

Crisis Communications and Sharing Message Control

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INTRODUCTION

Communicating during a crisis is now on an international stage. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) allow people to seek and share information that extends beyond the messages that organizations craft. Firms have found that they no longer control crisis information because their stakeholders can create and share messages, sometimes more quickly and more accurately, than the organization experiencing the crisis. While some organizations have adapted to share the message creation process with their stakeholders, other groups are challenged by these changes.

Today multiple stakeholders receive and use diverse forms of information during a crisis. Our goals for this article are three-fold. First, we review the interdisciplinary, historical literature on crisis communication. The second goal is to provide a comprehensive summary of the combinatorial nature of communication and information technologies when used in crisis situations today. This section highlights some of the latest research on how social media are used to communicate in crises and emergencies, such as threats on university campuses, product recalls, and wildfires. Finally, we discuss the future of this research and the role that ICTs will play in future crisis communication.

BACKGROUND

The term “crisis” is defined as a situation that can escalate in intensity, alter the normal operating condition of an organization, and potentially affect the organization’s image and bottom line (Fink, 1986). Crises include things like natural disasters, accidents, and product recalls (Seeger, 2006), and they are some-

times considered alongside studies of emergencies (e.g., Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). When communicating during crises and emergencies, there are high levels of uncertainty; thus there is a crucial need to share information that is accurate and timely (Coombs, 1999; Quarantelli, 1998; Seeger, 2006; Sorensen, 2000). Yet sending mass messages during a crisis might not reach the intended audience and can overload servers (Mastrodicasa, 2008).

While studying crisis communication is vital for understanding how to manage emerging situations, it is difficult to place crisis communication into a single discipline because scholars from several fields engage in related work. For example, the field of public relations has focused on understanding crisis message strategies (e.g., Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 1999; Stephens, Malone, & Bailey, 2005) and recent models explain how social media and technology are used during a crisis (e.g., Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012). The field of crisis informatics bridges disciplines like information technology and emergency management in their efforts to explain how technology plays a key role in crisis communication (Hughes & Palen, 2009; Palen et al., 2010; Palen, Vieweg, & Liu, 2009; Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2008; Stephens, Barrett, & Mahometa, 2013). Finally, the field of disaster sociology has an established tradition of understanding human behavior during a crisis or emergency (e.g., Quarantelli, 1998; Sorensen, 2000).

A common term used in the crisis literature is, “stakeholder.” This term originates from the field of management and Freeman’s (1984) original work conceptualizing stakeholders as groups of people or organizations that a firm has to manage because of their “stake” in the firm’s business. In their article reviewing the advances in stakeholder theory from its inception,

Parmer et al. (2010) demonstrate how stakeholder theory has changed over time. Stakeholder management is now viewed as a way to connect both ethics and capitalism, as well as help managers understand how value is created through these relationships. This bi-directional view of how stakeholders and organizations interact provides a comprehensive framework for examining crisis communication.

Trends in recent research in the area of crisis communication focus on taking a proactive approach to helping communities become more resilient to crises and emergencies and many types of ICTs are helping build resilient communication systems. “Community resilience” is defined as a process that links networks of resources to help communities adapt in times of adversity (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008). These resources include four main categories: social capital, information and communication, community competence, and economic development (Norris et al., 2008). When examining crisis communication and community resilience, it is important to consider that different types of technologies—including face-to-face communication—might be used depending on the community, the type of crisis or emergency, access to technology, and the degree of devastation.

Identifying Core Issues in Crisis Communication

At the heart of many issues surrounding a crisis is communication—a meaningful exchange of opinions, ideas, words, nonverbal cues, or symbols—that provide people direction and help them understand the crisis. By nature, crises are events characterized by high levels of uncertainty (Mitroff, 2004). The cause and consequences of these events, the organizational response, as well as the public’s perception of a crisis, all generate uncertainty (Ray, 1999). Communication functions to reduce uncertainty before, during, and after a crisis occurs. Although prior research emphasizes organizational accountability in reaching stakeholders with pertinent information during a crisis (Lyon, 2004), uncertainty drives people to take initiative and locate relevant information (Palen et al., 2010). In the past decade, technology has played a key role in reducing uncertainty, especially in situations where

time-sensitive issues are left unattended by organizations (Palen et al., 2010).

Researchers continually attest to the importance of communication during a crisis and its role in effective management (e.g. Barton, 1993; Coombs, 1999; Hale, Dulek, & Hale 2005). Historically, organizations have had time to negotiate their response to a crisis and, if needed, meticulously craft their post-crisis messages. Technology has changed these norms. Now mass communication is not a privilege held solely by organizations or broadcast media. Instead, personalized communication devices have ushered in a new age of crisis-response behaviors. “By viewing the citizenry as a powerful, self-organizing, and collectively intelligent force, ICT has the potential to play a remarkable and transformational role in the way society responds to mass emergencies and disasters” (Palen et al., 2010). Increasing the ability to share information has shifted the message control from organizations, to the individual level. In fact, there are instances when organizations rely on individuals to produce information for the organization (e.g. citizen journalism; see Wigley & Fonenot, 2010).

Research Focusing on Crisis Phases

While crisis communication is often associated with a specific event, in the past decade emergency managers and crisis planners have begun expanding their view to include the full cycle of communication practices (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005) including pre-crisis, during crisis, and or post-crisis actions and reactions. Research on the pre-crisis phase encourages organizations to plan for various types of crises and craft messages in advance that can be used during the chaotic eruption of the crisis (e.g., Coombs, 1999). This research stresses that the relationships organizations have with their stakeholders prior to the crisis can help organizations recover from crises more quickly (Ulmer, 2001).

During and After a Crisis: One of the most studied areas of crisis communication includes the rhetorical and apology strategies organizations use to explain how a crisis unfolds (Benoit, 1997; Coombs 1999). These strategies include messages that (a) try to enhance the reputation of the organization experiencing the crisis, (b) try to place fault, and (c) explain how the organization will ensure that this crisis will be handled appropriately.

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