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Spreading Like a Wildfire - Online and Offline

A qualitative analysis of Facebook as a crisis communication tool in Sweden

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Abstract

As the climate on our planet is changing, natural disasters are occurring increasingly often, and Sweden is not an exception. At the same time, Facebook and other social media are more frequently used as crisis communication tools among public organizations. Traditionally, research within the field of Crisis Communication is pursued from a management perspective, and therefore this thesis uses a recipient perspective. With a starting point in the 2014 wildfire in the County of Västmanland, the greatest fire in modern Swedish history, this thesis explores what kind of information the public wants from a public organization on Facebook during a disaster, and how they prefer it to be communicated. Using qualitative interviews a conclusion is reached, which suggests that the public wants *correct* and *local* information to be communicated in a *quick* and *personal* manner, and that trust is an essential factor in how the crisis communication on Facebook is perceived. This thesis was written by all three authors to an equal extent.

Keywords: crisis communication, social media, Facebook, disaster, wildfire, trust, public organization, recipient perspective, Västmanland.

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Sammanfattning

I takt med att klimatet förändras ser vi allt oftare naturkatastrofer äga rum, och Sverige är inte undantaget från denna utveckling. Samtidigt blir Facebook och andra sociala medier ett allt vanligare verktyg för kriskommunikation i offentliga organisationer. Traditionellt har forskning inom kriskommunikation ett managementperspektiv och därför undersöker denna kandidatuppsats istället kriskommunikation från ett mottagarperspektiv. Genom kvalitativa intervjuer, och med utgångspunkt i den största branden i modern svensk historia, branden i Västmanland sommaren 2014, undersöks vilken information och hur människor vill att denna kommuniceras på Facebook under en katastrof. I slutsatsen föreslås det att allmänheten vill ha *korrekt* och *lokal* information kommunicerad på ett *snabbt* och *personligt* vis, samt att förtroende spelar en viktig roll i hur man uppfattar kriskommunikation på Facebook. Arbetet kring detta examensarbete har till lika stora delar utförts av samtliga tre författare.

Nyckelord: kriskommunikation, sociala medier, katastrof, brand, offentlig organisation, mottagarperspektiv, Västmanland.

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1 Introduction

The weather was hot, dry and windy when the 2014 wildfire in the County of Västmanland, Sweden started. It was the last day of July and the majority of Swedish office workers were on vacation. A spark from a mounder ignited a small forest fire. When the emergency services were alerted, an area of about 900 square meters was on fire, but by August 4 it was clear that this was something else. The fire had officially become the greatest in modern Swedish history (LV, 2014). On the ground hundreds of firefighters, members of the National Guard and volunteers fought the fire, and from the air more than twenty helicopters and airplanes water bombed the area. During the most dramatic day of the fire, it spread with the speed of two kilometers an hour, and the fire area quintupled in size. In total about 1,000 individuals and 1,700 farm animals were evacuated. Hundreds of millions Swedish kronor worth of forest were lost, and several people were traumatized having to watch their lives' work go up in flames. Along with the diminishing of the flames, the publicity around the fire slowly decreased, but for the affected individuals the process had only begun. Nine months later, on April 21 2015, the fire was officially extinguished¹, but the memories still remain.

All over the globe an increasing number of natural disasters is taking place (Noordegraaf & Newman, 2011). In the last two years alone, over 700 natural disasters have struck the planet (Carmen Leong Mei, Shan, Peter & Laddawan, 2015). We argue the wildfire in Västmanland is an example of this environmental change taking place even in the historically calmer corners of the world. In Sweden, crisis communication traditionally involve the national warning system Viktigt Meddelande till Allmänheten², which is broadcast on TV and radio, and on extraordinary occasions as a loud outdoors signal³. When using mass media the public is often seen as a passive audience who accepts messages without further reflection (McQuail, 1997; Thompson, 2004). However, with the development of new media, this view has come to change (Carey, 2009) and social media has become a new channel for crisis communication (White, 2012). This was exemplified during the 2014 wildfire in Västmanland, where the Facebook pages of public organizations became important sources of information for the public. This

¹ Länsstyrelsen, 2015 <http://www.lansstyrelsen.se/vastmanland/Sv/nyheter/2015/Pages/inga-glodbrander-upptackta.aspx> Retrieved 05-25-2015

² *In English: Important Message to the Public*

³ Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, 2009 <https://www.msb.se/vma> Retrieved 05-25-2015

altered media landscape highlights the need for two-way communication, as well as the infinite diversity of interpretations of messages (Carey, 2009; Falkheimer & Heide, 2014), as social media allow the public to share their opinions easily.

This concept of two-way communication is one of the cornerstones in the field of Strategic Communication (Eksell & Thelander, 2014), from which our approach on crisis communication derives. Furthermore, the Swedish population is using social media more frequently (Findahl, 2014), and several crisis communication practitioners and researchers often express optimism of the potential of social media to enhance communication during a disaster (Houston et al., 2015). Therefore, with the starting point in said wildfire, we have chosen to investigate how Facebook could be used as a crisis communication tool by a public organization in times of disasters. As research from a recipient perspective on this subject is still relatively scarce (Jin, Liu & Austin, 2014) we chose this perspective, which led us to visit the affected area in Västmanland. Lastly, research on how a Swedish public organization could benefit from the use of this new crisis communication tool is likewise limited. Because of this, we argue there is a clear knowledge gap which we intend to further explore.

1.1 Purpose

Our purpose is to explore how social media could be used by a public organization to communicate during a disaster. In order to do so, we have chosen a recipient perspective for our research, because traditionally research in crisis communication is management centered. With this thesis we intend to contribute to the field of Strategic Communication, with further insight of the public's preferences on social media content and execution during a natural disaster.

To achieve this purpose, we formulated the following research questions and applied them to the 2014 wildfire in Västmanland, Sweden.

1. What information did the public perceive as important on Facebook during the disaster?
2. How did the public prefer this information to be communicated on Facebook during the disaster?

1.2 Limitations

For this thesis, we have limited our research to how the public perceived the communication of public organizations on the social medium Facebook during a specific case: the large 2014 wildfire in central Sweden. As previously mentioned (see section 1) we claim the use of crisis communication in social media needs further exploring, and this specific case gives us a unique possibility to do so. Moreover, we have chosen Facebook because it is the most visited social network in Sweden (Findahl, 2014), and because the Facebook pages of public organizations served as vital information sources during the fire (LV, 2014).

In crisis communication, the critical event is normally divided into three phases; pre-event, event, and post-event (Coombs, 2014; Falkheimer et al., 2009). Even though all three phases are interesting and worthy of exploration, due to time constraint, this research focuses solely on the event phase. We chose this specific phase because Facebook and other social media facilitates the information to be shared almost instantaneously, which in the crisis phase could be a matter of life and death. Social media is also relevant in the other phases, but then the organizations often have more time to communicate. We have determined the event phase to be from July 31, 2014, the day the fire started, until August 11, 2014, when the fire was declared to be under control by officials (LV, 2014). However, it is noteworthy that the fire was not completely extinguished until April 21, 2015⁴.

Finally, we are aware of the limitations placed upon this thesis, by our choice to explore a social medium. Firstly, not all are capable of using, or willing to use, the Internet (White, 2012) and therefore our thesis has a restricted demographic scope (see Appendix 1). Secondly, social media is a communication tool which is in constant transformation, and a public organization cannot decide which social media network is going to be the most popular (White, 2012) when a disaster strikes. Neither could it control software changes which might be implemented on the platforms, because that is controlled by the company who owns it (White, 2012).

⁴ Länsstyrelsen, 2015 <http://www.lansstyrelsen.se/vastmanland/Sv/nyheter/2015/Pages/inga-glodbrander-upptackta.aspx> Retrieved 2015-25-05

2 Previous Research

The section presents recent studies pursued within the field of Crisis Communication. This research shows how crisis communication has evolved towards including several new and slightly different terms. We have also observed that recent research still often holds a management approach to crisis communication, although the recipient perspective is increasingly discussed. We further present studies on how social media has developed into a common crisis communication tool, and how it is used by recipients. Lastly, we present recent findings from Sweden and describe how our thesis distinguishes itself from the previously mentioned research.

When studying previous research in the field of Crisis Communication a majority holds a management perspective, which focuses on private corporations and their reputations (Heath & O’Hair, 2009). For example, there are numerous models and theories for how to strategically maintain and rebuild the corporative image, such as Corporate Apologia (Ware & Linkugel, 1973), Image Restoration Theory (Benoit, 1995) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2014). More recent research from this perspective also includes social media strategies. Researchers argue that when these models and strategies are used by organizations it could result in a higher reputation after the crisis (Andersson, 2014; Coombs, 2014), as well as fewer secondary crises, compared to a similar strategy used only in traditional media (Utz, Schultz & Glocka, 2013). These findings stress the importance of including social media into organizations’ crisis communication plans, *in addition* to traditional mass media. This conclusion seems to be shared among different researchers (e.g. Austin, Liu & Jin, 2012; Coombs, 2014; Utz et al., 2013).

Even though research has been conducted on the role of social media in crisis communication during the last couple of years (e.g. Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Eriksson, 2014a; Ki & Nekmat, 2014; Romenti, Murtarelli & Valentini, 2014), some researchers argue there is still a lack of studies regarding the recipient point of view (Falkheimer et al., 2009) when using social media in a crisis (Jin et al., 2014). However, there are now a number of articles discussing the recipient perspective, and many of these are using a *uses and gratification* approach. Although originally developed in the 1940’s for understanding how and why the public uses the mass media, it is today sometimes applied on social media (Houston et al., 2015). This approach for

understanding *how* recipients use crisis information could provide clues for *what* information they value. One example of a uses and gratification study is Steelman, McCaffrey, Velez and Briefel (2015) who explored what information the public used, found useful, and trusted during five wildfires in America. They state the public often found talking to representatives of rescue personnel useful, but due to the limited availability of these they did not use this source of information to a large extent.

Today, social media is so strongly associated with two-way communication that when an organization is present on social media it is almost expected to interact with the public (Coombs, 2014). The two-communication is a great benefit of social media when organizations are communicating during a crisis, and it is also noted that recipients value this feature (e.g. Andersen & Spitzberg, 2009; Houston et al., 2015; Steelman et al., 2015). Furthermore, findings suggested that interactivity between sender and receiver is the key for effective and valuable crisis communication during disasters (Steeleman et al., 2015).

Moreover, researchers have examined social media's role regarding natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, fires and hurricanes (e.g. Seong & Han, 2013; Spence, Lachlan, Lin & del Greco, 2015). Leong et al. (2015) explored how information and communication technologies affect communities during natural disasters, and they argued social media could strengthen and empower communities. The researchers also claimed communities can develop and benefit from social media, and that it changes traditional crisis management due to the empowerment of citizens who now can take part in the crisis response themselves. Another aspect is how one uses the Internet differently depending on location. By comparing an Australian Facebook page and a Chinese Internet forum during two separate disasters, Kulemeka (2014) explored whether social media is used in different ways depending on where one is living. Even though the author highlighted several similarities between the two countries, there were still differences. Therefore we claim it is important to further investigate this issue from a Swedish perspective.

In Sweden, research has been conducted about how a public organization should use social media during crisis (e.g. Andersson, 2014; Eriksson, 2014b; Wessling, 2013). Moreover, Falkheimer et al. (2009) note that research in Sweden often has a societal rather than individual perspective on disasters. For example, many studies have investigated how different media are used and what roles they play in crises (Eriksson, 2014c). Ghersetti and Westlund's (2013)

study shows that people tend to turn to their regular media in crisis, although speed and mobility also seem to grow more important for recipients. Although Falkheimer et al. (2009) note that some modern research has taken a citizen perspective, we argue there is still a need for further investigation in this relatively new research field.

In summary, we have found that the previous research within the field of Crisis Communication in social media have three general qualities: (1) a management perspective, (2) a focus on private organizations with a brand image at stake, and (3) a non-European perspective. In light of these three aspects, we see a knowledge gap in the research regarding how a public organization in Sweden can use social media during a disaster. Further, we have chosen a recipient perspective for our thesis, since research conducted with this perspective is still outnumbered by the management perspective. With this perspective, we strive to contribute with new insights to the field of Crisis Communication in social media, which could be of value for practitioners in this field.

3 Theoretical Framework

In this section, we introduce the theoretical framework used throughout our thesis. Starting in traditional crisis communication, we then continue to presenting and discussing social media with its benefits and drawbacks, to finally present theories of crisis communication in social media. As our research field is fairly unexplored, we have carefully selected the most relevant research and theories in relation to our research questions.

3.1 Traditional Crisis Communication

Here we describe traditional crisis communication strategies. Even though they are not originally developed for social media, we find them to be of value when communicating on Facebook. This includes how and what to communicate during a crisis, which we will further discuss in relation to our empirical material in our analysis.

3.1.1 Trust

Trust is often recognized as the single most important aspect of effective crisis communication (Eriksson, 2009; Heath & O’Hair, 2009) and for a long time it has been a central area of research within the field (Eriksson, 2009). From a traditional management perspective, the restoration of the trust and reputation of an organization in relation to a crisis has been the main focus of research within crisis communication (Eriksson, 2009; 2014c) (see section 2). In contrast, more recent research has explored the importance of trust from a recipient perspective. Several studies have described how trust affects the public’s likelihood of complying with disaster warnings (Eriksson, 2014c; Heath & O’Hair, 2009; Rød, Botan & Holen, 2012), and some of them suggest the higher the trust, the higher the chance for compliance (Rød et al., 2012; West & Orr, 2007).

When communicating during a crisis, the asymmetrical relationship between the public organization and the public is demonstrated (Wray et al., 2006). As it is difficult for citizens to actually control the actions of the public organizations, they are forced to trust it to act in their best interest, rather than its own (Thomas, 1998). In opposite, the organization also has to trust the public (Thomas, 1998) because mutual trust allows for cooperation between the public and the organization during the crisis (Wray et al., 2006). This is argued to make crisis

communication more effective (Wray et al., 2006), which will be further discussed in our analysis (see section 5.3). Another central aspect of trust is how difficult and time consuming it is to build, and at the same time how devastatingly easy it is to demolish (e.g. Heath & O’Hair, 2009; Seeger, 2006). Moreover, researchers have found that communicating in a crisis is easier when trust is established *before* the incident (e.g. Seeger, 2006; Steelman & McCaffrey, 2013).

Renn and Levine (1991; Heath & O’Hair, 2009) suggest trust is created through a combination of six components.

- a) *Perceived competence* could be described as how knowledgeable a source is perceived to be, and the level of expertise is in turn dependent on factors such as status, education, and authority.
- b) *Objectivity* occurs when the public perceives the information given by the source as unbiased.
- c) *Fairness* is achieved when all relevant opinions are represented, and not just the one preferable to the source.
- d) *Consistency*, or rather the lack of persistent inconsistency, implies how predictable the argument and behavior of a source is. This is based on previous actions.
- e) *Sincerity* is explained as how honest and open a source is perceived to communicate.
- f) *Faith* could be illustrated as the public’s belief in the source having their best interest at heart.

Since these components are dependent on each other, being stronger in one component could compensate for a lack in another. For example, a higher level of perceived competence or fairness could outweigh a lower level of objectivity (Renn & Levine, 1991). Another aspect which makes trust more complex and fragile, is that when one is presented with conflicting information “people must either change their trust of the source or their trust in their own observations.” (Longstaff & Yang, 2008, Introduction, para: 4). Moreover, Renn and Levine (1991) state it is possible to create and improve trust in a *personal* communicator by developing a context where the public can relate to that individual. They argue the public will be increasingly likely to identify with the communicator, and consequently more open to her arguments, the more sympathy she expresses for them.

Besides Renn and Levine, several other researchers have acknowledged the importance of trust in crisis communication (Eriksson, 2009). Coombs (2014) for example states that even though it is not explicitly referred to in all literature it “is an underlying theme” (p. 152). The author further argues if there is no credibility or trust for the organization, it will not matter what or how it communicates since the public will not believe the message anyway. Additionally, Eriksson (2009; 2014c) suggests that trust is affected by the medium used to transmit the crisis message, which will be discussed later on (see section 3.2). Moreover, also the *type* of source might matter as several studies have shown that information from friends and family is generally trusted to a higher degree, compared to information from governments and public organizations (Haynes, Barclay & Pidgeon, 2008; Steelman et al., 2015). However, it is important to note that the Swedish population historically has a higher degree of trust for their government than the rest of the world does (Eriksson, 2014c).

3.1.2 What to communicate

In the beginning of a crisis little is known about the event, and therefore the public’s need for information is extensive (Coombs, 2014; Falkheimer et al., 2009). According to Coombs’ (2014) *base response* there are two matters which need to be communicated in any crisis event. Firstly, the content of the crisis response should primarily help the public to protect themselves from further physical harm, referred to as *instructing information*. For example, the knowledge of when and how to evacuate an unsecure area (Sturges, 1994). Secondly, the crisis response should help the public cope with the event psychologically, known as *adjusting information* (Coombs, 2014). This could be accomplished by providing the public with the information of what happened, when, where, why and how it happened (Ammerman, 1995 & Bergman, 1994 in Coombs, 2014; Wessling, 2013), because the fact of not knowing creates stress (Coombs, 2014). Moreover, to communicate what actions the organization has taken to prevent the event from repeating itself will further help the public to cope with the situation. However, this can be difficult to do in the early stage of a crisis because the reason behind the crisis might still be unknown. Lastly, it is also necessary to express concern and sympathy for the victims of the crisis (Coombs, 2014).

Moreover, Wessling (2013) argues it is necessary to make time to phrase an efficient message in times of crisis. An appropriate message expresses concern, answers the need or demand for information, and has the purpose to get the public to act or react in a certain way. If the message fails the communication becomes unclear, and the public will be confused. Furthermore, the

organization should recognize that there could be a difference between what information the public *needs*, and what information the public *wants*. If the organization focuses exclusively on what information the public *wants*, for example by only answering questions, the communication could become solely reactive, with the consequence that the organizations might forget to share other important information. At the same time, it is essential for the organization to answer the public's questions, as well as to adjust incorrect information (Fors-Andrée, 2012). If an organization does not acknowledge these questions, the relationship with the public might be damaged (Coombs, 2014).

3.1.3 How to communicate

In crisis communication, there are certain aspects that should be considered regarding how to communicate as an organization. If it does not provide a sufficient answer quickly enough, rumors and speculations may spread and the public might consequently lose confidence in the organization. Another reason for striving towards a rapid response is to get a head start, and take control of the communication situation, instead of letting the media publish their own assumptions. Therefore, a response should be given quickly, even if the organization does not have all the information. In such a situation, the organization should explain the lack of information to the public, and assure them it will come back when more is known (Fors-Andrée, 2012). It has even been argued that the advantage of responding rapidly in the beginning of a crisis is higher than the risk of potential incorrectness (Coombs, 2014). Moreover, Fischer (2000) notes the risk of rumors being reported as facts increases when a response is not given quickly enough by the organization, or is lacking in detail. One example of a late response was during the 2004 tsunami disaster. With the exception of an appearance of the Swedish ambassador in Thailand, there was no political reaction from any Swedish officials (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006). Instead Lottie Knutson, who was Director of Communications at a travel agency, became the main information source (Falkheimer et al., 2009; Strömbäck & Nord, 2006). Swedish media was of the opinion that Knutson had communicated in an efficient and empathetic way (Falkheimer et al., 2009). The Swedish government, on the other hand, received severe criticism in the media for its behavior (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006).

A second aspect for the organization to consider is to speak to the public with one voice, because consistent statements are easier to believe than conflicting ones. One way to do this, is to keep employees updated about the situation, which increases the chance of them giving

correct information to individuals around them (Coombs, 2014). In turn this minimizes the risk of employees communicating different messages (Fors-Andrée, 2012). A third aspect is the importance of communicating openly. This means the organization has to make itself accessible, be prepared to reveal information, and to be honest (Coombs, 2014), which could be related to Renn and Levine's (1991) component of trust named *sincerity* (see section 3.1.1).

3.1.4 A local aspect

During a crisis, local and national media traditionally cover the event differently (Cohen, Hughes & White, 2007; Fischer, 2000). It is stated that local media is of more use than national media for spreading vital information to the affected public, such as evacuation plans (Fischer, 2000). Local media also has a higher credibility among local residents, because they provide more accurate and relevant information (Cohen et al., 2007). We claim this is relevant in crisis communication, because if the goal is to make the public take action, a message which affects them is more likely to make them act accordingly (Wessling, 2013). In comparison, national media holds a more general perspective, reporting on how the public is reacting, and who to blame for it (Fischer, 2000). Cohen et al. (2007) argue the more general and non-local focus could make the public disregard the information, which we claim could have devastating consequences during a disaster. Additionally, wildfires often initially spread too quickly for the mass media to report on it, and the public is forced to turn to each other for information (Steelman et al., 2015). For example Shklovski, Palen and Sutton (2008) found that the public turns to individuals with direct access to accurate information about the event, such as emergency staff, or individuals who had defied evacuation orders and remained in the area.

3.2 Crisis Communication in Social Media

Here we discuss and problematize how social media has changed crisis communication over the past years. We present how the speed and reach of social media could possibly be both beneficial in crisis situations, but also how this could make crisis communication more difficult.

Social media could be defined as Internet-based media with user-generated content, which allow individuals to interact synchronously or asynchronously (Carr and Hayes, 2015). Furthermore, social media provides the possibility to rapidly distribute extensive volumes of information to the public (White, 2012), but also to have both broad and narrow audiences (Carr and Hayes, 2015). Additionally, as an online communication tool, it enables two-way

interaction in form of posting content, commenting on posts and receiving responses (Void n.d, referred in Coombs, 2014).

Ten years ago the concept of crisis communication in social media did not exist, while today it is a necessary tool for handling a crisis effectively (Fors-Andrée, 2012). As mentioned above, social media is an effective medium for two-way communication. During a crisis it presents a possibility to rapidly get a message across to the public (Wessling, 2013), as well as answer questions on what, why and how the event happened (Fors-Andrée, 2012; Wessling, 2013), which relates to Coombs' (2014) second base response (see section 3.1.2). Moreover, in a crisis the members of the public are often the first ones on site (Wessling, 2013; White, 2012), and therefore, if mutual trust (see section 3.1.1) is established, the public could quickly supply the public organizations with information (Wessling 2013). As social media provides the possibility for the public to share information directly from the scene (White, 2012), we argue this information could be locally connected.

Furthermore, crisis communication in social media does not only involve communicating verified information and facts (Eriksson, 2009). Because of the public character of social media where multiple voices could spread their own opinions and experiences of a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2014), there is also a dimension of correcting disinformation and dispelling rumors (Eriksson, 2009; Fors-Andrée, 2012). In order for the organization to do so, it needs to be considered as a credible source of information by the public (Coombs, 2014). This relates to Coombs' (2014) crisis base response, whereas the public is more likely to put their confidence in an organization that is perceived to have the public's best interests as their main priority (Coombs, 2014). Moreover, it has been argued that too much information to process, from too many sources, could create message overload, and ironically lead to information loss (Coombs, 2014). Based on the argument above, it is easy to make the assumption there would be a constant information overload on social media, such as Facebook. However, White (2012) claims social media reduces information overload by filtering information according to the individuals' preferences. In other words, the public acts as "an informal recommendation system" (Starbird et al., 2010, cited in Starbird & Palen, 2010).

Coombs (2014) additionally suggests a four-step approach to crisis communication in social media. Firstly, the organization needs to be present on social media during the crisis. This relates to Wessling (2013) who claims that a public organization which normally has a social

media presence, cannot choose to avoid the medium during a crisis, as well as Fors-Andrée (2012) who states that all platforms where the organization is present have to be managed. Secondly, the crisis needs to be handled on the platform where it originated (Coombs, 2014). However this specific approach do not apply on natural disaster since events such as wildfires do not occur online. Thirdly, it is more effective to implement social media in a crisis response if the organization already has a presence there before the crisis, because this adds to the organization's credibility and authenticity (Coombs, 2014). This further relates to Seeger (2006) as well as Steelman and McCaffrey (2013), who argue it is difficult to create trust during an ongoing crisis (see section 3.1.1). Fourthly, the organization needs to always be polite on social media (Coombs, 2014), which will be discussed further in the next section.

Primarily, the organization needs to respond calmly and professionally even to hostile comments from the public (Coombs, 2014), and it should not become absorbed by the jargon (Eriksson, 2014b). This is especially important, because in a crisis the affected public could be sensitive to certain wordings (Fors-Andrée, 2012). Thereafter, the organization should follow the rules of the platform on which it is communicating (Coombs, 2014). For example, on Facebook, we perceive the tone used is mostly personal and informal and therefore the organization should strive to communicate accordingly.

The tone used by an organization on social media also helps to create the public's perception of the organization. For example, a too formal tone indirectly emphasizes a distance between the organization and the public, while a personal tone is significantly more engaging. Moreover, when an urgent message is delivered in a simple language and with a personal tone, the message itself becomes more easily understood. One way for a public organization to appear more personal is for the employees to sign with their first name when answering the public's questions on social media (Andersson, 2014). Also White (2012) argues a human aspect is engaging and sympathetic. However, a personal tone is not equivalent to a private tone, and Andersson (2014) states it is important for the employees to remember they are still representatives for a public organization, even though the communication is taking place in social media.

4 Methodology

In our methodology section we present the research approach applied and discussed throughout this thesis. Then, we present the methods used and the motives behind the collection of our empirical material, the sample selection, methods of analysis for the material, and the implications and limitations with these methods.

4.1 Research Approach

As the field of Strategic Communication views the recipient as an active and interpreting being, rather than a passive one (Eksell & Thelander, 2014), this thesis views communication as something individuals interpret in different ways. Therefore, we use a social constructionist approach, which is based in the hermeneutic tradition (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008). This means we see the world as socially constructed by individuals interacting with each other, and that the only thing one can know about the world, and how it is constructed, is how individuals interpret it (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008).

From this perspective, the creation of meaning is a social process constructed through communication with others (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014), and is constantly created and changing (Bryman, 2011). Thus, the experience of crisis communication in social media is perceived in different ways by different individuals. To explore these perceptions we therefore utilized qualitative methods and asking individuals how they interpreted communication on Facebook during the wildfire. As the results of qualitative studies are not meant to be replicated nor to be considered absolute (Bryman, 2011), we rather present them as suggestions of how public organizations could resolve communication issues during a crisis. Furthermore, our methods are abductive, meaning that the authors alternate between theory and empirical data, allowing the understanding for the material to grow during the process (Troost, 2010).

4.2 Collection of Empirical Material

4.2.1 Online documents

As a starting point for our research, we read approximately 20 news articles on the topic and studied the first official report about the wildfire from the County Administrative Board of Västmanland (LV, 2014). We then observed several Facebook groups and pages that organized,

created or otherwise distributed information about the wildfire. We searched for central ideas, concepts, and opinions frequently mentioned among Facebook members. This information later served as a foundation for our interview guide, which we will discuss further on (see section 4.4).

4.2.2 Interviews

To gain a broader understanding, we decided on individual interviews. This method is common when a researcher seeks to find information that is not immediately observable, such as thoughts, emotions and interpretations (Merriam, 2006). Interviews can also be of use when the researcher wants to investigate something in the past, which is not likely to occur again (Merriam, 2006). We argue the wildfire in Västmanland is an example of such an event.

The conducted interviews were unstructured, which is argued to be suitable when the researcher wants to uncover the interviewees' opinions, rather than to let her own reflections and subjective interpretations color the material (Merriam, 2006). The questions were kept open-ended to further see how the respondent naturally associated the question (Bryman, 2011). Our respondents were then asked follow-up questions (Merriam, 2006), to further explore individual ideas and to avoid misinterpretations. To better understand the respondents and their involvement during the wildfire, our interview guide (see Appendix 2) included questions regarding how they usually use Facebook, as well as during the days of wildfire. Further questions explored what preferences our respondents had of the information content, and how they wanted to receive it on Facebook during a crisis event. The execution of these interviews is discussed further on (see 4.4).

4.3 Sample Selection

Our selection was a *convenience sample* (Bryman, 2011), as our criteria for being interviewed were few: (a) The respondent lived in the affected area, and (b) The respondent used Facebook to keep herself updated about of the wildfire. To recruit interviewees, we contacted local organizations, posted in several Facebook groups and used our own personal contacts in the area. To get as many interviewees as possible, we then used a network (i.e. snowball) selection (Bryman, 2011; Merriam, 2006) asking our interviewees to refer us to others involved who might be interested in our research. As Yin (2013) notes, it is important to remember that respondents found through a convenience sample do not always hold the most important or

relevant information. However, due to our social constructionist perspective (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008), we mean this is of less importance, because we are interested in any opinion, and do not value them as more or less important. Although we did not have the possibility to choose our interviewees ourselves, we are satisfied with our sample selection, because the respondents demonstrated a great variety of experiences, opinions, ideas and beliefs, which is emphasized by the social constructionist perspective (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008).

4.4 Procedure

The interviews were conducted between April 16 and April 21, 2015. Nine of the eleven interviews were conducted face to face in different municipalities in the County of Västmanland, and the additional two were held over the telephone. The interviewees were aged between 30 and 65, one of whom was male and ten of whom were female. The small number of male interviewees was unintended, but we still mean our empirical material are of value as Bryman (2011) states that in qualitative studies, findings can be of interest even when representation of the interviewees do not reflect the reality.

Due to the time passed between the wildfire and our interviews, the respondents' memories of specific events, and their participation on Facebook might have faded. However, after the interviews, it became clear what an emotionally strenuous experience the event had been to them. Therefore the time passed had most likely given our interviewees an opportunity to reflect on the event, which according to Trost (2010) could give a more composed and less emotionally colored empirical material to base the analysis on.

The interviews lasted from 25 to 70 minutes. However, Bryman (2011) claims that even if interviews differ in lengths, shorter conversations can still provide valuable insights to the topic. In our case, the difference in length was mainly due to the following reasons: Firstly, the variation of locations for the interviews. Depending on where the interviewee felt the most comfortable the interviews were held in conference rooms, library group study rooms, and private homes. As Trost (2010) suggests, there are more distractions in the interviewee's home, but this type of location can also allow for a wider understanding for the interviewee and its perspective (Bryman, 2011). Secondly, to show sympathy and respect for our interviewees, we gave them time to explain not only their experience of the communication on Facebook, but also their personal view on this tragic event. The variation in length could therefore be

explained by different individuals having different emotional needs to express themselves. Moreover, two of the interviews were held over telephone, as these interviewees were unable to meet with us in person. Bryman (2011) points out that when conducting telephone interviews, the interviewer cannot evaluate the body language of the respondent for social cues. However, as our responses shared similarities in depth and topics, we argue our telephone interviews equivalent to the interviews conducted face to face.

All interviews were held in Swedish, and the quotations in this thesis were therefore translated into English. Theoretically, there might be some loss of meaning due to this translation, however we have tried to stay as close to the original meaning as possible. The interviewees all verbally gave their informed consent to us recording their interviews and were offered a copy of the final thesis, as is often recommended (e.g. Bryman, 2011; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Trost, 2010). All respondents were treated anonymously in this thesis, with respect to their personal integrity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Hence, all names presented in this thesis are fabricated and unisex. Although in order to facilitate reading of this thesis, and to not give the identity of the one male participant away, we refer to all our interviewees as “she”.

4.5 Method of Analysis

Because of our socially constructed perspective (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008), also researchers inevitably construct their own perception of the world from their experiences and ideas (Bryman, 2011). We have attempted to keep this in mind when interpreting our material, in order to achieve *reflexive objectivity* which means that one actively questions and challenges one’s subjective views (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Still, these views might be reflected in the interpretations of the empirical material, and therefore also in the conclusions drawn from them (Bryman, 2011; Merriam 2006).

As our methods were abductive, we continuously analyzed our material throughout the thesis. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) claim that when the researcher starts to see patterns in the material, saturation of information is achieved. Bryman (2011) on the other hand argues saturation is accomplished when another interview would not give more information or knowledge. In our opinion, we have observed patterns in our empirical material, but we also acknowledge it can be difficult to know what the next interview might have revealed. Hence, a few more interviews could have helped us to ensure we had discovered the most common

patterns. However due to the constraints of this thesis, this was not possible. All interviews were recorded on several devices and then transcribed to prevent any answers from being forgotten. As mentioned earlier (see section 4.1), due to our abductive methods, the analysis of the responses was ongoing and occurred simultaneously with the conducting of the interviews. However, the transcripts made a more thorough analysis possible, and decreased eventual misinterpretations.

As a first step to analyze our material we read the individual interviewees' answers, which is often called *vertical analysis* (Thomsson 2002). We then analyzed the *meaning* of the quotations to uncover underlying topics between interviewees, called *horizontal analysis* (Thomsson, 2002). This is what Thomsson (2002) titles *reflexive analysis*, where the researcher looks beyond the actual words to find underlying mechanisms in an ongoing process, which we argue is suitable for our unstructured interviews. Furthermore, as our research is abductive, our material was continuously related to theories. The topics we found were then actively questioned and revised throughout the process to best present the underlying meanings.

4.6 Methodological Considerations

Today, the quality of qualitative research is preferably judged in trustworthiness, rather than in validity and reliability (Daymon & Holloway, 2011), hence we have chosen the former. Trustworthiness is evaluated by four criteria (Daymon & Holloway, 2011), which will now be discussed.

Credibility (Daymon & Holloway, 2011) is argued due to the rich and detailed material collected onsite in Västmanland. As mentioned earlier (see section 4.4), a possible drawback is the time passed between the disaster and our interviews. Due to the fact that participation was voluntarily and all respondents had much to contribute with, we acknowledge that their opinions might have been polarized. However, as the respondents are treated anonymously, they therefore might be more open and honest in their answers (Bryman, 2011) which we argue further improves the credibility.

Dependability (Daymon & Holloway, 2011) is strengthened by transparency of the decisions made throughout the thesis. Moreover, to achieve consistency the interviews followed an open interview guide (see Appendix 2) and one of the authors acted as main questioner. Therefore

all predetermined questions were posed in a similar manner. However, as the interviews continued our knowledge increased, which might have affected our follow-up questions. As we are aware of the risk of pre-understanding, we actively kept an open mind for new insight during the interviews.

Confirmability (Daymon & Holloway, 2011) is increased as our empirical material has been systematically and repeatedly processed by all three authors. Moreover, in the quotations we have strived to reflect the respondents' views as openly as possible, and by presenting the quotations throughout our discussion we facilitate for the reader to assess if we have managed to remain unbiased.

Even though we are aware we cannot make any statistically general conclusion based on our findings, we mean they have *transferability* (Daymon & Holloway, 2011) since we exemplify how our findings might be applied to public organizations in Sweden during a disaster. Further, the findings are based on respondents varying in age, occupation and extent to which they were affected by the wildfire. This might make the findings transferable to a wider population, even though male respondents were underrepresented. However, due to the speed of which social media is changing, the transferability should be taken with caution.

5 Results and Discussion

Here we present our empirical material which we explore and elaborate in relation to the theories introduced in our theoretical framework. Firstly, the four elements we have found in our empirical material are presented and reflected upon separately. In order to understand the complexity of the elements in their mutual context, they are thereafter once again intertwined and further discussed as we demonstrate relations to, and gaps in, the existing theories.

After going through all of our empirical material we found four consistent elements: *quick, correct, local* and *personal*. All of them concerned concrete aspects of crisis communication in social media. We are aware these elements are not independent and cannot be understood outside their context, as well as that they in practice are not entirely separable, but in fact highly intertwined. However, for the sake of the discussion we mean it is important to highlight certain aspects in order to better understand the material. We found that our respondents wanted *correct* and *local* information, to be communicated in a *quick* and *personal* manner, which will now be discussed.

As we found our four elements to be both influencing, and influenced by trust, we would like to start our analysis with a few words on this common denominator. The respondents mentioned trust in one way or another, without us first asking about it. They had very different experiences of trust in relation to public organizations during the fire. Early on, we found it interesting that those who held a positive view of the public organization, had very unspecified reasons for doing so:

“Well it’s an authority that stands for, I don’t know... Safety and good organization”

- Charlie

“My personal idea about this, based on what happened, is that if an organization like a municipality or someone in charge at a municipality [...] Because the average Joe often trusts the municipality more than he trusts an individual. - Francis

The quotations above illustrate the imprecise motives for trusting a public organization. We suggest one reason for this is the generally high trust the Swedish public has for authorities, as

mentioned earlier (see section 3.1.1). Another reason might be that trust takes a long time to build (Heath & O’Hair, 2009), which could make it more difficult for people to remember specific events related to the organization which made it trustworthy. In contrast, respondents who held a negative view had more specific and personal examples of why they did not trust public organizations:

”[I] had no contact with any authorities whatsoever. No, not at all. No one came here to help me. No nothing. So we had to make all our decisions ourselves. [...] With hindsight, what you feel... my trust for the authorities in a situation like this, it’s basically gone.” - Taylor

We found that the respondents were disappointed with the public organizations. Just as the satisfied interviewees, the unhappy did seem to have had trust in the public organization before the wildfire. As Taylor exemplifies, for a specific reason she now felt abandoned by the organization, and consequently did not trust it anymore. We therefore agree with Heath and O’Hair (2009) who argue that trust for an organization is easily damaged. On the other hand, one could argue that it is contradicted by what seems to be a stable relationship between Francis and the public organization. However, we argue that no matter how strong a relationship seems to be, it is just as easily destroyed as Taylor demonstrates. Moreover, Drew highlighted yet another aspect of trust in crisis communication:

”But of course, if they would say ‘You ARE going to evacuate’, and then change their minds after an hour or so, then it wouldn’t be as believable, in a way. Then I would think ‘OK, so what do they mean, are we, or are we not going to [evacuate]?’ and then eventually you start to make your own decisions... So I guess that’s the risk, that you lose your trust for the authority.” - Drew

Drew pointed out that if the public loses trust in a public organization during a disaster, there is a chance of people making their own decisions. This further relates to if the public does not trust the organization, it might not follow instructions (Rød et al., 2012; West & Orr, 2007), which we argue in times of disaster could be life-threatening. As trust is important for all four of our elements, we will now continue to discuss trust in relation to each element separately.

5.1 The Quick Element

During the wildfire there were interviewees who wanted to receive information from the public organizations as soon as there was any available. One respondent made a comparison with live sport updates:

“It’s kind of like when you are watching a sport event for example, there you also get like, ‘live’ [updates], and then someone reports, well, like short [posts].” - Morgan

She wanted constant updates about the wildfire, not only information about where the fire was currently situated, but also who was affected and what was done about it. If seen as a metaphor, Morgan did not only wish to know the result of the game, i.e. if the wildfire was extinguished or not, but also the continuous struggle between the two teams, i.e. the wildfire and the firefighters. This could mean periods of more frequent information updates, alternated with periods of fewer updates. Respondents also stressed the desire for immediate updates and a constant flow of information:

“Then [the County Administrative Board] quickly made a Facebook page and it was GREAT! They wrote all the time, updated, not only once a day, but basically every morning and every evening, and if something else happened, they wrote about that too.” - Erin

“[...] because if something happens, if it’s something big, then I want to know, then I want to have a look. We’re a bit impatient today.” - Alex

We suggest this relates to Coombs (2014), who notes that especially in the beginning of a disaster the need for information is extensive. Wessling (2013) on the other hand stresses the need to formulate a clear and concise message in order to avoid confusion among the public. The message should also be sympathetic and provide the information needed, with the goal to make the public behave as wanted. In times of crisis, we argue that it could be a challenge to give a rapid response that is also well formulated and easily understood. This will be discussed further on (see section 5.2).

A surprising aspect of rapid communication was how respondents experienced that *quick* information led to *more* information. We suggest, a possible explanation might be that one

single update, no matter how comprehensive, is still considered less than several shorter updates. Moreover, as respondents wanted immediate updates during the wildfire (see p. 27), summarized and consequently less immediate posts could therefore be regarded as less valuable. For example, even though the posts may contain more information, the information in question might no longer be of use or even valid. A respondent mentioned one additional reason why longer updates may be less appreciated:

“It’s a stressful situation. It always gets like that when you are close by, or in a situation like this, and then it is harder to stay focused on long articles.” - Alex

Yet another aspect of quick response is the chance of public organizations screening information, and therefore details irrelevant to a majority of the public, but still relevant to one specific individual, might be left out. On the other hand, if information is communicated less quickly, it allows the public organization more time to detect and correct misinformation. This aspect will be further discussed (see section 5.2). Moreover, from our social constructionist perspective (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008), we see another potential difficulty of responding quickly. *Quickly* is a relative word, which most likely has different connotations for different individuals. We further suggest, that meaning could also change within the same individual, depending on the situation. For example, depending on how immediate the actual danger is, the timespan of *quickly* might change. Charlie and Drew exemplified this dilemma in their quotations:

“Depending on what it is. If you think of that Tuesday, or whenever it was, that Monday, when it was burning like hell, three kilometers per hour. Then an hour [between updates] was a really long time.” - Charlie

“If it’s an intense situation, well, then maybe more information should be posted, more often kind of... And maybe later you could post less often, so to speak. Maybe sometimes it’s enough with a short post that says ‘The situation is stable, we have everything under control.’” - Drew

Charlie mentioned the most critical day of the disaster, when the fire was moving with extreme speed and quintupled in size (see Appendix 3). During this period she thought that an interval of one hour between Facebook updates was too long. We argue that Facebook makes it possible

to adapt the frequency of posting after the public's need, partly because there are barely any gatekeepers who control the information flow (Steelman et al., 2015), and partly because of the norm to update frequently. Moreover, Drew highlighted another aspect when she wanted updates even if the situation was currently stable, and there was no new information to report. However, others disagreed with her on this matter. For example, one interviewee mentioned that when she did not receive notifications from Facebook, she understood there was no new information available which calmed her. However, she further stressed others could be of different opinions:

“I thought [the amount of updates] was just right, but there were some disagreements about that, and I mean that if you are a bit more nervous or hysterical, then you want to have information all the time, even though there is none.” - Francis

Francis argued individuals who are anxious could have a greater need for more frequent updates. Another reason for why some might want to receive updates more often might be the level of trust the respondent holds against the organization. For example a person, who feels confident she will get updates when there is new information available, might not want constant posts about nothing. In contrast, a person who distrusts an organization might believe the organization is withholding information from her when there is no new information to obtain on Facebook. The example above reflects *sincerity*, which is one of Renn and Levine's (1991) components of trust. It implies that if an organization is not perceived as communicating openly and honestly the people might believe it is not sharing all the information with them, which in turn could hurt the trust of the organization. In addition, we are of the opinion that if an organization does not provide information quickly enough, it could be perceived as unknowledgeable and not updated on the current state of the disaster. This in turn could be related to the component *perceived competence*

Another aspect of openness specific for public organizations is that as a subject of the principle of public access to information, the public organization is obligated to answer the questions from the public as soon as possible (See Appendix 4). Moreover, if they do not, it could hurt the trust built between them (Coombs, 2014). Among our respondents we found both those who were satisfied and those who were dissatisfied with the public organizations' efforts to answer questions on Facebook. For example both Erin and Robin stressed the importance of answering questions rapidly during the wildfire:

“And as soon as you wrote a question you got a reply! And then you could look at a question [on Facebook], click ‘Replies’, and you got all the information!” - Erin

“Especially in a situation like this, you should respond as soon as possible if it’s an actual question. The ones that are more... You know like, sometimes a thread takes on a life of its own, and in that case those responsible don’t have to interfere.” - Robin

Robin also mentioned the possibility of other individuals to answer the questions themselves, instead of the public organization doing so. However, when a large amount of people ask for a lot of information at once, we argue it demands manpower the organization might not have.

Moreover, as Wessling (2013) problematizes, there is a risk the communication becomes reactive, rather than proactive when solely focusing on answering questions. The organization might lose the holistic perspective, and with it, the remembrance to share vital information the public might not be asking for. Moreover, we argue the extensive amount of information shared, not only by public organizations, but also by private individuals on Facebook and other online media during the wildfire, could have created an information overload. Interviewees described this information flow as troublesome:

“The feed flourished with people describing what they had seen and done, and pictures they had taken. So it was an unbelievable mix of information.” - Alex

*“In the end there was such an incredible amount [of information] that I couldn’t manage.”
- Charlie*

*“Well, the feed shouldn’t be too cluttered ‘cause then the message itself will drown.”
- Francis*

Our findings highlighted the extensive volume of information that circulated on Facebook during the time of the wildfire. Furthermore, Francis pointed out that one of the risks with information overload is that important information might be lost in the masses. Also Coombs (2014) mentions that too much information could ironically lead to information dearth. We argue that this is one of the problematic aspects of Facebook as a crisis communication tool. In

contrast, White (2012) notes that social media often solve this problem by filtering the information flow for its users. However, we have not found support for this theory in our empirical material. Still, we are aware that neither the respondents nor we could know what the information flow would have contained without the filtering. Moreover, respondents presented ambiguous attitudes towards the information volume. For example one respondent did recognize an overload, but at the same time she excused it by arguing the information might be relevant for someone else:

“No information is unnecessary. [...] [I’d rather have] too much than too little. Even if it becomes too much, you can decide ‘this doesn’t concern me right now’, and then you can just skip it. What doesn’t concern me concerns someone else [...] you do get a little sick of it, but that doesn’t matter in a crisis situation.” - Parker

Another downside of not communicating quickly enough is the risk of causing rumors to spread (Fors-Andrée, 2012). Rumors were an issue in our findings, and the topic was frequently brought up. We argue that the rumors might even be psychologically exhausting, especially when regarding critical information. For example as Drew described, the emotional strain of not knowing if one’s house had burned to the ground or not:

“There were so many rumors circulating and it wasn’t until then I felt like there has to be INFORMATION somewhere, because you can get really upset and sad if you hear something like that. And [my friends] didn’t really know if their house was still standing or not, because they weren’t allowed to return.” - Drew

We argue that this relates to Coombs’ (2014) second base response, about helping the public to cope psychologically with the event. Even if information about the situation is scarce, Fors-Andrée (2012) argues that it is still necessary to communicate in order to explain the lack of information, and to ensure the public that any new information will be shared.

However as Francis mentioned (see p. 29), how to cope with a situation like the wildfire is highly individual. For example some might want constant updates, while others only want updates when new information is available. Based on this, we argue that the individual differences make it more difficult for a public organization to please the public as a whole, and

according to the social constructionist perspective (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008) there is not *one* public interpretation but rather an abundance of individual interpretations.

5.2 The Correct Element

As previously discussed, it is important to communicate quickly in a crisis. However doing so increases the risk of communicating incorrect information (Coombs, 2014). We argue this creates a contradictory relationship between quick and correct, and a difficult balancing act for the public organization. Coombs (2014) claims the advantage of communicating quickly outweigh the risk of incorrectness. One of our respondents partially agreed with this quotation. At the same time she was critical of the confidence with which the public organization expressed their message in the example below. According to her, not only were they wrong, but also they gave her a promise they could not keep:

”Preferably quickly, maybe a liiittle incorrect, but this was just so wrong. Everything was depending on these planes. They could have said ‘We hope they will be here in three days’ instead of saying ‘They are coming now!’ when they aren’t. Because that’s like, like an emotional rollercoaster.” - Erin

Due to the crucial nature of the arrival of the water bombing airplanes to save the respondent’s home, Erin was emotionally involved in the issue and consequently more easily distressed. If the matter would have been less important to her, she might have been more forgiving towards the public organization. However, there were respondents who had even stronger opinions on potentially incorrect information:

“It just can’t happen. You have to make sure [it’s true] and read it through before you post it.” - Charlie

“One says this, one says that. So once again I think that it’s better to say nothing, than to say something wrong, in this situation.” - Jamie

These quotations contradict Coombs’ (2014) previous statement about prioritizing quick information over correct information. Again we see a variety of opinions in our findings. Both correct *and* quick information was demanded, and there was no belief that one had to exclude

the other. However, one respondent highlighted this difficulty and suggested a possible approach:

“If you talk about a bigger accident, it might not be absolutely necessary to know the exact number of injured, how they were injured or what type of injuries. But maybe it’s very important to know that it has happened, since it’s blocking the roads somewhere. And that there are many injured, but maybe not the exact number.” - Alex

She argues it is not necessary to be too specific about the event itself, but to be rather general about it. In contrast, Coombs (2014) claims the importance of communicating openly, which means that an organization should be honest as well as reveal available information. Therefore we argue that withholding details could create stress among the public. One example during this disaster was the confusion of where the fire was actually situated. One of our respondents described the lack of details made her unaware of the danger she was in:

”For us Sala is 35 kilometers away, but the municipality border is just up here in the woods. And [the fire] was just on the other side of that border, but that’s not how you think. Sala is the town. If they would’ve said ‘there’s a fire in the woods between Fagersta and Sala’, then we would have understood. But now, we thought ‘it’s just a small fire in Sala.’” - Erin

Erin explained the need for more precise information, since it would have made her understand its personal relevance for her. However, the element of local information is worthy a discussion of its own (see section 5.3)

We argue that another aspect of correct information is the need for validation, to assess what information is true, and which information is not. There were respondents who even felt the need to validate information they received from public organizations. Above all, it was the interviewees in immediate danger that seemed to have a greater need for validation, and particularly those with animals that would be difficult to evacuate all of a sudden. Taylor exemplified this when saying:

“But there was such an extreme amount of information and I came to the conclusion that you had to verify all of it. So you couldn’t take everything seriously, and you had to know exactly what information to trust.” - Taylor

Furthermore, Taylor was also responsible for other individuals' animals and explained she had contact with a lot of people during the fire. We claim it might have been because of this responsibility, she felt a need to validate all the information she received. Moreover, respondents did not feel a great need for validation when receiving information from the Municipal Commissioner of Norberg, Åsa Eriksson, which will be exemplified and discussed further on (see section 5.4).

In terms of validating information from public organizations on Facebook, we found that trust was diminished even if the respondents had not been personally affected by incorrect information. It seemed like it was enough to have heard about others who had received incorrect information to affect their trust. For example, Drew described how her friends did not receive information about whether or not their house was still standing, (see p. 31), and Taylor explained how a family received misinformation about being allowed to return home after the evacuation:

"I think this was on Tuesday they got the opportunity to come home, it said so on the County Administrative Board's Facebook page. And they just flew up, into the car and drove extremely fast. And the police [by the barricade] just said 'we don't take any orders from [the County Administrative Board]' and then [the family] almost went rabid and broke down of course. They just stood there for two hours before they were allowed in." - Taylor

We argue, even though the Swedish population generally has a high level of trust for public organizations (Eriksson, 2014c), incidents of this kind could affect their trust, and increase the public's need for validation. Moreover we suggest that this relates to one of Renn and Levine's (1991) components of trust, namely *consistency* that stresses the impact an organization's past actions have on people's trust in the present. In relation to social media, we argue that this aspect is even more important. Due to the fact that what is written online remains there (Coombs, 2014; Fors-Andrée, 2012), we argue that misinformation from a public organization during a current or past crisis is easily found by the public. Moreover, based on quotations we suggest that recently published misinformation affected the people extensively. Additionally, because of the network quality of Facebook, bad experiences do not only affect the trust of the individuals involved, but it could also potentially affect any of their Facebook friends. We

argue that this, in combination with the speed of social media mean that one single incident could have wide impact on the trust of an organization.

Another example of validation is presented by one of our respondents who compared the Facebook page of the County Administrative Board of Västmanland with information from other sources. By validating information she could determine the trustworthiness of the page:

”[The County Administrative Board] was the only [Facebook page] I felt was working [...] because when I got information from elsewhere it proved to be correct.” - Erin

Erin described that she trusted this Facebook page because its information corresponded with the other sources she used. We argue based on this quotation and her previous statements (see p. 34), that she was able to forgive imprecise information from the public organization. However, even though we do not know how more severe misinformation would have affected Erin’s trust, it clearly difference to Drew and Taylor whose trust in the public organization was diminished instantly. In our opinion, the imprecise information Erin received from the public organization about how close the fire was to her (see p. 35), was as severe as the misinformation Drew and Taylor mentioned. Once again we see a correlation to our social constructionist perspective (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008); how a person defines, and handles, misinformation is highly individual, which makes the communication situation more complex for the public organization.

Due to the high complexity of the public, the task of communicating can be complicated, as frequently discussed in this thesis. To further elaborate our discussion about the public’s need for getting their questions answered (see p. 30), we argue that replying to questions could be a possible way for a public organization to handle this complexity. For example, if a public organization answers one person’s question, we argue it could satisfy her momentary need. This can be seen as a part of Coombs’ (2014) base response, to both help the public to avoid immediate danger and to cope with the crisis psychologically. Respondents mentioned getting replies to their questions during our interviews:

“[I was] VERY happy with the [County Administrative Board’s Facebook page]. Because you could write a question, and then they replied right away. So there was staff there all the time, on the Facebook page. That was great.” - Jamie

“So it worked really well and it wasn’t just one way. If I call, I will only get the answer to what I’m asking, but there, I could get the answers to everyone’s questions. That’s great. I might not know that I was wondering something, but when I see the answer I realize ‘It was good I got to know that.’” - Erin

Jamie was pleased with the quick response, and Erin described a possible benefit of getting questions answered on Facebook. Because of the public nature of the platform, the questions are for anyone to see and benefit from. Therefore, we argue that Facebook has the possibility to reach others than those expected, which might lead to a better informed public. The public organization could also correct misinformation by answering questions (Fors-Andrée, 2012), as one interviewee exemplified:

”[They said on the radio] that ‘Today the planes will finally arrive, today they are starting water bombing’ [...] ‘Stay away because we’re going to water bomb now’. [Pause] But then, in our heads we understood that what the hell are they going to water bomb here for? The fire isn’t here. So people went hysterical. Old men and ladies came running with their walking frames. So people wrote to the County Administrative Board on Facebook, ‘get new information out there, this isn’t right’. So we went crazy. I don’t know how long it took them to post new information, but I mean it was long enough to raise your pulse so to speak.”

- Charlie

In this case, Facebook was not only used by the public organization to correct misinformation, but also by the public to alert the organization about their mistake. Thus, the public could be seen as a resource for the public organization because they can report and correct misinformation. When applying the quotation from Longstaff and Yang (2008) (see section 3.1.1), Charlie’s quotation further highlights an aspect of trust. We argue that Charlie had to decide whether or not to trust her own observation, that there was no fire in sight, or she had to change her trust in the County Administrative Board of Västmanland who claimed the opposite. We find it obvious that Charlie would trust her own observation rather than what the public organization tells her, and consequently we argue that the trust for said organization declined.

5.3 The Local Element

As Wessling (2013) notes, individuals are more likely to comply with instructions personally relevant to them. Hence, we argue it is important for public organizations to connect with the public, and one possible way of doing so could be to provide local information. Taylor in particular stressed the importance of local information during the wildfire. We claim this might have been because of her extreme situation, and therefore she had a greater need for urgent information. As previously mentioned, she was responsible for a large amount of animals which required significant planning and time to evacuate, and additionally she lived right in the expected path of the wildfire.

“What was important, was to get local information from the ones closest [to the fire], because that’s what was missing [...] Since no one came and told us it was dangerous, no warnings, no nothing, we had to look for it ourselves, and above all [we did that] locally.”

- Taylor

Taylor felt there was a lack of local information, as well as of prior notice of the evacuation. Here we see a connection to Renn and Levine’s (1991) *faith* component of trust. As previously mentioned (see p. 26), Taylor felt abandoned by the public organizations, and therefore she did not believe the organizations had her best interest and well-being at heart. Also Drew recognized this shortage of local information, although she did not use the word local. Instead she observed the fact that it was the public themselves who reported on the event, and neither the public organizations nor the media.

“Because it happened so quickly, it was more or less the public who reported ‘the fire is here now’. So that was almost never on the radio or on the TV. [...] Instead there was just more of a general overview.” - Drew

According to Coombs (2014) the public often feels a great need for information in the beginning of a crisis. At the same time, information often is scarce. During the wildfire, we claim this might have been due to the speed with which the fire was moving. In other words, one could even say the fire spread more quickly than the information did. However, due to the characteristics of Facebook, we argue the platform has the possibility to facilitate fast and local

information needed to solve this problem. As Taylor mentioned, Facebook was one of her main sources of information during, what for her was, the most critical time of the fire:

“I think [the information I got] came from people who called me, and then it was Facebook. Yeah, Facebook played a pretty large part at the time. [...] There were the people who wanted to come and help, and then there were people who said where it was burning, but a lot of that was wrong.” - Taylor

On the other hand, Taylor also mentioned she received a lot of misinformation from individuals on Facebook, and we argue this could be one of the disadvantages of Facebook as a crisis communication tool. We claim that the less strict gatekeeping on social media could be one of the reasons why misinformation is spread, however the minimal control of what is published is also why information could be spread quickly on Facebook. Another reason behind misinformation might be the many voices on social media (Coombs, 2014) which could cause rumors to spread if an organization does not give the public the information it needs (Fors-Andrée, 2012). The lack of local information during the wildfire caused the individuals in the affected area to share what little information they had. Due to the critical nature of the situation they might not always have had time to validate it before publishing.

Moreover, other interviewees mentioned the value of local information, even though they received it from the local radio station:

“Well, I listened to the radio. [It was] the local broadcasts I turned to.” - Francis

“[...] but it was the local radio station that was on all the time, during the time of the reporting I mean.” - Jamie

One reason why our interviewees turned to local media for crisis information might have been because, as Fischer (2000) points out, local media has more practical information and tend to provide more useful news for the affected individuals in the crisis area. In comparison, national media is more inclined to report more general and dramatized information, which even could increase the emotional stress among the affected ones (Fischer, 2000). We argue this sensationalization clashes with Coombs' (2014) second base response. However, we see an opportunity for the public organizations to decrease this emotional stress, by providing even

more local and practical information on Facebook. Also Taylor mentioned this possibility of sharing local information, when discussing what kind of information she wanted during the wildfire. Besides the fire range, and if she was in any immediate danger, Taylor also gave a more concrete example of information she would have wanted to receive:

“[I wanted] very local, very local [information] since it is possible with Facebook. [...] When we came to the railroad crossing, over here, the level-crossings were down, so if we had followed the law we wouldn't have gotten through. But we did, wriggled us through with animal transports and everything, so that was quite lawless I'd say. [...] It was the same thing there, perhaps you should have just known 'the level-crossings are down but it is alright to cross anyway' but there were no local information like that. But how it should be adjusted, I don't know.” - Taylor

Despite the possibilities of sharing local information on social media, there could also be disadvantages. We argue that local information could require extensive cooperation within, and resources from the public organizations, in order to gather, process and validate all of the local information. Moreover, the respondents closest to the fire needed information whether or not to evacuate, while respondents further away from the fire wanted to know how to manage the extensive amounts of smoke blown in their direction. In both cases, the information needed could be considered local. With the social constructionist perspective (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008) in mind, what is local could vary from individual to individual. If one is severely affected by the fire, local is considered to be the very close by area, while if one is not in an immediate danger, but still in the affected area, locally might include a larger area. Furthermore, the information needs to be presented in a perspicuous way (Andersson, 2014), which we argue is easier in theory than in practice. One possible alternative for a public organization to be perceived as more locally relevant would be to create Facebook pages for smaller geographical areas. For example, in the case of the wildfire, each municipality could have communicated more extensively with their own local target audience.

On the other hand, when several different organizations communicate similar messages during the same time span, we claim it could increase the difficulty to speak with what Coombs (2014) refers to as one voice. This is problematic because consistent messages are more believable (Coombs, 2014). For example, if a county administrative board decides that two municipalities should prepare to evacuate and asks them to communicate this to their separate target

audiences, there is a chance they might communicate two different messages: Municipality A communicates “we will probably evacuate, be prepared”, while Municipality B communicates “we will probably not evacuate, but be prepared anyway”. We argue this could create confusion and distress among the public, and make them unsure which message to believe. Therefore, when accidentally communicating conflicting messages from similar public organizations on the same topic, we argue it could decrease their trustworthiness. In our findings the public already had a need to validate information as previously discussed (see p. 33), and we argue, if they additionally would have received conflicting messages from different public organizations, the need to validate would have been even greater.

As previously discussed (see section 5.2.) the public can provide crisis information during a disaster (Coombs & Holladay, 2014), which Drew also described earlier (see p. 37). When trust is established between the public and an organization, the public can be used as a resource to collect local information (Wessling, 2013), as they are usually on-site before the public organizations (Wessling, 2013; White, 2012). Another example of this is when Charlie (see p. 36) explained how the public corrected the public organization’s misinformation about the water bombing. The quotation additionally demonstrates the asymmetric relation between the public and the public organization (Thomas, 1998), and how local information can be shared vertically between them. Furthermore, we mean that local information could also be shared horizontally, between members of the public, as Erin describes:

“So I took pictures and wrote a couple of times every day. [...] And it was very valuable to say the least for those who had houses or summer cabins in the area... And so I wrote it on Facebook, and it turned out that people I wasn’t friends with on Facebook had found me on Google, and then followed the course of the event [through me].” - Erin

As Erin mentioned she became an unofficial source of information for both individuals who lived in the area and for the general public. We argue that public organizations could possibly utilize this kind of local information sources. For example, these unofficial sources could be encouraged to share information the public organization is publishing on Facebook. They could either only forward the information, or screen and rewrite it, which we argue in turn would make the information even more local and therefore possibly more personally relevant for the affected individuals in their network. As previously argued, individuals are more likely to comply with messages that are personally relevant (Wessling, 2013), and therefore we suggest

this could be a possible way to improve the crisis communication on Facebook during a disaster. As both our elements *Local* and *Personal* are so intimately intertwined, this discussion will be continued in the next section.

5.4 The Personal Element

In the findings there were clear opinions on what tone a public organization should use when communicating on Facebook during a disaster. Even though there were some differences, a personal approach was preferred. One example is Robin who noted:

"I think a personal tone is really important, but it shouldn't get too private. It has to be professional. But still, I think it's good that it's clear there's a person behind the keyboard, so it doesn't get impersonal or a large distance." - Robin

This respondent asked for a personal tone in the communication, but she also pointed out the importance of simultaneously being professional. She further stressed the need for communicating with another individual, or at least to have the perception of doing so, instead of talking with a faceless organization. This relates to White (2012), who argues that a human aspect facilitates for individuals to feel support from the public organization. Further, the public is more likely to trust the organization if it is perceived as having the public's best interest in mind (Coombs, 2014; Thomas, 1998), which we argue could be related to communicating in a personal tone. Based on this, we argue a personal tone could possibly increase the perception of personal relevance, which according to Wessling (2013) could increase compliance for the message. Furthermore, a personal tone could improve trust (Reen & Levine, 1991), which in turn also could raise compliance (Rød, Botan & Holen, 2012; West & Orr, 2007). Charlie emphasized another perspective on tone:

"Well, I actually believe you have to think with your heart. Because, I mean now, when so incredibly many people are affected, you have to [stop and] think 'What kind of situation is this?'" - Charlie

She argued a public organization should have the recipient's strenuous situation in mind when communicating. She believed compassion is of value in crisis communication. To communicate in a sympathetic and sensible way is interconnected with trust (Coombs, 2014),

which we argue is one reason for public organizations to have this aspect in mind. The empathetic aspect is even more relevant when the public organization is forced to correct its own misinformation. One of our respondents mentioned the absence of an apology when the public organization had given misinformation:

"You didn't even get an excuse from them, and I know I was extremely disappointed with that [...] I think you could be humble and [...] say 'Sorry, that didn't work out, we apologize' or something like that." - Taylor

Moreover Alex also discussed the potential of apologizing, and for a public organization to correct its own misinformation:

"If you correct it later, and say 'this was wrong, this is how it should have been instead', that I can understand, because you can't know everything. That's why it's so important to select the information. Maybe you don't have to inform about everything." - Alex

The respondent would understand if the public organization could not always give correct information. If a public organization is willing to apologize it might ease the public's distress, which relates to Coombs (2014) second base response. Moreover, Coombs' (2014) fourth rule of how to communicate on social media during a crisis, stresses the importance of adapting the tone and practice of the medium used. As Facebook is a social medium where each individual creates one's own individual profile⁵ we argue that the general use of language and tone is personal. As discussed, there are benefits of using a personal tone on Facebook, however there are also difficulties that we will explore and discuss later on (see p. 43). Moreover, Coombs' (2014) fourth rule further includes being polite and professional, even when strong language is used by the public. This is also addressed by one of our interviewees:

"It felt like those who answered [the questions on Facebook] actually understood how hysterical it was for us, that we had our reasons. Some questions were written very impolitely, and then they replied very calmly and friendly to the actual question, without noticing that aggressive tone. Because if you start reacting towards that tone... [Pause] but they really took it down to a reasonable level." - Erin

⁵ Facebook, n.d <http://newsroom.fb.com/products/> Retrieved 05-25-2015

She complemented the public organization for showing sympathy and understanding the distress and agitation created by the situation. She further touched upon a problem that can arise if the organization allows itself to be provoked by the aggressive approach from the public. As Eriksson (2014b) mentions, it is easy to get caught up in any of the different tones used by the public in social media, but underlines the importance of adapting to the tone of the organization one represents. For example, we argue that if an upset member of the public, who uses an angry tone in her message, gets an equally angry reply from the public organization, the communication could easily escalate. Moreover, based on the *objectivity* component of trust (Renn & Levine, 1991) we suggest this type of emotionally colored communication could decrease the public's trust in the public organization, while in contrast a more neutral communication could increase it. As previously mentioned (see p. 34), what is once published online in relation to a public organization, is easily found again and therefore these types of conversations might not only affect the trust of the individuals involved, but also the trust of others in the future.

As previously demonstrated, we notice a variation of preferences on what tone a public organization should use when communicating during a crisis, in our empirical material. For example, the respondents mentioned words such as professional, empathetic as well as personal, and we argue that finding a balance between these tones could be difficult. Once again, our social constructionist perspective (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008) makes this an even more complex matter. On the one hand, there is a risk of being perceived as too private instead of personal, and on the other, too impersonal instead of professional. Furthermore, the difference between a personal and a professional tone might be perceived as great by one recipient, but nonexistent by another. According to Andersson (2014), a too formal tone could make the perceived distance between the organization and public larger, while a personal tone is more inviting. Yet another example of what tone to use, was mentioned by one of our respondents:

"[...] That you try to be just like health care and rescue... [Pause] well that you try to have a calm approach and tone as not to frighten the people who receive the information, but still not hiding the truth. That you try to have that calming tone, and act professional. I don't want 'Oh my God, run!' or something like that but more 'Now, let's do this, think of that'.

Clarity." - Robin

She suggests that by mimicking the tone nurses and other emergency staff use in crisis situations, one could instill calmness without concealing the severity of the situation. In other words, one should tell the truth, but in a composed manner. We argue that this could possibly serve as a benchmark for the employees of public organizations when communicating, as a “nurse metaphor” might be easier to relate to than just the recommendation of “professional and personal, but not private”.

We saw a distinct, and to us slightly surprising way of communicating in our findings. It was the private Facebook page of Åsa Eriksson, the Municipal Commissioner of Norberg, which was considered a vital source of information:

”So then it was Åsa’s Facebook page that became the most important [source]. Not the papers. Not the County Administrative Board. It was her... [Pause] That’s what you trusted. And she was local. You knew she was local and you knew she would never write anything that wasn’t true.” - Taylor

Taylor even said that she became the most significant source of information for her during the fire, and the respondent felt confident Åsa would not publish incorrect information. We suggest this to be partly because she lived in the same area as the interviewee, and therefore was equally affected by the fire. Additionally respondents mentioned other qualities which made Åsa trustworthy:

”Well, it felt like [Åsa] got to make a lot of decisions in relation to the fire, and it was she, together with the incident commander and others, if we say so, who made the decision about evacuation and stuff like that.” - Drew

“Well, Åsa is a person I trust. Because she’s professional and good. I thought it was great to follow her [on Facebook]. And besides, she had connections right into this center of leaders in Ramnäs where they were, so she got information straight from there, and that was really good. She is an amazing asset. No matter where you stand politically, she is competent and professional in her work.” - Francis

Drew highlighted Åsa's involvement in the decision making during the wildfire and Francis pointed to her professionalism and connections to the individuals in charge. Åsa was perceived as trustworthy due to her local connection, established personal network, professional attitude and unique access to information from within the crisis management team. At the same time, she was a *person*, and a face to trust in a time of great uncertainty. Another reason people trusted her, was because of her earlier presence on Facebook, which according to Coombs (2014) makes the communication more trustworthy.

We argue, this relates to some of Renn and Levine's (1991) components of trust, the first of which was *perceived competence*. Åsa was perceived as being competent because of her role as a Municipal Commissioner, and therefore possessed formal status and power as a decision-maker in the community. Additionally, she was also a member of the crisis management team in her municipality, which gave her yet more authority during the event. The second component we see a similarity to is what Renn and Levine's (1991) refer to as *sincerity*. Åsa was perceived as sharing the information she received from the crisis management team openly. This way, she was not believed to have a hidden agenda. Furthermore, she was perceived as having the public's best interest in mind, which is another component of trust, which Renn and Levine (1991) title *faith*. Also Coombs (2014) and Thomas (1998) stress this as an important aspect when building trust. Moreover, Renn and Levine's (1991) model consists of six components, and since we are limited by our empirical material we do not know how Åsa was perceived in relation to *objectivity*, *consistency* or *fairness*. Nevertheless, these components work in correlation with each other, and the lack of one could be compensated by excess in another. In her case, she was considered trustworthy among the respondents. Therefore she most likely either possessed all of the components above, or the three components that we know of compensated for the lack of one or several of the others.

Additionally, we argue these aspects of trust might be the reason why the respondents did not have a great need to validate Åsa's information on Facebook, in comparison to information provided by public organizations, as previously mentioned (see section 5.3). As Taylor pointed out she was certain the information from Åsa was correct, and therefore validation was not important to her:

“As I said before, you have to read Facebook [in a certain way]. You kind of have to think about where the information comes from [and ask yourself] ‘Is this true?’ Sometimes there

were information you had to verify, but I never had to do that with Åsa. There I knew it was the truth.” - Taylor

Although Åsa’s presence during the wildfire could be seen as a happy coincidence, we argue this is not a unique phenomenon. We claim to have seen this at least once before in Sweden, when Lottie Knutson became the face to trust during the 2004 tsunami disaster. The situations were very different from each other. For example, Lottie Knutson was the Director of Communication for a private corporation (Falkheimer et al., 2009; Strömbäck & Nord, 2006), it was an international disaster, and Facebook was not yet a crisis communication tool. Despite this, we claim there were also similarities, for example both of the disasters affected Sweden and there was a great need for information.

As mentioned earlier, Coombs (2014) notes that in the beginning of a crisis the information is often scarce, but at the same time, the need for information is great. In this situation, researchers suggest an organization should inform that only limited information is available (Fors-Andrée, 2012). When Lottie Knutson broke the initial silence from the authorities during the tsunami disaster (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006), we argue she met the need for information for the Swedish public. We mean something similar occurred in Västmanland, only smaller in scale, when Åsa started sharing information during a period of perceived information dearth. Based on Renn and Levine’s (1991) components of trust, we argue both women became trusted individuals due to their professionalism, access to and willingness to share information, as well as their personal approach.

Moreover, even when the initial need for urgent information during the wildfire had subsided, we argue that Åsa had already established herself as an important figure for the affected individuals. Therefore the respondents continued to use her as a trusted information source throughout the crisis, as one of our interviewees exemplifies:

“I felt like... She never posted any other information than what usually was posted on the Municipal of Norberg’s webpage. It wasn’t like any inside information or anything, but still I felt like you got a more direct [information flow] that way. So I thought that was valuable.”

- Drew

Even though Drew later on could get the same information from the municipality, she chose to keep following Åsa on Facebook. We suggest this is another argument for why public organizations should use “faces to trust” in disasters. However, we do understand the difficulty of finding individuals like Åsa. For example, as previously mentioned, her presence might have been coincidental and the next time a disaster strikes, there might not be an obvious individual for the public to turn to. Coombs (2014) argues that well informed staff members are more likely to forward correct information, and Shklovski et al. (2008) argue that the public is likely to turn to local individuals with direct connections to the disaster when there is no other information available. Therefore we argue, in case of a disaster, that public organizations should keep their employees well informed, to increase the possibility of them forwarding correct information through their personal networks on Facebook. Under the right circumstances, we argue that the employees of the public organization might voluntarily become local information sources.

5.5 Re-intertwining the Elements

We started this analysis by stating how all of our elements were closely related to trust, and intimately intertwined with each other. Therefore, after discussing them relatively separately, we would now like to discuss them altogether to further highlight their relations to each other.

Despite the rather concrete nature of our research questions, the findings became very complex in its essence. With a starting point in Renn and Levine’s (1991) components of trust, we argue that depending on the trustworthiness of the public organization, Facebook as a crisis communication tool could be both beneficial and disadvantageous. For example, if the trust in a public organization on Facebook is high, the need for frequent updates when there is nothing new to report is low. High trust also decreases the need to validate information from said organization, and incorrect information might be more easily forgiven. In contrast, when trust is low the need for frequent updates is greater, which might be due to the perceived chance for the public organization to screen the information, and possibly even purposely withhold relevant information. Consequently, the need to validate this information becomes greater, which increases the likeliness of using other sources, and possibly excluding the public organization completely. This poses a risk because if the direct communication between the public organization and the public is disrupted, vital disaster information might not get through which could lead to increased distress and possible physical injuries among the public.

Rumors are an existing issue on Facebook, and we argue rumors are more easily mistaken for facts when the trustworthiness of a public organization is questioned. Based on Coombs' (2014) aspects on how to communicate during a crisis, another possible reason for the public to trust rumors could be a lack of confirmed information from public organizations. For example, if a public organization does not communicate quickly enough, especially in the beginning of a crisis, individuals might start sharing what little information they have on Facebook. This could be exemplified by local residents who believe they have seen the fire in an area, share these experiences on Facebook as a fact, and unintentionally start rumors.

On the other hand, if mutual trust is established, the public organization and the local residents might have a meaningful exchange of information (Thomas, 1998). For example, local residents could share useful information with the public organization, and the public organization could aid the public by correcting facts before a rumor is widely spread. However, even if there is no mutual trust we argue that the public might communicate with a public organization to correct severe misinformation, which is facilitated by the two-way nature of Facebook. Consequently, both rumors and misinformation could create distress among the public, and it might also cause decisions to be made on false pretenses.

In our findings, local information from public organizations on Facebook is not only highly valued, but it also affects the public's trust. A larger degree of local information increases trust, while a smaller degree decreases it, which relates to how local media is argued to be more credible among the local public because of its relevance and accuracy (Cohen et al., 2007). Moreover, the trust for a public organization could also be affected by the tone used when communicating on Facebook. In our material a personal tone was appreciated and affected trust positively, which might be due to the perception of talking to a human being, instead of a faceless organization. There is also an indication that a personal tone might increase the degree of forgiveness the public has towards a public organization that unintentionally communicates misinformation.

As mentioned above, local information and a personal tone increases trust for a public organization, and we argue a high degree of trust consequently decreases the need for validation. This might be why "a face to trust" was greatly appreciated during the wildfire; it is simply easier to trust a familiar face than an abstract organization. One example is how an

individual in an official position, with direct access to accurate information about the disaster, could use one's own personal network on Facebook to communicate to the public, either officially or unofficially. A second example we see indications of is also how a private individual could become an unofficial source of information for the public, which possibly could be used by a public organization as a secondary information channel if these individuals are kept well informed. This is in line with Renn and Levine (1991) who state that the right context can enable individuals to act as trustworthy communicators, a context we argue is created on Facebook.

However, we do acknowledge that satisfying the multiple needs of the public is demanding, and to answer all questions on social media is not only expected (Coombs, 2014), but for a public organization also required by Swedish law (see Appendix 4). This, in combination with collecting and validating an extensive amount of local information, requires extensive resources. Realistically, we see a limit to the physical and monetary means of a public organization, and therefore all of the public's needs might not be met.

Finally, we are aware that other aspects affect the crisis communication during a disaster as well. For example, an organization cannot control how the message is received. This is because the recipient always exists in a context, where matters such as language barriers, disabilities or temporary distractions might all affect how well the message is understood. Moreover, the social constructionist perspective (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008) further complicates the elements of crisis communication. We argue that *quick*, *correct*, *local* and *personal* are all relative terms holding different meanings for different individuals, and this complexity might make it more difficult for a public organization to successfully communicate during a disaster.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how social media could be used by a public organization to communicate in a disaster, from a recipient perspective. In this section, our two research questions are answered based on our findings in theories and empirical material.

6.1 What information did the public perceive as important on Facebook during the disaster?

Firstly, *correct* information is highly valued. Even if it might be considered obvious, incorrect information from public organizations during a disaster does exist, and it greatly affects the public's trust for the organizations. It could also negatively affect the public both physically as well as psychologically. In previous management focused research, the benefits of sharing information quickly have been found to outweigh the risks of publishing incorrect information (Coombs, 2014). However, from our recipient perspective we have not found support for this theory. Instead correct information was demanded, and only occasionally overlooked, depending on the severity of the incorrectness, and the trustworthiness of the organization prior to the incident.

Secondly, the need for *local* information is great. It is considered personally relevant since it clarifies more precisely what actions to take and what is currently happening in the closest area, which consequently reduces anxiety among the public. Contrary, in the absence of local information a perceived lack of information can emerge, which sequentially might cause rumors to spread when individuals share what little they know. During a disaster, local information could even contribute to minimizing the number of lives lost and properties damaged.

6.2 How did the public prefer this information to be communicated on Facebook during the disaster?

Firstly, there is a demand for receiving information *quickly*, and even a need for immediate and frequent updates. Quick information could prevent rumors from spreading, and enhance the public's perception of the organization communicating in an open and honest manner. In turn,

this could improve the trust for the public organizations, which might make the public more inclined to comply with instructions, and consequently keep the public safer in times of disaster. On the other hand, quick and frequent updates create inconveniently large volumes of information. However, the information overload is excused with the explanation that what is not relevant for one individual, might be relevant for another.

Secondly, *personal* crisis communication increases the impact of the message, because having a face to trust, rather than speaking to an abstract organization, is preferred by the public. This could be achieved in several ways: for example by simply using a personal tone when creating messages on Facebook, or by encouraging employees to share correct information in their personal networks. In turn, this could lead to an employee becoming a local and personal source of information.

Finally, by accommodating these elements the public's trust for the public organization should increase. Consequently, it would reduce the risk of rumors, decrease the public's need for validation in urgent situations, and lessen the distress among the public during the disaster.

7 Possible Further Research

When pursuing our research, we found several interesting aspects which could inspire further research. Since our thesis has a qualitative approach, we cannot make any generalizations about our findings. Therefore we encourage further exploration of this field to assess whether our discoveries are coincidental, or if they are part of a larger pattern.

One interesting aspect was the personal approach on crisis communication exemplified by the Municipal Commissioner of Norberg, Åsa Eriksson. We also saw a possibility of using the preexisting networks and trustworthiness of private individuals when communicating during a disaster. With this in mind, it would be interesting to determine whether or not other individuals in similar situations also would have valued this personal connection. If so, it would be of interest to evaluate how a crisis communication plan comprising our four elements *quick*, *correct*, *local* and *personal* affect the public's trust for a public organization.

8 Final Words

Communication during a disaster is vital, and well performed crisis communication in social media *can* save lives. We have aspired to contribute with useful information to this research field, as well as to encourage others to further investigate this very important and complex matter.

Communicating during a disaster is also very difficult. This is because what is perceived as efficient communication lies in the eye of the beholder. For this very reason there is always potential for improvement, which makes the field of Crisis Communication ever changing and continuously challenging. As one of our interviewees so excellently explained it:

“The day you think you’ll experience a crisis where no one complains about the information, that day will never come.” - Alex

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Facebook

Facebook is a large social network that was launched in February 2004 in USA. The platform has grown quickly the last couple of years, and in March 2015 it had 936 million users who were active on a daily basis⁶. The company was introduced to the NASDAQ stock exchange in 2012⁷, and is therefore dependable on its profit. Facebook is widely used in Sweden, however there are still individuals who do not visit the site. For example, the main part of people aged 55 years or older never uses the site, and during the most recent years the use of the platform among teenagers in the age 12 to 15 years has declined (Findahl, 2014).

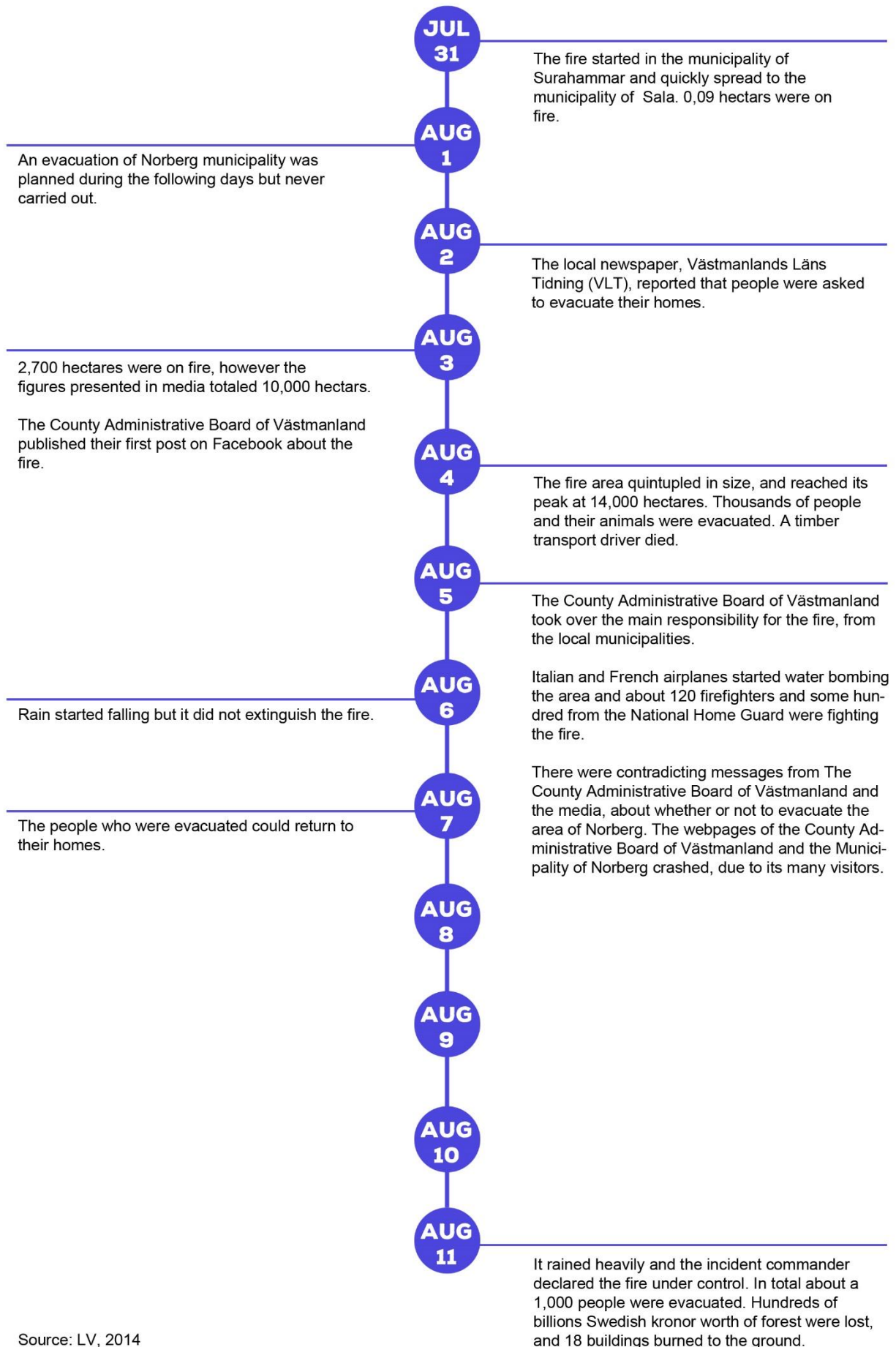
⁶ Facebook, n.d <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/> Retrieved 05-25-2015

⁷ Facebook, 2012 <http://newsroom.fb.com/news/2012/05/facebook-announces-pricing-of-initial-public-offering/> Retrieved 05-25-2015

Appendix 2: Interview guide

- Could you please tell us a little about yourself?
- Would you mind telling us how you use Facebook an average day?
- Could you describe how you used Facebook during the wildfire?
- How did you experience the communication on Facebook during the wildfire?
- If an event like this would happen again, what kind of information do you think you would like to receive on Facebook?
- Could you explain how you would like to receive this information on Facebook?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Appendix 3: Timeline based on our limitations



Appendix 4: The Principle of Public Access

In Sweden the public sector is mainly made up by the public administration, the ministries, the county councils or regions, and the municipality⁸. Within these one finds public organizations such as county council administrative boards⁹, police¹⁰ and emergency services¹¹. Moreover, these public organizations abide to the principle of public access to information, which could be described as a requirement of openness. It entitles the public, as well as the media, insight into the activities of the organizations. Anyone is allowed to read the official documents, and the employees are free to disclose what they know to a third party as well as and under normal circumstances they have the right to give information to the media¹². Lastly, when this principle is placed upon public organizations in social media, it has been juridically proven the organization is obligated to answer comments and questions as soon as possible¹³.

⁸ Nationalencyklopedin, 2015 <http://www.ne.se/ludwig.lub.lu.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/lång/förvaltning>
Retrieved 2015-25-05

⁹ Länsstyrelsen, 2015 http://www.lansstyrelsen.se/jonkoping/Sv/om-lansstyrelsen/pressrum/Pages/fakta_om_lansstyrelsen.aspx Retrieved 2015-25-05

¹⁰ Regeringen, 2015 <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/2462> Retrieved 2015-25-05

¹¹ Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting, 2015 <http://skl.se/tjanster/lattlast/vadarsverigeskommunerochlandstingskl.593.html> Retrieved 2015-25-05

¹² Regeringskansliet, 2013 <http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/20/80/71/f108795f.pdf>
Retrieved 2015-25-05

¹³ Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting, 2015 <http://skl.se/download/18.547ffc53146c75fdec0ef1b6/1405429253387/skl-juridisktpm-socialamedier.pdf>
Retrieved 2015-25-05