

Evaluating the information and support website for Dutch bereaved of the MH17 airplane disaster in the Ukraine: findings from a mixed-method study

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Background: On the 17th of July 2014, all 298 passengers and crew members of flight MH17 lost their lives in a plane crash in Eastern Ukraine. There were 196 Dutch casualties. Within a day, Dutch government decided to roll out a model of information-distribution for the next of kin. An important part was the development of an information and support website (the Information and Referral Center: IRC). The IRC was openly accessible but contained a ‘closed section’ only to be accessed by users that accepted a token. It provided direct (one-stop-shop) information from a diversity of partners: Dutch government, Police, the Public Prosecution Service, the Dutch safety board, Victim Support Netherlands and Impact foundation. In addition, in the closed section it was possible for users to directly contact these parties when needed and to get into contact with each other (peer-to-peer contact). The IRC is part of a specific model or approach for victim support after mass fatality incidents in the Netherlands and is used in conjunction with the deployment of family liaison officers from the Dutch Police and case managers or volunteers from Victim Support Netherlands.

Aim: The development and organization of the Information and Referral Center, and the extent to which it was used by the target group was evaluated.

Method: A total of 128 bereaved filled out a questionnaire, and 22 bereaved participated in 5 focus groups to discuss their experiences with the IRC. Additionally, data was gathered via a pop-up questionnaire within the IRC, as well as user statistics. Finally, 16 representatives from agencies involved in the IRC were interviewed about expectations and experiences in developing the IRC.

Results: More than 500 messages from involved agencies were placed. Around 600 tokens were distributed. Bereaved also received IRC push-notifications and newsletters. Between November 2014 and February 2016, 44.429 sessions and 366.108 page views were counted. Three main IRC goals were tested. (1) Trustworthy information: is the IRC seen as a

dependable source of information? This was clearly the case. The availability of news before being broadcasted by other media was highly appreciated, as well as its news-archive function. Bereaved quickly learned to use the IRC as the most important source of information and to verify information from other (sometimes less reliable) sources. (2) Peer-to-peer contact. These findings were more ambiguous. Some of the bereaved used the IRC for personal contact, most however, had difficulties sharing via an open forum, and preferred real-life contact. (3) Collection of meaningful data on specific needs: Generating data on specific needs for additional care proved difficult.

Discussion: Systematic evaluations of online communities like the IRC are scarce. Underlying assumptions are rarely made explicit or tested. In this evaluation we made a start by discussing the assumptions on what an IRC should constitute with the target group. Based on this evaluation some main recommendations are:

1. Following a disaster or large scale crisis, an information and advice centre should be set up;
2. The IRC should be available for at least 2 years as a reliable source of information and an archive;
3. Where it's possible to do so, create a 'closed section' of the IRC;
4. Invest in promoting the IRC, both the closed section as well as the open section;
5. Facilitate peer to peer contact, but be attentive to the needs thereof by the affected;
6. "Peace time exercise" develop a basis IRC for various scenarios. Terrorism is a prime example. Maintain a network with cooperating partners around these and discuss the division of roles.