

**Dear readers,**

It happened one day in a packed subway train at the Opera station in Paris. The metro stopped in the middle of the tunnel, the light went out. A voice said immediately: 'I am your conductor. I am informing you that we will have a short stop because of an incident on this line. I will keep you informed. We will start again soon.' The train made some more stops in complete darkness before arriving at the station but all incidents were immediately reported and explained by the reassuring voice of the conductor. It took more than half an hour to move a hundred metres, but there was no sign of fear, unrest or criticism from any of the passengers. Good communication can build trust and prevent a crisis.

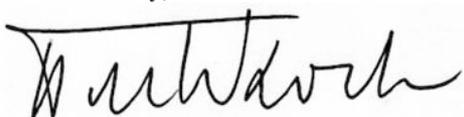
It happened on March 24, 1999 approximately seven kilometres from the French entry to the tunnel of the Mont-Blanc. A violent fire that lasted 53 hours caused the death of 39 people and the closure of the tunnel for three years. The investigation concluded that the communications systems (fire detectors, cameras, computers, etc.) had not worked properly. The director of tunnel safety was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to six months in prison. Communication can save lives.

Some years ago, on an island of the Azores, I read Jared Diamond's book Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed. Like so many that have read this book, I was particularly moved by his account of the collapse of the Easter Island society. From A.D. 900 onwards, the society, ruled top-down by chiefs and priests, had carried out one of history's most extreme examples of forest destruction. How was this 'eco-suicide' possible? Was it lack of reasoning and foresight? Did the Easter Islanders who cut down the last trees around A.D. 1600 think that future technology would solve their problems; that one should not fear because experts would find a substitute for wood? Societies may fail because information is kept by a few; because data is not communicated or properly analysed. Indeed, full access to information and responsible communication is central to assessing risks properly, be it on an individual or societal basis.

As Xavier Emmanuelli, the co-founder of MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES told me recently: 'We always prepare ourselves for the last war instead of preparing for the next to come...' and wishing good luck he added 'Public institutions will always be overwhelmed. So we need private initiatives like yours.' Our core initiatives are gathering risk related information and informing communities so that they may define their acceptability of risks in good order, making everyone aware of his own capacity to prevent a crisis, a disaster or a catastrophe, stimulating individuals and communities to prepare themselves better for the inevitable and last but not least helping with our hands and our skills when destiny strikes.

We, members of the ASSOCIATION OF RISK AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION, we put communication at the heart of risk and crisis management.

Yours sincerely,



**Herbert Koch, President**