

Postal Security, Anthrax and beyond Europe's Posts and the Critical Network Challenge: Lessons from the Anthrax Case to Meet Future Challenges

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La Poste's chairman, Mr Vial, was in New York when he heard the news: According to AFP, two persons had been infected with anthrax in Germany, Europe's first confirmed cases in the mail-bourn terrorist scare of autumn 2001. He immediately tried to get in touch with his counterpart at Deutsche Post, to no avail. He was also unable to get a hold of the head of Royal Mail. Unfortunately, the news came on November 2, part of a long weekend holiday in much of Europe. Mr Vial had to settle for a conference call with a few of the staff members at La Poste who were working that day. Tension remained high until 8:30 p.m. that evening, when AFP finally announced that its earlier report had proved false.

For an industry such as the postal sector, being able to work together in times of crisis is crucial. Each day millions of letters and parcels are shipped across borders in Europe. As worries of contamination spread from the U.S. to Asia, Europe, and around the globe, it became clear to everyone, and not just those in the postal industry, just how interconnected the global postal network truly is.

PostEurop members and officers, of course, have long been aware of the interconnectedness of the operators. This interconnectedness can bring benefits, as when we are able to suggest to our members common solutions to common problems. But the anthrax crisis has also shown the flip side of the coin.

As fears of contamination spread beyond the U.S., posts acted individually in drawing up their contingency planning. But, although some informal contacts had been established among crisis managers, no co-ordinated effort had been made to deal with the crisis at the European level. The first lesson was self-evident: The post industry was prepared for specific, local or national crises. It was not for international interconnected crises. A lack of co-ordination and effective communications planning was

revealed. Clearly, a new area of risks and potential crises had emerged. As a result both the structure and culture of systems safety and crisis preparedness had to be revisited.

PostEurop has considerable experience in getting its members to tackle tough issues that can affect them all. This case was just another difficult challenge to meet. But when such a challenging issue emerges the process has to contain a mix of numerous ingredients. A number of coordinated and well designed initiatives created a key drive to the process. The determination of several public postal operators to put the issue on the agenda and to work hard on a benchmarking project gave the initial impulse. The intellectual input to clarify the challenge as well as general support coming from public postal operators throughout the continent and a strong innovative coordination capacity at European level was put in place. And, last but not least, the direct cooperation of USPS, directly confronted to the most severe front of this crisis, as well as other organisations such as the Universal Postal Union and CERP.

The most important factor contributing to success and of benefit to any complex international network confronted to such emerging threats with a potentially debilitating industry-wide impact, is sharing experiences on that very rich process launched in response to the crisis. This is the guiding principle of this paper, which focuses on the crucial issue, the global process of being prepared for crises, and not only the specific (national) results of crises on an individual basis.

An international initiative stemming from an international threat

If anthrax spores had managed to cross the Atlantic, either through terrorist designs or because of cross-contamination during sortine,

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European posts would have had a delicate situation on their hands. One of their chief concerns would have been ensuring the safety of their employees and the customers they serve, while seeking to minimise the disruption to a vital part of the economic motor. Moreover, in France employees are legally entitled to stop work if they have strong fears of immediate and severe threats.. This would have made it extremely difficult to keep postal operations running. Unfortunately, even though the alerts proved false, the system was terribly affected.

In April 2002, La Poste organised a national debriefing led by the French public postal operator (see Mr Hagenbourger's contribution). One of the conclusions of this debriefing was that it is urgent to set up an international planning and immediate response capacity. The idea for a European conference meeting on postal security can be traced back directly to Mr Vial's experience in November 2001. The objective was to ensure that never again Europe's posts would be at a loss to respond readily to a new crisis, especially one that could paralyse the entire European postal network.

At La Poste senior management was determined to act quickly, launching initiatives with their colleagues in other countries and PostEurop, an association whose membership at the time encompassed 42 public postal operators across Europe. Experts in public health issues would also be involved as well as experts in the area of managing emerging crises.

In June 2002, La Poste submitted a proposal to PostEurop's Management Board, suggesting holding a conference on the theme of postal security. A conference bringing together crisis management and security experts from all these postal operators, would offer an excellent occasion to exchange views on what different posts had learned from the anthrax crisis as well as on what they needed to do to cope better with future emergencies. The objectives were multiple:

- first, to share experiences and lessons from the anthrax crisis;
- secondly, to share ideas and proposals to improve the collective management of such emerging threats;
- thirdly, to establish a European crisis management capacity enabling crisis managers in public postal operators to network with their counterparts and with other international and European organisations, using a common platform.

Furthermore: while the anthrax crisis was a good starting point for discussions, the conference would go much further. The challenge was not anthrax per se, but the emergence of a whole new profile of crises.

It must be emphasised that after any crisis, the temptation is to focus exclusively on that event. PostEurop's conference intended to show that this is not enough, and that it can even be dangerously misleading. The crucial objective is to grasp the overall lessons that are linked to the underlying challenge, not to the self-evident tactical difficulties of the specific event. The old dictum ever present in the minds of crisis managers, "never be a crisis behind," has to be recalled.

Accordingly, it was felt that participants should be encouraged to share their thoughts and suggestions for improving the European postal industry's collective ability to respond to future crises. The ultimate goal of the conference was to gather such ideas and to serve as the launch pad for concrete initiatives that would strengthen the ability of PostEurop's members to communicate and handle whatever contingencies may lie ahead.

A European project: PostEurop's powerful involvement

PostEurop has a decade-long history of bringing together European public postal operators to talk about matters that concern them all. Over the years it focused members' attention on diverse issues, from EU enlargement to funding opportunities available from the UPU (Universal Postal Union) and to making the most out of new technologies. So when approached by La Poste with the idea of organising a conference on postal security, PostEurop was quick to express its interest.

Their members cover an immense territory, over 23 million sq. km., stretching from the Atlantic across to the Pacific. Many of their members exchange a large share of their international mail with their European counterparts, and for some of smaller members international mail can represent a large portion of total mail flows. It is in their interest, that they be able to work together effectively in the event of a crisis, and at PostEurop we have considerable experience in providing their members' staffs with opportunities to network with each other.. The utility of these networking opportunities has been demonstrated in many other areas. The anthrax scares in Europe pointed to how useful this could be in the context of postal safety and security as well. It was quickly agreed that the best way to proceed would be to hold a conference in Paris. The date was chosen: one year after the peak of the crisis, on 27-28 November 2002. •

Global dynamics for a groundbreaking collective initiative

The objective was not to organise another conference providing some ready-made crisis

management recipes. La Poste and PostEurop united their efforts to launch a collective move in order to stimulate common efforts. As is well known, what matters is the process, not just the results, and planning involves more than putting plans down on paper. Getting people is crucial for collective intelligence and successful innovation. This perspective lead to a wide-spread effort:

- La Poste sent out a questionnaire to its European counterparts to find out more about their experiences and expectations.
- Several representatives from European public postal operators were invited to talk about their experiences during the anthrax crisis: J.A. Rasink, TPG Post, The Netherlands; Edith Pfeifer, Deutsche Post AG, Germany; Chris Babbs, Royal Mail, United Kingdom ; Martin Hagenbourger, La Poste, France.
- Thomas Day, vice president of the U.S. Postal Service, was also approached and invited to the conference to provide a first-hand account of what it was like on the front lines in dealing the attacks and their aftermath.
- In addition, the organizing team met with European speakers and experts in advance. This was necessary to set in motion a common approach and framework for dealing with the issue. The objective was not only to obtain a series of presentation, but to construct a common dynamics—for the conference itself and, more important, for the outcome and follow-up after the conference. In crisis preparedness, networking is vital, and this aspect was thoroughly integrated into the planning for the conference.
- A small team including specialists in crisis management (affiliated with the *European Crisis Management European Academy-ECMA*:

Patrick Lagadec, Arjen Boin, Werner Overdijk) was set up to help in preparing the conference. Their task was to help incorporate what crisis management experts in the field have already learned elsewhere, providing conference participants with current vision of the issues at stake. Erwann Michel Kerjan, from the Wharton School of Business in the United States was asked to clarify the US advances in the areas of critical infrastructure and emerging global crises.

- PostEurop brought support to reach members and to bring experts and official involvement.

Representatives from 30 public postal operators came to Paris in late November 2002 to share their experiences, to suggest new avenues for research and to launch a debate on new operational capabilities. Novel crisis situations require high-level involvement which explains why international organisations such as the Universal Postal Union, CERP (Comité Européen de Régulation Postale) as well as USPS (United States Postal Service) were present at the conference. Mr Thomas Day, Vice-Président of USPS, accepted to cross over the Atlantic to give the vivid testimony from the directly affected country.

Finally, as had been determined during the preparations for the conference, it was felt important to put down together the main ideas in writing. That was the idea of a special issue in this journal. Again, the objective is to disseminate the experiences, to learn from them and to share our best practices. That has resulted in this special issue: several papers focused on the main lessons to clarify the whole stake and to suggest the key perspectives which need to be developed to meet the new emerging challenges in the area of risks, crises and critical networks.