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Communicative Risk Management in the Military Emergencies Unit. Strategy and Structure.

Abstract

Risk communication plays a key role in the management of emergencies. Before they take place, it helps people to believe in the responsible for solving them, and to adopt the protection measures to minimise its impact. On the other hand, during its development, risk communication is part of the response that public administrations and emergency services offer to control such situations.

The Military Emergencies Unit (UME), as the spearhead of the military capacity of the Spanish Armed Forces in emergencies situations, knows the importance of risk communication. For that reason, since its creation in 2005, it has a structure and a public communication strategy not only to construct a corporate image consistent with its institutional mission, but also to informative management of the disasters.

Based on the bibliographic review about risk communication and conducting interviews, this research explores how the UME has carried out risk communication throughout its fifteen years of existence, mainly through its social media and close collaboration with the mass media, to protect the citizens and improve the quality of life of the victims.

Key words

Risk communication, Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication, mass media, social media, Military Emergencies Unit.

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Introduction

Fifteen years after its creation by agreement of the Council of Ministers on 7 October 2005, with the aim of supporting the State structure in responding to emergencies anywhere in Spain and abroad, and with 538 interventions carried out up to 1 July 2020¹ – equivalent to an average of 30 per year – the Military Emergency Unit (MEU) is now considered a successful project and a benchmark within and beyond our borders.

Perfectly integrated into the National Civil Protection System, according to the provisions of Organic Law 5/2005, of 17 November, on National Defence², the Military Emergency Unit has not only become an element of national cohesion that transmits security, confidence and well-being to citizens, but also the main bastion, together with international military operations, of the prestige that the FAS enjoys among Spaniards³. Equally significant has been its work outside the national territory as a vector for the projection of the “Spain Brand”, to the point that the “MEU model” has attracted the interest of more than fifty countries, whose representatives have visited the unit to learn about its structure and operation with the aim of creating similar military units specialised in emergencies or adapting, with the same capabilities, some of those they already have.

While this national and international prestige is mainly attributable to its competent and professional performance, it is not only due to the excellent use of its operational and logistical capabilities; to the availability, commitment and military training of its almost 3,600 components, or to the possession of a robust command and control system, capable of accurately identifying priority needs for action and effectively delivering orders to the intervention teams; but also to the timely integration of so-called “risk communication” in all its interventions. This fact has served to manage them more effectively, since, as the recent Operation Balmis against COVID-19 has shown, Spanish society trusts the Armed Forces in general⁴ and the Military Emergency Unit in particular, and this trust is, in the words of the head of the MEU’s Public Commu-

¹ Data provided by the director of the Escuela Militar de Emergencias, Infantry Colonel Antonio Puerto Gómez, during the inaugural conference *La Unidad Militar de Emergencias. Para Servir!*, given at the Summer Course “La Unidad Militar de Emergencias. Al servicio de todos los españoles”, organised by the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia and held at the Instituto Universitario Gutiérrez Mellado and at the Torrejón de Ardoz Air Base, headquarters of the MEU Headquarters, from 13 to 15 July 2020.

² Article 15(3) of this law provides for the participation of the Armed Forces in situations of catastrophe, chaos or disaster, together with the rest of the State institutions and the services of the public administrations.

³ ALCANIZ COMAS, M. “La Unidad Militar de Emergencias. Influencia del buen hacer de la milicia”. *Revista Ejército*, issue 934, 2019, pp. 68–69.

⁴ HIDALGO GARCÍA, M. “El papel de las Fuerzas Armadas en la gestión de la COVID 19 como generador de confianza”, Analysis Paper 11/2021, *Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, 10 March 2021.

nications Office (OCP), Lieutenant Commander Aurelio Soto Suárez, “what allows us to resolve an important part of the emergencies”.

In this context, the aim of these pages is to delve into the communicative management of risk in crisis situations through the case study of the Military Emergency Unit. To this end, this research examines the strategy that governs the unit’s risk communication in order to be useful in crisis management, and the communication structure it has in place to carry it out.

To achieve these objectives, a qualitative methodology is used, combining a literature review of the literature on risk communication as an academic discipline, to establish a broad conceptual framework for the study, with the analysis of the doctrinal documentation of the MEU on public communication and semi-structured interviews with those responsible for its planning and implementation in both institutional and emergency contexts. The interviewees are Lieutenant Commander Aurelio Soto Suárez, head of the Public Communication Office and *community manager* of the MEU; Colonel Juan José Marí y Marín, head of the Relations and Evaluation Department, and Lieutenant Colonel Juan Saldaña García, head of the Personnel Section⁵.

Risk communication: concept, type and actors involved

Social risk, i.e. that which, motivated by anthropogenic causes such as scientific and technological development, compromises the security of humanity and the continuity of the planet, is an inseparable part of post-modern and global society. As such, these risks must be managed, as they change economics, politics, education and even individual and collective behaviour.

According to Rodríguez Perea (2016), although the involvement of the Public Administration in risk management is a social requirement, in his opinion, “it is society as a whole that must develop the capacity to anticipate threats, to withstand new dangers and to face them”⁶. However, in order for citizens to participate in such management, they must first have an adequate social awareness or perception of risk, understood as the set of beliefs, attitudes, judgements, feelings, values and social and cultural dispositions that they adopt in relation to the sources of danger and its benefits⁷.

⁵ Unless otherwise specified, quotations in the text about these authors are taken from these interviews.

⁶ RODRÍGUEZ PEREA, E. *Comunicación de riesgo y estudio de caso. Los polígonos químicos españoles*. Barcelona: UOC Ediciones, 2016, p. 51.

⁷ PIDGEON, N.; HOOD, C.; JONES, D.; TURNER, B; GIBSON, R. *Risk perception*. In: THE ROYAL SOCIETY (eds.), *Risk Analysis, Perception and Management. Report of Royal Society Study Group*. London: The Royal Society, 1992, quoted in PUY RODRÍGUEZ, A. *Percepción social del riesgo. Dimensiones de evaluación y predicción*. PhD thesis. Complutense University of Madrid, 1994, p. 65.

Although among the multiple factors or attributes that people use to evaluate risks are some as decisive as their proximity in time and space, the voluntariness of their exposure, the catastrophic potential or the possibility of obtaining compensation⁸ or even the effectiveness that public managers demonstrate in the face of certain emergencies, “risk communication” stands out above all others, since the quantity and quality of the information that the population possesses regarding the dangers that loom over them at any given moment contributes to a large extent to their perception being suitably adjusted to the reality of these, and determines an active involvement in their management or a reaction of rejection: “Risks arise in knowledge, and therefore in knowledge they can be reduced, magnified or simply eliminated from consciousness”⁹.

Consequently, and given that the degree of risk acceptability is a compromise between knowledge and understanding of risk and participation in risk management, risk communication is defined as “an interactive process of information and opinion exchange between individuals, groups and institutions about a potential risk to human health or the environment”¹⁰, and emerged as an academic discipline in the social sciences in the 1950s as a complementary area to research on the social perception of risk to study the features of effective risk communication in public or private risk management¹¹.

Risk communication actors

The people, groups and institutions involved in risk communication can be divided into three groups: the companies that generate or know about the risk, the media and scientists who disseminate the risk, and the administrations that manage the risk.

In the case of the former, such communication is integrated within the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility, which implies not only identifying the impacts that their activity may have on the environment in which it takes place, and establishing a prevention system that guarantees the capacity to react to the activation of risk, but also, as Marín Calahorro (2008) points out, dialogue with their stakeholders to find out their concerns and opinions, and satisfy their demands “informing them of the preventive measures, and taking on board their proposals for improvement”¹².

8 LÓPEZ CERESO, J. A.; LUJÁN, J. L. *Ciencia y política de riesgo*. Madrid: Alianza, 2000.

9 BECK, U. *La sociedad del riesgo. Hacia una nueva modernidad*. Barcelona: Paidós, p. 84.

10 NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL, *Improving risk communication*. Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 1989.

11 RENN, O. “Risk communication and the social amplification of risk”. In: KASPERSON, R. E.; STALLEN, P. J. M. (eds.), *Communicating risk to the public. International perspectives*. London: Kluwer, 1991, pp. 287–324.

12 MARÍN CALAHORRO, F. *Responsabilidad social corporativa y comunicación*. Madrid: Fragua, 2008, pp. 28-29.

As for the media, particularly the audiovisual media, their important role in shaping public opinion has made them not only an important source of information about the risks we take¹³, but also, in some cases, the only reference for viewers, as Gil Calvo (2003) points out: “The information conveyed by the media is decisive, since raising one or other expectations conditions the attitudes of the actors on whom the risk factors depend, altering both their evolution of the perceived danger and their capacity to overcome it”¹⁴. This circumstance, which has led experts to use them frequently to disseminate their messages, entails a great social responsibility on their part, which must be translated into overcoming both the internal conditioning factors that hinder their informative task –journalistic routines, the tyranny of the time factor, cost savings or job insecurity – and external ones – economic pressures from the sectors generating the risk, for example –¹⁵ in favour of improving the preparation and scientific knowledge of society.

Finally, bearing in mind that, according to Fairman *et al.* (1998), “the degree of trust in administrations or regulatory bodies is inversely proportional to the degree of risk perception”¹⁶, it is necessary for them to work not only to regulate and plan prevention and action protocols to deal with emergency situations, but also to create a sufficient degree of trust in them among the population, so that they notice the commitment to contain and control them and accept the messages that affect their safety.

Types and functional lines of risk communication

Lundgren and McMakin (2009) classify risk communication in the three aforementioned areas – environmental, safety and health – and within them they establish three functional lines of action: preventive communication, communication for consensus and risk communication in crisis situations or emergency communication¹⁷. Although these lines share common requirements, such as knowledge of the target audiences, the adaptation of techniques and channels to deliver the required message in

¹³ A clear example is the onset of the global pandemic caused by COVID-19. According to the March 2020 barometer (Study No. 3277) conducted by the Sociological Research Centre on a sample of almost 4,000 people, 88.4% of those interviewed in Spain who were following news related to the health crisis with interest at that time said they did so through television news, compared to 20% and 21.7%, respectively, who used the written press and radio to get information, and 39.3% who turned to the Internet.

¹⁴ GIL CALVO, E. *El miedo es el mensaje*. Madrid: Alianza, 2003, p. 39.

¹⁵ RODRÍGUEZ PEREA, E. *Comunicación de riesgo y estudio de caso. Los polígonos químicos españoles*. Barcelona: UOC Ediciones, 2016, pp. 111-120.

¹⁶ FAIRMAN, R.; MEAD, C.D.; WILLIAMS, W. P. *Evaluación del riesgo medioambiental. Enfoques, experiencias y fuentes de información*. Madrid: European Environment Agency, 1998, p. 123.

¹⁷ LUNDGREN, R. E.; MCMAKIN, A. H. *Risk Communication. A Handbook for Communicating Environmental, Safety, and Health Risks*. New Jersey: Wiley-IEEE Press, 2009 (4th edition), p. 3.

each case, or the credibility of the broadcaster, each has its own purpose and demands a different degree of audience participation.

Preventive risk communication requires the least participatory effort, as it aims to disseminate, through classical communication techniques such as brochures, reports or publicity campaigns, measures or recommendations from experts that improve the quality of life of society and foster a culture of prevention.

On the contrary, risk communication for consensus inevitably requires feedback from the population, and implies organising mechanisms that allow the population to participate in the management of their own risk, through the identification of the problems it poses, in order to promote better decision-making. Such mechanisms, which, unlike those used by preventive communication, are part of a two-way communication model, can be voluntary and free of charge, such as surveys, or obligatory and remunerated, such as the so-called “participatory intervention nuclei”, which include, for example, joint legislative commissions with public participation.

Ultimately, risk communication in crisis situations encompasses the instructions that public administrations and emergency experts give to citizens in extreme conditions such as floods, fires, heavy snowfalls, traffic accidents or even terrorist attacks, in order to try to minimise their harmful effects.

Risk communication in crisis situations

Since the state is obliged by law to inform citizens about public matters affecting their security even if they do not request it¹⁸, risk communication in crisis situations is a priority for the public administration. While such information work is of particular importance during the course of an emergency, according to Rodríguez Perea (2016), this type of risk communication:

“can never be considered a one-off or isolated process, but rather a prior effort to consolidate trust, either through preventive campaigns or by establishing mechanisms for social participation that make [...] the population accept the instructions and behaviour that are required in each situation of danger”¹⁹.

In this sense, risk communication in crisis situations encompasses preventive information, pre-emergency information and information during the emergency. While

18 An interesting summary of the legislative framework regulating public information on civil protection, catastrophes and emergencies in Spain and Europe can be found in IBAÑEZ PEIRÓ, Á., *Comunicación, administraciones públicas y gestión de la crisis y emergencias*. PhD thesis. Complutense University of Madrid. 2014.

19 RODRÍGUEZ PEREA, E. *Comunicación de riesgo y estudio de caso. Los polígonos químicos españoles*. Barcelona: UOC Ediciones, 2016, p 141.

the first is mainly regulated by the Administration and operates in the field of the aforementioned preventive risk communication, in the second and third, which seek to respond to the information needs that may arise in the event of the possibility or occurrence of specific risks, both the communications offices of the State Security Forces and Corps and of the emergency services involved in crisis management and the media also play a fundamental role. In fact, the latter are obliged to collaborate free of charge with the authorities in the dissemination of preventive and operational information on risks “in the manner indicated by the authorities and under the terms established in the corresponding civil protection plans”²⁰.

To increase the effectiveness of public communication in emergencies and prevent risks from turning into disasters, the UN advocates making public communication a tool for citizen education^{21,22}. This challenge implies not only, as already mentioned, orienting messages towards preventive purposes, in order, as Aurelio Soto points out, “to promote a relationship of trust with citizens before the emergency materialises”, but also “to use their language, which is understandable and helps them to make their own decisions on how to deal with risks”²³; to identify the information needs in communities according to the different risks – which implies first knowing the risk perception of those affected, since “the risks that kill people and those that alarm them may be different”²⁴ – and, of course, to take advantage of all available information opportunities and all existing resources, including new information and communication technologies and social networks, given their proven usefulness in crises caused by adverse weather conditions or in the collaboration and prosecution of crime²⁵.

Risk communication in the strategy of the Military Emergency Unit (MEU)

The Military Emergency Unit’s risk communication is mainly situated in the third functional line described by Lundgren and McMakin: emergency communication. In

20 HEAD OF STATE, Law 17/2015, of 9 July, on the National Civil Protection System, Official State Gazette, no. 164, of 10 July 2015.

21 This philosophy indeed permeates the *Disaster Risk Management Handbook for Social Communicators: A Practical Guide for the Social Communicator Committed to Informing and Training to Save Lives* (UNESCO, 2011).

22 SIMON, T.; GOLDBERG, A.; ADINI, B. “Socializing in emergencies. A review of the use of social media in emergency situations”, *International Journal of Information*, vol. 35, issue 5, 2015, pp. 609–619.

23 FISCHHOFF, B. “Risk perception and communication unplugged. Twenty years of process”, *Risk Analysis*, vol.15, issue 2, 1995, pp. 137-145.

24 SANDMAN, P. “Risk Communication: Facing Public Outrage”. Article [<https://www.psandman.com/articles/facing.htm>] (Published in *EPA Journal*, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 1987: 21-22), 4 September 2020.

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disaster or crisis situations, it not only contributes to giving visibility and credibility to those institutions, such as the MEU, whose mission is to intervene in emergencies to guarantee the safety and well-being of citizens, but also forms part of the response they offer to such emergencies. In this sense, such communication allows, on the one hand, leaders to make timely decisions, properly assess damages and needs, mobilise relevant resources for solidarity and support actions, and elaborate lessons learned; and on the other hand, it allows affected people to take ownership of the real risk they are exposed to and to take appropriate protective measures to reduce its impact²⁶.

Risk communication in MEU doctrine

The public communication of the Military Emergency Unit has a dual focus: institutional and emergency management. According to the head of the OCP, Aurelio Soto, the first is aimed at “projecting in society an image of the institution that is coherent with its mission, which, in this case, means that citizens perceive us as guarantors of their security”²⁷. With regard to the second, it consists of “exchanging, as experts, information, recommendations and opinions with people facing a threat or risk in order to promote their survival”.

The strategic nature of such communication in both contexts explains why, in addition to being part of its annual sectoral plans – which specify how it can contribute to achieving corporate objectives on a regular basis – it is also present in the unit’s own standing doctrine, which encompasses its main capabilities: forest fires, floods, severe winter storms, urban search and rescue, and technological and environmental hazards. In this way, Soto clarifies:

“when the doctrine of a new capability is established, it includes a chapter on public communication, in which the main lines of communication of the risk on which the capability is going to act are defined, because each risk must have specific nuances in public communication, so that people know how to act in the face of one or the other”.

The MEU therefore has a planned and flexible public communication strategy, which seeks to involve all its personnel so that their knowledge and specialisation contribute greater quality to the content disseminated, in order to avoid an information

26 MURPHY, D. M. “The Role of Information and Communication in Disaster Response: An Overview”. In: TUSSING, B. B. (ed.), *Threats at Our Threshold. Homeland Defense and Homeland Security in the New Century*. Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, 2008, pp. 179-190.

27 Institutional communication took on special relevance in the early years of the MEU in order to achieve the desired corporate positioning among its internal and external stakeholders, since, in its first years, the creation of the unit was questioned from a political, economic and even operational point of view, and aroused great controversy among the members of the Armed Forces themselves, as they considered that the functions entrusted to it distorted the mission of the military institution.

vacuum before and during the management of crises²⁸. In this sense, in all its interventions, and following the guidelines of the operational director of the emergency, its risk communication is based on an active/reactive information policy and focuses on three aspects: support in decision-making for the management of the disaster, optimal attention to the affected population and information to society through the media²⁹ and its social network profiles.

Working with the media in emergencies

Information is the most precious commodity when an emergency situation occurs that directly affects a significant part of the civilian population, making the social responsibility of journalists even more evident in this type of coverage³⁰.

In order to fulfil their social role in these special and difficult circumstances, communication professionals need information, so it is the duty of public administrations and emergency services to provide it. According to Aurelio Soto, their main demands are “data, figures, images, consequences, expert opinions and reports on the response of the authorities and emergency services”.

For this reason, the MEU’s public communication strategy expressly envisages close cooperation with the media not only as part of its institutional communication, but also, and above all, in emergency management. In the latter case, such collaboration is intensified with local journalists, because, as Commander Javier Marcos Ingelmo argues, “they are the true connoisseurs of their inhabitants, the ones who get close to their lives every day and tell them about the things that happen around them”, so they are the perfect people to “help us build trust, as they are part of their daily lives, and they generate security and credibility [...] and, after all, risk communication must be a dialogue with the public”³¹.

In the case of the Military Emergency Unit, this collaboration is first and foremost to position itself as a quality source of information, by making spokespersons available to the media, both communicators and specialists,

28 Public Communication Plan of the Military Emergency Unit 2020.

29 GUERRERO JIMÉNEZ, J.L. “La Unidad Militar de Emergencias”. In: SPANISH INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES (ed.), *Strategy Paper 165. España ante las emergencias y catástrofes. Las Fuerzas Armadas en colaboración con las autoridades civiles*. Madrid: Ministry of Defence, 2014, pp. 170-171.

30 MAYO-CUBERO, M. “News sections, journalists and information sources in the journalistic coverage of crises and emergencies in Spain”, *El Profesional de la Información*, vol. 29, issue 2, 2020.

31 INGELMO, J. M. “La información en los medios de comunicación social en la gestión de catástrofes”. In: MINISTRY OF DEFENCE (ed.), *Liderazgo y emergencias. Unidad Militar de Emergencias*. Madrid, 2018, pp. 277-282.

to provide “clear official statements, issued in a timely and transparent manner” and “to generate confidence in the emergency services provided by the Community and the State as the main element of action in the disaster and, at the same time, credibility in the face of an immediate improvement of the situation with positive results, visible in their quality of life”³². Secondly, the MEU also provides television stations with images captured by its own cameras, so that, as Soto points out, “journalists do not have to expose themselves to the dangers involved in emergencies, for which, moreover, they are totally unprepared”.

Risk communication in social networks

The proven usefulness of social networks in disaster management mentioned above has led the Military Emergency Unit to use its profiles on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and Instagram to exercise its leadership in each emergency, both operationally and in terms of the media, since, as the unit’s community manager, Aurelio Soto, points out, in addition to being a means of communication:

“social media is an opportunity to face the people we serve face to face and to take advantage of this two-way communication without intermediaries to manage many aspects of major disasters [...] such as giving instructions, disseminating self-protection measures or informing those affected of risks”³³.

In order to position itself as an informative reference in collaborative channels which, in such situations, can be saturated in a matter of minutes with hundreds, thousands and even millions of messages, Soto recognises that “the first thing is to work so that users are aware of our capacity to react to a catastrophe and have the certainty that we will also act on social networks to help them”, maintaining a daily presence “with a useful, coherent and responsible information policy”³⁴, which also means “fighting from them against fake news, setting ourselves up before and during emergencies as a useful tool for verification agencies, journalists and, above all, citizens”³⁵.

32 INGELMO, J. M. “La información en los medios de comunicación social en la gestión de catástrofes”. In: MINISTRY OF DEFENCE (ed.), *Liderazgo y emergencias. Unidad Militar de Emergencias*. Madrid, 2018, pp. 277–282.

33 SOTO SUÁREZ, A. “Las redes sociales, un nuevo canal para la comunicación pública en emergencias”. In: MINISTRY OF DEFENCE (ed.), *Liderazgo y emergencias. Unidad Militar de Emergencias*. Madrid, 2018, pp. 283–288.

34 SOTO SUÁREZ, A. “Las redes sociales, un nuevo canal para la comunicación pública en emergencias”. In: MINISTRY OF DEFENCE (ed.), *Liderazgo y emergencias. Unidad Militar de Emergencias*. Madrid, 2018, pp. 283–288.

35 The MEU General Plan 2020 expressly includes among its general objectives the importance of preventing and combating fake news.

The communicative structure of the Military Emergency Unit (MEU)

Although, as will be explained below, any component of the MEU is in itself a source of information about the unit, since, according to the first Strategic Defence Communication Directive (2013), “all members of the Armed Forces are potential communicators both by their actions and their omissions”³⁶, strictly speaking, the public communication of the Military Emergency Unit is the responsibility of a structure formed by the Public Communication Office and section 9 of each of the five Emergency Intervention Battalions that make up the unit. In addition, the Department of Relations and Evaluation collaborates with the first in the communicative management of risks, since, according to its chief, Colonel Juan José Marí y Marín, “institutional relations are essential in this management, due to the fact that the MEU must interact in emergencies with multiple organisations and through this department we try to establish the necessary links to optimise its work”.

The Public Communications Office

The Public Communications Office is located at the headquarters of the Military Emergency Unit at the Torrejón de Ardoz air base (Madrid), together with the rest of the bodies that provide the human and material resources necessary to assist the Commanding General of the MEU in the exercise of the unit’s command: the General Staff, the aforementioned Department of Relations and Evaluation, the Economic Affairs Section, the Technical Department and the Legal Department.

The office is currently headed by Lieutenant Commander Aurelio Soto and is staffed by nine other people, divided into three areas: 1) Press; 2) Audiovisual and 3) Design.

The first encompasses, apart from media relations and spokespersonship, the management of the corporate digital media, i.e. the website and social networks. In addition, its four members – a commander, a brigadier, a lance corporal and a corporal – together with the head of the OCP, are also responsible for writing the scripts for the institutional videos, the storylines, as well as the general sectoral public communication plan based on the guidelines of the unit’s annual general plan and the Ministry of Defence’s strategic communication instructions.

The Audiovisual area is made up of a second lieutenant and two lance corporals. The former is in charge of production and photography, while the latter, in addition to being camera operators, are in charge of editing, lettering and voice-over of the pieces. The main function of this team is the production of institutional videos and social

³⁶ MINISTRY OF DEFENCE, *Directive of the Minister of Defence on Strategic Defence Communication*, March 2013.

media pills, although, as mentioned above, in major emergencies, they would be in charge of supplying images to television channels.

Finally, the Design area is headed by a second lieutenant and a lance corporal, both with their own names: Manuel Pizarro and Juan Martínez Rivas. In addition to preserving the coherence in the use of the corporate visual identity, since its creation they have been responsible for the graphic design of the MEU in all media: posters, leaflets, photocall, front, merchandising and GIFs. With their works they seek to promote in a creative way an unusual knowledge of the Military Emergency Unit and, by extension, of the Armed Forces, trying to combine the dreamlike with the real³⁷.

Section 9

Within its organisational structure, the Military Emergency Unit has five Emergency Intervention Battalions with bases in Madrid (BIEM I), Seville (BIEM II), Valencia (BIEM III), Zaragoza (BIEM IV), and León (BIEM V)³⁸. Given that communication is part of their response to such situations, the General Staff of all of them includes a section, the so-called S-9, dedicated to public communication and institutional relations with the main organisations in the operational area. However, this confluence of functions does not take place at the head of the MEU, where the latter falls, as mentioned above, to the Department of Relations and Evaluation, since, as Colonel Marí y Marín explains again,

“the enormous workload that institutional relations with private and public bodies, not only national but also international, entail at the unit level, since it should not be forgotten that the MEU is also an instrument of the State’s external action, requiring a management and implementation body”.

Thus, the S-9s report organically to the battalions and functionally to the Public Communications Office. These sections are headed by a commander, who has three or four auxiliaries in the rank of officer or non-commissioned officer under his command. When the battalion is not deployed, this team is dedicated to responding to local and regional news requests from the area in which it operates, while in emergency situations, as Lieutenant Commander Aurelio Soto points out, it also manages relations with the national media, “acting as communicating spokespersons to give a general account of how the intervention is being carried out or selecting the specialist spokespersons who can best explain the technical issues involved”.

37 MILITARY EMERGENCY UNIT. Website. [<https://www.defensa.gob.es/ume/>], 4 September 2020.

38 MILITARY EMERGENCY UNIT. Website. [<https://www.defensa.gob.es/ume/>], 4 September 2020.

Commanders and responders

Given that, in the Military Emergency Unit, as in any organisation, everything and everyone communicates, within the programme designed to prepare its personnel to intervene in any type of emergency, the MEU includes at all levels –troops and sailors, NCOs and officers – the subject of Public Communication, whose teaching is the responsibility of the Department of Human Factor, Leadership and Social Sciences of the Military Emergency School (EMES), created by Order DEF/85/2017, of 1 February, as a military teaching centre, and which since then constitutes the pillar of the unit's continuous and specialised training³⁹.

The development of the communicative competence of managers and participants is part of the cultivation of ethical leadership based on the values of the unit that is sought through internal communication. According to the head of the Personnel Section, Lieutenant-Colonel Juan Saldaña García, such leadership:

“is developed with a mission-oriented exercise of command, where the commander sets his purpose and empowers his subordinates to act, and where the agility, reach and penetration of the media and, in particular, of social networks, establish direct links between operations, citizens and all kinds of actors, which end up influencing decision-making”.

Communication training pursues different objectives depending on the level of responsibility of the MEU members. Thus, those who join the unit with the rank of troop and sailor up to captain must complete the Basic Emergency Course. As Aurelio Soto, who also serves as a full professor at EMES, explains, this course:

“includes general sessions on communication to familiarise new arrivals with the public function of the media, with the public's right to information and with their role as potential communicators of the institution, given that, with their attitude, the way they wear their uniform or their publications on social networks, they also speak of the unit”.

Meanwhile, in the Disaster Management Course, which trains MEU officers from commander to colonel and managers of the General State Administration, the Autonomous Administration and the Local Administration in operational management procedures for emergencies of national interest, the training is aimed, according to Soto, at making them aware that, due to their capacity to reach the public derived from the position they occupy, “they must be involved in risk communication both in terms of spokespersons and public communication planning”.

³⁹ MINISTRY OF DEFENCE, Order DEF/85/2017, of 1 February, approving the rules on the organisation and functions, internal regime and programming of military educational centres. Official State Gazette, no.33, 8 February 2017.

In addition to the specialisation courses, the Military Emergency School offers other informative courses and seminars in which communication also plays a key role. Among the former, it is worth mentioning the Basic Course on Technological and Environmental Emergencies, in which responders receive specialised training in the communication of chemical, radiological or nuclear risks. Among the latter, the Leadership and Communication Seminar and the spokesperson seminars for S-9 personnel stand out, to which on many occasions, as Soto points out, “section and/or unit chiefs of the MEU are also invited to practice their communication skills”.

Conclusions

In light of the above, it can be concluded that risk communication in crisis situations constitutes, in addition to being a field of study of great interest and topicality, one of the most pressing institutional challenges that public administrations and specialised emergency services must face, since the safety, well-being and even the lives of many citizens depend on the quality, timeliness and effectiveness with which these entities manage such communication before and during the development of the emergency.

Specifically, this research has shown that for the Military Emergency Unit, public communication is not only a valuable instrument for projecting a corporate image in accordance with its mission, vision and values, but also a strategic tool for resolving crises in which its intervention is required. This fact explains not only why it has had, since its creation, a solid communications structure, consisting of the Public Communications Office and Section 9 of its five battalions, but also why risk communication is an intrinsic part of its doctrine, and why the unit strives to train and involve all its members in it in order to better achieve its objectives.

On the other hand, this study has also revealed that the MEU’s risk communication management is governed by the desire and commitment to keep society constantly and correctly informed about the threats that compromise its security. Therefore, in addition to working on preventive communication and collaborating extensively with the media, the Military Emergency Unit bases its strategy on establishing itself as a direct interlocutor with the public through publications on its social networks, with which, in addition to providing truthful and useful information, it tries to combat the misinformation that circulates on them, especially in critical situations.

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Interviews

Interview with the head of the Public Communications Office of the Military Emergency Unit, Lieutenant Commander Aurelio Soto Suárez, on 4 August 2020.

Interview with the Head of the Department of Relations and Evaluation of the Military Emergency Unit, Colonel Juan José Marí y Marín, on 26 August 2020.

Interview with the head of the Personnel Section of the Military Emergency Unit, Lieutenant Colonel Juan Saldaña García, on 3 September 2020.

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