interviewed in the qualitative study, and the sample was purposive. We strived for variation in the sample (cf. Patton, 1990), by including respondents representing diverse Swedish municipalities in terms of number of inhabitants, geographical location, degree of urbanization, size and risk profile. Risk profiles were established based on local risk and/or threat identified in the Swedish national risk assessment (SKL, 2017), such as (1) high risk for floods; (2) hosting of Seveso plants and (3) fluctuating population depending on seasonal tourism (see Appendix for full information). The aim was to include a *variety* of municipalities facing different types of risks and not to create a basis for generalizations based on size, geography, or risk profiles. Most of the resulting interviewees were communication practitioners in upper-level positions (e.g. managers, leaders and strategists) and all had appropriate risk communication experiences or responsibilities (cf. Appendix).

The interviews were carried out by both researchers using video-conferencing technology. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. The interviews were semi-structured (see Silverman, 2001), as there were two themes to be covered in sequence: first to gain an understanding of the actual structure and operation of communicational functions and roles in Swedish municipalities, in particular in relation to risk communication, and secondly, to get an understanding of latent and manifest tensions related to carrying out the tasks and duties related to risk communication. The interview-topics included work-related background (education, work-related experience and career profiles); the communication department's function, development and portfolio and risk communication ideals and practices (planning, cooperation, digitalization and conflicts of aims). Although the interviewees were contacted *qua professionals*, some of the questions were sensitive. In particular, questions about conflicts of aims are touchy, even in a professional context. Therefore, in approaching and contacting the interviewees, they were given information about the project and key topics in the interviews beforehand. Furthermore, all informants were guaranteed anonymity and had the opportunity to withdraw from the interviews at all stages of the process. Questions and topics considered sensitive were introduced at the end of interviews.

The analysis was inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2006) model for reflexive thematic analysis and Eggebo's (2020) framework for collective qualitative data-analysis. The (collective) thematic analysis was carried out in four steps.

- (1) Immersing oneself in the data. All transcriptions were read and re-read and important parts of the interviews were identified. In this step, the two researchers worked individually (cf. [Eggebo, 2020](#)).
- (2) Collective mapping of central dimensions. This was a collective stage, where the researchers discussed the interviews together. As described by [Eggebo \(2020\)](#), this mapping of dimensions was triggered by questions such as: “what are the interviews really describing?” and “what topics, ideas, thoughts, and analytical threads are important after reading the transcripts?” In particular, the mapping concentrated on overarching ideas in the material related to roles and duties of municipal communication practitioners, perceptions of risk and/or crisis and communicative paradoxes and tensions.
- (3) Coding and grouping. The interviews were scrutinized again individually and coded in detail to identify passages and topics related to the dimensions described in stage two. The coding can be characterized as “hybrid,” as it was both inductive and deductive, integrating data-driven codes with theory-driven ones (cf. [Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006](#)). Inductive codes particularly emerged for the descriptions of communication officers’ roles, functions and backgrounds; whereas theory-driven codes were applied when analyzing tensions (based on the previous section on tensions embedded in municipal risk communication).
- (4) Ordering and presentation. Finally, the material was ordered and connected into larger clusters, where central patterns, recurring regularities, overlaps and repetitions were described.

## Results

### *Risk communication and communication management*

*Risk communication: mandate and autonomy.* How is risk communication integrated in municipalities’ communication management? As municipal practices and obligations, “risk” and “risk management” remain in the intersection of crisis management and security/safety management and risk communication is not perceived as an organizationally well-defined function distinct from other domains of crisis communication and emergency management. This perception partly has to do with the general mandate and autonomy of the communication practitioners. The interviewees generally tend to ask for clearer mandates and guidance on where to invest effort, as indicated in this excerpt: “[. . .] we need someone telling us ‘this is important’. Then we can make a plan or a campaign or something” (Interview, M1). Furthermore, the interviewees often play down their role as initiators of risk communication activities. Instead, they assign these roles and responsibilities to the municipalities’ safety units or emergency coordinators.

In the literature, risk communication is often described as a vital part of risk analysis and risk management. All Swedish municipalities are obligated to perform risk and vulnerability assessments (RVAs). The assessments produce knowledge that can be used to reduce local risks and vulnerabilities – particularly those that can lead to local crises during disrupting events. This overall risk picture should be used as a starting point for coordinating the risk- and vulnerability-reducing activities in the municipality. The main responsibility for producing the analysis lies with the municipalities’ security departments, but the process should also include other municipal functions such as the communication unit, according to government policies. In practice, the degree of involvement in the RVA, is low. Only a minority of the interviewees perceive that they participated in the entire process, from risk-assessment discussions to designing and implementing communication campaigns.



They also perceived that they had more bounded responsibilities, limited to specific phases and/or campaigns. Hence, they struggle to claim a more defining role in the risk planning and other risk-related processes.

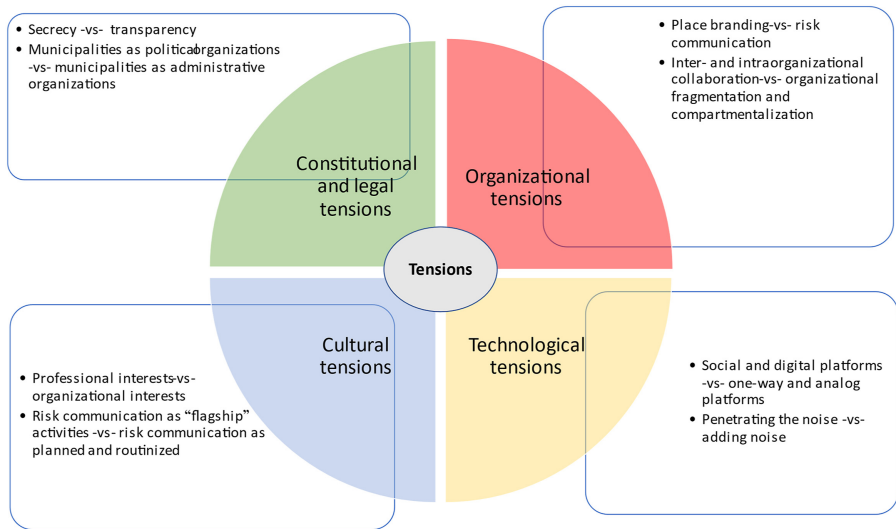
*The organizing of risk communication.* According to the interviews, the domains of (1) crisis communication (often located at communication units) and (2) security, safety and emergency issues (often located at a safety unit) are the most influential neighboring fields of work for communication practitioners responsible for risk communication. In almost every investigated communication unit, the responsibility for the risk communication lies explicitly with the communication practitioners formally in charge of the crisis communication tasks. Particularly in the smaller municipalities, the communication officers' job-tasks are diverse, ranging from operational to strategic duties. The responsibility for crisis communication, in turn, is often formalized, and it is highlighted in both relatively institutionalized crisis communication plans as well as in the interviewees' titles/positions ("crisis communication manager", "press communication officer in charge of crisis communication", "communication specialist with a focus on crisis communication"). Organizationally, 17 of the interviewees are located at the municipality/city administration offices, and they support the municipality administration and various departments with communication issues. Crisis communication plans are institutionalized in municipalities, whereas risk communication plans are loosely coupled to the municipal RVAs.

*Risk communication practitioners' background.* Crisis management and crisis communication are often equated with media relations, which is also reflected in the interviewees' backgrounds; nine of the interviewees had a solid professional background in journalism, and five interviewees had educational backgrounds from media and communication studies. This means that at the communication units the responsibility for risk communication for preparedness is to a large degree managed by people with extensive experience of crisis management and of building and handling relations with the mass media. Hence, risk communication responsibilities are integrated with crisis management functions. The fact that the responsibility for risk communication is often assigned to the crisis communication managers means that the role is highly demanding, since risk communication usually involves communicating in a situation where, for example, citizens' interest in and engagement with information and communication is relatively low, unlike in crisis situations where public interest in the communication is particularly high. One interviewee put it nicely: "Risk communication is when no one listens or is interested. Crisis communication is when everyone listens and is interested" (Interview, M9). The interviews invited the communication officers to reflect openly on how to conceive risk communication as a practice. Here, the interviewees often turned to conceptualizations of crisis and crisis communication to explain and elaborate their perspectives. Talking about crisis communication is seemingly easier than talking about risk communication. The reason might be that crises are tangible, concrete and bounded in time and space, whereas risks are associated with uncertainties, boundlessness and the future.

### *Communicative tensions*

Most of the communicative challenges mentioned by the interviewees had to do with lack of resources and unclear mandates. Some of these challenges can be labeled as tensions, in the sense of being expressions of a clash between ideas or principles and irrationalities (Stohl and Cheney, 2001; Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004). In the analysis, these tensions are categorized as constitutional and legal, organizational, cultural and technological, and they are visualized in Figure 1.

*Constitutional and legal tensions.* The first type of tensions emerges from constitutional frameworks and legal structures that are external to the municipal communicators. These tensions are formal in the sense that legislative and administrative frameworks and protocols guide risk communication work in different and often competing directions. As public



**Figure 1.**  
Tensions in municipal  
communication  
management related to  
risk communication

**Source(s):** Created by the authors

authorities, Swedish municipalities are subject to the same secrecy requirements as regions and national public authorities. However, as municipalities, they are also obligated to respect principles of transparency and public access. In risk communication processes this tension is brought to a head, as they involve questions with large public interest but also possible secrecy concerns, as this quotation illustrates:

There are issues that we are not allowed to talk about. I mean, with some of the risks, we have even been told “this is within the framework of protection and secrecy.” [...] Of course, this creates challenges: on what level can we inform the inhabitants, so that we strike the right balance – so that inhabitants understand that it’s dangerous without knowing the precise level of threat. Because we cannot, and are not allowed to, say everything. The problem is then that the level of attention among the inhabitants is not high enough. (Interview, M9)

As the quote illustrates, communication practitioners are sometimes told to withhold information. Still, there is considerable leeway in how the interviewees manage this tension, and the amount of emphasis placed on secrecy and transparency has varied in recent years (Interview, M8). Hence, the right way to prioritize between secrecy or transparency is not clear-cut, and this causes discomfort among the interviewees about how to strike the right balance between being completely open about risks and accommodating to secrecy concerns.

Withholding information, which in some cases is required by law, can impede the possibility to raise citizens’ awareness and attention regarding local risks. In general, however, the overall aim is to direct attention to risks without “giving terrorists free information,” as interviewee M7 puts it.

Constitutional and legal tensions can also arise because municipalities are both political institutions and administrative organizations. This tension is most apparent among the larger municipalities. The interviews contain, for instance, some examples of municipal politicians using risk topics to profile partisan politics, which violates administrative protocols. Hence, this tension is created by diverging signals sent by the municipality as both a political organization and an administrative organization. In theory, politicians in the political organization should decide *what* needs to be done, while civil servants in the



administrative organization (such as communication practitioners) determine *how* it will be done. In practice, however, the picture is more complex:

The balance between politics and administration can be tough, in particular in acute situations. [...] as an employee you are good at following the basic structures. However, not all politicians are. They work free-style outside these structures. [...] They might feel that they know best how to communicate. Still, there might as well be experienced communicators alongside them who know about tone and know which words raise questions, and know how to express themselves so as not to create more questions or worries. (Interview, M12)

Hence, advising politicians in risk communicational issues is not always “successful” from a communication practitioner’s point of view, as politicians can have their own agendas. For instance, politicians can have an interest in accentuating (or downplaying) certain risks. Although the interviewees are well aware of this fact and the challenges it can create, some also sees this tension as productive, because it can provoke “very exciting cases and situations” (Interview M16).

*Organizational tensions.* The second domain of tensions concerns organizational structures within municipalities, such as organizational design, hierarchies, resources and capacities. These tensions arise from the fact that municipal organizations and their communication functions involve a number of different duties and aims (cf. [Fredriksson et al., 2018](#)). As for the communication departments, especially in larger municipalities, the different communication functions might also be split into different sub-units. The municipality’s organizational design when it comes to communication can here be characterized as *fragmented and compartmentalized* and this creates communicative tensions. A particularly salient one is the difficulty of harmonizing municipal place branding with risk communication messaging. Although there is great variation in how the interviewees perceive this tension, many interviewees see a paradox between making the municipality attractive and simultaneously communicating local risks. To exemplify this variation, three different perspectives are presented below:

The information-centered perspective: “My job is not to market the municipality. That’s not my job. My job is to put out relevant information to target groups A, B and C. That’s my job. I don’t see attracting new inhabitants to the municipality as part of my work.” (Interview M5)

The attractiveness-oriented perspective: “Our priorities focus on making the municipal attractive: We have to be visible and get publicity so that people will move here, stay here, and invest here. So, everyone [at the department] wants to make the municipality attractive. And this also puts pressure on the communicational function, coming from the politicians and the administration.” (Interview, M10)

The balancing perspective: “It’s an interesting idea that we should provide information about risks with power plants and where to run if there’s an explosion, and simultaneously we want you to move here with your family and feel safe. From my perspective, the basis of all risk communication is that it takes place in a very undramatic way. Calm and sensible and factual information is packaged in such a way that you know what to do with the information.” (Interview, M8)

As seen in these excerpts the perspectives range from embracing both risk communication and place branding, to simply rejecting that there is any opposition between them. The excerpts are illustrative of [Liu and Horsley’s \(2007\)](#) perception of tensions between what is considered to be public communication and what is advertisement. Promotional communication, such as place branding, is something utterly different from risk communication. Still, the last quote presents a middle position where this tension is recognized and accepted and where the interviewees reflect on *how* risk communication can be adapted and harmonized with place brand initiatives. In some of the larger municipalities, the very organizational design accentuates the tension, as different parts of the organization handle branding issues and risk communication respectively, without any common denominators: “the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing,” as interviewee M9 puts it.

Some interviewees also mention spill-over effects between municipal attractiveness and risk communication. Controlling, informing about and reflecting on municipal risks might have a positive spill-over effect on attractiveness. At the same time, *not coping* with risk in an adequate way can spill-over negatively:

Suppose you'd like to move to our municipality. You want to know if the school is good. You also want to know that the municipality knows what to do if there's a flood. We're expected to keep an eye on it. Obviously, if we handle an event badly, it will spill over a bit on the brand. [...] How good is the municipality if we don't get rid of all the water and so on. [...] All basements are destroyed; it's guaranteed to spill over onto the municipality. (Interview, M10)

Another dimension of this organizational tension has to do with organizational hierarchies and the possibilities they afford for cooperation and for communicative control. The interviewees perceive cooperation as pivotal in risk communication. At the same time, cooperation is sometimes viewed with ambivalence, as it also involves a loss of control and leads to fragmentation of responsibilities. In collaborative risk-communication projects, for instance, some interviewees admit to being hesitant and uncertain about who really "owns the case" (Interview, M4).

*Cultural tensions.* Cultural tensions are associated with the institutional norms, informal values and statuses embedded in communication work in municipalities. Such tensions might also arise from differences between professional values of communication officers and values inherent to the municipal organization. In some municipalities, risk is a topic with high organizational profile and status. Yet, in other municipalities, risk communication is not a prioritized area. The status of and priority of risk, crisis and security issues depends very much on individuals who are proactively putting these issues on the agenda:

[Risk communication has] quite high priority, probably because we have a damn good, active and savvy security team who work intensively with the issues, and are prominent and leading nationwide, I would say. I don't mean to brag, but they're damn good. I think . . . people perceive the municipality as a forerunner, as a role model . . . and also as active in that way. They're a catalyst for making these issues highly conspicuous in the organization, because they're good at both internally marketing themselves and demonstrating the importance of preparedness, really. (Interview, M9)

Profiling risk communication may nevertheless lead to a situation where communicating people's personal responsibility for preparedness is undermined. This tension ties in with [McConnell and Drennan's \(2006\)](#) perspective on the "paradox of the positive."

Moreover, when talking about risk communication, the interviewees often highlight planning and routines as important. Communicational planning is part of their professional identity. For example, several interviews tap into tools such as "annual cycles." Here, the communicators plan for communicational activities related to recurrent risks: flooding in the spring, water-shortages and forest fires during summer and so on. Risk communication thus follows a planned annual trajectory, and it also suggests a sense of order and control ([Otway and Wynne, 1989](#)). This way of perceiving risk communication contrasts with other perspectives on risk communication within the organization, which is also evident in the interviews. In these other perspectives, risk communication deals with specific and targeted efforts, often improvised outside an annual plan and introducing "flashy" measures. The quotation from M9 above, where preparedness issues are part of the internal marketing of the department is indicative of this. Such perspectives tend to originate from outside the communication departments. Striving to balance between perceiving risk communication as planned and routine-oriented, on the one hand, and perceiving it as a specific, targeted and "flashy" activity, on the other, creates tension among the interviewees. The tension manifests itself in difficulties in how to prioritize and allocate time to internally planned risk communicational activities and externally and improvised flashy measures, respectively.

The interviewees see risk communication as a domain where they are useful and where they can play a crucial role. However, in some situations, other professionals are seen as more

essential than communicators for communicating risks, as they are considered more knowledgeable and, hence, more legitimate senders of information. This challenge can be labeled as a cultural tension because the mandate of communication professionals is conditioned by organizational cultures and statuses in the municipalities. An interviewee gives an example: “So when there’s flooding, for example, flood risk, then I often use the head of the rescue services, if I’m recording videos and so on, so he’s the one who says things, so there’s a bit more punch to it” (Interview, M5). These results add to Otway’s reflection on the “information culture paradox,” where the actual source of the information is considered pivotal.

### *Technological tensions*

In several interviews, the interviewees displayed tension and discomfort around how they perceive digital communication technologies in a context of risk communication. While they embrace the possibilities of digitalization, they also recognize the vulnerability of digital technologies. Municipal communicators also describe feeling torn between pressure to be digitally oriented and the need to handle analog communication. Of particular interest is the importance placed on the municipal web-portal, even for risk communication. For instance, municipal web-portals are the main medium for disseminating RVAs. This confirms [Fredriksson and Sjögren’s \(2021\)](#) finding that Swedish municipalities are increasingly prioritizing their web-portals as one-stop shops for citizens. Previously, these were merely bulletin boards for disseminating information. Today, municipal web-portals are becoming communicative hubs for the entire municipal organization ([Fredriksson and Sjögren’s, 2021](#), p. 50). In many cases they are seen as the most important link between the municipality and its stakeholders, even when it comes to risk communication:

[. . .] I try to make our organization understand that the municipality’s website is what the town hall used to be for the municipality. This is where meetings take place, this is where we create relationships, this is where we do everything. [. . .] We must be an actor that can be trusted, and we build that trust by being good at using the web. (Interview, M11)

As shown in this excerpt, the municipal web-portal is crucial in terms of both transmitting risk-information and providing a hub and digital meeting point for the municipality and its citizens. Still, prioritizing one channel for transmitting risk-information can lead to the exclusion of certain groups and thus creates vulnerabilities by not reaching those who may be more vulnerable to the risk in question. Moreover, web-portals are also seen as possibilities for creating genuine relationships with citizens. However, the actual use of municipal portals is inconsistent. From one municipal communicator we learn, for instance, that there are campaigns to attract tourists and visitors to the portal for the purpose of communicating risks. Simultaneously, they are worried that the portal might break down due to increased web-traffic. Hence, the digital communication infrastructure becomes a risk in itself.

Although developing the municipal web is seen as part of the digitalization process, in some interviews social media play a more prominent role. Social media are perceived as important for directing traffic and attention to the municipal web. This might be particularly important for risk communication, as citizens do not visit municipal portals by accident:

The traffic to the municipal web usually comes from interest in school issues and things like that. [. . .] But what attracts people to the web – because you don’t go and waste time surfing to the municipal web: no one does that! In our case it’s Facebook that draws people. And it works very well. (Interview, M5)

Social media are making it easier to publish and transmit risk-information, and both inhabitants and organizational insiders are familiar with and socialized into these platforms. Concerns are raised however, regarding how the municipality can stand out on such platforms. This is of particular importance when it comes to the disseminating risk-information, which needs to be clear and unambiguous: “With digitalization it is easier to publish and transmit information.

However, it also creates digital noise, and how can you reach through that? How can you stand out?" (Interview, M14).

Citizen's expectations put pressure on communication managers who, in many cases, cannot live these expectations. Furthermore, the continuing need for analog communication adds to these pressures. In particular, in smaller and rural municipalities this tension of being digital and analog simultaneously, is particularly pronounced as they may not have the same level of resources or expertise to fully embrace digital communication methods, while still needing to meet the information needs of the community.

### Discussion and conclusion

Risk communication in Swedish municipalities is a flexible practice with no pre-given organizational form. It is not an organizationally well-defined function with clear goals, which confirms [Boholm's \(2019\)](#) findings. As identified in the literature review, risk and crisis communication can be seen as two distinct communicational practices ([Johansson et al., 2021](#)). In our study, however, municipal risk communication converges to a great extent with municipal crisis communication. As organizational functions, risk and crisis communication are located in the same place with the same staff. First and foremost, this function is devoted to crisis communication with a foundation in media relations. Risk communication is therefore at risk of being marginalized. Moreover, municipal risk communicators often face challenges in trying to demonstrate the significance of their role in risk-related activities within the municipality.

If we adhere to [Lofstedt's \(2003\)](#) definition of risk communication as an open process, with a two-way flow of information and risk assessments between stakeholders, practical municipal risk communication is much more restricted. The most significant example is the interviewee's involvement in RVA-processes which is often bound to certain phases or sub-projects. Furthermore, the interviewees' perception of not being the prime initiators of risk questions and issues is interesting, as one could have expected these professionals to take on a leading role in handling and initiating risk issues. Instead, this perception echoes [Liu and Horsley's \(2007\)](#) description of governmental PR in general, key characteristics of which are devaluation of communication and lagging professional development are key characteristics. Similarly, the diversity of duties that that interviewees highlight shares the characteristics described in studies by, e.g. [Palttala and Vos \(2011\)](#) and [Fredriksson et al. \(2018\)](#), where a multifaceted and many-sided organizing of municipal communication stands out.

The results identified four categories of tensions – constitutional and legal, organizational, cultural and technological – that can have an impact on risk communication in municipalities. These tensions are not inherently "bad." They can even be productive for organizations because they might provoke deliberative discussions about both challenges and solutions. As municipalities also are political institutions and tensions are therefore inevitable, they might even help ensure that a diversity of viewpoints comes to the surface. By foregrounding tensions, more nuanced understandings of actual communication management practices can be achieved beyond what [Otway and Wynne \(1989\)](#) describe as operational theories where technical advice in problem solving issues is seen as most important.

Although tensions can be seen as unavoidable, uncontrollable and unresolvable ([Cooren et al., 2013](#)), we conclude by suggesting three steps that municipal communication managers can take in order to cope with tensions. First, making tensions visible and tangible serves a purpose in its own right, also because it implies an acceptance of organizational imperfection. [Figure 1](#), presented above, is a helpful starting point for this, as it gives structure and pattern to the complexity involved. Secondly, focusing on developing "reflexive communication" could be a way forward in coping with tensions (cf. [Holmström, 2018](#)). This ties in with [Rickard's \(2021\)](#) discussions of risk communication, where different risk messages are continuously shaping and (re)creating definitions of risk in certain contexts.

Reflexive communication requires second-order thinking and contrasts with the psychometric paradigm of risk communication, which for decades has been dominated by operational theories, best-practice guidelines and instrumental recommendations. In particular, reflexive communication might contribute to overcoming cultural tensions as it encourages communication managers and practitioners to integrate communication into all aspects of the municipal organization and to fundamentally reexamine “assumptions that one pole of a paradox is the correct one” (Falkheimer *et al.*, 2016, p. 145). According to the findings, tension arising from conflicting viewpoints can be seen as advantageous, because it can generate exciting situations, discussions and deliberation. A third step is to raise the professional status of communication practitioners. Specifically, organizational tensions are a matter of how risk communication functions are positioned in municipalities and what mandate and degree of autonomy the practitioners have. As identified in this study, risk communication shares many of the attributes of the PR profession in general, as discussed by Liu and Horsley (2007). The lack of managerial support and lagging professional confidence and development are important examples of this. An increase in the professional status of officers involved in risk communication could strengthen their ability to reflect upon and tackle organizational tensions, for instance by providing better conditions for participating in and contributing to in RVAs. Furthermore, it might also conduce to greater confidence in handling constitutional and legal tensions, especially when it comes to balancing between transparency and secrecy.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf)

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**Table A1.**  
List of interviewees

Municipal code	Size (in population)	Interviewee's title	Prime risk profile	Interview length
M1	50,000–100,000	Communication manager	Seveso	52 min
M2	25,000–50,000	Communication officer	Seveso	38 min
M3	<10,000	Communication officer	Tourism	25 min
M4	10,000–25,000	Communication officer	Tourism	24 min
M5	<10,000	Communication manager	Floods	59 min
M6	<10,000	Administrative manager	Tourism	40 min
M7	100,000–150,000	Press-communication officer	Floods	44 min
M8	50,000–100,000	Communication officer	Floods	57 min
M9	150,000–200,000	Communication strategist	Seveso	49 min
M10	50,000–100,000	Communication officer	Seveso	42 min
M11	10,000–25,000	Communication officer	Floods	47 min
M12	100,000–150,000	Press and communication manager	Seveso	57 min
M13	<10,000	Communication manager	Tourism	40 min
M14	50,000–100,000	Communication manager	Floods	38 min
M15	<10,000	Communication officer	Floods	40 min
M16	25,000–50,000	Communication strategist	Seveso	43 min
M17	10,000–25,000	Communication manager	Tourism	29 min
M18	10,000–25,000	Communication officer	Tourism	51 min
M19	>500,000	Communication strategist	Seveso/floods	45 min

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