

Backup for critical functions?

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Did you also see the Dutch public national news broadcast on 'NPO 1' of 30 January at 8 pm? Or better, did you look and you see a message that it was not possible to broadcast the news due to so called 'conditions'? At home we looked at each other and we were joking about a sick intern. However, it was soon clear that there was something strange going on. After all, the message was not like 'because of a failure, there is no broadcast'.



More than an hour later we watched an extra news broadcast on the commercial station RTL 4, where everyone could see the 19-year-old Tarik Z. with a weapon in his hand talking to a guard. Then agents arrived into the studio and overpowered the intruder. This image has gone around the world.

There was something ironic in retrospect. A young student

who was confused and with a fake gun who, in his own words, wanted to discuss on behalf of intelligence services bigger problems during the national news broadcast, with about 2,5 million viewers (not counting myself ☺)¹. But it is even more ironic that our national disaster TV channel does not function when one essential link is not available (there are however regional channels in case of disaster²). The direction of the channel was the critical link. This is located in one building and has no backup. We could therefore see the arrest on the commercial competitor. Commercial broadcasters may provide the role of emergency transmitter, but you never know for sure. After all, they have another interest than the public channels.

On the internet site of the NOS (organization who provides the news broadcast) it can be read that this summer a comprehensive backup is available. 'With that contingency technicians can control the final direction of the three public TV stations remotely', as can be read on the website. That means it does not happen again a broadcast on the emergency channel is not possible, because the backup fulfills the dysfunctional critical link when needed. Right?

That is the question. Having a backup is not everything. Many people who wanted to travel by train on 2 February around the town of Utrecht, have experienced that a backup does not always work. Around 8 o'clock in the morning the computers of the rail traffic control company 'ProRail' failed and the backup system then was overloaded³. This put all train traffic around Utrecht to a halt. In the afternoon, the traffic slowly recovered, but there were delays until the evening. This was not the first time that there were problems; On 22 January the IT system was also 'stuck'. Then there was an IT network failure⁴.

In case of failure on 2 February, we are talking about approximately 230.000 passengers⁵, where an hour delay by train is valued at 19,75 euros per passenger⁶. In a supposed delay of 3 hours per person

¹ <http://www.mediacourant.nl/category/kijkcijfers/>

² Here the Dutch regional channels are shown: <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/veiligheid-en-terrorisbestrijding/vraag-en-antwoord/wat-is-de-rampenzender-in-mijn-omgeving.html>

³ <http://www.nrcq.nl/2015/02/02/storing-treinverkeer-werd-veroorzaakt-door-ict-problemen>

⁴ <http://tweakers.net/nieuws/101158/ict-systemen-prorail-blijken-niet-bestand-tegen-stroomstoring.html>

⁵ <http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stations Utrecht Centraal>

(and I suspect that this is a conservative estimate), we are talking about 15 million euros of failure costs for travelers. For that money, you can do some investing in IT systems. Some parliament members also call for measures to improve the information systems.

With the news on 30 January on the on channel 'NPO 1' there was no backup making a broadcast on a critical station impossible. On the track around Utrecht there was a backup, but that did not work. A backup is no guarantee that in case of problems the required function is available. ProRail has now noticed it twice painfully.

Let's go back to the 'old' PAS55. This standard stated explicit demands on emergency measures in section 4.4.7: 'emergency planning and response'. There it can be read an organization should determine whether the periodic or (emergency) measures are effective. Companies that were certified in accordance with PAS55 and identified emergency measures, were well prepared in that respect (but then you have to define a situation like with the news or on the track as an emergency). PAS55 is 'exit' and we now have the ISO55001 standard. The emergency measures are less explicitly mentioned the new standard than in PAS55, but this does not necessarily have to be less effective. ISO55001 assumes that the emergency measures including periodic testing are part of the general control of risks. If a result of a risk assessment is that backups are required, it also means that they must be tested and trained.

Summary: it is not only important to focus on management of non-acceptable risks, they should of course be tested at appropriate times and you should exercise the control measures in case of an emergency. Otherwise you can have unwanted surprises.

BTW: Does your CO detector as backup for a non-working protection of your water heater still work? ⁷

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⁶ <http://www.nrc.nl/carriere/2013/06/17/uurtje-in-de-file-kost-2625-euro/>

⁷ <http://www.assetresolutions.nl/en/column/does-mot-for-gas-heaters-and-boilers-make-sense>