

EDITORIAL STATEMENT

Critical Networks and Chaos Prevention in Highly Turbulent Times

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The Journal of Contingencies and Crisismanagement aims to be one of the leading vehicles for the world-wide knowledge about alternative futures, threats and opportunities. In December 2001, a special issue focusing on "New trends in crisis management research and practice" took account of the global shock wave of the September 11th events - which imposed a new grammar anchored on one key word : 'unconceivability'- Some words and sentences that were not fully accepted some years ago, are now considered as self-evident: 'unconventional', 'total surprise', 'out of the box-thinking'.

Academics

This implies an urgent need for new approaches for academics. Their challenge has become the unthinkable, *fuzzy* processes, and unstable contexts; far from well-known grammars, clear-cut statistics, organized games in stable environments. The challenge is formidable. It even could question the very foundations of our approaches to crises. Now we could and should take full account of some initial warnings, given decades ago when crisis studies began to develop.

Practitioners

There is also an urgent need for new approaches from the people in charge. Once, there were some clear-cut borders: natural/technological/social risks. Crises featured a distinct beginning and a definitive end. But since the turn of the century, this scene has been subjected to violent mutations. The systemic vulnerability of our modern complex world has forced its way into our agenda. There is no isolation, no boundary anymore, be it between disciplines, places, times, activities. Each and every turbulence can swiftly mutate into a world-wide hurricane. And the challenges brutally

mix: ignorance, total surprise, instant domino effects, organisational over-complexity, policy "black holes". Yesterday, some dangerous factories and plants were the key sources of technological risks (Seveso, Bhopal, Three Mile Island). Today, vital networks are the skeleton and the nerves of our complex societies - and at the same time key sources of destabilisation potentialities.

This fact was remarkably acknowledged in 1998 in Quebec, when ice rains destroyed a large part of the electrical power network: 'We were ready to solve technical failures. We were confronted by a network collapse'. The same systemic challenge was underlined in the BSE crisis: 'By the time that BSE was identified as a new disease, as many as 50 000 cattle are likely to have been infected. Given the practice of pooling and recycling cattle remains in animal feed, this sequence of events flowed inevitably from the first cases of BSE.' And, last but not least, when terrorists attempt to hijack these networks, the full scale of the scenery of crisis management and chaos prevention is uncovered. That was the very challenge of terrorist attacks through the postal systems : the Anthrax crisis of 2001.

Yesterday, the usual approach in emergency management training was to prepare technical people - in each sector, each geographical region - to react to well-known situations, and to apply codified procedures. As from now, the imperatives have become : think systemic, be prepared for the unknown, get acquainted with unforeseen complexities, with very high speed shock waves across the boundaries. And prepare leaders (not only technical officers) for total surprise. But avoid the classic pitfall : the aim is not to predict the unthinkable but to get better trained to face it.

No occasion has to be wasted to learn and to share. The anthrax crisis has been one of the most important cases for questioning and benchmarking. It was of critical importance to work together with the people in charge, to

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invite pinching open questions and explore promising avenues. This was done in Paris at an international debriefing conference in November 2002. It is crucial to diffuse the

knowledge and insights gathered in that effort. This is the ambition of this special issue of the Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management.