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Jeanine Guidry and **Marcus Messner**, Virginia Commonwealth University, **Yan Jin**, University of Georgia, **Shana Meganck**, Virginia Commonwealth University, and **Jerome Niyirora**, SUNY Polytechnic Institute

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Ali Symons, McMaster University/Syracuse University

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Kimmo Taiminen and Vilma Luoma-aho, University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and **Katerina Tsetsura**, University of Oklahoma

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Laura C. Thomas, Method Communications, and **Pamela Brubaker**, Brigham Young University

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Katerina Tsetsura and **Kelsie Aziz**, University of Oklahoma

The paper investigates current media transparency practices in the USA. The survey of 287 PRSA members showed that direct media bribery is not a pressing issue in the USA; however, indirect media pressures that involve new forms of content creation, including native advertising and content marketing, are worrisome.

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Institute for Public Relations Top Three Papers of Practical Significance Award

Christopher Wilson, Brigham Young University

Drawing on insights from systems theory and research on relationships, this study identifies one value (i.e., organizational openness) and two perceptions (i.e., environmental complexity and organizational autonomy) that have the potential to influence dominant coalition members’ decision making. The study adopts the upper echelons perspective from organization theory to examine the relationships among these variables.

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Ansgar Zerfass, University of Leipzig, Germany & BI Norwegian Business School, Oslo, Norway, and **Juliane Kiesenbauer**, University of Leipzig, Germany

This study takes a close look at leaders shaping the professional field now and in the future. Qualitative interviews with 20 chief communication officers (CCOs) from global brands like Bayer, BASF, Bosch, BP, DHL, Microsoft, Pfizer, Puma, Siemens and 20 future leaders (Generation Y) in the same companies were conducted. The analysis identifies cognitive patterns and offers ideas for further, comparative research.

Crisis Information Generation and Spread: Examining the Influence of Traditional and Social Media in Crisis Response through the Lens of Media Professionals

Lucinda L. Austin
Elon University

Yan Jin
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Abstract

During crises media play a vital role in generating and spreading crisis information; however, few studies have examined the intertwined role media play during crises, particularly from the perspective of the media. Guided by the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012; Jin & Liu, 2010), this study explores: (1) how traditional and social media produce crisis information for publics and stakeholders affected by a crisis, (2) how traditional and social media utilize each other to disseminate crisis information, and (3) the perceived role of social media in crisis communication. Forty in-depth interviews lasting just under an hour on average were conducted with experienced media professionals at regional and national U.S. news outlets covering organizational crises, natural disasters, and man-made disasters, such as terrorist attacks. Findings provided insider insights on the differences and connections traditional media channels and social media platforms have with regard to their roles, functions, and influences in crisis information generation and dissemination. Study findings provide the first empirical evidence for the media links and interactions theorized in the SMCC model. Additionally, findings present best practices for communicating effectively about crises with stakeholders and publics who need rapid, yet accurate, crisis information tailored to increasingly shifting media platforms from the perspectives of seasoned media professionals.

The role of social media in crisis communication has been well documented by public relations scholars and practitioners over the past decade, particularly in how social media can create new challenges and opportunities for crisis communicators and publics (e.g., Austin & Jin, in press; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011). Yet, considerably less attention has been given to how social media may affect how journalists cover crises – despite increasingly blurring lines among social media such as Twitter and traditional media such as broadcast news. For example, a Pew Research Center study found that while the 2014 shooting death of an unarmed teenager in Ferguson, Missouri broke on Twitter, coverage of the crisis “rose in tandem” on Twitter and cable news (Hitlin & Vogt, 2014, para.1).

Understanding how the changing media environment affects media professionals’ crisis coverage is particularly important given that the media frame how publics perceive organizational crisis responses and responsibility (An & Gower, 2009). Additionally, media can provide life-saving information about protective actions publics should take during crises, such as complying with food recall messages (Freberg, 2012), and facilitate crisis recovery by providing venues for information sharing among organizations, community leaders, and publics (Procopio & Procopio, 2010).

Accordingly, this study is perhaps the first to examine in-depth how media professionals cover crisis responses through 40 interviews with experienced media professionals at regional and national U.S. news outlets. Findings inform the social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model, one of the only theoretical frameworks that comprehensively examines how crisis information is produced, shared, and consumed by media professionals, publics, and crisis communicators (Jin & Liu, 2010). Furthermore, findings provide empirical-based insights into how media professionals are adapting to the changing media landscape, which can inform how crisis communicators interact with media professionals.

Literature Review

The Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model

The Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) Model is the first theoretical model to explore the complex landscape of social media and traditional media specific to crisis communication (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012; Jin & Liu, 2010). The SMCC model provides evidence-based guidelines to help crisis communicators decide if, when, and how to respond to influential social media, while also acknowledging the influence of traditional media and offline word-of-mouth communication (Liu, Jin, Austin, & Janoske, 2012). The SMCC model describes the relationship between an organization, key publics, social media, traditional media, and offline word-of-mouth communication before, during, and after crises (See Figure 1).

First, the SMCC model identifies three key publics who seek, produce, or share information before, during, and after crises: influential social media creators, social media followers, and social media inactives (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014). Further, the model highlights three main forms of crisis communication, including social media, traditional media, and offline word-of-mouth communication. Arrows in the model represent direct and indirect relationships in the flow of information during crises among different publics, media, and organizations. The SMCC model includes five considerations for organizations in their response to emerging issues

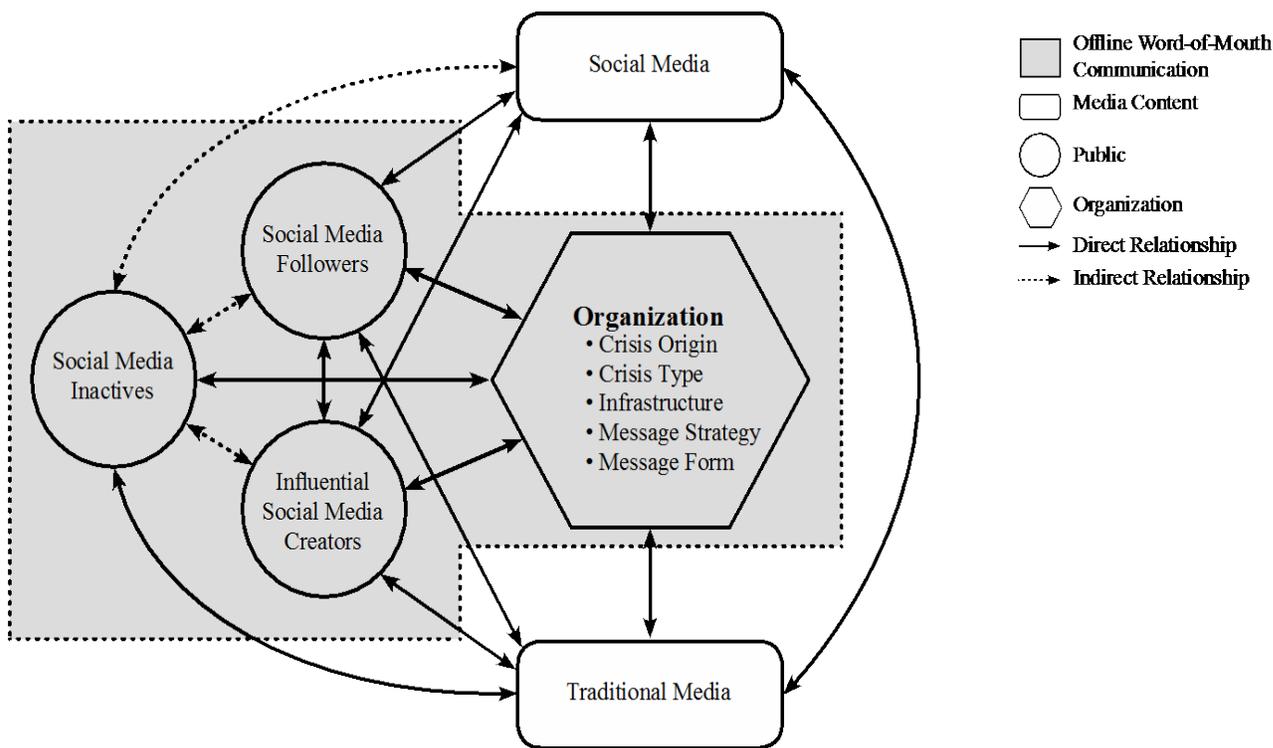


Figure 1. Social Mediated Crisis Communication Model

and crises: (1) *crisis origin* (i.e., who/what caused the crisis – internal vs. external), (2) *crisis type* (i.e., how the crisis took form and the related extent of perceived organizational blameworthiness), (3) *organizational infrastructure* (i.e., the extent to which organization-wide response is warranted – centralized vs. localized), (4) *crisis message strategy* (i.e., crisis communication content), and (5) *crisis message form* (i.e., the communication channel used to distribute the message – social media, traditional media, or WOM) (Liu, Jin, Austin, & Janoske, 2012).

To date, the SMCC model has been tested through interviews and experiments with crisis communicators at nonprofit organizations and strategic communications agencies, and publics of organizational crises. Previous research has explored how factors such as crisis origin (e.g., emanating from the organization or from an outside entity), crisis information form (i.e., traditional media, social/new media, or word of mouth), and crisis information source (i.e., organization or a third party) affect publics' emotional and cognitive responses to crisis information, their information seeking patterns and crisis communicative tendencies, as well as acceptance of crisis response strategies (e.g., Austin et al., 2012; Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011; Liu, Jin, & Austin, 2013; Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2012; Jin, Liu, Anagondahalli, & Austin, 2014). Additionally, interviews with senior-level crisis communicators at strategic communications agencies have integrated an expanded focus on crisis recovery in addition to crisis response, identifying factors for effective recovery from crisis (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2014). The SMCC model has also been applied to disaster communication contexts (e.g., Liu, Jin, Briones, & Kuch, 2012; Liu, Fraustino, & Jin, 2015). This study builds upon the SMCC model by incorporating journalists' perspectives, an important group of content creators and sharers in times of crisis

whose perspectives have not yet been incorporated into empirical SMCC model research or other theory-driven work on crisis communication.

Crisis Information Processing and Sharing

Decades of research reveal that before deciding whether to take action during crises, at-risk publics first seek crisis information including what they should do to respond to threats. At-risk publics then share (and discuss) information about what actions they may need to take before potentially reacting (Mileti & Sorenson, 1990). Finally, after mitigating any personal harm, publics turn to understanding crisis causes and assigning crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2015).

Of course, access to social media has sped up crisis information seeking and sharing for those directly affected by crises and those merely interested in crises (Schultz et al., 2011; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013). Assuming social media access, we often can now learn about crises within minutes, and create our own crisis content within the same timeframe. Access to social media during crises can also provide a variety of crisis information sources, which in turn may affect how at-risk publics process crisis information (Liu et al., 2015). Yet, collectively, research increasingly shows that during crises at-risk publics desire information from a variety of forms (i.e., social media, traditional media, and offline communication) and sources (e.g., government, journalists, and family/friends (Freberg, 2012; Palen, Starbird, Vieweg, & Hughes, 2010; Schultz et al., 2011; Wogalter, 2006). Indeed, the latest research cautions against what some call the social media bandwagon, and instead urges crisis communicators to use a variety of information forms and sources to reach diverse at-risk publics (Liu et al., 2015, in press). For example, in an experiment, Liu et al. (2015) found that no single form and source combination consistently predicted behavioral intentions in response to a hypothetical bombing crisis.

Accordingly, social media are not silver bullets during crises, and a variety of information forms (and sources) are needed during crises. Indeed, content provided by social media is often quite terse (Sutton et al., 2014) or less rich than other media that allow for more visual and social cues such as face-to-face communication (Draft & Lengel, 1984). Consequently, when publics first learn about crises via social media, they often seek additional information such as from television, which offers expanded cues or higher richness, as explained by information and communication technologies (ICT) succession theory (Stephens, 2007).

Scholars proposed the social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model to capture how a variety of information forms and sources impact at-risk publics' information seeking and sharing as well as their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors surrounding crises, (e.g., Jin & Liu, 2010; Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2013). The SMCC model explains and predicts the process of direct and indirect influence of social media in distributing crisis information via social media, traditional media, and word-of-mouth, as further explained below. Yet, all research to date has examined at-risk publics' information seeking and sharing, rather than how social and traditional media produce crisis information, and outside of SMCC model research there also is a dearth of research on this topic, as explained further below.

Media Professionals' Role in Spreading Information in Times of Crisis

Research shows that, traditional media remain stakeholders' primary source of crisis information (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012), as the information they provide helps reduce threat during times of ambiguity (Wilson, 2004). However, individuals also turn to social media during crises to obtain the most up-to-date information (Moreo, 2012), and much crisis information

reported on social media comes from traditional media (Reynolds & Seeger, 2012). Therefore, both social and traditional media are essential in information dissemination during crises. Media professionals as the content creators for traditional and social media, play an important role in crisis information dissemination.

The SMCC model was one of the first theoretical frameworks to explain how social media, traditional media, and word-of-mouth communication interact to inform at-risk publics during crises. In the model, Jin and Liu (2010) proposed identifying three audience types that interact to share and produce information before, during, and after crises, which later research elaborated on: influential social media creators, social media followers, and social media inactives (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Liu, Jin, Austin, & Janoske, 2012). *Influential social media creators* immediately recognize the gravity of a crisis or potential crisis and are able and motivated to talk about it online. *Social media followers* receive crisis information from influential social media creators either directly or indirectly. *Social media inactives* do not directly receive crisis information from social media, but may receive information shared via social media through offline word-of-mouth communication or as reported by media (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012).

This framework points to the possibility of individuals, media, and crisis response organizations becoming influential social media creators during crises. Of these three stakeholders, however, traditional media seem to be the primary source of crisis information across all platforms. As Reynolds and Seeger (2012) concluded, the majority of social media crisis content comes from traditional media. This finding is supported by another study that found tweets that provided links to news sites are retweeted, but tweets that provide only personal accounts during crises are not as likely to be retweeted (Chew & Eysenbach, 2010). In addition, Revers' (2014) study revealed the adoption of Twitter in media professionals' daily practices, as well as tensions between professional control and transparency in journalism beyond the success of Twitter, in terms of how Twitter has been adopted by media professionals to engage audiences and disseminate news.

The influence of traditional media is also strong for social media followers and inactives. For example, Reynolds and Seeger (2012) found that the majority of those online during crises are social media followers because most people consume rather than create crisis content. For social media inactives, traditional media tend to be the main source of crisis information (Littlefield & Quenette, 2007; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998). Meantime, these social media inactives may choose to use social media for the first time in a crisis situation, the experience of which may trigger further social media usage and even make social media inactives become social media followers. In addition, in crisis situations, opinions and needs voiced by social media inactives may be disseminated online by influential social media creators and other followers, given their importance and relevance to crisis coverage. Mostly recently, Liu et al. (2015) found significant main effects of disaster information form and source, including local and national news media, but no single form and source combination consistently predicted behavioral intentions.

Therefore, across the three audience types who seek, produce, or share information before, during, and after crises (e.g., influential social media creators, social media followers, and social media inactives), media professionals are a key crisis information source for social media creators and social media followers and also serve as influential social media creators. At the same time, other influential social media creators, such as bloggers, also provide a key information crisis creation and dissemination role and are often followed by media professionals or journalists. While considerable research investigates how traditional and social media frame

crises through content analyses of crisis coverage (An & Gower, 2009; Durham, 1998; Scheufele, Nisbet, & Ostman, 2005; Tsung-Jen, Wijaya, & Brossard, 2008), no existing study has examined how these media create content through speaking to the creators themselves. As researchers note, the crisis communication field largely lacks insider insights (Heath, 2010; Kim & Dutta, 2009). Therefore, by interviewing media professionals who create and spread information via traditional media and social media channels, this study fills a key knowledge gap through providing insider insights into the role media professionals play in producing and spreading information in times of crisis.

Research Questions

Based on the above literature and the current gaps in the crisis communication field described, we explore the following research questions from media professionals' vantage point:

RQ1: How do media professionals produce and distribute crisis information?

RQ2: How do media professionals perceive the role of social media in crisis communication?

Methods

Forty in-depth, phone interviews were conducted with experienced media professionals at regional and national U.S. news outlets. Media professionals covered a variety of types of crises, including organizational crises, health crises, and natural disasters. At a minimum, participants were the primary writer or reporter for a crisis during the past year; however, participants had on average 20 years of professional media experience (Mean = 20.05, SD = 12.95). In this study, crisis was defined broadly as to capture the participants' diverse rich experiences: "unpredictable incidents that threaten organizations, communities, and publics; these may be disasters such as severe weather events, organizational misdeeds, terrorist attacks, scandals, etc."

Media professionals were recruited through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling strategies to ensure maximum variation of geographic location, type of media, and sector of media coverage. Interviews lasted on average around an hour, depending on participants' responses and availability. Researchers stopped conducting interviews when the answers to the research questions displayed depth and variations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Interviews were conducted following a semi-structured interview guide of open-ended questions exploring the research questions listed above. Participants were asked to provide examples of recent crises they had covered in their form of media, how they first learned about the crisis, how they shared information about the crisis, and how they interacted with others—including stakeholders and other forms of media—to learn more and share information about the crisis. Participants were also asked about their view of the role of both traditional and social media in information generation and dissemination during crises.

The phone interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Researchers systematically analyzed transcripts through Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2013) data analysis procedures: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Interview transcripts were coded, line-by-line, using Atlas.ti and NVivo during the data reduction phase. Researchers merged related codes into common themes and exported the data into thematic, conceptually clustered matrices in Microsoft Excel to enable systematic collection and comparison.

Findings

RQ1: How Do Media Professionals Produce and Distribute Crisis Information?

Interview participants' thoughts on crisis information production covered seven themes, which sometimes overlapped: (1) emotional intelligence, (2) enterprise reporting, (3) media collaboration and competition, (4) integration, (5) breaking news, (6) information filtering and aggregation, and (7) information seeking and news generation. A few participants felt they had limited interaction between forms of media during crisis reporting, due to the fast-paced nature of crises.

Emotional intelligence. Interview participants voiced the importance of emotional intelligence in producing crisis news. First, emotional intelligence allowed them to connect better to sources, thereby improving crisis news coverage as well meeting goals of compassion for crisis victims. For example, one participant noted:

When I am there a couple of days and had a little more time to work with my story, I tried to get to know these people before I said 'hey can I put a camera in your face,' you know, so if you listen to them first, they're a lot more likely to say 'yeah, I'd love to share my story with you.'

Or, as another participant observed: "Capture the emotion of the crisis. That's what separates journalism from simple bullet point gathering." Finally, a third participant stated: "We never called it a massacre. We're very sensitive about that word. It's shooting...if it makes us cringe it's going to make our readers cringe a lot quicker than that."

Second, emotional intelligence assisted media producers in balancing their own emotional responses to crises while producing objective journalism. For example, one participant stated:

It's just a weird balance of all these things you have to be able to stomach to go and see things that generally people don't want to see yet you have to have the sensitivity to cover those things while you're there and the stability to be able to deal with those feelings afterwards, and all those things are held at a tricky balance.

Or, as another participant stated: "It took me a second when I first got to Haiti to calm myself down...you've got to constantly work to keep yourself out of it. Keep your own ideas and feelings out of it. It's hard."

Enterprise reporting. Participants agreed that a hallmark of today's crisis news coverage is speed including quick social media updates and finding unique angles not covered by others. Or, as one participant noted:

I'm trying to stay abreast and do what we call enterprise reporting...So we're looking at new areas that haven't been reported that might shed light on what the situation...In today's era you write something immediately for the Web, and then you also, later on in the day you'll update that and/or write a separate story for the newspaper.

Or as another participant stated: "We're running around like chickens with our heads cut off because we're worried about video; we're worrying about tweeting; we're worrying about blogs or thinking about the story for a project we're supposed to be working on."

In terms of the speed aspect of enterprise reporting, participants viewed this as a double-edged sword. On one hand, speed allowed media to quickly alert the public about public safety issues. For example, one participant observed:

Obviously in a lot of those situations TVs are knocked out, but cell phone apps, Twitter, weather apps, like those things are important for the media to put out the information to protect the public and you know help them recover.

On the other hand, speed sometimes leads to inaccurate reporting, which some participants noted distinguishes journalists from others producing crisis information online. As one participant commented:

So, my big thing is these social media groups see themselves as news reporters and journalists but they've never had the training, they don't have the background. This group has 36,000 followers on Facebook. And they just put stuff out there willy nilly like it's God's word and it happened. And when you do more digging, maybe that shooting is a suicide. Does the public really need to know about that? Or maybe that fire really isn't that big, maybe it's just a little dryer fire and it's all going to be gone in a matter of ten minutes, does the public really need to know?

Or as another participant stated: "New media is very valuable for getting information out fast and to more places sometimes than traditional media can sometimes. Of course, the corollary of fast is not always correct." Accordingly, several participants discussed the importance of waiting to produce news until facts are verified, which they saw as more important than being first,

A final aspect of enterprise reporting discussed by participants was how social media can facilitate finding sources and fact checking. For example, one participant said:

I found a bogus class that the university offered, because I was fishing around on some of these course grading websites. I started checking out, when I saw the list of bogus classes, I started plugging them into these websites. And on one there was a student who actually had written a review of the class. And he said, "I wish I knew that this class wasn't going to meet and that I was just supposed to write a paper." This person was really kind of surprised and disappointed. And I wrote about that and a short while later I actually heard from somebody who was very familiar with that class and gave me a whole bunch of information about the athletes that were in that class. And it really showed just how much of a connection there was between these bogus classes and the athletic department. It was a pretty significant development, and largely because of, again, using the social media tools that are out there.

However, participants also noted the importance of talking directly to people (not via social media), particularly when feasible geographically.

Media collaboration and competition. Participants expressed a tension between collaborating with other media forms to produce crisis stories vs. being in competition. Overall, collaboration occurred more frequently when covering natural and man-made disasters compared to reputation crises. As one participant noted: "A lot of times media works together during those kinds of things [hurricanes]. You're not in competition anymore." Or, as another participant shared:

And there's generally a willingness to share information that's, I hate to say mundane, but still very important, but if someone took time to call the hospital and you didn't get a chance to do that yet then you made another call, perhaps two reporters, even if they're competitors, would swap that information and say well here's what the hospital said, what do you know about this?

Collaboration even came in the form of taking turns napping, as another participant recollected: And then I was sitting next door to a Reuter's reporter for the whole day. I think we sat next to each other for 16 hours straight. It got to the point there where, you know, breaking news, I don't know, there's not real competition. If you wanted to grab a quick three minute nap he would stay up and be there and wake you if something happened and

vice versa. You're interacting there and you're sharing tips and sharing information just to make sure that everybody is caught up to speed.

Collaboration also came in the form of taking turns covering press conferences and providing video footage, as another participant revealed:

We came up with very informal what we call pool arrangements. Where one station or network will shoot a press conference or will shoot some scenics of the city and then share it with your competitors. Just because it's something we're all going to use, so no reason that everybody's doing the same thing. One organization would take the morning press conference and the other would take the afternoon, things like that.

However, some participants stated that they do not collaborate with their competition. For example: "It's very competitive. I didn't have any contact, I just ignored the other reporters." Or, as another participant stated: "We were competing with other members of the media to be a source for people to go to. So my focus was more on my guys and getting my guys out there."

Most often, competition seemed to be covert, rather than overt, in the form of needing "to break the crisis story first."

Participants mentioned the competition most in regards to the fast-paced nature of crisis coverage on social media. For example, as a participant stated:

You look at something like the Newtown shootings and how many times the wrong name was reported there by major news outlets because they were trying to be first and they were trying to be fast. I think major news outlets feel like they're competing with, you know, John Doe on Twitter at this point to be first. You don't want some anonymous guy to get retweeted 500 times and be the source on the story when you're [*national paper*]. And that kind of competition is really hard to figure out.

Integration. For participants who utilized social media and more traditional forms of journalistic writing, many saw traditional and social media as intertwined and integrated. To illustrate the intertwined and integrated nature, one participant stated:

I don't really see them as different necessarily... When I need to know stuff, I look to the NY Times and the Washington Post on their Facebook pages, on their Twitter feeds, where they send me mobile alerts, so that's a print news organization that's disseminating information about a crisis. During the Boston Marathon bombing, I'm from New England, and I was not there when the BM Bombing happened but I was very concerned for my family members...in that area so I was constantly, constantly reading the Boston Globe online and looking at their Twitter feed and that's a newspaper but those are also social media things.

Participants at smaller or regional media organizations expressed that they were often the social media presence for the news organization, in addition to their other coverage roles, such as writing in-depth stories:

Well I think that somewhere like [*national paper*], they have a much larger staff and they may even have someone who is just a social media specialist and that's all they do.

Their focus is just what information needs to be put out on various social platforms, checking to see what people are saying, retweeting. Whereas a smaller outlet like [*regional paper*] there were like 6 of us on that entire staff. So we had to do the social media side, we had to keep working under pressure to print each edition as well.

Breaking news. Though not surprising, participants emphasized the "breaking news" nature of crises. What may be surprising, is that participants shared a wide variety of sources they use to first find out about a crisis: telephone calls from the public, whistle blowers, or

officials; in-person conversations; visual and audio cues; a large grouping of reporters at a scene; Facebook; Twitter; press releases; police scanners; wire services; and major news outlets like CNN. When discussing these sources, participants emphasized the importance of verifying information before producing crisis news, particularly information provided by citizen journalists. For example, one participant stated:

You know, if Joe Blow comes with a video of something, how did they get it, what was the motivation, and was this a legitimate video or was it staged video? Because I think that the risk of being pranked in this day and age is so tremendous.

Or, as another participant observed:

Say there's an accident, or something, a crisis, like an overturned tractor-trailer, we would depend on citizens for eyewitness accounts. But I think it's dangerous when eyewitness accounts start turning into opinions. Every reporter has an opinion, but he has to filter that, there has to be a gatekeeper. I don't think there's as many gatekeepers in new media, and I think we still try to play that role.

However, not all participants relied on citizen journalists. Indeed, a small minority was opposed to relying on them at all. For example, one participant said: "It's not like we have people sending us their iPhone videos of hostage situations or things like that. So I'd say that's [relying on citizen journalists] at a minimum right now."

Information filtering and aggregation. Another key finding related to breaking news was a consensus that social media are best for sharing facts, but traditional media are better for filtering information to provide comprehensive crisis reporting. As one participant observed:

I would say with social media you have instantaneous, you have completely unfiltered information. You just have raw data. I think some people call it journalism but to me it's not journalism, it's just raw data that's being put out.

Or, as another participant said:

I think one is, on the social media side it's a stream of consciousness of those who are producing things like that; it's not in-depth stories and coverage being posted, I'd say it's more of anecdotal, quick heads being posted on the social media side versus the more traditional media side is going to have bulk and substance.

Finally, participants discussed how social media could be useful for promoting their traditional media coverage of crises and for interacting with the public after producing crisis news. For example, one media professional stated about utilizing social media channels to complement his coverage, "Well I mean, most reporters retweet their stories or tweet little blurbs or little facts here and there as they're putting the story together. That's what I see most people doing." Another participant noted that, "Every news organization has the capability to become that 5 minute news organization that updates Twitter, updates Facebook, and sends out email alerts. So the difference is really between organizations that use that and organizations that don't."

Information seeking and news generation. Participants reported utilizing social media for information seeking and as sources of news generation for their crisis coverage. For example, one participant said:

Facebook is a great resource because when someone dies, people go to Facebook for some reason, so if you search a name or something you can usually find a lot of information and narrow down, then you go to a white pages, and somehow you can usually drill down and get a phone number for someone. And I'm sure that's what was actively happening.

Other participants discussed how they use Twitter and LinkedIn similarly to find sources and information. For example, as one participant described, “If somebody tweeted out that ten people were killed in a car crash, start with that person. Were you there? Did you see it? Do you have a picture? Did you know somebody involved?” This participant was careful to note that social media was a starting point or springboard, but that further investigation was required: “And it gives you better access to sources that you might not have had access to but it’s not free reign to just take what they say at face value and report it as facts.”

Another participant describes scanning and monitoring social media as part of a particular investigation for potential generation of future news stories on the ongoing crisis:

Keeping up with social media, so occasionally I’ll search [#hashtag] on Twitter to see what people are saying, I’ll go into Facebook groups that students or alumni have created in support of changing the policies at [university] and see what people are saying about it, see if anyone has come forward with more stories and if they have then I will contact that person. So it is a very open and active, I guess you could call it investigation on my part.

Limited interaction in crisis reporting. A few participants expressed that they had limited interaction with other forms of media during a break crises, due to the fast-paced nature of the crisis. For example, as a participant notes, “But when we’re in crisis mode we don’t have enough time to even see what these other places are doing. We just kind of focus on what we do and try to do it as well as we possibly can and get things out in a timely manner. Hopefully the public will make the right decision and watch us and not be listening to some random Joe Schmo on Facebook or Twitter that may or may not have an idea.”

RQ2: How Do Media Professionals Perceive the Role of Social Media in Crisis Communication?

Interview participants described four major themes for the role of social media in crisis communication: (1) immediacy, (2) providing other voices, (3) rumor generation and spread, and (4) telling the story.

Immediacy: the new “news wire.” As suggested above, under RQ1, participants saw social media as an immediate way to share basic news and information that may be vital in an emergency situation. As one participant described about a tornado:

Yeah, well social media was very vital when it happened... I came back early to come help with the coverage but from what I understand the people who were there right when it happened, they were tweeting information about it. They were finding out from the rescue people, telling people to stay off this road. So that was definitely helpful in terms of the most immediate needs and then we did cover [it] in the paper.

Similarly, under this theme, a participant noted that social media has replaced newswire services for crises. As this participant stated:

You know, one of the things that we’ve seen here is that the traditional newswire has almost been usurped by social media like Twitter. So in the old days, let’s say there was a shooting in Arizona of a lawmaker. In the old days that would move over the wire fairly quickly. Today, you see this stuff on Twitter before you see it anywhere else. And often times that is, that might be the news organization on the ground there, but it also might be witnesses or individuals who are spreading that.

Providing other voices. One major role of social media in times of crisis, which participants noted, was the ability to provide other voices during crises, including citizens and individuals “on the ground.” Participants noted that providing divergent voices had its good and

bad elements. For example, as a participant stated, “Citizen journalists factor in a large part of crisis journalism. Mostly because they are the people on the ground. They’re the people informing the larger news companies when they can’t get there.” Another stated,

Well, social has speed. It’s more crowd sourced. Anyone can just go post some information. We’ve seen in a bunch of cases how it sort of fails, like during the Boston Marathon when all this false information was coming out. People were tweeting on the police scanners and everything and it was this clusterf# of information.

Rumor generation and spread. In a negative sense, some participants described social media’s role in times of crisis and generation and spreading rumors. For example, as one participant stated:

I see a lot of rumor mongering, for lack of a better term, among new media. I think there is much more of a sense of getting things out first even if they’re not fully checked or fully sourced. I think the blogosphere and twitter sees it as fair game, whereas traditional media you’ll see folks relying on the more traditional model of double or triple sourcing and ensuring everything is accurate before it’s published or presented.

Another noted, “I think, too often, what can happen in the media is the crisis happens and while it’s still happening, before it’s even over, you have people that work for news outlets generating information about what’s going on without checking the fact. And there’s such a competition to be the first to say something, that they put stuff out there that’s incredibly harmful and incredibly hurtful.” Lastly, a participant stated about combatting rumors and false information:

I really think social media is a beast of its own. You have to be extremely careful about what you do. There’s way too much, you know, leeway to give misinformation... we have our own groups and stuff on Facebook. You know, private groups that are geared toward kind of improving our own industry because you never know when someone’s going to put that image of something and say there’s a tornado and it’s not even a real image.

Telling the story. A few participants believed that social media and traditional media “play the same role” in times of crisis coverage, which was telling the story and providing coverage, although in different formats. For example, as one participant noted:

I think they play the same role. It’s just a different means. Sometimes I want to read a story and sometimes I want to read a list or five questions or I want to look at a map or a graphic. I think that they’re all telling the same story, just depends how I want to consume it. And I think the more your readers and more people have a chance to consume the story...I think it all gets the same in the end.

Another stated similarly: “Now I don’t see any difference...I think now it’s blurred to a point where you know people are breaking news on Twitter. So, I don’t think there’s any difference. I think it’s all a platform to tell your story. There’s different ways to tell a story and I think the best reporters are the ones that embrace the idea that you’re there to get the story and however you get it out, you get it out.”

Discussion

While media professionals use traditional and social media to disseminate crisis news, media professionals’ perceptions of crisis communication and their views of social media in crisis reporting remain largely unknown. Instead, research predominately focuses on how organizations respond to and communicate with publics online and offline. To fill this gap, our

study conducted in-depth interviews with seasoned media professionals, who had extensive experience in crisis reporting and crisis news production. Findings provide insights for crisis managers and empirical evidence for the media links and interactions theorized in the SMCC model.

Best Practices of Social-Mediated Crisis News Generation and Dissemination

Empathetic and deep story telling. The seasoned media professionals we interviewed consistently emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence in producing crisis news, which prior research also showed was important for public relations practitioners communicating about crises (Liu & Pompper, 2012). Specifically, media professionals' emotional intelligence lies in the sense of empathy and compassion felt and expressed to victims and their families who suffer in crises, as well as keeping a balance between being emotionally connected with the situation and staying journalistically neutral and objective to report the factual information as accurately as possible. The depth of representation of what happened and the full picture of a story depend upon the level of connections media professionals have with their sources, whether it be sources in offline one-on-one settings or online via social media platforms. Social media allow media to quickly alert the public about crisis situations, public safety or health issues, and to put out the information to protect the public and help them cope with the situations and facilitate the crisis recovery process.

Use social media purposefully. Interview participants consistently stated that social media could be a powerful tool for sharing facts in breaking news situations, if used and engage with properly. However, media professionals expressed the need to filter information obtained via social media, conduct thorough fact checking, and provide comprehensive crisis reporting. Specifically, media professionals use social media for information seeking and as sources of news generation for their crisis coverage, not only for finding sources and information but also for monitoring issues and trends in order to be mindful about future news stories and any ongoing crises.

Another important function social media provide to news media content creators is to cross-promote the crisis news content and disseminate quickly to where it is needed. As some interviewees pointed out, crisis news, if accurate and timely, can not only inform the public, but also protect them by providing potentially life-saving instructions. Therefore, social media can be useful for promoting traditional media coverage of crises and for interacting with the public after producing crisis news. This cross-media-platform collaboration is not new. Two decades ago, when the Internet was first adopted by the news industry, traditional newspapers explored and adapted to the functions newspaper websites had in disseminating news stories and even promoting newspaper subscriptions using advertisements embedded in newspaper websites (Rodgers et al., 2005). In the social media era, media professionals need, and have been, more and more open and creative in utilizing their own social media channels to drive traffic to and promote more comprehensive coverage of crises provided by traditional media and deep reporting.

Challenges for Media Professionals to Balance Speed and Accuracy in Crisis Reporting

The consensus reached by the interviewed media professionals regarding today's crisis news coverage lies in the speed of information generation and spread as well as the volume of information provided by both known and unknown sources. On one hand, quick social media updates and unique angles of stories provide media professionals with unprecedented

opportunities for enterprise reporting and breaking news not covered by others. On the other hand, many social media provide unfiltered raw material for journalistic filtering and gatekeeping, which can leave much room for rumors and even damaging misinformation if disseminated to the public. Because of this, interview participants frequently noted the importance of using multiple online and offline sources to verify facts, which distinguishes journalists from citizens and others covering crises online.

Further, the speed social media naturally provide to information generation and spread sometimes leads to inaccurate reporting, which has brought strong caution to the media professionals we interviewed. The shared sentiment is that accuracy, as the hallmark distinguishing journalists from other online content creators producing crisis information, needs to be the number one priority for media professionals. Indeed, many interviewees argued media professionals should wait to produce news until facts are verified, especially when facing the temptation of “being first” in crisis reporting. Clearly, the media professionals interviewed have mixed views on the role of social media in crisis information generation and dissemination. One of the primary concerns is the doubt or uncertainty about the reliability of online sources and the truthfulness of crisis information they claim to have. Despite the general appreciation of divergent voices via social media during crises, some interviewees stated that they would not rely on citizen journalists at all while others viewed citizen journalists as crucial sources for breaking crisis news.

Interview participants also expressed that they have varying levels of interaction with other forms of media during breaking crises. However, when covering natural and manmade disasters, media professionals working for different news outlets are more likely to collaborate, compared to covering organizational or corporate reputation crises, where they tend to be more competitive to break the news. Clearly, crisis reporting is a highly competitive news business. Some interviewees were rather adamant in stating their unwillingness to collaborate with their competitors in the news market. Social media, with its speed and rising opportunities of sources and news angles, appears to have aggravated such competitiveness when it comes to organizational crisis coverage.

Implications for Crisis Managers and Researchers

Establish crisis information credibility. Given the immediacy and diverse voices social media platforms provide to crisis reporting, organizations have the opportunity to serve as a credible source for media professionals in need of information during crises. Interview participants repeatedly mentioned relying on official sources to verify information found online and prioritizing online information from authorities such as police and emergency managers. As organizations continue to invest in their online presence, media professionals may be more confident in breaking crisis news quickly if they receive information directly from these official sources. Furthermore, online crisis coverage by media professionals can help organizations combat rumors and shield against reputation damage caused by unverified crisis information.

Use social media to facilitate deep and accurate story telling. Interview participants identified social media as ideal for breaking crisis news, but traditional media as ideal for deep storytelling – with accuracy being a hallmark for all journalistic crisis news coverage. Accordingly, crisis communicators likely need to provide information in formats that facilitate both breaking and deep media coverage. Furthermore, interviewed media professionals expressed that social media can facilitate finding sources and fact checking; therefore, crisis managers can help their organizations’ social media channels and the content they produce and

disseminate to become a reliable crisis information source.

Empirical support for SMCC research. Interview data and findings from this study supported the SMCC's proposed linkages between organization, social media creators, social media followers, and social media inactives. Specifically, data confirmed that media professionals play multiple roles as mapped in the SMCC model. First, media professionals are social media creators of crisis information themselves when they produce crisis news and disseminate it online via the social media outlet of either their media affiliation's channel or their personal site. Second, media professionals often act as active social media followers when it comes to crisis information seeking, gathering, and fact checking, who follow influential online sources and monitoring the trends being developed or crisis situation unfolded. This observation provides unique opportunities for organizations to be engaged actively and authentically in crisis information generation and spread, combating rumors and inaccurate information together with media professionals and serve as factual and reliable crisis information sources. Future SMCC research should further examine the potential and approaches for organizations to serve as informational bridges between media professionals and primary publics to facilitate crisis information flow during crisis and play a meaningful role in supporting each other's crisis recovery.

Conclusion

Through 40 in-depth interviews with media professionals reporting during crises, this study highlights how both traditional and social media produce and distribute information during crises, building upon the SMCC model. Participants in the study expressed the importance of emotional intelligence during crisis reporting, and the increase of enterprise reporting and breaking news reporting during crises. Participants also discussed media collaboration, competition, and integration between varying forms of media and competing news organizations. Media professionals suggested social media, in particular, assisted with information filtering and aggregation, as well as information seeking and news generation. Media professionals viewed the role of social media in crisis communication as providing immediate information, allowing other voices to emerge, generating and spreading rumors, and serving as another outlet to tell the story. Findings present best practices for communicating effectively about crises with stakeholders and publics who need rapid, yet accurate, crisis information tailored to increasingly shifting media platforms from the perspectives of seasoned media professionals.

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**How Do Media Companies Gain Legitimacy?
An Experimental Study on the (Ir)relevance of CSR Communication**

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Abstract

In this experimental study, we analyze how the extent of CSR communication affects a media company's legitimacy. On the one hand, we expect that a company can strengthen its legitimacy through communicating about far-reaching CSR engagements. On the other hand, we expect that stakeholders become skeptical and distrust self-disclosures about generous deeds. Hence, we assume that extensive CSR communication both directly increases and indirectly decreases a media company's legitimacy. According to the results, both assumptions are incorrect: CSR communication is not the crucial factor in determining whether or not stakeholders perceive a media company as legitimate, but rather the perceived corporate credibility—with the sub-dimensions of trustworthiness and expertise. This result challenges two widespread beliefs, namely the "business case" argument that far-reaching CSR is in a firm's interest and the "catch 22" argument that CSR communication triggers stakeholders' skepticism.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is considered as a means to increase a company's legitimacy. Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) stated decades ago: "One legitimating behavior is contribution to charity" (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975, p. 133). Since then, it has become widely held that extensive CSR has a positive impact on a company's legitimacy (see Carroll & Shabana, 2010, pp. 99-100; Chen, Patten, & Roberts, 2008, pp. 133-134; Lee, 2008; Matten & Moon, 2008). Crook (2005) states in *The Economist* about the CSR movement: "It would be a challenge to find a recent annual report of any big international company that justifies the firm's existence merely in terms of profit, rather than 'service to the community'" (Crook, 2005, p. 3).

However, extensive CSR is also suspected of decreasing a company's legitimacy. Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) warn companies with tarnished legitimacy about the "self-promoter's paradox": If they try too hard to regain legitimacy from stakeholders through extensive CSR, they run the risk of achieving the exact opposite (see also Jones & Pittman, 1982, p. 243). Morsing, Schultz, and Nielsen (2008) even warn today's companies in general about the "catch 22" of CSR communication: Although stakeholders would expect companies to engage in CSR, they nevertheless distrust their communication about it (see also Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010, p. 17; Morsing & Schultz, 2006, pp. 331-332).

Bartlett (2011), from a public relations perspective, puts this dilemma in a nutshell: Companies "are damned if they do [CSR communication] and damned if they don't". She thus recommends further research on the tension between stakeholders' CSR expectations on the one side and accusations of "spin doctoring" and "green washing" around persuasion models on the other (Bartlett, 2011, p. 81; see also Coombs & Holladay, 2009, pp. 95-97). Taking up her recommendation, in this paper we hypothesize a direct positive effect of extensive CSR communication on a company's legitimacy, as perceived by its stakeholders, while taking potential suppressing or counteracting effects around stakeholder skepticism into account. Against these two contradictory assumptions of the increasing and decreasing effects of extensive CSR communication on legitimacy, the *research question* is as follows: How does the extent of CSR communication affect the stakeholders' perception of legitimacy?

Explaining this in more detail, we expect that companies informing their stakeholders about extensive CSR activities in terms of voluntary service to the community will be perceived as more legitimate than companies that merely inform about their core obligations to make profits and products (see Carroll & Shabana, 2010, pp. 99-100; Chen, Patten, & Roberts, 2008; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975, p. 133). On the other hand, we also assume that extensive CSR communication triggers skepticism among stakeholders, which in turn suppresses or even counteracts its positive effects on corporate legitimacy. If a company's CSR communication sounds 'too good to be true', stakeholders may disbelieve its content and/or activate their "persuasion knowledge" (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which triggers a motivational defense mechanism called "reactance" (Brehm & Brehm, 1981, pp. 121-150; see also Koch & Zerback, 2013a; 2013b; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009; Pomeroy & Johnson, 2009; Pomeroy, Johnson, & Noble, 2013). As a consequence, stakeholders lose trust in the company and its CSR communication—at the expense of the company's legitimacy. In Crook's opinion, for instance, CSR is in most cases nothing more than "public-relations" or "lip-service" (Crook, 2005: 3-4).

We argue that media companies are well-suited to an examination of the assumed contradictory effects. The media companies' struggle for profits and survival results in cost-cutting programs and market concentration. While media companies strive more and more to adapt new business models, they increasingly neglect their unique obligation to strengthen and

support democratic processes through quality journalism (e.g., Kaye & Quinn, 2010; Levy & Nielson, 2010; Russ-Mohl, 2011). Against this background, CSR gains more attention in the media industry these days, because it is considered to be a means for media companies to keep or regain legitimacy (see Altmeppen, 2011; Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Trommershausen, 2011). While some media companies have adopted the practices of CSR communication, others are still reluctant (as content analyses reveal, see Hou & Reber, 2011; Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2012). Ironically, although *The Economist* is notorious in campaigning against CSR, with the magazine publishing many critical articles about this issue (see Guthey, Langer, & Morsing, 2006, pp. 42-45), even *The Economist Group* makes an extensive CSR claim in one of their nine “Guiding Principles”:

“As an international company, we conduct business in many different markets around the world. In the countries in which we operate, we abide by local laws and regulations. We make an active contribution to local charities by charitable giving. We encourage our people to participate in charitable and community activities and we permit them to take time off for this purpose. We match employee donations of time and money to charities” (The Economist Group, 2014).

In the next section, we outline the theoretical background underlying the contradictory assumptions as to whether or not extensive CSR communication has a positive impact on a media company’s legitimacy. The methodology follows with the description of the experimental research design and the operationalization of the constructs. The results of the structural equation models (SEM) are presented in the findings section, and we end with a discussion on the results, limitations, and future research.

Theoretical background

The Direct, Positive Effect: Corporate Legitimacy through CSR Communication

Proponents of neo-institutionalism theory call the widespread belief that companies can strengthen their legitimacy through extensive CSR a “management fashion” or “rational myth” (Guthey et al., 2006, pp. 45-55; Hiß, 2006; Matten & Moon, 2008). The popularity of CSR gives reason to assume:

Hypothesis 1: The greater the extent of a media company’s CSR communication, the greater its corporate legitimacy as perceived by its stakeholders.

However, as the terms “fashion” and “myth” imply, previous empirical evaluations are highly contradictory (see Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Margolis & Walsh, 2003, for an overview). We suspect the main reason for these contradictory evaluations is that there is neither a common definition of what is meant by “CSR” (see Carroll, 2008; Crane, McWilliams, Matten, Moon, & Siegel, 2008, p. 4; Marrewijk, 2003) nor by “corporate legitimacy” or similar constructs (see Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Tost, 2011; Vergne, 2011). As a consequence, results are not comparable. Therefore, we first need to clarify what we mean by CSR communication and corporate legitimacy.

CSR communication. From a social sciences perspective, responsibility is a multi-relational ascription that embraces a *subject*, a *time-reference*, an *object*, an *authority*, and a *criterion*: Somebody has—in a retrospective or prospective manner, for something, towards somebody, on the basis of certain normative standards—responsibility. Such ascriptions of responsibility take place in social interactions (see Höffe, 2008; Pincoffs, 1988). Based on this understanding, we define CSR communication as specific responsibility-ascriptions, according to which companies or their managements (*subjects*) have present or future obligations (*time-*

references, see Carroll, 1991) to generate profits and revenues, accomplish social, political, and cultural benefits, or maintain or improve the quality of the environment (*objects*, see Elkington, 1998), towards affected living beings (*authorities*, see Freeman, 1984), on the basis of certain normative standards (*criteria*, see Carroll, 1991; Höffe, 1993). CSR-ascriptions take place between corporate members and/or stakeholders (see Freeman, 1984) and are usually mediated (e.g., through corporate websites, mass media, social media) (see Capriotti, 2011). A self-ascription of CSR is induced by authorized members of a company (e.g., a CEO, a spokesperson).

Corporate legitimacy. Legitimacy is a multi-dimensional construct (Yoon, 2005). Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity [e.g., a media company] are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Tost (2011) points out that there are two different research strands on legitimacy, namely institutional theory on the macro-level and social psychology on the micro-level. From the perspective of institutional theory, legitimacy is seen as a social structure: Legitimate companies are regarded as more likely to survive and as acquiring resources more easily (see Deephouse & Suchman, 2008, pp. 58-59; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). In contrast, from the perspective of social psychology, legitimacy is seen as an individual’s perception or attitude regarding how a company attempts to reach desirable goals or outcomes, how it treats others with dignity and respect, and how it acts consistent with moral and ethical values (Tost, 2011, pp. 693-694). Following Tost’s argumentation, we define corporate legitimacy as a stakeholder’s perception that the actions of a company are desirable, proper, or appropriate within that person’s own moral standards and ethical values, which leads him or her to an attitude regarding whether the company should be sanctioned positively or negatively in terms of survival and acquiring resources.

The “Boomerang Effects” of Stakeholder Skepticism

We further assume that the extent of CSR communication has indirectly negative effects on a company’s legitimacy. Among communication scholars in particular, “stakeholder skepticism” is used as a generic term to encompass a heterogeneous group of mediator effects (see Austin et al., 2002, pp. 158-159) that are suspected to suppress or even counteract the positive effects of CSR communication (see Bartlett, 2011; Brønn, 2011, p. 119; Morsing et al., 2008). In this paper, we distinguish two kinds of mediating effects when it comes to stakeholder skepticism.

Content credibility of CSR communication. Firstly, we assume that the perceived “content credibility” is a mediator variable that suppresses the positive effect of extensive CSR communication on a media company’s legitimacy. Our argument is as follows: Stakeholders are seldom present when CSR actually takes place; instead companies inform about CSR via mediated communication (e.g., corporate websites, mass media, social media) (Capriotti, 2011, pp. 370-372). While stakeholders have no reason to distrust CSR communication about the media company’s core obligations in terms of making profits and media products, it is harder to believe in CSR communication that goes beyond, such as that regarding a media company’s voluntary services to the community. In this respect, we propose:

Hypothesis 2: The extent of CSR communication is negatively related to its content credibility.

Hypothesis 3: The content credibility of CSR communication is positively related to the

media company's legitimacy.

Persuasion knowledge and reactance. Secondly, we argue that stakeholders become aware of the media company's attempts at persuasive communication, and this evokes reactance and a derogation of the corporate credibility (Jenkins & Dragojevic, 2011). The persuasion knowledge model postulates that people learn to cope with strategic communication (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which leads with regard to CSR communication (see Pomeroy & Johnson, 2009, pp. 423-425; Pomeroy et al., 2013) to:

Hypothesis 4: The extent of CSR communication is positively related to the stakeholders' degree of persuasion knowledge.

In turn, persuasion knowledge evokes reactance, which is defined as a "motivational state that is hypothesized to occur when a freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination" (Brehm & Brehm, 1981, p. 37). Reactance is a psychological reaction to everything that threatens personal freedoms, including persuasive communication (Brehm & Brehm, 1981, pp. 121-150). In line with reactance research (e.g., Koch & Zerback, 2013a, 2013b; Meirick & Nisbett, 2011; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Moyer-Gusé, Jain, & Chung, 2010; Quick, Shen, & Dillard, 2013), we expect:

Hypothesis 5: The stakeholders' degree of persuasion knowledge is positively related to the stakeholders' degree of reactance.

According to Brehm and Brehm, "boomerang effects", like the self-promoter's paradox or the catch 22 in the case of CSR communication, "represent the best evidence for reactance theory" (Brehm & Brehm, 1981, p. 38).

According to reactance theory, individuals that receive persuasive messages preserve their personal freedoms by derogating the communicator's credibility. Referring to Koch and Zerback (2013a, 2013b), Meirick and Nisbett (2011), Pomeroy and Johnson (2009, p. 425), we assume:

Hypothesis 6: The stakeholders' degree of reactance is negatively related to the media company's credibility.

According to Newell and Goldsmith (2001), corporate credibility is a specific variant of a communicator's credibility with "trustworthiness" and "expertise" as sub-dimensions. A company needs to be perceived as trustworthy and skilled in order to be perceived as credible (see Newell & Goldsmith, 2001, p. 237; see also Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Consistent with credibility research (see, for instance, Koch & Zerback, 2013a; 2013b), we formulate:

Hypothesis 7: The media company's credibility has a positive effect on the content credibility of its CSR communication.

Furthermore, we assume that stakeholders who perceive a media company as trustworthy and skilled also perceive its actions as desirable, proper, and appropriate (see also Suchman, 1995; Tost, 2011). Hence, we propose:

Hypothesis 8: The media company's credibility has a positive effect on its legitimacy.

Summary of the postulated relationships. Figure 1 provides a summary of all hypotheses. Accordingly, the direct positive impact of a media company's extensive CSR communication on its legitimacy is firstly suppressed by a decreased content credibility, and secondly counteracted by the activation of persuasion knowledge and reactance, which lowers the media company's credibility. A lower corporate credibility—in terms of trustworthiness and expertise—leads to a lower content credibility of the CSR communication as well as to a lower legitimacy (see Koch & Zerback, 2013a, p. 11; 2013b, p. 998, for a similar model).

[Figure 1 here]

Method

Participants

Students of social sciences from a Swiss university (274 in total, 169 women, 104 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 22.1$ years, $SD = 2.44$, age range: 19-40 years) were asked to fill in a questionnaire. Students are an appropriate sample for two reasons. Firstly, the purpose of this experimental study is to test general causal assumptions, which are independent of specific groups (consistent with Falk & Heckmann, 2009, p. 537). Secondly, students have a relatively high educational level and are thus expected to be important stakeholders of media companies that produce journalism (e.g., Elvestad & Blekesane, 2008, pp. 437-439; Jandura & Brosious, 2011, p. 200).

Research Design and Stimulus

The research design is a “single-factor between-groups design” with five different CSR disclosures of a fictive media company named “Tell Media Inc.”. All texts of this company were presented in the layout of the corporate’s website. Participants were randomly assigned to one of five groups. All of the participants read a self-description of the company (“about us”), which indicated that Tell-Media Inc. is a profit-oriented media company:

“With its daily and weekly newspapers, magazines, online platforms as well as printing facilities, Tell-Media Inc. is one of the leading media corporations in Switzerland. Tell-Media is an independent media company, which has its roots in the German- and French-speaking parts of Switzerland. We stand for freedom of speech, quality journalism and excellent entertainment. The Tell-Media Inc. has been listed on the Swiss Stock Exchange since 2004.”

Afterwards, the participants read one out of five versions of the media company’s self-ascribed CSR (“our social responsibility”). These stimuli served as the independent variable and increased by degrees in terms of the extent of the company’s self-ascribed CSR (see Figure 2).

[Figure 2 here]

The control group (CG) read solely the following text about the media company’s *core obligations*, namely to make profits and media products:

“As a large Swiss media company we carry social responsibility. We make our contribution to democracy in shaping public opinion through fair, critical, and independent reporting. We also provide plenty of talking-points with entertaining stories from every area of life. The Tell-Media Inc. is a profit-orientated company. Only with the highest profitability and economic efficiency can we contribute to the formation of public opinion today and in future.”

The experimental groups read additional texts on Tell-Media’s responsibilities that go beyond the core functions of media companies. The first experimental group (EG1) read an additional text in which the media company self-imposes *internally covenanted obligations*:

“The ethical basis for our actions is written down in the Tell-Media ‘code of conduct’. The ethical guidelines of this ‘code of conduct’ are binding for all employees—regardless of their ranking in the company or their area of business. With these guidelines, we ensure respect in interpersonal dealings within all of our journalistic and entrepreneurial activities. We have pledged to conduct ourselves

ethically and responsibly.”

The second experimental group (EG2) read the two above-mentioned texts and additionally a text in which the media company self-imposes *externally covenanted obligations*: “We take our social responsibility seriously with our charity program ‘Tell-Media: Culture & Education’. We are committed long-term to promote culture and education in Switzerland. We organize a number of concrete projects, such as dance festivals, theatre performances, exhibitions of young artists, language courses for teenagers and much more. Every six months we provide information on how the ‘Tell-Media: Culture & Education’ program keeps its promises.”

Beside these above-mentioned texts, the third experimental group (EG3) read additionally a text about the media company’s *voluntary donations within its production chain*: “In addition, we assume social responsibility by supporting charitable organizations and foundations occasionally. They can ask us to waive media advertising costs or printing costs for publications. Our internal committee—comprised of members of the management as well as chief editors—decides on the approval of applications.”

The fourth experimental group (EG4) additionally read a text about the media company’s *voluntary donations beyond its production chain*:

“We know about tragic events such as wars, natural disasters and famines through our reports and stories. We want to do more than merely informing about the harsh realities of people from all over the world. As a media company, we know first-hand where help is most needed worldwide. That’s why we give project-related funds to recognized charities when people are in distress and need quick and professional help.”

The extent of CSR communication is increased by degrees, starting with the media company’s undeniable core functions in terms of making profits and products (CG), to self-imposed internally (EG1) and externally covenanted (EG2) obligations in terms of a code of conduct and a charity foundation, to voluntary donations inside (EG3) and outside (EG4) the production chain. In order to increase the external validity, all texts are based on real website texts from Swiss media companies (e.g., NZZ Mediengruppe, Ringier Inc., Tamedia Inc.).

Measures

In line with the paths of our causal model, we first measured the constructs “content credibility”, “persuasion knowledge”, and “reactance” on one page, and then “corporate legitimacy” and “corporate credibility”, with its sub-dimensions “expertise” and “trustworthiness”, on another. All items were judged on 7-point Likert scales (1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree”). The order of items was randomized in order to control for possible side effects. We avoided items that were supposed to measure the same construct appearing immediately after each other.

Content credibility of the CSR communication. We measured this construct with one item derived from Koch and Zerback (2013a, 2013b) and two items derived from Kohring (2004, see also Rössler, 2011: 355): “I consider the statements from the Tell-Media Inc. about their social responsibility as credible” (cre1), “The statements made by the Tell-Media Inc. about taking on social responsibility would withstand a verification” (cre2), and “The website of the Tell-Media Inc. about its social responsibility provides the facts as they are” (cre3) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .703$; $M = 4.05$; $SD = .99$).

Persuasion knowledge. In order to measure this construct we adapted three items from

Koch and Zerback (2011, 2013a, 2013b): “I have the feeling that the Tell-Media Inc. wants to convince the reader of their leading role with respect to social responsibility” (pkn1), “The Tell-Media Inc. deliberately tries to convince me that they are socially responsible” (pkn2), and “The Tell-Media Inc. wants to convince me of their social responsibility” (pkn3) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .772$; $M = 5.50$; $SD = 1.09$).

Reactance. Like Koch and Zerback (2013a, 2013b), we relied on items developed by Herzberg (2002) in order to measure reactance as a one-dimensional construct. We used the following three items: “It bothers me very much that the Tell-Media Inc. presents itself as a role model” (rea1), “I would like to object to the Tell-Media Inc. with regard to its social responsibility” (rea2), and “I strongly resist the Tell-Media Inc.’s attempts at manipulation” (rea3) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .726$; $M = 3.50$; $SD = 1.23$).

Corporate credibility (trustworthiness and expertise). We used a measurement scale from Newell and Goldsmith (2001) in order to measure corporate credibility as a two-dimensional construct of trustworthiness and expertise. Trustworthiness was measured by four items: “I trust the Tell-Media Inc.” (tru1), “The Tell-Media Inc. makes truthful claims” (tru2), “The Tell-Media Inc. is honest” (tru3), “I do not believe what the Tell-Media Inc. tells me” (tru4) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .875$; $M = 4.01$; $SD = 1.10$). In order to measure expertise, we used the following items: “The Tell-Media Inc. is skilled in what they do” (exp1), “The Tell-Media Inc. has great expertise” (exp2) (see Newell & Goldsmith, 2001, p. 237). Additionally, we relied on two items developed by Ingenhoff and Sommer (2010, p. 352) to measure expertise: “The Tell-Media Inc. stands for high product quality” (exp3), and “The Tell-Media Inc. works with comprehensive attention to detail” (exp4) (with regard to all four expertise-items, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .782$; $M = 4.27$; $SD = .94$).

Corporate legitimacy. As noted above, there is no established measurement scale for this construct yet (see Hudson, 2008; Vergne, 2011; Yoon, 2005). In order to measure corporate legitimacy, we derived the following three items from our definition of legitimacy (see Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Suchman, 1995; Tost, 2011): “The Tell-Media Inc. makes an important contribution to the general public” (leg1), “It would be a great pity if the Tell-Media Inc. were to go bankrupt” (leg2), “The Tell-Media Inc. should be retained in Switzerland” (leg3) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .776$; $M = 4.31$; $SD = 1.16$).

Statistical analyses

In order to test the hypotheses we applied structural equation modeling (SEM). With regard to our experimental data, the main advantages of this statistical method are that it allows us to determine the effect of the stimulus (the independent variable: “extent of CSR communication”) on the output measure (the dependent variable: “corporate legitimacy”) and—at the same time—to take mediating variables (“content credibility”, “persuasion knowledge”, “reactance”, and “corporate credibility”) into account (see Bollen & Pearl, 2013, pp. 316-318; Pearl, 2014).

We chose Maximum Likelihood (ML) and Bootstrapping (2,000 samples) as the estimate. These settings allow the testing of SEM even if distributions are not normal (Preacher & Hayes, 2008, p. 880). All calculations were run using Mplus 7.1.

Findings

Two Full Structural Equation Models: Trustworthiness and Expertise

Given that corporate credibility is a two-dimensional construct, we ran two full SEM (see

Figure 3a and 3b), one with “trustworthiness” and the other with “expertise” as a mediator variable (consistent with Newell & Goldsmith, 2001, p. 245). This approach of calculating each sub-dimension independently makes the models more parsimonious.

The two models adequately describe the empirical data from the 274 questionnaires as the global fit indices reveal (see Byrne, 2012, p. 64). Each of the models has an acceptable overall model fit, namely with regard to the *trustworthiness-model* $\chi^2 = 203.20$, $df = 112$, $p = .01$; RMSEA = .06 with 90% C.I. between .04 and .07, $p = .26$; CFI = .95; TLI = .94; SRMR = .04 (see Figure 3a) and with regard to the *expertise-model* $\chi^2 = 176.68$, $df = 112$, $p = .01$; RMSEA = .05 with 90% C.I. between .03 and .06, $p = .69$; CFI = .96; TLI = .95; SRMR = .05 (see Figure 3b). However, even though the overall model fits are acceptable (see Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008; Hu & Bentler, 1999, pp. 27-28), most hypotheses are not statistically significant. To put it another way: While the “measurement models” are satisfying in both cases, the “structural models” are not (see Byrne, 2012, p. 15).

[Figures 3a and 3b here]

The extent of CSR communication has no direct effect on legitimacy. Both SEMs reveal that the media company’s extent of CSR communication has no direct effect on the perceived corporate legitimacy—which leads to a rejection of H1. The standardized path coefficients are small ($\beta = .09$ and $\beta = .04$ respectively) and non-significant ($p = .14$ and $p = .84$ respectively). We did not expect this result and thus ran an additional analysis of variance (ANOVA, Bootstrapping with 2,000 samples) with the extent of CSR communication as the independent and the perceived legitimacy as the dependent variable. The ANOVA confirms the rejection of H1. The five groups do not differ with regard to the perceived legitimacy, $F(4,269) = .201$, $p = .94$, with $M_{CG} = 4.36$, $M_{EG1} = 4.18$, $M_{EG2} = 4.29$; $M_{EG3} = 4.38$, $M_{EG4} = 4.39$ (see Hayes, 2005, p. 373). Post hoc analyses were performed using the Scheffé test: Again, no differences were found ($p = .96$). This means that a media company that limits its social responsibilities to the making of profits and media products (CG) is perceived to be as legitimate as a media company that additionally signs a code of conduct, runs a charitable foundation, waives advertisement costs for non-profit organizations, and donates money to people in need (EG4).

Content credibility has no suppressing effect. H2 assumed a negative effect from the extent of CSR communication on the content credibility. While there is a significant relation in the trustworthiness-model ($p = .02$), there is none in the expertise-model ($p = .28$). However, regardless of the significance, the path coefficients are positive in both models ($\beta = .12$ and $\beta = .06$ respectively), meaning that—contrary to expectation—the extent of CSR communication is not negatively related to its content credibility, which leads to the rejection of H2. Furthermore, H3 must also be rejected: The content credibility of the CSR disclosure has no effect on legitimacy ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .98$ and $\beta = .01$, $p = .98$ respectively). The rejections of H2 and H3 imply that the content credibility of the CSR communication has no mediating effect. Hence, content credibility is not a suppressor variable—it cannot explain the above result that the extent of CSR communication has no effect on legitimacy.

Persuasion knowledge and reactance have no boomerang effects. There is neither a significant effect of the extent of CSR disclosure on persuasion knowledge (H4: $\beta = .14$, $p = .06$ in both models) nor of persuasion knowledge on reactance (H5: $\beta = .13$, $p = .11$ and $\beta = .10$, $p = .23$ respectively). Therefore, H4 and H5 need to be rejected as well. Persuasion knowledge and reactance are not counteracting variables—they also cannot explain the above result that the

extent of CSR disclosure has no effect on legitimacy. H6 can be confirmed because there is a strong effect from reactance on corporate credibility in both models: Reactance decreases the media company's perceived trustworthiness ($\beta = -.72, p = .01$) as well as expertise ($\beta = -.63, p = .01$). However, it is not the extent of CSR communication which triggers persuasion knowledge and reactance. Hence, we do not know what triggers reactance.

The importance of corporate credibility. Corporate credibility has a strong effect on the content credibility of the CSR disclosure (in both models $\beta = .83, p = .01$). Moreover, there is also a strong effect of trustworthiness on corporate legitimacy ($\beta = .76, p = .01$) as well as of expertise on corporate legitimacy ($\beta = .78, p = .01$). Hence, H7 and H8 are confirmed.

In summary, the extent of CSR disclosure has no effect on corporate legitimacy. This absence of a direct effect can neither be explained by the mediator variable "content credibility of CSR disclosure" nor the mediator variables "persuasion knowledge" and reactance". The results indicate no suppressing effects. However, the full models reveal that the "corporate's credibility", with its two dimensions trustworthiness and expertise, explains best whether or not a corporate is perceived as legitimate.

One Restricted Structural Equation Model

In order to get a clearer picture of the effects of trustworthiness and expertise on the perceived corporate legitimacy, we ran a restricted model without the mediator variables "content credibility", "persuasion knowledge", and "reactance" (see Figure 4).

[Figure 4 here]

The global fit indices of this restricted model show that the model fits the empirical data ($\chi^2 = 92.95, df = 51, p = .01$; RMSEA = .06 with 90% C.I. between .04 and .07, $p = .31$; CFI = .97; TLI = .96; SRMR = .04). It confirms the previous result that the extent of CSR communication does not have an effect on corporate legitimacy ($\beta = .08, p = .14$). In contrast, the two sub-dimensions of corporate credibility—trustworthiness and expertise—have direct effects on legitimacy ($\beta = .45, p = .01$ and $\beta = .36, p = .03$ respectively) and explain about 61 percent of its variance. The results of this restricted SEM underline the unimportance of extensive CSR communication and the importance of corporate credibility—with its two sub-dimensions trustworthiness and expertise—in order to explain a media company's legitimacy as perceived by its stakeholders.

[Table 1 here]

Discussion

The surprising result of our experimental study and answer to our RQ is that the extent of CSR communication has neither a direct positive effect nor indirect negative effects on a media company's legitimacy. Instead, the perceived corporate credibility—with its two sub-dimensions trustworthiness and expertise—is the crucial factor, which explains best whether or not a media company is perceived as legitimate by its stakeholders.

Our findings challenge two widespread beliefs among CSR scholars and practitioners: Namely the "business case" argument that CSR is in the interest of a firm because it strengthens its legitimacy (e.g. Carroll & Shabana, 2010, pp. 99-100; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975, p. 133; Lee,

2008), as well as the “catch 22” argument that extensive CSR communication triggers stakeholders’ skepticism, which in turn decreases a firm’s legitimacy (see Morsing et al., 2008, further Brønn, 2011; Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009; Pomeroy & Johnson, 2009; Pomeroy, Johnson, & Noble, 2013).

We assumed that media companies are rewarded for communicating about generous deeds in terms of a higher legitimacy. However, according to our results, a media company that limits its self-ascription of CSR to making profits and media products is perceived to be as legitimate as a media company that additionally communicates about its extensive CSR activities. Hence, the long-lasting and widespread belief that (media) companies can strengthen their legitimacy through extensive CSR communication belongs to the realm of “rational myths” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). We further assumed that stakeholder skepticism suppresses or even counteracts the positive effects of extensive CSR communication on legitimacy. However, according to our results, a media company’s CSR communication that goes beyond its core obligations in terms of making profits and products has neither a lower content credibility nor increases persuasion knowledge, which in turn might activate reactance. We could not identify mediator variables that have significant suppressing or counteracting effects. An explanation could be that despite CSR disclosures are perceived as persuasive, they neither evoke reactance nor derogate the company’s source credibility because they are written in a polite, non-threatening way (see Jenkins & Dragojevic, 2011, p. 579; Kim, Levine, & Allen, 2014). Taking up the quote from Bartlett (2011, p. 81), we can sum up the first main finding as follows: Media companies are neither damned if they do CSR communication nor if they don’t. The analyses of the experimental data also reveal that the perceptions of a media company’s credibility, with the two sub-dimensions trustworthiness and expertise, have strong and significant effects on the perceived legitimacy. The second main finding is that a media company’s credibility is the main driver for its legitimacy.

Limitations

We ran three SEM models, which all showed acceptable overall fit indices. Our results therefore have robust statistical evidence. However, the validity of this experimental study is limited for several reasons. One limitation relates to the stimulus material: We relied on a fictive media company, the “Tell-Media Inc.”. The participants probably perceived the materials as artificial, which lowers the external validity of our experimental study.

Other limitations are related to the measurements. The participants were aware of the survey situation, which means that they were probably more aware of persuasive attempts than in everyday situations. The level of persuasion knowledge was high in the control group as well as in the four experimental groups ($M_{Total} = 5.5$ on a 7-point Likert scale). Reactance is also difficult to measure via questionnaire items (see Brehm & Brehm, 1981, p. 37; Koch & Zerback, 2013a; 2013b, p. 1004; Quick et al., 2013, p. 171). Moreover, we operationalized the construct of corporate legitimacy in a new way by deriving three items from literature. Although these items were reliable, we have to take into consideration that the results rely on a non-validated scale.

Finally, our experimental study might not be fully applicable to other industries, but we believe that its results are particularly valuable with regard to the media industry. Considering that media companies face difficult market conditions and react with cost-cutting programs these days (see Kaye & Quinn, 2010; Levy & Nielson, 2010; Russ-Mohl, 2011), we found that it might be reasonable for them—in order to be perceived as legitimate by key stakeholders—to stick to their core obligations in terms of strengthening democratic processes through economicall y

viable quality journalism instead of scattering their resources on extensive CSR. Stakeholders may appreciate companies' extensive CSR in general, but according to our results media companies are better off in terms of legitimacy when doing their core business in a credible manner.

Future Research

We hope that our experimental study will stimulate further research where researchers might concentrate on companies from other industries. Furthermore, future research might also focus on optimizing the measurement constructs of perceived legitimacy and validate the scale of persuasion knowledge and reactance (see Quick & Stephenson, 2007; Kim et al., 2014, p. 14)—particularly with regard to companies. The experimental design of this study could also be applied to crisis responsibility research for evaluating which crisis response strategies have “boomerang effects” on corporate legitimacy (see Coombs, 2007; Sohn & Lariscy, 2012).

We emphasize that we do not argue that media companies should not engage in and communicate about CSR beyond their core obligations of making profits and media products. From a normative point of view, we raise no objection to extensive CSR. However, from an instrumental point of view, the findings of our experimental study strongly indicate that decision makers—at least from the private media sector—should be aware of the unimportance of extensive CSR communication and the importance of corporate credibility, with the sub-dimensions trustworthiness and expertise, in order to gain corporate legitimacy.

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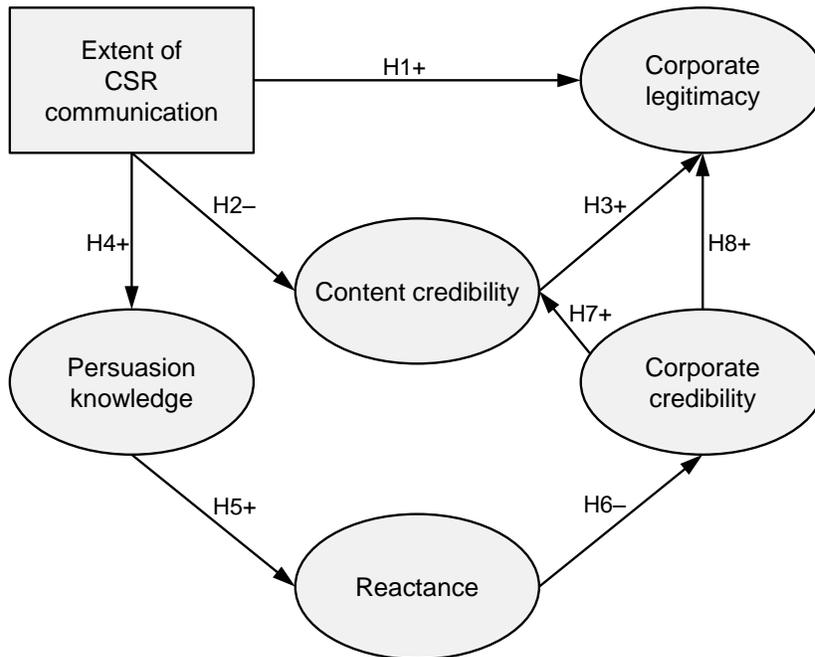


Figure 1. Summary of the postulated relationships

Extent of CSR communication

	Core functions in terms of profits and products (57 words)	Internally covenanted code of conduct (53 words)	Externally covenanted charity foundation (56 words)	Donations inside production chain (55 words)	Donations beyond production chain (63 words)
Control group (n=53)	Yes				
Experimental group 1 (n=58)	Yes	Yes			
Experimental group 2 (n=55)	Yes	Yes	Yes		
Experimental group 3 (n=56)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Experimental group 4 (n=52)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

N=274

Note. The questionnaire (including stimulus material and items) was written in German.

Figure 2. Independent variable (stimulus) and groups

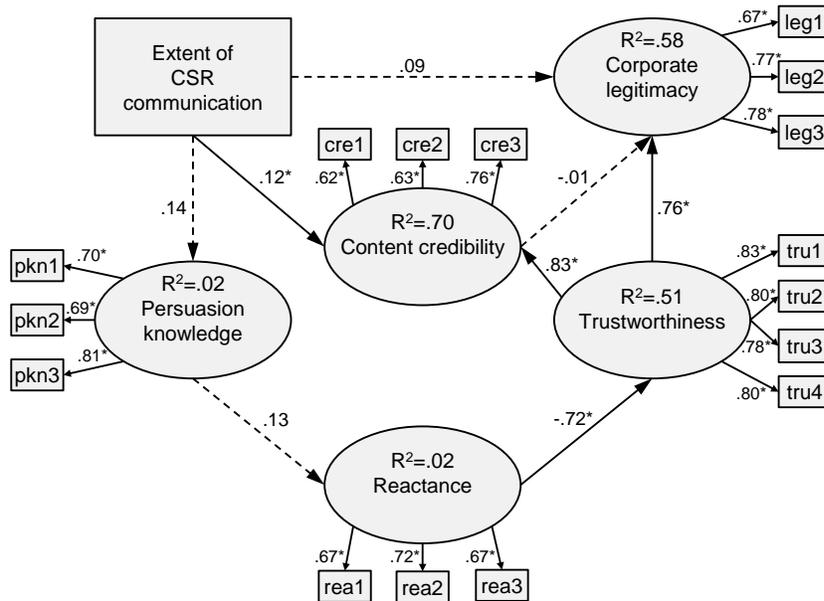
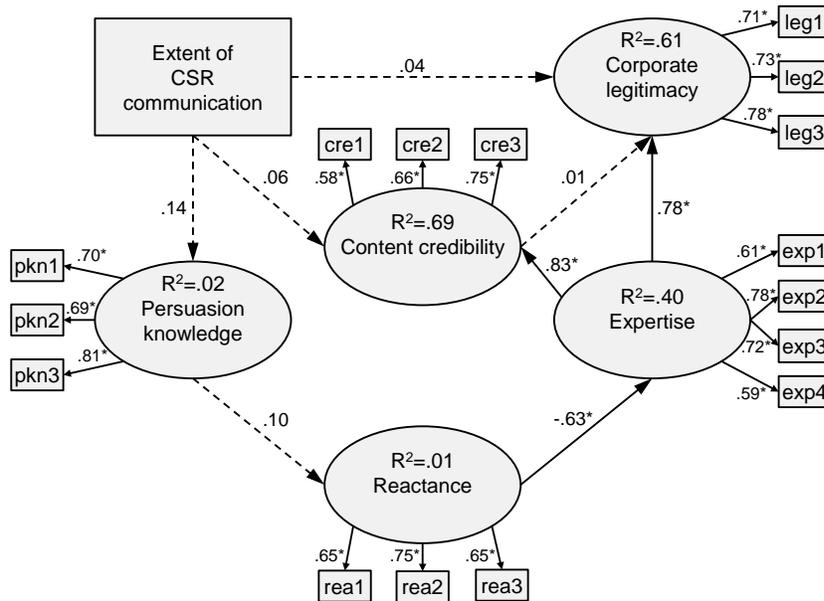
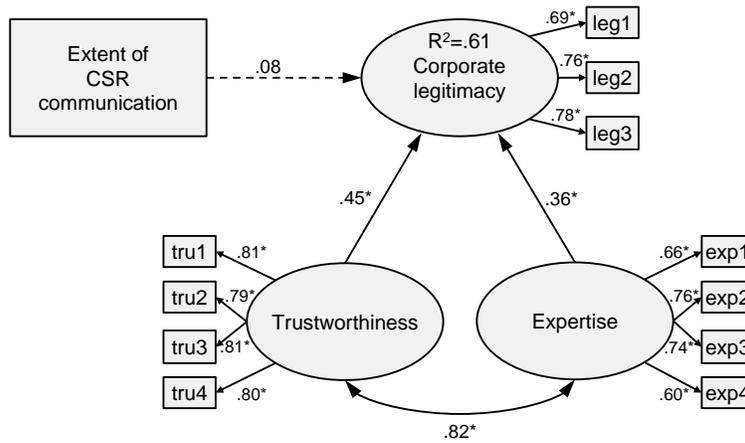


Figure 3a. Observed full SEM (trustworthiness)



* $p < .05$. Standardized path coefficients. Correlations matrices are presented in Table 1.
 Figure 3b. Observed full SEM (expertise)



* $p < .05$. Standardized path coefficients. A correlations matrix is presented in Table 1.
 Figure 4. Observed restricted SEM (trustworthiness and expertise)

Table 1. Zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics

<i>Variables</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Extent of CSR com.	–	–	–						
2. Corp. legitimacy	4.31	1.16	.03	(.776)					
3. Content credibility	4.05	.99	.07	.64	(.703)				
4. Persuasion knowl.	5.50	1.09	.16	-.03	-.15	(.772)			
5. Reactance	3.50	1.23	.04	-.62	-.63	.12	(.772)		
6. Trustworthiness	4.07	1.10	-.14	.75	.81	-.12	-.69	(.875)	
7. Expertise	4.27	.94	-.01	.73	.79	.02	-.54	-.82	(.782)

Note. Coefficient alphas are provided in parentheses on the diagonal.

Appendix

Tell-Media Inc. “About us”

The screenshot shows the 'About us' page of Tell-Media Inc. The browser address bar displays 'www.tell-media.ch/de/about_tell-media'. The page features a search bar and a navigation menu with links for 'About us', 'Locations', 'Facts & Figures', 'Responsibility', 'Career', and 'Contact'. The main content area is titled 'The Tell-Media Inc.' and contains the following text:

With its daily and weekly newspapers, magazines, online platforms as well as printing facilities, Tell-Media Inc. is one of the leading media corporations in Switzerland. Tell-Media is an independent media company, which has its roots in the German- and French-speaking parts of Switzerland. We stand for freedom of speech, quality journalism and excellent entertainment. The Tell-Media Inc. has been listed on the Swiss Stock Exchange since 2004.

An 'Imprint' link is located at the bottom of the page.

Tell-Media Inc. “Our social responsibility”

Stimulus 1

The screenshot shows the 'Our social responsibility' page of Tell-Media Inc. The browser address bar displays 'www.tell-media.ch/de/corporate_responsibility'. The page features a search bar and a navigation menu with links for 'About us', 'Locations', 'Facts & Figures', 'Responsibility', 'Career', and 'Contact'. The main content area is titled 'Our social responsibility' and contains the following text:

As a large Swiss media company we carry social responsibility. We make our contribution to democracy in shaping public opinion through fair, critical, and independent reporting. We also provide plenty of talking-points with entertaining stories from every area of life. The Tell-Media Inc. is a profit-orientated company. Only with the highest profitability and economic efficiency can we contribute to the formation of public opinion today and in future.

An 'Imprint' link is located at the bottom of the page.

Stimulus 5

The screenshot shows the 'Our social responsibility' page of Tell-Media Inc. The browser address bar displays 'www.tell-media.ch/de/corporate_responsibility'. The page features a search bar and a navigation menu with links for 'About us', 'Locations', 'Facts & Figures', 'Responsibility', 'Career', and 'Contact'. The main content area is titled 'Our social responsibility' and contains the following text:

As a large Swiss media company we carry social responsibility. We make our contribution to democracy in shaping public opinion through fair, critical, and independent reporting. We also provide plenty of talking-points with entertaining stories from every area of life. The Tell-Media Inc. is a profit-orientated company. Only with the highest profitability and economic efficiency can we contribute to the formation of public opinion today and in future.

The ethical basis for our actions is written down in the Tell-Media 'code of conduct'. The ethical guidelines of this 'code of conduct' are binding for all employees – regardless of their ranking in the company or their area of business. With these guidelines, we ensure respect in interpersonal dealings within all of our journalistic and entrepreneurial activities. We have pledged to conduct ourselves ethically and responsibly.

We take our social responsibility seriously with our charity program 'Tell-Media: Culture & Education'. We are committed long-term to promote culture and education in Switzerland. We organize a number of concrete projects, such as dance festivals, theatre performances, exhibitions of young artists, language courses for teenagers and much more. Every six months we provide information on how the 'Tell-Media: Culture & Education' program keeps its promises.

In addition, we assume social responsibility by supporting charitable organizations and foundations occasionally. They can ask us to waive media advertising costs or printing costs for publications. Our internal committee—comprised of members of the management as well as chief editors—decides on the approval of applications.

We know about tragic events such as wars, natural disasters and famines through our reports and stories. We want to do more than merely informing about the harsh realities of people from all over the world. As a media company, we know first-hand where help is most needed worldwide. That's why we give project-related funds to recognized charities when people are in distress and need quick and professional help.

An 'Imprint' link is located at the bottom of the page.

Note. The questionnaire (including stimulus material and items) was written in German.

**Conversations with PR Leaders:
Heading Into a Dynamic and Uncertain Future at Warp Speed**

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Abstract

Interviews with 137 PR leaders in 10 countries/regions examined how PR leaders manage complex issues, the influences of organizational culture and structure on practice, and needs and expectations for future leaders. Five themes emerged: 1) the global hunt for talent, 2) intensification of the sensemaking role due to the digital revolution, 3) the dilution of communication power due to cultural and structural constraints, 4) lack of strategic leadership development programs, and 5) incredibly high expectations for future leaders.

Excellent leadership in public relations practice is rich human capital. The qualities and capabilities of communication leaders and their day-to-day performance help drive the success, reputation, and future of their organizations and the profession (Berger & Meng, 2010; Meng, Berger, Gower & Heyman, 2012). Scholars and practitioners recognize the link between excellent leadership and effective practice, but few have tried to explain the complex and multi-faceted nature of leadership in the field. The leadership construct and the development of leaders in public relations are under researched, under developed, and largely unmeasured (Berger & Meng, 2014).

To advance our understanding, The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations carried out a global study in 2012 to gain a big picture of leaders in practice (Berger, 2012). An international team of 28 researchers conducted survey and interview research. In the first phase, nearly 4,500 practitioners in 23 countries completed an online survey in nine languages. The survey examined key issues in the field, how leaders manage them, how they affect leaders' roles and practices, and what might be done to improve the development of future communication leaders. Individual perceptions about leaders, organizational culture, gender, and the profession also were captured.

This research paper reports on findings from the second phase of that study, which involved depth interviews with 137 communication leaders in 10 countries and regions. The interviews: 1) provided depth insights about managing issues in a turbulent environment and how they affect what leaders do, 2) examined how organizational cultures and structures influence leadership roles and practices, and 3) explored the development of future leaders. The interviews revealed two crucial needs: more leadership talent at all levels and more strategic, systemic development of PR leaders globally to achieve future success. This report reviews five major themes in the interviews and discusses three practical implications/best practices for leadership development in organizations and groups.

The Literature and the Integrated Model of Leadership

Leadership is a “complex, multifaceted phenomenon” (Yukl, 1989, p. 253), and research about it reflects this complexity through a wide range of theoretical perspectives and approaches developed in the past century. Several comprehensive reviews of this literature are available and are not duplicated here (e.g., Hackman & Johnson, 2009; Northouse, 2007; and Yukl, 2012). Drawing from these works and original studies, four major theoretical approaches are first briefly described—the trait, behavioral, situational, and transformational approaches. Leadership studies in public relations are then reviewed as a basis for setting up the integrated model of PR leadership that framed the global study. This model integrates concepts from the major theoretical approaches and the public relations literature.

Four Major Approaches to Leadership Theories

The Trait Approach. One of the earliest research areas in leadership, the trait approach refers to leaders' attributes such as personality characteristics, intelligence, motives, values, and skills (Stogdill, 1948, 1974). This research focused on identifying personal attributes or superior qualities deemed essential to effective leadership. Studies often compared such traits exhibited by leaders with those exhibited by non-leaders (Bratton, Grint & Nelson, 2005; Yukl, 1989). However, researchers found it difficult to identify consistent patterns of traits that differentiated leaders from non-leaders; they failed agree on specific traits that would guarantee effective leadership (Stogdill, 1948, 1974); and the approach largely ignored the importance of followers

(Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975).

Despite its limitations, trait research continues, and many believe that certain traits remain essential to leadership. Manfredi (2008), for example, argued that successful leaders today must be intelligent, possess high energy, think conceptually, and communicate effectively.

The Behavioral Approach. This approach emphasizes what leaders do and the consequences of their behaviors on managerial effectiveness (Fleishman, 1953). Two types of behaviors are often studied: task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviors (Bratton, Grint, & Nelson, 2005). The *task-oriented* approach seeks to discover what activities are typical of managerial work and the processes of decision-making and problem solving (McCall & Kaplan, 1985; Yukl, 1989). The *relationship-oriented* approach has focused more on leader-follower relationships during work, such as showing respect and support for followers (Kotter, 1982; Mintzberg, 1973, 1979).

This approach also emphasizes *style* of leadership, and Blake and Mouton (1964) characterized five leadership styles in their influential Leadership Grid: authority-compliance, team management, country club management, middle-of-the-road management, and impoverished management. Despite its practical application, the behavioral approach has been unable to describe a universal style of leader behavior that is effective in the vast majority of situations. Nevertheless, leader styles and behaviors remain a central area of study because “walking the talk” and “show it, don’t tell it” remain important to organizational members.

The Situational Approach. The situational approach emphasizes the importance of the leader’s traits and behaviors within a mix of contextual factors such as the myriad issues in external environments and the attributes of subordinates and other internal affairs. This approach recognizes both the need for flexible leaders and the importance of context. Various theories in this approach have sought to establish the relevance of, and interrelationships among behavior patterns and situations (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Fiedler, 1978; House, 1971; Kerr & Jermier, 1978).

For example, *path-goal* theory (House, 1971; House & Mitchell, 1974), argues that the leader’s main task is to use the appropriate behavior style to help followers clarify their paths to achieve work and personal goals. The nature of the task, the work environment, and subordinate attributes determine which style best improves subordinate satisfaction and performance. Fiedler’s (1978) *LPC contingency theory* proposes that the fit between the leader’s orientation and the favorableness of the situation determines the team’s effectiveness. *Leader-member exchange theory* (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) describes how leaders develop different exchange relationships with subordinates. The basic idea is that leaders form two groups of followers. *In-group* members share characteristics similar to those of the leader and are often given greater responsibilities, rewards, and attention. In contrast, *out-group* members work outside the leader’s inner circle and receive less attention and fewer rewards.

The Transformational Approach. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, research shifted from what is now frequently termed “traditional leadership” to the “new leadership” with the advent of charismatic and transformational approaches (Northouse, 2007). Traditional leadership theories emphasized rational processes, but the new approaches are more concerned with emotions, values, ethics, and long-term relationships, as well as followers’ motives, needs, and satisfaction (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; House, 1977; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

Transformational leadership theories are broader in scope because they involve leader style, traits, power, behaviors, and situational variables in a dynamic model. Moreover,

transformational leaders articulate a vision of the future that can be shared by subordinates. The benefits of such leadership include broadening and elevating the interests of followers, generating awareness and acceptance among the followers of the organization's mission, and motivating followers to go beyond their self-interests for the good of the organization (Bass, 1985, 1997; Beyer, 1999; Conger, 1999; House, 1976, 1999).

Public Relations Research and Leadership

Until recently, few research projects have directly explored leadership in public relations (Aldoory & Toth, 2004). However, the concept has been addressed in several essays and is implicit in at least four theoretical perspectives in the field. For example, Thayer (1986) argued that professionals should take on a strategic communication leadership role. Neff (2002) advocated for integrating leadership processes and service into the basic PR principles course in education. Other scholars have recognized the importance of applying leadership skills to enhance practice and to help professionals participate successfully in decision-making arenas (Berger & Reber, 2006; Berger, Reber, & Heyman, 2007; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Four leadership perspectives in public relations and the work of The Plank Center are reviewed in this section.

Excellence and Role Theories. The IABC Excellence Study identified key characteristics of excellence in public relations as general principles (J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). The well-known principles reflect characteristics and values that a public relations unit could (and should) have, and we can view these principles as a conceptual framework for leadership. Applying some of them to leadership, for example, we might conclude that PR leaders should: 1) be involved in strategic management of the organization, 2) be empowered as members of the dominant coalition, 3) possess a managerial worldview and requisite professional knowledge and experience, and 4) model two-way symmetrical communication (Broom & Dozier, 1986; Dozier & Broom, 1995; J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

Excellence theorists also concluded that an organization's structure and culture influence both the role and effectiveness of public relations, and they advocated for a "culture for communication." In addition, excellence theory and role theory underscore certain crucial leadership traits (visionary, managerial view), skills (communication knowledge and expertise), and behaviors (model two-way communication) for professionals in the field.

Contingency Theory. Cameron and colleagues (e.g., Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001; Reber & Cameron, 2003) developed contingency theory, which focuses on strategic and conflictual relationships between an organization and its publics. PR leaders help manage their organizations strategically by scanning the external environment, identifying crucial issues and interpreting what they mean, and then making appropriate strategic choices based on those issues and actors. These choices fall within an organization-public relationship continuum that ranges from an organization's pure advocacy of its own position on an issue (adversarial), to pure acceptance of the public's position on an issue (accommodative).

Contingency theory in public relations reflects the situational approach in leadership theory (Waller, Smith & Warnock, 1989): context affects what leaders pay attention to and what they do. This suggests that "leadership is best not conceived as a universal trait, but as situationally-sensitive management and strategic (even tactical) options" (Shin, Heath, & Lee, 2011, p. 172).

Power Relations Theory. L. A. Grunig (1992) linked the power-control perspective with

public relations, arguing that PR executives need to be part of the dominant coalition, that insider group of key influencers and strategic decision-makers in organizations. To gain admission to this group and influence its decisions, communication leaders must possess professional expertise and experience and the ability to understand and articulate a variety of stakeholder information that bears on the organization. In addition, communication leaders must have the persuasive ability to be effective advocates and counselors.

Berger and Reber (2006) explored how power can make PR units more effective and ethical in organizational decision making. They claimed the practice is inherently political, and the practice exists and occurs within strategic relationships marked by power. To be an effective leader, then, one must increase her or his power and influence, “become more politically astute, employ more diverse influence resources and tactics, and exert greater political will in organizational arenas where power relations shape decisions” (Berger & Reber, 2006, p. 2). This research highlights organizational structural and cultural dimensions of leadership and valorizes certain traits and skills (e.g., vision of power, political willpower, and political knowledge).

Leadership and Gender. Aldoory (1998) interviewed female public relations leaders to examine their leadership style and found that they exhibited transformational and interactive styles, grounded in a situational context. Aldoory & Toth (2004) examined which leadership styles are most effective and how leadership perceptions vary by gender. Practitioners strongly favored transformational leadership style over transactional style. Overall, the survey revealed few differences between female and male participants and their style preferences.

A study of gender and public relations documented a long-time pay gap between women and men and examined why women find it more difficult to ascend to leadership (L. A. Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001). Gender stereotyping is a key driver: issues of gender bias are essentially issues of perceptions of women created by both men and women. Though women now represent about 70 percent of the professional workforce, the pay gap persists. This has been attributed to “years of experience, manager role enactment, participation in management decision-making, income suppressing career interruptions, and career specialization” (Dozier, Sha, & Shen, 2012).

The Plank Center Studies and the Integrated Model of Leadership in PR. In 2006 The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations at the University of Alabama launched a research program to enrich the body of knowledge about leadership in the field. To date this effort has yielded 22 studies that explore diverse aspects of leadership—behaviors, styles, skills, ethics and values, emotional intelligence, and education, among others.

For example, Choi and Choi (2007) identified six leadership behaviors that influence the value of public relations in organizations, including providing employees with a clear vision about public relations policies and strategies, exerting upward influence, acting as a change agent, and creating alliances inside and outside of the organization. Werder and Holtzhausen (2009) found that transformational and inclusive leadership styles were most prevalent among practice leaders. Both styles were seen to increase the effectiveness of public relations strategies.

Jin (2010) examined core emotional traits and skills for PR leaders. She found that PR leaders preferred a transformational leadership style, and empathy played an essential role in this type of leadership. Both leadership style and empathy were significant predictors of PR leaders’ competency in gaining employee trust, managing employee hopes and frustrations, and taking successful stances toward employees and top management in decision-making conflicts.

Lee and Cheng (2011) interviewed 20 high-level PR executives to examine the ethical dimension of leadership. They found that ethical leadership was grounded more strongly in personal rather than professional ethics. Also, advocating ethical standards and modeling

appropriate behaviors facilitated the transfer of ethics knowledge and behaviors in the organization more effectively than did communicating ethics codes and conducting training.

Erzikova and Berger (2011, 2012) surveyed university PR educators to learn how and to what extent leadership is incorporated in education. The teachers said they are advocates for leadership and help develop future leaders, but few universities offered actual leadership courses or content. Educators indicated the most important leadership skills and values for students were communication knowledge and skills, a strong ethical orientation, and problem-solving ability.

Meng and colleagues at The Plank Center (Meng, 2009; Meng & Berger, 2013; Meng, Berger, Gower & Heyman, 2012; Meng, Berger & Heyman, 2011) have been carrying out a research program to build theory about leadership in the field. As described above, research in managerial leadership and public relations leadership is marked by a broad range of theories and approaches. Meng's model (2009) grew out of a review of these theories and the belief that successful leadership is complex and multi-dimensional. Thus, the model draws from and integrates elements of several of the theoretical perspectives—traits, skills, behaviors, and situational and transformational leadership styles.

This integrated model of leadership in public relations includes six individual dimensions and a major environmental moderator of leadership effectiveness. A *dimension* is a fundamental unit or element of the leadership construct (Berger & Meng, 2014). The six dimensions are: self-dynamics (self-insights and vision), team leadership and collaboration capabilities, ethical orientation and professional values, relationship-building skills, strategic decision-making capabilities, and communication knowledge management and skills. The seventh dimension—the environmental moderator—represents the organizational structure and culture in which the PR teams and leaders practice. Issues in the external world also affect practice and influence what leaders pay attention to and what they do.

Essentially, the integrated model contends that communication leaders may be more effective and excellent when 1) their six personal dimensions are rich and strongly developed, and 2) organizational culture and structures support open and transparent communication processes. The seven dimensions are fully described in other publications (Meng, 2009; Berger & Meng, 2014). The model was tested in the U.S. and Singapore, and subsequently in countries in the global study. In each test, factor analysis yielded a single factor, which was labeled the *integrated model of excellent leadership in public relations*.

The interviews with leaders in the global study, the subject of this paper, were concerned with three areas of questions related to the model. First, some questions focused on culture-specific interpretations of critical issues and how those issues affected the personal dimensions of leadership and leaders' roles, decisions, and day-to-day practices—from hiring and training to strategic decision making and vision. Second, several questions focused on specific ways in which organizational culture and structure—the seventh dimension of leadership—facilitate or impede practice. Third, leaders' perceptions were gathered about the crucial qualities, capabilities, and values required for future leaders—personal dimensions of leadership. Corresponding development needs and the state of PR leadership development in each country/region also were discussed.

Method

An international team of 28 researchers developed a 17-question Interview Guide for use in 10 designated countries/regions: Brazil, the Chinese-speaking countries (China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan), the German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany and Switzerland),

India, Latvia, Mexico, Russia, South Korea, Spain, and the U.S. The three primary areas of questions were those described in the preceding paragraph. Back translation procedures were used to prepare the Guide in nine languages. Participants were given the option to complete the interview in English or in their home language.

Snowball sampling was used to ensure that participants were diverse, senior professionals and recognized leaders. As a result, most professionals in the sample were high-level communication executives with 20 years or more of experience. Overall, 137 in-depth interviews were completed in the 10 countries/regions, and 10-15 interviews were completed in most countries and regions. Men and women were equally represented in the interviews (68 women and 69 men), and they worked in three types of organizations: public or private companies (64), communication agencies (38), and nonprofit organizations (35), which included government agencies, universities, and political groups and organizations.

The vast majority of interviews were conducted by telephone, though a few were completed via Skype or in person. The shortest interview lasted 30 minutes, the longest more than two hours. On average, each interview lasted about 52 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed by the country researchers, most of whom used the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This method requires a careful and thoughtful approach to code and conceptualize field data into themes or categories of interest, constantly comparing new data text entries to each category. The researcher then integrates the various categories and properties to attempt to develop “a focused, selective accounting of the phenomenon” (Lindlof, p. 224).

Researchers in each country then produced a written report of their findings and analysis. Three researchers subsequently reviewed and analyzed the country reports for commonalities and differences among the themes and concepts in the 10 texts. This final analysis of the reports is the basis for this paper.

Five Themes—The Old, the New, and the Future

Five primary themes and a number of sub-themes emerged in analysis of the conversations with communication leaders. The 137 executives were thoughtful and forthright. Overall, they provided a rich mosaic of perceptions, insights and beliefs about the profession—where it is and where it needs to go. They shared many similar concerns and hopes; none of them were satisfied with where things stand; and they anticipate a brighter though far more challenging and complex future for a rapidly expanding global profession that requires more outstanding leaders and role models. The five themes are discussed in this section.

1. The Hunt for Talent at All Levels Keeps PR Leaders Awake at Night.

When asked to discuss the key issues they confront, the executives collectively named 14 issues in the interviews, including frequent mentions of the 10 issues identified in the global survey (Table 1)—dealing with the speed and volume of information, managing the digital revolution and rise of social media, crisis communication, and so forth. However, the senior leaders said that finding, developing, and retaining top talent at all levels keeps them awake at night more than other issues. This was the case in most of the countries/regions, but especially in the Chinese-speaking countries, India, Russia, and the U.S.

Table 1. The Most Important Issue for PR Leaders Today (n=4,483)

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Dealing with the speed and volume of information flow	1029	23.0
Managing the digital revolution and rise of social media	684	15.3
Improving the measurement of communication effectiveness	547	12.2
Being prepared to effectively deal with crises that may arise	532	11.9
Dealing with growing demands for transparency	375	8.4
Improving employee engagement and commitment	354	7.9
Finding, developing and retaining top talent	337	7.5
Meeting demands for corporate social responsibility	274	6.1
Meeting communication needs in diverse cultures	239	5.3
Improving the image of the profession	112	2.5

The talent hunt isn't new, but the PR leaders said globalization, the growing demand for communication professionals, increasing transparency requirements, and the digital revolution exacerbate the quest. Some said this issue consumed a majority of their time and was their most crucial responsibility because it affects not only hiring and training, but also strategizing, structuring the function, assigning projects, and other practice elements. An energy company PR leader summarized this position: "Having the right team is more crucial than ever in our hyper work world today. The majority of my time is spent finding, developing, retaining and managing people."

Regarding hiring entry-level talent, an agency leader in the U.S. echoed the sentiments of many in highlighting the great need for digital and research specialists:

We're looking for specialists now. We used to be all generalists and everybody knew a little bit about everything, but that's no longer working. So we're looking for people with deep specialties in research, design, software development, social networking. We have an increased focus on people strategists who understand research and measurement.

Finding enough well-educated young professionals is a related challenge in burgeoning markets like India. According to the head of an agency in that country, "We don't have great schools. We have very few schools that teach PR. These are cottage courses. There are very few structured communication courses or degrees that make true blue professionals."

However, hiring talented entry-level specialists is only part of the issue. The PR leader at an insurance company in the U.S. emphasized the need for developing professionals already in the function, as well as hiring new skill sets at higher levels: "I purposefully look outside to bring in change agents, people who have a different set of skills and who see the vision and understand the changing landscape we're facing."

Another leader in the chemical industry said it was very difficult to find talented middle managers or directors. "I need people with great experience, with critical-thinking capabilities, with the capacity to get dropped into any problem or opportunity in any country and deal with it successfully," she said. "Yes, I need digital media specialists, but even more I need people at more advanced levels with full capabilities who can solve problems."

Retaining high performers is as difficult as finding them, according to a communication executive in China. "Those companies that provide solid training courses are now so concerned they will lose people as soon as they train them—they will take higher paying jobs elsewhere—that they are increasingly reluctant to offer training." Similar turnover problems in agencies were mentioned by leaders in India.

A leader in an industrial manufacturing company described why finding the right people at all levels is so crucial:

If you don't get the right people in the right jobs, it takes more people to get the work done. The budgets and the downsizings over the last five years are just not forgiving. When you have people who aren't carrying their full load, it puts stress on the people who are high performing. The organization I came from had so many weak links that I put really hard stress on two or three people while the others just came in, did their thing, and left. I just didn't have time to develop people. I inherited people, and now I have zero patience for those who don't perform at a high level.

Other communication leaders addressed another dimension of the talent issue—the ongoing challenge of preparing front-line managers and supervisors to be more effective internal communicators and listeners, which is linked to employee engagement, trust, and other internal issues. Locating professionals with business savvy is a related issue. One Chinese company leader expressed it this way: “PR leaders lack commercial sensibility. We do not have a large number of executives who are PR people who have run large-scale enterprises.” Greater business knowledge also was cited by some as a requirement for future leaders.

An information technology communication leader said the best teams in the global world today blend people with old and new skills, and both require training:

I need both traditionalists and Millennials. The more traditional PR folks—they're great writers, great storytellers, and those skills are always going to be in high demand. However, the challenge is to get them to change how they look at news cycles, and faster ways to tell the story. So, there's a huge training need for them. The Millennials are incredibly advanced with the channels, very open, very keen to tell that story. But the challenge with them is their writing skills aren't as strong, and their understanding of the business is still wanting.

A leader at a manufacturing company in South America summarized the power and scope of this crucial global theme:

The talent issue touches virtually all aspects of my work: hiring and development, forming teams, budgeting, strategic planning, resource allocations and so forth.

Getting the right people in the right places to do the right things in the best way is the ongoing challenge in leadership. Isn't that what leadership's all about?

The digital revolution, globalization, and the growth of public relations practice in large and growing markets is fueling competition for well-trained and highly capable professionals at all levels. All indications are that the talent wars will continue to intensify worldwide, but perhaps more so in the large and rapidly growing economies of Brazil, China, India and Russia.

2. *Digital Magnifies the Sensemaking Role of Leaders.*

The top issues in the global survey (Table 1)—dealing with the speed and volume of information flow and managing the digital revolution and rise of social media—were the second area of greatest concern for those interviewed. Communication leaders bear many roles and responsibilities, but above all they have been and are *sensemakers*—they gather, process, interpret and distill vast amounts of information. They then translate and make sense of this information for others inside and outside their organization (Parry, 2008). All leaders spend a great deal of time in gathering, processing, and distributing information about issues, problems, and opportunities confronting their organizations (Walsh, 1995), but this is arguably the central role for public relations leaders today.

This sensemaker metaphor is rooted in the work of Smircich and Morgan (1982), who claimed that leaders are concerned with managing (influencing) meaning among followers. Leaders attempt to manage the meaning of issues, events, and experiences so that followers understand those issues and events within the preferred interpretation of the leader. In doing so, followers may better understand their role in dealing with these issues and experiences, identify more closely with their organization, and increase contributions to goal achievement.

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) described three cognitive processes for considering the sensemaking work of leaders. The first process is *sensemaking*, which gives meaning to experiences and events. This involves 1) information seeking where leaders search their environment for issues that may impact the organization, and 2) then constructing meaning to provide a framework or structure for decision-making and action.

Sensegiving is the second process. Here, leaders interpret and explain to others what the issue means for the organization, in their view. They attempt to influence meaning to gain followers' support, and they may use many approaches to do so, including rites, rituals, metaphors, storytelling, rewards, and so forth (Schein, 1992).

The third process is *sensenegotiating*, which refers to the interplay of the leader's preferred meanings, and the views of other organizational members who have their own interpretations of the issue, as they attempt to negotiate collective understanding. These three processes play out continuously because the global political-economic-social environment is dynamic and fast moving, and organizations must successfully adapt to external changes and integrate them internally.

Today, these managerial communication responsibilities involve multi-dimensional sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensenegotiating. Like all leaders, communication managers try to make sense of experiences, events and issues inside and outside of their organizations. They then adopt preferred meanings for those issues and convey them to their team members and followers, who make their own sense of the issues and how they affect them. This leads to negotiation of preferred meanings among communication leaders and their followers.

For public relations leaders, however, sensemaking goes beyond this traditional leader-follower interaction, and the role has become far more complex due to the digital revolution and the breathtaking velocity, volume, and variety of information ("big data"). Public relations leaders today must process at warp speed this high-speed flow of information to 1) determine what is most relevant to the organization, 2) evaluate the relevant information strategically and tactically, and 3) identify what corresponding worthwhile opportunities for engagement and interaction are presented in the flow. Communication leaders then try to make sense of these issues and opportunities in their interactions with organizational leaders and employees. They add more to these processes when they prepare or facilitate communications between other organizational leaders and their followers, or with other stakeholders.

Further, public relations leaders try to make sense of their organization's world of stakeholders and their issues and concerns. They gather information from groups and stakeholders and translate it tactically and strategically to organizational leaders and decision makers. They engage in sensenegotiations and decision making about what to do, and especially how and what to communicate about what they decide to do, in an increasingly transparent world. In the data and digital age, then, sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensenegotiating are increasingly complex and ever more crucial.

One example from many in the interviews nicely illustrates this metaphor in action. The communication leader in a large energy company described how her work has been radically

altered by social media—how the sensemaking, sensegiving, and sense negotiating processes have changed:

Social media has redefined everything we do, and here's how we are managing now. We outsourced some information gathering and preparation of briefing documents. They troll information all the time. Then we [the communication team] have a really solid briefing first thing every morning. I have a team that has a pretty good sense of what to bubble up, and I have a sense of what to bubble out, down, up, which means we are tethered 24/7. I've had to learn to manage when to focus on information and when to be thoughtful about what to do with it. How we changed from three years ago is there are a lot more face-to-face meetings—a lot more communication among executives to make sure that everybody is fully informed and participating in problem solving.

Processing and reflecting on information that has been strategically selected out of the vast data flow; bubbling it up, down and out; negotiating meanings with and among senior leaders; engaging in decision-making—these are some of crucial requirements for public relations leaders, the multidimensional sensemakers.

According to communication leaders in South Korea, the social media revolution impacts practice at four levels: practitioner, work unit, organization, and field. It requires people with new skills and knowledge who nevertheless require ongoing training, and who will drive information sharing among team members. The ability of professionals to use social media effectively, to make sense of these extensive tools, and to understand the new electronic publics and communities who use them, have elevated the status of the function. One South Korean PR leader described what happened in his organization:

The possibilities of new communication technology led to a reorganization of our unit, which resulted in a new team in charge of PR. We moved from traditional media relations and established a new team, new equipment, and so forth. Social media are currently taking a greater place in practice.

In addition, agency leaders in several countries described how they have created new electronic monitoring and listening centers to track traditional media, social media, and social communities and conversations to better serve their clients. These new approaches allow them to become aware of issues faster, make sense of them faster, and respond or engage in real time. Hiring people with new skill sets, continuously training people, and creating new units or structures are some of the ways in which communication leaders try to become more efficient and responsive sensemakers in the high-speed digital world.

3. Organizational Cultures and Structures Diminish the Power of Strategic Communications.

Professionals have long lamented that they aren't part of key strategic decision-making groups and processes in organizations, and that their company leaders don't understand the value of PR. Organizational structures and perceptions of public relations strongly influence what leaders do on the job, and they can reduce public relations practice to a technical production role when its greatest value is strategic.

Based on the interviews, this issue appears less problematic in the German-speaking countries and the U.S., where PR leaders described a number of structural and cultural factors that supported their work. Structural factors included close links with the CEO/leader, participation in strategic decision making, sufficient staffing and resources, growing strategic alignment with organizational goals, and so forth. Positive cultural factors included an open communication climate, two-way communication, and regard for and recognition of employees,

among others.

What has led to this more favorable environment for practice? U.S. leaders cited three reasons: 1) the exemplary leadership of a single individual who imbued the function with credibility, 2) a strong and measurable performance record by the function over time; and 3) CEOs, presidents or other functional executives who embrace communication and serve as excellent role models for it.

In most other countries/regions in the study, however, a variety of cultural and structural barriers inhibit practice. Public relations leaders in Brazil, for example, said internal culture was their top issue; their communication functions operate in “an environment where the function is not fully supported, nor the strategic value fully understood.” One executive summarized this view: “There is still a cloud over all of the potential in the area and the changes that could be implemented that might positively impact change.”

Executives in Mexico reported that while internal communication is highly valued in their organizations, organizational leaders still don’t understand the value of external public relations, which impacts budgets and sharply limits involvement in strategic decision making.

Latvian public relations interviewees said they were constantly under pressure to convince management of the value of public relations and provide a rationale for everything they did. One leader said, “We must make management understand that public relations is part of the bottom line, part of our company’s final success.”

Societal culture and a long legacy of authoritarian control still dominate Russian organizations, and the influence of the state constrains communication leadership and success. Russian PR executives said misperceptions of PR (as spin or manipulation) and lack of understanding of strategic public relations, was the top issue in their country, along with a low level of professionalism. An agency leader said, “PR professionals are seldom involved in decision making. They are simply given a task, like organizing a media event.” According to some of the interviewees, part of the problem is due to a weak educational system that doesn’t arm students with basic writing or digital media skills.

Public relations practice in South Korea was described as being in the formative stage with a continuing strong focus on media relations and the execution of technical roles. Some organizational leaders there also view PR as a luxury, while others fail to see the link between PR and success in the marketplace. On the other hand, interviewees indicated that effective understanding and use of social media appeared to be improving the reputation of practitioners in their companies.

In some countries, e.g., Latvia, Russia, India, and Spain, weak educational systems and professional associations contributed to the problem and reinforced the general belief that public relations practice is neither strategic nor essential. Communication leaders in Latin American countries believe the solution to the problem lies in new measurement tools and approaches that will help them build a fact-based case for the value of public relations in their organizations.

4. Leadership Development in Public Relations is Under Developed.

The most successful public relations programs and campaigns are grounded in research, guided by clear and measurable goals, shaped by appropriate strategies, carried out with the best tactics, and measured or assessed for results. Shouldn’t national or international efforts to enhance leadership or strengthen the development of leaders in the field follow the same formula?

Certainly there's an opportunity for improving leadership and the conditions for leadership in public relations as evident in results in the global survey (Table 2). The Summated Leadership Index, a simple measure, depicts the mean scores for answers to three survey questions: the performance of the senior communication leader, the extent to which the CEO values public relations, and the presence of two-way communications in the organization. These are three measures of a culture for communication (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & D.M. Dozier, 2002). The mean score for each country/region (summed means for each of the three questions, 7-point scale) indicates the extent to which the environment for excellent leadership is present. A perfect score would be 21.0, and the average mean score for countries in the survey was 14.49. The opportunity to improve leadership and the conditions for it is evident.

Table 2. Summated Leadership Index

<u>Country/Region</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>
India	140	16.44	4.26
Mexico	213	15.31	4.55
Chinese-speaking countries	143	14.87	4.29
United States	828	14.76	4.47
German-speaking countries	1773	14.62	4.07
Latvia/Estonia	142	14.60	3.96
United Kingdom	139	14.42	4.89
Spain	210	14.39	4.89
Chile	156	14.00	4.51
Russia	215	13.56	4.59
South Korea	205	13.37	2.14
<u>Brazil</u>	<u>302</u>	<u>13.09</u>	<u>4.61</u>
Total	4,464	14.49	4.26

The executives we interviewed agreed that leadership in public relations should be strategically developed and strengthened. However, there appear to be few formal leadership development efforts and little will power or collective interest in doing so in many countries/regions. The German-speaking countries, for example, boast strong educational programs, and many leaders there hold graduate degrees. However, little attention is devoted specifically to leader or leadership development in educational curricula or within professional associations. The same is true in Latvia, Russia and Spain, where the PR leaders said that education programs were relatively weak and more oriented to theory than to practical or applied knowledge. In Spain, a cottage industry of general leadership training programs has mushroomed, though the quality and contents of such programs are unknown.

The situation is similar in most Asian and Latin American countries in the study. Educational curricula vary widely from country to country—some practically oriented but most theory heavy. Leaders in India, for example, said efforts to build a professional community and to meet growing marketplace demands are hampered by lack of 1) strong culturally relevant communication education programs, 2) a supportive industry structure, and 3) strong role models in the field. Formal leadership development is not high on the agenda of most

professional associations in the countries, which focus more on developing basic technical and management skills, creating platforms for speakers and presentation of case studies, and providing social networking events to build identity among professionals.

The profession in the U.S. is marked by a network of professional groups and associations, and university education programs have spread rapidly in the past 30 years. More than 300 colleges and universities now offer degrees or courses in public relations, and 10,000 college students are members of the Public Relations Student Society of America (Public Relations Society of America, 2013). Leadership development is not the primary focus of these education or professional programs, but some development may occur in these systems and does take place in four other approaches.

First, some individuals take on the responsibility for their own development and proactively go about enhancing their leadership knowledge, capabilities, and capacity. Self-responsibility is an important driver. Second, some companies and agencies carry out comprehensive internal leadership development programs (e.g., GE, IBM, Ketchum, P&G, Southwest Air), and presumably this includes employees in worldwide locations. Some of these are robust programs, literally “company universities” with specially designed curricula, structured development assignments, and real work projects to facilitate succession planning and strengthen the overall capabilities and capacities of organizational leadership.

Third, several large professional associations provide a wide range of development opportunities and programs, though most focus on skills and management development rather than leadership development. The Arthur W. Page Society provides perhaps the most intensive and planned two-year leadership development program for 30-40 “future” chief communication officers each year. Fourth, a variety of specialist leadership development suppliers like the Center for Creative Leadership offer diverse training and programming opportunities to organizations.

Overall, then, some leadership development efforts exist in all countries in two senses: 1) some individuals seize the initiative to develop and educate themselves, and 2) some organizations develop their high performers through internal educational and experiential programs. These two approaches represent development for both leaders and leadership. Van Velsor and McCauley (2004) said *leader* development refers to individual growth and skill advancement that expand one’s leadership capacity and capabilities. *Leadership* development focuses on an organization’s attempts to enhance its team of leaders to strengthen their overall organizational performance.

Leadership development is appropriate for professional associations, too, and it represents a significant opportunity for the field. At present, however, there are few association- or education-focused leadership development programs available, and none at a national or international scale. Moreover, there appears to be no compelling urgency to address the need, and no systematic plan or approach for doing so at a time when the profession is experiencing rapid development under the influence of media, cultural, and social changes (Servaes, 2012).

As the profession contemplates its future, then, two questions need to be addressed. First, should leadership development be a priority in the field? Second, how can we systematically and systemically develop more great leaders in the profession when the context for leadership is changing dramatically?

5. *Future Leaders May Come from Other Planets: They Are Bigger than Life.*

The communication executives were asked to look ahead 10-15 years and describe how

future leaders might differ from current leaders, given the rapidly evolving world and practice. Many said some traditional qualities and characteristics would remain the same, but future leaders would also be significantly different in other respects. One financial services vice president best captured the notion of enduring traits or qualities:

The primary leadership traits shouldn't change. I think it's how you interact with people, how you motivate, how you communicate and engage with people. It's about empathy and enabling employees. I don't see those things disappearing. I think some of the great leaders in the past would still be great leaders today, and great leaders tomorrow.

On the other hand, the diverse communication leaders described a number of new or embellished qualities, skills, and requirements for future leaders. Because these comments were fairly consistent across the countries and regions, the most frequent descriptives were used to create the following composite profile of hypothetical future leaders in the field:

More public relations leaders in the future will be women. Future leaders will be better educated and armed with more specialist information and multidisciplinary education. A growing percentage of leaders will possess degrees in public relations or strategic communication, but they also will have a better understanding of business, economics, advertising, marketing, and technology. Continuous education and training will be required to keep up with an ever expanding pool of knowledge in a world where the half-life of any acquired knowledge set is sharply reduced.

Having grown up wired, future leaders will think digital first. Decision-making will grow out of analysis of mountains of data and carefully targeted research, rather than intuition, past experience, or gut-instinct. Measurement will be refined, routine and demanding. Transparency will be a practice, not an objective. Future leaders will possess extraordinary communication competence and knowledge, and they will combine great organizational clarity with a compelling vision for how communication connects the organization with others in the world.

Future public relations leaders will be culturally aware and possess a global world view. They will be risk-takers, fire fighters and formidable change agents who push to create cultures for communication by knocking down internal barriers and driving engagement. Above all, they will be ethically branded and courageous—willing to speak truth to power and to challenge those who abuse or misuse power. In these ways future public relations leaders will be seen as business and organization leaders, as well as communication leaders.

This collective vision is compelling and ambitious, but it begs the question: How does the profession arrive at this bright future without some deep systematic or systemic changes in how it conceptualizes and prepares individuals for leadership roles?

Discussion and Implications

The communication leaders we interviewed confirmed the survey findings regarding the most important issues in the field, that crucial context that shapes practice. The digital revolution accelerates the sensemaking process and touches many aspects of leaders' day-to-day practices and decisions even as it casts sweeping changes over the profession globally. Digital is a local and global issue. Is it also both the problem and the solution?

The public relations executives also confirmed the varying stages of professional practice in the world as reflected in country histories, the development and state of educational programs and curricula, the extent and quality of professional support structures and systems, and the perceptions of practice among organizational leaders. In many countries organizational leaders

still question the credibility and value of public relations, and corresponding cultures and structures in those organizations often diminish the potential strategic impact of the function. Improving the reputation and strategic use of the practice, whether through new measures of value, improved performance over time, cutting-edge uses of new technologies, or other approaches will help organizations achieve their goals and solve other problems, e.g., transparency, CSR, and employee engagement.

The most compelling findings, however, are the interconnected issues of 1) finding talent at all levels and 2) the development of future leaders. The growing competition to find, develop, and retain top talent—human capital—at all levels underscores the competitive advantage of excellent professionals in our high-speed digital world. The keen competition to find talent is global, but so are the payoffs for landing such individuals and this is why leaders lose sleep over the issue.

Sometimes high pay and lucrative benefits land top communication talent, but greater autonomy on the job may be increasingly important (Berger & Meng, 2014). Retaining top people appears linked to the culture of the organization—the extent to which it is an open and inclusive culture, a culture for communication. Thus, organizations with strong, rich cultures are likely to get richer with their hires, and this brings us back to leadership development.

Many of the leaders in the study pointed to an absence of meaningful leadership development efforts within the professional structures of the system—education programs and professional associations. Education programs contribute to leadership development by strengthening students’ analytical and critical-thinking skills and their communication knowledge management capabilities, though this varies by country. Professional associations contribute by enhancing technical and management knowledge and skills. But overall, formal leadership development is “not high on the radar” of important issues in their countries, the leaders said.

Some individuals actively seek out and take on leadership development opportunities. A number of top companies and agencies have strong internal leadership development programs for high-potential professionals. But as the Summated Leadership Index suggested, there’s much room for improving leadership and the conditions for excellent leadership in every country in the study. Greater involvement of association and educational components of the system, along with strategic development inside organizations, seem crucial to closing the gap between what is and what might be.

In closing, three practical implications of research and best practices for leadership development are briefly described. Acting on them may help groups, organizations, and institutions of all types build better leaders and competitive advantage in their fields of operation.

1. Create a Strategic, Long-Term Leadership Development Plan—Live It and Infuse It in the Culture.

According to the Human Capital Institute (HCI) (2010), some organizations do little to develop future leaders, while others use a simplified approach—they carry out a leadership-training program and corresponding annual talent review. On the other hand, top companies for leader development—e.g., IBM, GE, Deere & Company, P&G, 3M, and Cargill—practice a deeper, more complex and structured approach.

These and other top companies view leadership development as a key driver of competitive advantage, company strategy, and future success (e.g., Fulmer & Goldsmith, 2001). They document links between financial success and their leadership practices and development.

Some of the top companies' best leadership development practices were identified in a longitudinal study of leadership in more than 500 companies, which was carried out by Hewitt Associates, Fortune Magazine, and the RBL Group (Human Capital Institute, 2010). Here are four of the practices:

- ✓ CEOs invest real time and energy into developing leaders—they live it.
- ✓ Leadership development is integrated into business planning and organizational culture. Leaders are responsible for demonstrating core values.
- ✓ A holistic view guides leadership development and actions in four senses—management of people, preparation of leaders and succession planning, effectiveness of leaders in achieving organizational goals, and the constant tracking of high-potential employees at all levels in the organization.
- ✓ A measurement mindset and a rich set of data inform many aspects of leadership development programs, decisions, and actions.

2. *Envision Leadership Learning and Development as a Continuous Process, a Journey throughout Life—Not a Discrete Set of Planned Activities or Programs.*

Individuals develop their leadership capabilities and capacity through multiple approaches during this journey: individual experiences, knowledge gained through actual leadership roles at all ages, formal or structured leadership development programs, educational programs or other types of interventions, and the influence of role models, mentors and coaches (Conger & Fulmer, 2003).

An individual's natural life experiences, and what he or she learns from them, generate a significant impact on a leader's development and style (Bennis, 2009). In addition, organizations can help talented employees gain the right experiences at the right time to accelerate their development (e.g., McCall, 2010; McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994). McCall (2010) described five leveraging points organizations can use to create a supportive context for leadership learning and development: 1) identify developmental experiences; 2) identify people with potential to be leaders; 3) develop processes for getting the right learning experience; 4) increase the odds that learning will occur; and 5) take a career-long view with a focus on critical career transitions.

Similarly, Conger (2010) argued that it is important for organizations to create formal leadership development initiatives that not only focus on individual skill development, but also integrate corporate vision and values; add strategic interventions to promote major changes; and design active learning approaches to address real organizational challenges and opportunities.

Best-in-class companies employ these and other approaches, and recognize that development is a long, work-life journey. According to the Hay Group's *Best Companies for Leadership* survey in 2014, best-in-class companies adopt a proactive, structured approach to talent development (Hay Group, 2014). They identify crucial roles and skills required for future leaders; they plan development experiences to strengthen these roles and capabilities; and they make leadership development programs available at all experience levels, by way of building the talent pool. In addition, they deliberately work to create a diverse pool of future leaders.

3. *Develop a Measurement-Mindset for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating Development Activities That Are Critical to the Business.*

HCI (2010) reported that top companies regularly use a 360-degree survey and feedback process—or similar in-depth approaches—to assess leaders at all levels. They measure

leadership performance at the team level by evaluating effectiveness of onboarding processes, turnover rates, movement rates of high potentials, and rates of completed development plans.

They gauge the effectiveness of leadership development programs with specific metrics such as employee engagement rates, movement of talent across the organization, and fulfillment rates for key positions. In addition, they identify and evaluate skill and experience gaps for the next generation of leaders. Top leaders in top companies are held accountable for developing other leaders, demonstrating behaviors that exemplify core values in the organization, and embedding leadership metrics into measurement of organizational performance.

Put simply, top organizations “see” leadership development differently than do other organizations, they hold top leaders accountable for development outcomes, and they possess a measurement-mindset. The communication leaders interviewed in this study agreed that the future of public relations profession is bright and promising. Learning more about leadership development through research and best cases/practices, along with strengthening systemic capabilities, may improve the development and performance of public relations leaders globally and render that promising future even more brightly.

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Communications and Logistical Challenges of the First External Voting Process for Costa Ricans Abroad: Lessons Learned and Applications for International Government Public Relations

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Abstract

Using information gathered from 40 interviews with Costa Ricans who live abroad (some who decided to vote through the newly granted external voting right and many other who did not vote in the Costa Rican National Elections of 2014), the variables that impacted the voting intention and/or behavior of these Costa Rican diaspora members were categorized using the independent variables presented by the Situational Theory of Publics: problem recognition, constraint recognition (internal and external constraints), and level of involvement. This theory was used to better understand what is moving these potential external voters to vote or not, in order to suggest what kinds of efforts should the Costa Rican government undertake to increase the number of external voters.

Introduction

In this qualitative study, 40 Costa Rican migrants who live in eight different countries (including in the United States) discuss the reasons why they voted –or not– on Election Day, on February 2, 2014, in the first external voting process offered by the Costa Rican government to its diaspora community around the world.

The results are analyzed using the Situational Theory of Publics as theoretical framework, with the intention of developing suggestions and guidelines that can be applied in the future by national governments trying to involve its citizens abroad in the political process at home. This study, then, has a practical orientation for international government public relations, in particular, in the state-diaspora relationship building process.

Literature Review

The Costa Rican government offered its diaspora community members the possibility of voting for national president and Congress representatives, while abroad, for the first time in the national elections of February 2, 2014. This political achievement, nonetheless, stemmed not from diaspora activism but from an initiative of the Costa Rican Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones (Electoral Supreme Court, TSE Spanish acronym) to keep up with international norms and trends (Bravo, 2011).

The Costa Rican government, through its Electoral Supreme Court (TSE), started a communications campaign two years ahead of Election Day to inform its diaspora community around the world, and mainly in the United States, about this new political right (Bravo, 2014). For this purpose, TSE established a dedicated website about absentee vote, developed a newsletter with information about this process, distributed news releases to the media in Costa Rica, and posted messages on its Facebook page about the process and how to take part in it.

In summary, this was the process to vote: If you were a Costa Rican (18 years old or older) living abroad, you could vote in the National Elections of February 2, 2014, if the following conditions were met: 1) the voter got registered, in person, at a Costa Rican consulate or embassy by the deadline of September 30, 2013; 2) the voter came, in person, to the corresponding Costa Rican consulate or Embassy on National Elections Day to cast his or her vote (Bravo, 2013).

Unofficially, it is estimated that there are about 200,000 Costa Ricans living abroad, most of them in the United States. Officially, the U.S. Census indicates that there are about 127,000 Costa Ricans living in the United States (Pew Research, 2013b). In the United States, there are only seven Costa Rican consulates, which means that for Costa Ricans to cast their vote, they had to register in advance in one of those seven consulates, and then they had to come back on National Elections Day to the corresponding consulate to exercise the external voting right.

For the national elections of February 2, 2014, a total of 12,654 Costa Ricans registered to vote, and 2,771 Costa Ricans actually voted while abroad that day (Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones, 2014; Ruiz Ramon, 2014). Even using the conservative estimate of having only 127,000 Costa Ricans living abroad, this means that only about 10 percent of Costa Ricans who live abroad registered to vote, and only about 2.2 percent actually took advantage of the newly extended external voting rights.

A low participation of diaspora members in these elections was somewhat expected because it was the first time Costa Ricans could vote in absence, so it was understood that some of them might not be aware of this new political right, or might not be interested in taking advantage of it, but the 2.2 percent of participation was still lower than expected. What

happened? Was there a transnational communication problem? Was it lack of awareness on the part of the diaspora members? Was it lack of interest in exercising this political right? Or were there other problems? The reasons have not been analyzed before, and this case study of transnational public relations is a contribution to start filling that gap in the literature.

To understand the reasons why the percentage of absentee voters was so low, this qualitative study used the Situational Theory of Publics as its theoretical framework. Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed this theory when they classified an organization's publics into non-publics, latent, aware and active based on dependent variables such as whether or not the publics process information about a situation, actively seek additional information about the situation, and/or react or not to the situation by behaving in a certain way. The independent variables in the Situational Theory of Publics are level of problem recognition, level of constraint recognition (internal and external), and level of involvement (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Level of problem recognition refers to whether the public recognizes that the problem exists and that something has to be done to face the problem (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 149). Level of constraint recognition refers to whether the public recognizes that there are factors that limit or restrict their behavior. Regarding level of constraint recognition, it is necessary to explain that constraints can be internal (for example, the psychological perception that the person's actions will not have an impact or will not make a difference, no matter his or her behavior, which is called self-efficacy perception) or external (the existence of real-world challenges or limitations that impede the person to behave in a certain way; for example, lack of time or financial resources to accomplish a certain task). Finally, level of involvement refers to whether the public is personally invested with the issue at hand; in other words, whether the public cares deeply or not about the problem (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The situation theory of publics is a well-accepted theory in public relations, and it has been applied to many different communication studies through the last 30 years (Aldoory & Sha, 2007; Sriramesh, Zerfass & Kim, 2013). In a few cases cases, it has already been used to assess the effectiveness of political communication (see, for example, Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2013; Strömbäck, Mitrook & Kioussis, 2010).

This paper follows that lead and applies the situational theory of publics to a political communication process; in this case, to a transnational political process between a home government and its diaspora members around the world: the first external voting process granted by the government of Costa Rica to its citizens (18 or older) living abroad. This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the main reasons that helped or hindered the voting intention and or behavior among the Costa Rican diaspora members in this external voting process?

RQ2: Was problem recognition an issue in this process? If so, how do participants describe this issue?

RQ3: Were internal constraints an issue in this process? If so, how do participants describe them?

RQ4: Were external constraints an issue in this process? If so, how do participants describe them?

RQ5: Was level of involvement an issue in this process? If so, how do participants describe their level of involvement?

Methodology

A group of 40 participants (all of them Costa Rican adults who live abroad) were

interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire about the reasons why they voted or not, and about the factors that influenced their decision to participate –or not—in this civic process.

The interviews with these 40 Costa Rican migrants were conducted between February 3, 2014 and April 30, 2014 (the Costa Rican national elections happened on February 2, 2014). As this group (diaspora communities) is a very specific, but hard-to-reach population, and as the 40 participants in this study are dispersed in eight different countries, the interviews were conducted by email or through the chat feature of Facebook. Of the 40 participants, 18 live in the United States, 11 in Brasil, 5 in Canada, 2 in the Netherlands, 1 in Belgium, 1 in Panama, 1 in Mexico, and 1 in El Salvador.

Each interview was used as the unit of analysis. The data collected from the interviews was coded and analyzed to determine core themes that explain the reasons why these migrants participated –or not—in this new transnational political right (including, but not limited to, factors related to the communication strategies and tactics developed by the Costa Rican government to promote this absentee voting process).

The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was followed to look for thematic patterns and peculiarities in the interviews. The emerging core themes were grouped into categories of analysis.

Findings

Neither to try to establish numerical calculations, nor with the intention of generalizing these results, but just for descriptive purposes, the following numbers are offered about voting intention and voting behavior among the 40 participants in this qualitative study:

Among the 40 participants, a total of 15 voted, encouraged by the newly granted external voting right. Of those 15, six voted even though the logistical conditions were “unreasonable” in terms of the distance they had to travel and the money they had to spend to be able to cast their vote. The following are examples of the obstacles these persons had to overcome in order to vote:

“I traveled from Montreal all the way to Ottawa, about 200 kilometers [124 miles] to cast my vote. I feel that voting is not only a right, but also a duty with the homeland. I am proud of being Costa Rican, and I know many persons of different countries who don’t have to opportunity to vote in the home country elections. I had to do this. I found a group of persons from Montreal, and we went together. We left at 9 a.m. and came back around 5 p.m.” (S. Atkinson, in Montreal, Canada, email/Facebook communication).

“I traveled from Gainesville to Miami, in Florida. It took me 10 hours to go and 10 hours to come back, plus spending the night in Miami, because I traveled with my baby, who is six months old, so we had to stop frequently. It was a good experience, but next time I will drive alone because it is not fair to bring a child to a trip that is so long and tiring” (Tania Quesada, in Florida, USA, email/Facebook communication).

Six participants voted because it was important for them do so *and* because the Costa Rican consulate was in close proximity to where they live, so casting the vote did not represent a difficulty in terms of time or money invested.

“It was important for me to vote, and I decided to do so because the consulate is just 5 kilometers [3 miles] away from where I live, so it only took me seven minutes driving” (Alex Molina, in Brussels, Belgium, email/Facebook communication).

“The only voting center made available for this absentee vote in Brazil was located in Brasilia, which is the city where I live. So I did not even have the excuse that it was too far away for me to cast my vote” (Marco Sibaja, in Brasilia, Brazil, email/Facebook communication).

“When I was in Costa Rica, I worked with youth groups and with my political party in the electoral process. Now that I live here, I realized that it was my civic duty to vote. Also, I felt that our strong but --at the same time-- fragile democracy in Costa Rica was under threat by political forces that do not benefit the countries where they establish themselves, so I knew I had to vote to defeat those forces. I wanted my party to win, but, more than that, I wanted my country to win from this process. So I helped, not only voting myself, but helping bring voters to the consulate” (Ulises Chacón, in New Jersey, USA, email/Facebook communication).

The other three thought it was important to vote, but they decided that traveling to the consulate in the host country was so time-consuming and expensive that they opted for combining their civic duty of voting with their vacations, and they ended up traveling to Costa Rica to vote in the home country. This is one example of the reasoning behind this decision:

“It was so expensive and so inconvenient to have to travel all the way from Rio de Janeiro to Brasilia to vote, that I decided to take vacations in Costa Rica instead, and I stayed there a couple of additional days to cast my vote in my own country” (Daniel Castillo, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, email/Facebook communication).

This leaves 25 persons (out of 40) who did not vote. The main reasons given by these participants were that it was too time-consuming and/or too expensive to do so. This happened because, in order to vote in this external voting process, the person had to register first in the closest consulate or embassy, and then the person had to travel again to the consulate or embassy to cast his or her vote on Elections Day.

In the case of the United States, the country with the largest number of Costa Rican diaspora members, there are only seven consulates (plus the Embassy) throughout the U.S. territory. This means, for example, that a person who lives in North Carolina has to travel to Atlanta to visit the nearest consulate. Or a person who lives in rural Texas has to travel 10 or more hours to reach the consulate in Houston. In a country like Brazil, for example, only the Costa Rican embassy in Brasilia was habilitated as a voting center. In such a huge country like Brazil, that meant that most Costa Ricans would have had to travel very long distances to reach the Brasilia’s Costa Rican embassy.

In all these cases, not only the number of hours to be invested in the process of voting was a limitation. With traveling long distances, many expenses also arise: gas bills or airfare, lodging, meals, and, for some, time away from work (either because they work on Sundays or because the person needed at least one or two more additional days to go and come back from his or her assigned voting center). The following are examples of the situations described above:

“I did not vote for financial reasons. I did not have enough money to pay a trip to Brasilia. I would have had to spend about \$600 to fly there, just thinking of myself, not even considering the expenses for my wife and daughter, who can also vote. And I would have had to spend similar amounts to register to vote, in advance. If there was a simpler method, for instance, registering using the Internet or if I had a voting center that was no

more than two hours away, I would have voted, for sure, but this is way too complicated as it is now” (Guido Carballo, in Castanhal, Brazil, email/Facebook communication).

“I would have loved to cast my vote, but it would have taken me 12 hours driving to Houston, and then coming back. I could not leave my husband, who is American, in charge of the children and the household because he had to work that weekend. The distance was too overwhelming” (Victoria Rodriguez, in Texas, USA, email/Facebook communication).

“I registered to vote in Houston, but I was unable to go back on Elections Day, because my son got sick, and I had homework to finish for my PhD., and considering that it would have taken me 22 hours to go and return from the consulate, I had to give up on the idea of voting. We live in the middle of nowhere, and both the Houston consulate and the Chicago consulate are too far away from us. Flying there would have been ideal, but it would have been too expensive, even more if I decided to travel with my children” (Marisol Mayorga, in Kansas, USA, email/Facebook communication).

Among the 25 persons who did not vote, there was almost absolute consensus that voting was important both as a political right and as a civic duty. Of them, 22 expressed that they would have definitely voted if the logistics had been different. This indicates a high self-efficacy perception and a high level of involvement, meaning that a large majority of the persons who did not vote perceived that their vote was valuable, capable of changing things at home. It was just not possible for them to exercise this right, due to logistical barriers. The following are exemplary quotes about this situation:

“I could not register to vote on time, so I could not cast my vote on Elections Day. Nonetheless, I still decided to accompany a group of Costa Ricans to the consulate because for us *ticos* [Costa Ricans] having the privilege to vote is a national celebration. It is important, through our vote, to help preserve the democracy we have. I, personally, feel proud of being Costa Rican, of the peace and liberty we have. That’s why I wanted to participate. I just could not register on time. The process was complicated” (Merlyn Valerio, in Florida, USA, email/Facebook communication).

“I love my country and its democracy, and I think that voting is important to defend our political system, but the truth is that traveling six hours to Miami is just too much, plus, it brings a lot of financial expenses. I wanted to vote, but I would have not traveled all the way to Miami” (Maricruz, in Florida, USA, USA, email/Facebook communication).

“Even though, for logistical reasons out of my control, I ended up not voting, I really wanted to do so for several reasons: 1) It was a historical vote. 2) I have always voted, and I am convinced that it is a citizen duty to do so. 3) It was necessary any effort to impede [*name of one of the political candidates*] from becoming president. Every vote is needed to help change things there” (Marisol Mayorga, in Kansas, USA, email/Facebook communication).

Of the 25 persons who did not vote, only six cited lack of information as the main reason for not registering to vote, although a couple of them mentioned that if they had the information

necessary to do, they might end up not voting because of how costly it would have been for them to vote. This is one exemplary quote about this situation:

I did not know that we could vote while in the United States. I was not aware that the registration process was going on. To be honest, the consulate in this area is not good at all providing information, even though they have all my contact information because I have visited the consulate for different reasons. My two sisters, who also live in Miami, had the same situation: They could not vote because they lacked the information needed to do so. And it is a shame, because the consulate is just 30 minutes away from my home (Rosibel Mena, in Florida, USA, email/Facebook communication).

Only three out of the 25 non-voters said that even though they were informed about the process, they decided not to vote on purpose. They indicated that they perceived that their vote was not going to be useful, that it was not going to change the problems that concerned them about Costa Rica (in other words, only 3 participants expressed having a low self-efficacy perception). This is one exemplary quote:

“I decided not to vote while abroad because of the corruption that is killing my home country, Costa Rica. Corruption is the cause that living expenses have gone up and unemployment has become so high. Poverty levels have become misery levels there. I know I should have voted, it is a civic duty, but I thought that by voting I would have contributed to a system that only creates wealth for the same politicians that rule the country time and time again. Those are the persons who are guilty of forcing me, and many like me, to abandon our homeland, pushed away by the unemployment and the social inequality” (Mario Mata, In Quebec, Canada, email/Facebook communication).

Table 1 summarizes the results presented in this section, with each category followed by a few exemplary quotes. The categories are organized in the following descending order of importance: 1) external constraint recognition, 2) level of involvement 3) problem recognition, and 4) internal constraint recognition.

[Table 1 about here]

Discussion

Findings indicate that, as explained and predicted by the Situational Theory of Publics, the outcomes of an external voting process, even in the presence of good communication strategies and tactics, can be affected by independent variables such as problem recognition (i.e., awareness), internal constraint recognition (i.e., self-efficacy perceptions), external constraint recognition (i.e., real-life constraints), and level of involvement (i.e., personal investment in the topic) (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

In the particular case of these 40 participants, external constraint recognition was clearly the variable that most strongly impacted the process adversely (in other words, this was the variable that most strongly deterred potential voters from voting). In these conditions, not even the best transnational public relations campaign would have been able to achieve success.

In the presence of a transnational communication/public relations campaign, like the one started by TSE through traditional and social media to inform Costa Ricans abroad that they could vote, while away from the home country, starting in 2014, the communications campaign was not enough to achieve the desired outcomes. Appropriate communication strategies and

tactics implemented by TSE to inform potential voters about the external voting right failed, in many cases, because the persons got the information necessary but could not act accordingly to take advantage of this newly granted political right.

For most of the persons in this group of participants, lack of information was not the problem. Only six of the 40 participants did not vote because they did not receive the information necessary, on time, to register to vote. A large majority of these participants received the information on time, either through TSE information channels or through online newspapers and social media. Nonetheless, external constraints (in other words, real-life limitations such as distance and lack of financial resources to afford the expenses related to being able to vote) impeded them to participate in the process nonetheless.

Even fewer did not vote because they did not think their vote could make things different or better at home (only three persons mentioned an internal constraint related to self-efficacy perceptions). A large majority of the interviewees, instead, mentioned logistical challenges as the reasons why they did not vote (external constraint recognition). Even the persons who did not vote said, consistently, that it was important to do so, that they wished they could have participated, and that they considered it was their duty and their right to vote while abroad.

Most of them also indicated that their vote could help change things back in Costa Rica, that through their vote they could instill change in the home country (in other words, self-efficacy perception was strong among most of the participants). Only 3 participants mentioned distrust and the feeling of not being able to change things with their vote as the reason why they did not vote.

This could be related to the fact that Costa Rica is one of the most stable democracies of Latin America, with uncontested elections since the late 1940s. Citizens frequently criticize politicians, but they still believe that their vote matters and that, through their vote, they can not only make decisions but, along with that, they can get rid of politicians who are not living up to the expectations.

Limitations and Further Research

The recruitment of participants for this study happened through social media, and this was a study about the experience the participants faced with the first external voting process granted by TSE in Costa Rica. For that reason, it is likely that this particular group of participants was more aware about this absentee vote process than the average population of diaspora members, as these participants were self-selected, definitely interested in this topic, and actually quite eager to offer their opinions.

The persons in this group of 40 participants were probably more educated and affluent as well, compared to the average diaspora member, as they had access to computers, the Internet, and social media, which is not necessarily the case for all Costa Ricans who live abroad. For that reason, the variable of level of awareness might be stronger in this study than what it possibly is in reality.

Besides that, even though this is not a limitation per se, the nature of qualitative research is that the results are not generalizable to larger populations. In other words, the results of this study cannot be generalized to all Costa Ricans living abroad, in general, or even less to other diaspora communities from other countries who participate in external voting processes. Still, this is a rigorously developed study, conducted with the aim that it will help researchers and practitioners alike to start realizing the kind of challenges that home governments face when trying to communicate with publics located abroad, such as diaspora communities.

Transnational communication processes are not easy ones, given that they occur in long-distance situations, and the effectiveness of these communication processes can be lowered or damaged for good if other factors, besides communication strategies and tactics themselves, are not analyzed and addressed in the process. For instance, in this particular case, the Costa Rican government has to improve its communication efforts to reach its diaspora community, so that more Costa Ricans will be familiar with this political right and with how to exercise it, but even the best communication strategy will not be enough to succeed if external constraints are not solved as well.

The logistics of the external voting process are complicated and unfriendly for many potential Costa Rican voters who live abroad, and this logistical issue will have to be addressed along the evaluation of the communication strategies deployed by the Costa Rican government.

Regarding further research, it is necessary to use the case of Costa Rica to compare it to other cases in the region and around the world. A starting point would be to compare these Costa Rican results with the case of El Salvador, another Central American nation that also granted external voting rights to its citizens, for the first time, in early 2014. Interestingly, the process was much worse for El Salvador than for Costa Rica, because only 1909 persons voted in absence in the Salvadoran elections of February 2014 (Tribunal Supremo Electoral, 2014).

The total number of external voters for El Salvador (1909 persons) was similar to the total number of external voters for Costa Rica (2771 persons), but the percentage of absentee voters was significantly lower, considering that while Costa Rica has about 127,000 persons living in the United States, there are, officially, 2 million Salvadorans in the United States, according to the U.S. Census (Pew Research, 2013a), although the number could be closer to three million, according to unofficial sources.

In other words, only about 0.1 percent of Salvadorans abroad voted in the 2014 elections (compared to 2.2 percent of Costa Ricans living abroad), even though the Salvadoran process of external voting is easier than the Costa Rican, because absentee voters from El Salvador mail their votes using snail mail, without having to show up, in person, to a El Salvadorian consulate.

What happened in the case of El Salvador? What are the similarities to the situation in Costa Rica? What are the differences? How did political contexts and historical reasons shape this result for El Salvador?

One interesting inquiry would be to analyze the self-efficacy perceptions Salvadorans have about their democratic electoral process. Do they feel they can change things with their vote? Or are they so disappointed with the political process at home that they think that their vote does not matter anymore?

The comparison with the Costa Rican case could be very rich, because while Costa Rica has had political stability since the late 1940s (Lijphart, 2012), El Salvador suffered a violent civil war between 1979 and 1992 (White, 2009), and it was not until 2009 that FMLN, the opposing party to the traditional ruler party (conservative, right-wing ARENA) was defeated in the national elections.

These and other inquiries and comparisons can be developed for El Salvador, for other Latin American countries, and for many other nations around the world, not to generalize results, but to highlight similarities and differences, with the intention of trying to explain why those similarities and differences exist.

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Table 1. Variables that impacted the voting intention or behavior of Costa Rican diaspora members in the external voting process of Feb. 2, 2014, in descending order of relevance.

Variable	Explanation	Exemplary Quote
External constraint recognition	Whether the public's members recognize that there are external factors that limit or restrict their behavior.	<p>About financial constraints: “I could not go because traveling from Vancouver to the consulate in Ottawa would have taken five hours and a lot of money. It is very expensive. But I hope TSE in Costa Rica understands that this opportunity to vote while abroad is very important for us. I hope it will maintain it in the future. The low number of voters could be misinterpreted by TSE and by the Costa Rican government as lack of interest on the part of the diaspora members, but that is not the case. The problem is the financial cost to vote, the logistical barriers that exist right now. I hope absentee vote continues to be offered. I fear that the government might want to suspend this initiative” (Alfonso Lara, in Vancouver, Canada, email/Facebook communication).</p> <p>About time limitations: “I work filing taxes. February is my high season regarding work. I could have not taken four hours from my busy day to drive to Atlanta and four hours to come back” (Jorge Solorzano, in Alabama, USA, email/Facebook communication).</p>
Level of involvement	Whether the public is personally invested with the issue at hand; in other words, whether the public cares deeply or not about the problem	<p>“I had to travel about 200 kilometers [124 miles] to cast my vote, and I spent more than \$150 in doing so. Still, it was one of the most valuable investments I have done. It was important to vote because it is a political right, a civic duty and a privilege, because very few people in the world can participate in an absentee voting process, and because our home country put a lot of effort and invested a lot of money so that we could be involved in the political life and political decisions at home” (Iris Pérez, in Montreal, Canada, e-mail/Facebook communication).</p>

Problem recognition	Whether the public recognizes that the problem exists and that something has to be done to face the problem	“I was furious, because I could have had registered to vote. I had the time to do so, the consulate is nearby, and I really wanted to cast my vote. The problem is that here in Washington D.C. the people who work in the consulate are disastrously inefficient, even though the consulate has a database with information about the Costa Ricans living in this area. They could have sent us an email or something. A heads-up, at least. I had no clue this was going on” (Laura E., in Virginia, USA, e-mail/Facebook communication).
Internal constraint recognition	Whether the public’s members recognize that there are internal (psychological) factors that limit or restrict their behavior.	Self-efficacy: “Many years ago I stopped trusting any politician. It is worthless to spend time and money to do something [<i>cast a vote</i>] that is not going to change anything in the political situation at home” (Boris Morales, in Rio Grande de Norte, Brazil, e-mail/Facebook communication).

**The Cost-Reduction Evaluation (CRE) Model:
Suggestions for the Public Relations Value Assessment**

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Abstract

Although theoretical and empirical research has shed valuable light on the measurement of public relations value and effectiveness, approaches to measure cost-reduction impacts of public relations are missing in current literature. However, such an approach can strengthen the overall measurement of public relations value and support a rational decision-making process. This paper addresses the financial impact of public relations from a cost reduction perspective. Using a theoretical approach and interviews from practitioners, the cost-reduction evaluation (CRE) model allows corporations to evaluate the business impact of public relations for their specific cases. This constructed model therefore, makes the public relations value more visible to corporations by connecting its effectiveness to organizational cost reduction, specifying two dimensions of organizational cost reduction (i.e., explicit and implicit cost reduction), proposing a comprehensive measurement for both traditional and social media publicity, and finally exploring the underestimated value of public relations.

Introduction

In the long-term communication effectiveness research, the value of public relations (PR) has always been a heated topic among both academics (J. E. Grunig, 2000; L. A. Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2000; Holtzhausen, 2000; Huang, 2001a, 2001b, 2012) and practitioners (Levy, 2002; Neff, 2005). In the academia, scholars from the economical (Ehling, 1992), societal (J. Grunig, 2000), strategic (Li, 2006), rhetorical (Heath, 2000), feminist (L. A. Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000), and postmodern (Holtzhausen, 2000) perspectives explain the public relations value. In practical areas, a majority of managers undervalued the contributions of public relations (Gregory, 2004; Heath, Toth, & Waymer, 2009; Murray & White, 2005; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009; White & Vercic, 2001), while the expenses of public relations, especially in recent years, have been growing fast. Thomas L. Harris/impulse research agency survey (2001-2004) showed the public relations cost of the Fortune 500 in the U.S. increased 28.5% over 2003, reached \$475 million in 2007, and was predicted to increase at a faster speed than marketing and advertising, which equaled to almost 9% per year (K. Kim, 2007). In China, according to a 2010 survey by the China International Public Relations Association (CIPRA), earnings from public relations services were 21 billion RMB (\$3.3 billion), a 25% increase rate over one year. All the above mentioned data from another perspective showed the increasing expenses of public relations services and accordingly its growing importance in corporations (Y. Kim, 2001).

When facing fast increasing public relations budgets, how do practitioners convince their managers that public relations are valuable, or even have been undervalued (RQ1)? What exactly is the economic contribution of public relations from a cost reduction perspective (RQ2)? This study aims to answer these questions and contribute to theoretical and practical fields from three dimensions below:

(1) To provide a systematic and detailed measurement model following the cost reduction approach: earlier, when scholars discussed the organization-specific value of public relations activities, a cost-benefit analysis was usually applied (Hicks, 1943; Huber, 1980; Thompson, 1980). In turns, types of revenue generations were elaborated by Ehling (1992), L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier (2002), Kaplan & Norton (1996) and Y. Kim (2001). However, all their studies failed to justify why the cost reduction paradigm had been ignored. Different from the revenue generation perspective which promoted public relations as the functional service to generate market share and income, the cost-reduction approach reflected the rationale of public relations to prevent crises and reduce costs through proactive management. Heath (2001) argued that attention should be given to the cost reduction approach, which was easily ignored, but could bring enormous business impact for organizations. Hon (1997) through active interviews with 32 practitioners supported the argument that besides “making money”, “effective public relations can also help organizations save money by building positive, long-term relationships with publics” (p. 5). Huang (2012) tested the cost reduction as one of five measurement dimensions and concluded that compared with revenue generation, cost reduction could be a more important contribution to the organization effectiveness. However, Huang’s 5-item scale (e.g. “the public relations can reduce cost resulting from public complaints,” “the public relations can reduce cost resulting from opposition and activist pressure” etc.) couldn’t fully illustrate the reduced cost, other tangible or intangible cost such as the loss of productivity cost, capital cost emerging from both inside and outside corporations in crises should be considered (Kazoleas & Wright, 2001). This study intended to clearly define cost, categorize cost reduction, and systematically explain how the PR effectiveness contribute to corporate cost reduction.

(2) To construct a convincing measurement to dig out the underestimated value of public relations: An underlined assumption in previous research was that the actual value of public relations services was larger than what managers could realize (Gregory, 2004; Heath, Toth, & Waymer, 2009; Murray & White, 2005; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009; White & Vercic, 2001). For example, White and Vercic (2001) pointed out that public relations were not emphasized; Gregory (2004) argued that because public relations mixed with other communication activities such as advertising and word of mouth, it was “seriously” undervalued (p. 13). Solis and Breakenridge (2009) claimed that “don’t undervalue PR” since it could be significantly valuable for company branding (p. 15). Based on the existing literature, this study aimed to propose a direct and clear approach to measure the underestimated value of public relations.

(3) To propose multi-dimensions of media exposure: In previous studies, the media exposure as one dimension of PR effectiveness was not fully explained, although it was very important and widely applied in quantities of research (Bissland, 1990; Huang, 2011, 2012; K. Kim, 2007; Lindenmann, 1995; Smith, 2008). On the one hand, except the media tone or amount, other significant attributes such as media value, location of articles and publication types should be included as the measurement of media exposure (Smith, 2008). On the other hand, with rapid diffusion of social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook etc.), the earned online media exposure (e.g., lift in brand buzz, increased Twitter followers, shares, links and comments) should be involved to provide a comprehensive measurement of media impact of public relations.

Method

Contrary to the quantitative method, which relies on a large representative sample, this paper employs a qualitative research method seeking information richness (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The goal of this study is exploring a full understanding of participants’ interpretation of PR and achieving the contribution of PR towards the cost reduction in business.

Materials are collected through in-depth interviews from 8 practitioners who hold high positions in multi-national corporations from April to July, 2014. These interviews then yielded 8 usable transcripts. All of the transcribed data were treated as potential answers to the research questions. Considering the difficulties in sourcing enough data from interviews, the second-data analysis was applied in answering the research questions. The keyword screening method was applied to filter related articles. Articles with the following keywords in titles, abstracts or keywords sections were selected for review: any of “public relations,” and any of “financial performance,” or “cost reduction,” or “cost saving,” or “money saving”. Forty-one direct relevant research articles in the SSCI were collected and used for data analysis.

Findings

Defining the Public Relations

The conceptualization of the value of public relations requires a definition of this concept and a delimitation of its function first.

According to Professor F. Harlow in 1976, there were 472 kinds of definitions of public relations from three approaches: the rhetoric, management and integrated management marketing (Huang, 2001c). In 1990s, as the popularity of excellence theory, the management paradigm dominated the field, and public relations was defined as the “management of communication between an organization and its publics (J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 6). In 2001, Vercic, Ruler, Butschi, and Flodin found that, compared with the U.S.-based definition of public relations as

relationship management, the European view of public relations not only included the relationship dimension, but also concerned with public consequences of corporate behavior.

This study, different from the above offered approaches, emphasized the financial impact of PR and conceptualized it from an implicit cost reduction way. Public relations involved taking actions to proactively reduce the extent of implicit and explicit cost or avoid crises from inside and outside corporations.

Cost and Cost Reduction

The concept of cost has been widely applied to many disciplines (e.g. business, engineering, health care and so on), and even within the business literature, types of definitions and categorizations have been developed according to different needs (Bragg, 2010). For instance, the tangible and intangible cost were developed to define whether the cost could be calculated in monetary term; the historical and future cost were used to classify whether cost would occur in the future period or periods; the variable and fixed cost were used to identify whether the cost would vary with changes in volume; manufacturing and non-manufacturing cost were applied to companies with different properties, referring to whether the company needed to consider materials, labor and overhead cost or only distribution, administration, R&D and financial cost. In business field, basically, the cost means kinds of inputs used up for production (Malonis, 1999). The “cost” here refers to all explicit or implicit cost emerging from the inside and outside corporation.

Cost reduction is a way through some changes in processes to save cost. This approach is adopted because of two reasons: on the one hand, a systematic cost reduction measurement remains lacking, which could bring key contribution to corporate effectiveness in crises (Heath, 2001; Huang, 2012); on the other hand, compared with the revenue generation, cost reduction analysis is “the easiest and most certain way” (Bragg, 2010, p. 7) to help corporations increase profits in the short term within their control range. Traditional cost reduction initiatives focused on exerting pressure on vendors, reducing staff and cutting programs (Zoller & Gerigk, 2006). Later, scholars found that the effective way to reduce cost also included technological innovation such as new machines in a factory floor (Payson, 1998), ERP software implemented in inventory system (Lancioni, Schaub, & Smith, 2003); services such as counseling in health care (Tolley & Rowland, 1995), and public relations in corporations (Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Hon, 1997; Huang, 2012).

The Role of Public Relations in Crises

Crisis means a “perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact corporations’ performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2007, pp. 2-3). Significant evidence from previous studies has supported the PR contributions in preventing crises or reducing relevant costs (Heath, 2001; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Vercic, 1997; Huang, 2012). For example, Wigley (2011) through multi-case study comparison, found that by applying a proactive PR strategy called stealing thunder, the governor received considerably less news coverage and fewer negative media frames than the other who did not. Huang (2012)’s survey research found that corporations with good reputation, relationship with the public, or positive media publicity, could reduce costs, such as the costs resulting from public complaints, opposition and activist pressure, and law suits.

Public Relations Value and its Measurement

Concerning the evaluation of public relations, the word “effectiveness” was frequently used in public relations literature to describe whether communication activities could achieve communication goals and whether the expenses could achieve outcomes in a cost-effectiveness way (Hon, 1998). “PR effectiveness” and “corporate effectiveness” were the most frequently used two levels. Some researchers preferred a uni-dimensional level: corporate effectiveness or PR effectiveness (Dozier & Ehling, 1992; Ehling, 1992; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Ehling, 1992; Li, 2006; Rhee, 2004); other researchers argued that both the two levels should be considered at one time (Y. Kim, 2001; Huang, 2001a). For instance, Huang (2012) stated that the corporate effectiveness represented the whole point view of the corporation. The PR effectiveness should tie in with the goals of corporation, which was defined as “the extent to which public relations as a sub-system of an corporation, given certain resources and means, fulfills its objective without incapacitating its means and resources and without placing undue strain upon its members” (ibid, p. 6). Survey research findings from public relations practitioners also supported that the public relations value could express itself in both PR effectiveness and corporate effectiveness (ibid). Therefore, corporate effectiveness cannot be directly obtained (Dozier & Ehling, 1992; J. E. Grunig, 1992; Huang, 2012; Y. Kim, 2001). The PR effectiveness should be achieved first and then contribute to the corporate effectiveness.

This study proposed the Cost-Reduction Evaluation (CRE) model, which concentrated on how the public relations services help corporations to reduce cost. The CRE Model (as shown in Figure 1) was constructed following a two-level dimension (PR effectiveness and corporate effectiveness). Different from previous studies which emphasized the revenue generation of corporate effectiveness (Ehling, 1992; Kaplan & Norton, 1996; Y. Kim, 2001), this CRE model adopted a cost reduction perspective and proposed the concept of corporate cost reduction as one kind of corporate effectiveness, meaning that the corporation as a social system achieved cost reduction as one of its goals.

[Figure 1 here]

As PR services can effectively help corporations reduce cost from crises (Ehling, 1992; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Vercic, 1997; Hon, 1997; Huang, 2012). Consequently, I propose the first set of theoretical proposition:

Proposition 1 (P1): *The two fundamentally distinguishable, but inter-correlated factors: Public relations effectiveness and corporate cost reduction represent the public relations value.*

Public Relations Effectiveness and its Measurement

For the selection of dimensions for PR effectiveness, some researchers applied the uni-dimension to assess PR effectiveness: Lindenmann (1997) used communication effects; J. Grunig (1993) and Y. Kim (2001) used corporate reputation; Li (2006) and Ferguson (1984) used organizational-public relationship (OPR). In contrast, Huang (2001b) used 4 dimensions (reputation, economic input, OPR and conflict resolution). Based on these significant but inconsistent findings, Huang (2012) further developed an integrated model to measure the value of public relations, which included the two levels (public relations and corporate effectiveness) and three dimensions of PR effectiveness (corporate reputation, OPR and media publicity), and applied the scale in a cross-cultural context. This established model with high reliability and validity greatly contributed to the measurement of public relations value.

This study adopted a more comprehensive multi-dimensional scale rather than a uni-dimensional scale (Hon, 1997; Huang, 2001a). A three-dimensional scale (media exposure, corporate reputation and OPR) was used for the measurement of PR effectiveness.

Media Exposure. In the field of PR, media exposure/publicity was the most commonly used evaluation tool (Bissland, 1990; Huang & Hagan, 2011). Huang (2012) used media tone and amount to measure it; Smith (2008), through interviews with practitioners, used the marketing mix model to divide media impacts into different levels and provided several useful tools such as raw clip/story counts, message quality (type, tone, visual, headline, exclusivity, influencer, size, placement, and prominence), share of discussion, impact score, and digital points. This CRE model chose “impact score” for measurement (Smith, 2008, p. 21) and comprehensively included both traditional and social media publicity: The “media value” (advertising value equivalency), “message tone” (positive, negative and neutral), and “prominence” (location of articles, publication types, ranks based on media credibility, circulation of news) and “message contents” (types of contents).

Organization-Public Relationship (OPR). Since Ferguson in 1984 called for a shift of focus on the concept of relationship between the corporation and public, OPR has attracted much attention in past decades. Scholars emphasized its contribution as part of PR effectiveness (Dozer, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995; Hon, 1998; Huang, 2001a, 2001b). Bruning and Ledingham (2000) even claimed that the public relations practice could be regarded as a way of relationship management.

Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000) first developed a model to measure the antecedents, concepts and consequences of relationship. Ledingham and Bruning (2000) from the perspective of relationship impacts, categorized three types of relationships (professional, personal and community) and defined OPR as the “state which exists between an corporation and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political, and/or cultural well-being of the other entity” (p. 160). In 2000, Grunig and Huang from the perspective of relationship characteristics, constructed a new model measuring the antecedents, concepts and consequences of OPR. Huang (2008) further summarized different literature discussing the relational features, and conceptualized OPR as “relational characteristics, subjectively experienced by, or objectively represented between a corporation and its stakeholders” (ibid, p. 300). This study followed Huang’s (2008) definition to demonstrate more than one character of OPR (e.g. trust, commitment, face and favor).

Corporate Reputation. According to Chun (2005), the study of reputation has become a “paradigm”. Scholars from different disciplines had various understanding of this concept. For example, in the economy field, reputation was viewed as “traits or signals; perception held of the organization by an organization’s external stakeholders” (Chun, 2005, p. 2). In the accounting field, it was viewed as an intangible asset which will bring financial worth (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Chun (2005) further categorized all these different research of reputation and raised “three schools of thought”, which included the evaluation (Fryxell & Wang, 1994; Fortune, 2000), impressional school (Deephouse, 2000; Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994), and relational school (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Chun & Davies, 2006).

In the PR literature, the widely used word “corporate reputation” belonged to the impressional school. Instead of meaning superficial “positive image”, the reputation here referred to the “image” or “impression” focusing on behavioral relationships with stakeholders (J. E. Grunig, 1993). For instance, Kim (2001) defined the corporate reputation as “the relational image between the corporation and its publics” (p. 11) and successfully supported reputation as

an important variable between public relation expenses and corporate revenue generation. In this study, the term “corporate reputation” was used, which emphasized the “relational image between the corporation and its publics” (Kim, 2001, p. 11).

In sum, the second set of opposition assumed the 3 dimensions: media exposure, OPR and corporate reputation are significant positively related with public relations effectiveness.

Proposition 2.1 (P2.1): *Public relations effectiveness is positively related with the media exposure.*

Proposition 2.2 (P2.2): *Public relations effectiveness is positively related with the OPR.*

Proposition 2.3 (P2.3): *Public relations effectiveness is positively related with the corporate reputation.*

Corporate Cost Reduction and its Measurement

As previous research has supported the active role of PR in preventing conflicts or crises and reducing relevant costs (Heath, 2001; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Vercic, 1997; Huang, 2012), this study followed the literature on the evaluation of conflict cost (CGG, 2006; Dana, 2001; PDC, 2012; PSC, 2011; Slaikev & Hasson, 1998), and proposed two attributes (i.e., explicit and implicit cost reduction) to categorize all the relevant cost (as shown in Table 1) that public relations could help prevent.

[Table 1 here]

Explicit Cost Reduction. Past research on workplace conflicts listed different explicit cost such as the litigation cost, damage cost, services of third-party mediation cost etc. (CGG, 2006; Dana, 2001; PDC, 2012; PSC, 2011). The explicit cost referred to the tangible expenses which could be easily calculated by monetary terms or directly be picked up from accounting books. When corporations face crises, the explicit cost comes from external stakeholders’ pressure. For example, similar situations may happen in crises: customers complain products or service; Twitter followers dislike corporate social account; websites crack because of large quantities of clicks; wholesalers or retailers reduce or even refuse to distribution products; stockholders sell their stocks short; lawsuits or activists come from other institutions; governmental institutions come to investigate and inspect at several intervals; competitors even take advantage of this opportunity to attack your company and increase their market share (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). In this way, effective public relations can help prevent conflicts and reduce warranty cost (Hall, 1992), mediation cost, lawsuits cost, destruction of property cost (Huang, 2012), and the cost of capital of companies (Gelb, 2000).

Further, explicit cost from internal corporation cannot be overlooked. According to Kazoleas and Wright (2001), when corporations face crises, employees usually feel “frustration, fear, uncertainty, dissatisfaction and a sense of hopelessness” (p. 472). At that time, staff turnover may happen due to poor communication, and the cost including pre-departure cost, recruitment cost, selection cost, orientation and training cost may increase (Hinkin & Tracey, 2006), while successful public relations can help prevent these costs.

Implicit Cost Reduction. Contrary to the explicit cost in crises, the implicit cost is the hidden or intangible cost which cannot be easily found and usually lost in traditional accounting methods, such as the inventory cost, long design cycle time cost, loss productivity cost etc. (Bowdin & Church, 2000; Hao, 2010).

Past research on conflicts management has provided some implications for the implicit cost measurement. For example, for costs from inside stakeholders, Center for Good Governance (2006) based on a research on conflict management skills, clarified loss of productivity cost, loss of sleep, stress, frustration and anxiety, wasted time cost as the intangible cost; Practice development counsel (2012) found the loss of productivity, loss of relationships, emotional strain and pain cost as the indirect cost; Dana (2001) developed a cost estimated model and raises 6 factors including the wasted time, reduces decision quality, restructuring, lowered job motivation, and lost work time cost for calculation.

For costs from outside corporations in crises, Cullen in 2008 identified the cost of complaints; Practice development counsel (2012) stated the cost of losing clients. The inventory cost was another type of implicit cost due to low-quality products storage under the pressure of external stakeholders (Gummesson, 2004).

This study summarizes four types of implicit cost that public relations help reduce (listed in Table 1), including the loss of productivity cost from internal stakeholders, inventory cost, complains cost from outside stakeholders, and the cost of fake fame on social media.

First, the loss of productivity cost is identified since it is mostly discussed in literature. Dana (2001) found that over 65% of performance problems come from conflicts in corporations. High tension and stress distract employees from work and “a 25% loss of productivity resulting from conflict reduces the average work week to fewer than 20 hours” (Cram & MacWilliams, 2004, p. 7). Managers have to spend 42% of their time on resolving conflicts and being distracted from getting their assignments done (Watson & Hoffman, 1996); employees tend to have lower morale and job satisfaction, and “retire on the job” (Duxbury & Higgins, 2003, p. 27). In this way, productivity means “the craft hours necessary to produce a unit of finished product” (Finke, 1997, p. 312). The loss of productivity is defined as the decline in efficiency or increased cost of performance, which combines the wasted time cost, work delayed cost, loss quality of work cost and workload problems of others; effective public relations can help reduce these costs (Kazoleas & Wright, 2002).

Second, the inventory cost is another implicit cost which refers to the cost of holding unsalable products in stock. It includes the space, security and interests of money cost (Li, Xie, & Xie, 2008) and usually increases to a high level under the pressure from distributors or customers. Third, the complaints cost is defined as the intangible cost for managing non-claim complaints, the loss of existing and potential clients cost (Cullen, 2008). Finally, online PR activities can reduce the cost of fake fame, and the cost of shifting the spending from traditional marketing expenses to social media channels. For example, every year, the fake follower may cost more than \$6,800 (Greathouse, 2014), while good PR performance can earn real and valuable followers and their comments, which can save the cost of fake fame. Meanwhile, if the corporations have good effectiveness of PR, their offline good reputation, relationship and media publicity can quickly shift to all the online platform, which can save large cost of shifting the media platform.

Implicit cost, compared with explicit cost, becomes even more important to be identified since sometimes it is huge, but can hardly be notified in practice (Corradi, 1994; Hutchins, 1992) and can be easily ignored by managers (Hao, 2010; Quan, 2006).

This study emphasizes the exploration of implicit cost which represents the unrecognized part of total cost. Through helping corporations identify the rationale of public relations in implicit cost reduction, it is expected to find the undervalued (implicit cost reduction) part of public relations services. In sum, this research regards the explicit and implicit cost reduction as

two dimensions representing the corporate cost reduction and emphasizes the implicit cost reduction as the undervalued part of public relations. Thus, I propose here:

Proposition 3.1 (P3.1): *Corporate cost reduction is positively related with the explicit cost reduction.*

Proposition 3.2 (P3.2): *Corporate cost reduction is positively related with the implicit cost reduction.*

Control Variables. In this study, variables including the age, size and focus of corporations, advertising expenditures, and operation margin are all regarded as control variables in analysis since past literature in marketing and communication fields have supported the significant relationships between these variables and corporate reputation, media exposure or OPR, which may influence the unique contribution of public relations services to corporations (Chang & Musa, 2006; K. Kim, 2007; Vithala, Manoj, & Denise, 2004).

Discussion and Conclusion

To recap, this study explored the value of public relations demonstrated through a two-level CRE model including public relations effectiveness and corporate cost reduction. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both theoretical and practical fields.

Theoretically, it contributes to public relations theory building in three ways: identifying the value of public relations and especially demonstrating its underestimated value, facilitating the public relations function in the cost management of the corporation, and further adding new measures into the media exposure study.

Practically, this study provides practitioners a better understanding of the value of PR. Practitioners can become more confident for their expenses since the CRE model shows that PR can achieve goals by contributing to the corporate cost reduction. Practitioners can also share a common language with other managers in the corporation, especially those focusing on cost management, and work together to contribute to the corporate effectiveness.

Future of the CRE Model

As shown in Figure 2, the developed CRE model directly showed the relationships between media exposure, OPR and corporate reputation, and corporate explicit and implicit cost reduction. Future research could test the developed model and explore how the specific dimensions of public relations effectiveness directly correlate with the two dimensions of corporate cost reduction.

[Figure 2 here]

First, scholars (Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Böhm, Schulze, Kleinschmit, Spiller, & Nowak, 2009; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013) have found evidence between the positive media coverage and potential reduced cost of crises. For example, Utz, Schultz, & Glocka (2013) discussed how corporations use media to mitigate potential negative outcomes, such as boycotts. Charland (2004) pointed out the casual link among positive media exposure and loss of productivity cost savings. Fang and Peress (2009) claimed that media coverage would alleviate information problems and affect firms' cost of capital. Jones in 2005 summarized that "bad media stories can destroy employee morale and productivity, turn customers away, depress stock prices, and influence future jurors who will go into court already prejudiced against you" (p. 74), which would influence both the implicit and explicit cost (e.g., the loss of productivity cost, complaints

cost, inventory cost and litigation cost etc.) Therefore, it is expected that future studies can examine the relationship between *media exposure* and *corporate explicit/implicit cost reduction*.

Second, Post, Preston, & Sachs (2002) proposed that the relationship with “critical stakeholders” (p. 75) could generate sustainable wealth including reducing costs of conflict and potential threat from activists. Huang (2001b) supported the correlation between favorable OPR and cost reduction from conflict incidents. Hon (1997), Kazoleas and Wright (2001) found that good corporate-employee relationship became very important in improving employee morale and job satisfaction, reducing uncertainty and anxiety emerged from the inside corporation in crises, and cutting down the staff turnover cost (e.g., training cost, pre-departure cost etc). The improved morale and attitude of employees also helped to reduce the loss of productivity cost (MCAA, 1976). Gelb (2000) argued that effective investor relations could lower the cost of capital. Gummesson (2004) stated that inventory cost would go down when firms maintained good customer relationship management (CRM) quality. Therefore future studies can directly test whether *OPR* positively predicts *corporate explicit/implicit cost reduction*.

Third, the influence of reputation on corporate cost reduction was also mentioned. For example, Markham (1972) found that good corporate reputation could attract talents, retain customers and reduce the cost from relationship loss. Hall in 1992 asserted that good reputation would keep companies in privileged positions with its customers and supply chain, and thus cost for complaints, warranty cost could be reduced. Furthermore, empirical studies also showed that good corporate reputation, regarded as the intangible asset could influence equity markers’ evaluation, enhance investor satisfaction and affective loyalty, reduce the cost of capital (Hall, 1992; Helm, 2007) and lower procurement rates (Wiedmann & Buxel, 2005). Therefore, future research can focus on the relationship between *corporate reputation* and *corporate explicit/implicit cost reduction*.

Finally, regarding to the application of the CRE model, the study suggests surveys as the research method could be applied. Compared with experiments or multiple-case studies (Yin, 2014), surveys are especially useful if researchers want to use collected data to test the pre-established relationships between PR effectiveness and corporate cost reduction. As shown in appendix A, this paper also provided a scale for testing the CRE model through survey research.

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Table 1. The list of PR cost reduction contribution

Explicit cost reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Pre-departure cost reduction ✓ Recruitment cost reduction ✓ Orientation & training cost reduction ✓ Mediation cost reduction ✓ Lawsuits cost reduction ✓ Destruction of property cost reduction ✓ Inspection & test cost reduction ✓ Capital cost reduction ✓ Cost reduction of buying online followers ✓ Web maintaining cost reduction
Implicit cost reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Loss productivity cost reduction ✓ Cost of negotiation with stakeholders ✓ Complaints cost reduction ✓ Inventory cost reduction ✓ Fake fame cost reduction online

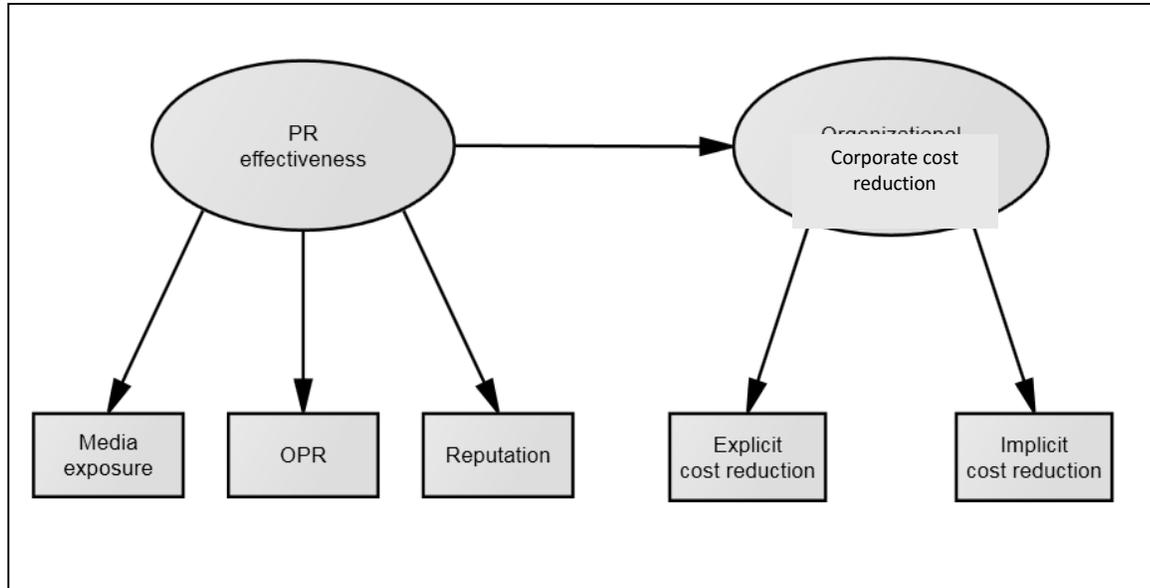


Figure 1. The Cost Reduction Evaluation (CRE) model

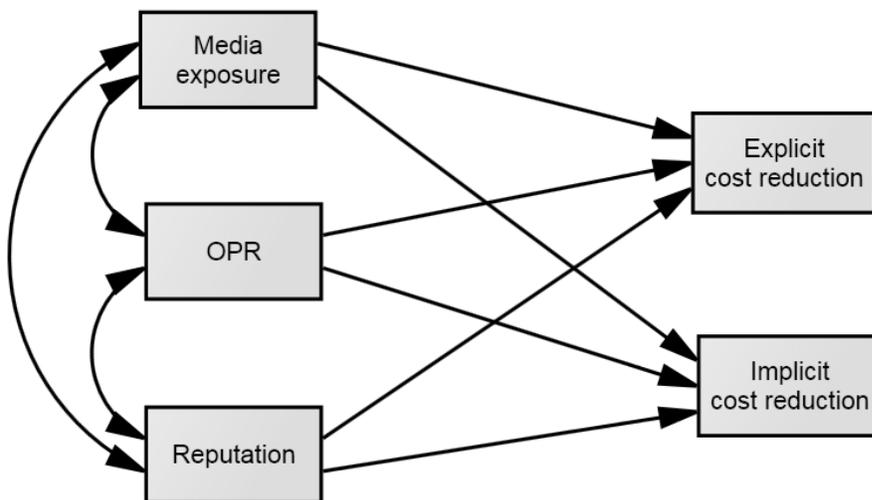


Figure 2. The developed Cost Reduction Evaluation (CRE) model

Appendix A

1. Public Relations Effectiveness and its Three Dimensions

1.1 Media exposure: the “impact score” can be used for measurement (Smith, 2008, p. 21), which includes four dimension below:

- 1.1.1. Media value (advertising value equivalency),
- 1.1.2. Message tone (positive, negative and neutral),
- 1.1.3. Prominence (location of articles, publication types, ranks based on media credibility, circulation of news, links with social media)
- 1.1.4. Contents of messages (type of contents)

Questions for practitioners in corporations can be asked such as “how much do you agree that public relations will increase the media value (advertising value equivalency), “how much do you agree that public relations will increase the amount of media exposure and publicity,” “how much do you agree that public relations will increase the positive media coverage,” how much do you agree that public relations will increase the article size in a top ranked media”. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) is applied.

1.2. OPR: studies can use Huang’s (2001a) 16-item scale to test practitioners’ perception of OPR. This scale has high reliability (scale reliability: .91) and validity in cross-cultural contexts. The essence of OPR consists of five dimensions:

- 1.2.1 Control mutuality
- 1.2.2. Trust, relation commitment,
- 1.2.3. Relational commitment
- 1.2.4. Relationship satisfaction
- 1.2.5. Face and favor.

Questions for practitioners can be asked such as “how much do you agree that public relations will increase in new network in corporations,” “how much do you agree that public relations will strengthen the *guanxi* between employees and employers,” “how much do you agree that public relations will increase the relationship with stakeholders”. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) is applied.

1.3 Corporate reputation: Based on the Fortune’s annual AMAC survey, Y. Kim (2001) used 8 dimensions to measure corporate reputation.

- 1.3.1. Quality of management
- 1.3.2. Quality of products or services
- 1.3.3. Ability to attract, develop, and keep talented people
- 1.3.4. Value as a long-term investment
- 1.3.5. Use of corporate visible and invisible assets
- 1.3.6. Financial soundness
- 1.3.7. Innovation in corporate culture
- 1.3.8. Community and environmental responsibility.

Questions can be asked such as “how much do you degree that public relations increase public impression that your corporation maintain high standards in the way it treats people,” “how much do you agree that public relations increase public impression that my corporation has high quality of products or service,” “how much do you agree that public relations increase public impression that my corporation is an environmentally responsible corporation.” A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) is applied.

2. *Corporate Cost Reduction and Its Two Dimensions*

2.1. Explicit cost reduction,

Questions for practitioners can be asked such as “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual lawsuits cost from outside stakeholders in crises,” “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual warranty cost from outside stakeholders in crises,” “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual recruitment cost from inside corporation in crises,” “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual training cost from inside corporation in crises.” A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) is applied.

2.2. Implicit cost reduction

2.2.1. The loss of productivity (Dana, 2001; PDC, 2012)

Questions for practitioners can be asked such as “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual cost of wasted time resolving conflicts inside corporation,” “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual cost of having client work delayed inside corporation in crises,” “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual cost of missing a specific deadline inside corporation in crises,” “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual cost of losing quality of work inside corporation in crises.” A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) is applied.

2.2.2. The inventory cost

Questions for practitioners can be asked such as “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual cost of space for inventory in crises,” “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual cost for security of inventory (e.g. utilities for heating or freezing) in crises,” “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual interests cost for holding inventory.” A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) is applied.

2.2.3. The complaints cost (PDC, 2012)

Question for practitioners can be asked such as “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual cost for managing non-claim customers in crises,” “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual cost for losing the existing clients in crises,” “according to your knowledge, public relations reduce the actual cost for losing potential clients in crises.” A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) is applied.

In addition, the age, size and focus of corporations, advertising expenditures, and operation margin are all regarded as control variables in this research.

Social Media Keep Buzzing!
A Test of Contingency Theory in China's Red Cross Credibility Crisis

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Abstract

Based on current literature from the crisis management and contingency theory of public relations, this study explores how the Red Cross, China's biggest charity, is practicing public relations in a low-trust society, and how the stances of the organization change dynamically in response to contingency factors in crises. By analyzing 1,300 public posts and comments on social media, 576 news articles, and reputation repair strategies of the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC), this case study focuses on "Guo Meimei Incident", which initially erupted in 2011 as a personal issue, but quickly destroyed the reputation of the Red Cross, and continuously evolved within the previous 3 years. Findings identifies several unique contingency variables within the Chinese context such as the low-trust society, public-led agenda, and heavily censored media landscape, which previous quantitative studies have not detected in the United States. These contingency factors are further categorized according to their long-term and short-term influences. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

Introduction

On August 3, 2014, the 6.5-magnitude earthquake hit Southwest China's Yunnan Province and 400 residents lost their lives. Instead of immediately updating information about this crisis, Chinese official media (e.g., the *CCTV*, *Chinanews.com*, *Xinhuanet.com*) chose to provide the most comprehensive coverage of a 23-year old young lady named "GuoMeimei". Reports included description of her childhood, family, education, emotional life, and various misdeeds including running an illegal gambling ring in Beijing and offering sexual services. This particular news was rapidly spread on social media and brought our memory back to three years ago, when the scandal, widely referred as "Guo Meimei Incident" incubated on the night of June 21, 2011. The same key character, Guo posted photos of her collections of luxury handbags and sports car on Sina Weibo (a Twitter-like microblogging service with the largest user base in China's online market) and claimed herself as the "Business General Manager of the Red Cross Society". Guo's posts immediately provoked massive suspicion among the Chinese social media users and were shared for about one hundred thousand times across the Internet within 24 hours.

The Red Cross Society of China (RCSC), as a non-governmental organization (NGO), is China's largest charity and is designated by the government as the central public donation collecting point during times of disasters. With the flaunting wealth of Guo Meimei and her alleged association with RCSC, a rumor erupted from the Internet then jumped to the front pages of newspapers, and a huge credibility controversy for the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC) began. Even state-run media, such as *CCTV* and *People's Daily*, took an unusual stand to publicly question the RCSC (Hong & FlorCruz, 2011). An avalanche of criticism towards RCSC from both the public and the media led the organization to a critical crisis of reputation and trust. As a result, public's negative sentiment and distrust spread to other charitable groups in China. According to the official information published by the China Charity & Donation Information Center, after "Guo Meimei incident", donations fell 80% to 840 million RMB (US\$131.98 million) between June and August, 2011 (Ma, 2011). This incident continuously evolved and triggered a chain of credibility crises of RCSC (e.g., the incident of donating quilts in Typhoon Rammasun 2014) from the year of 2011 to 2014. Compared with the generous donation in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, RCSC was suffering because of a lack of public support from the Chinese nationwide (Beech, 2014).

Based on Cameron's contingency theory of conflict management (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Cancel, Mitrook, and Cameron, 1999; Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2000; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010), and Coombs' reputation repair strategies (2014), this study selected the RCSC credibility crisis as a theoretical sampling case, aiming to advance relevant theoretical implications from the following four respects.

First, motivated by contingency theory which argued that the stances of the organization "depend" on various external and internal factors. This study explored how the stances of RCSC changed and what strategies it adopted in the crisis. However, different from majority of studies testing contingency practice and factors in the United States, this study tested the theoretical explanatory power of contingency theory within a non-Western Chinese context, where the communists still dominate the political, media and cultural systems, and strictly controlled the ideology of the public. Potential new and significant contingency factors were expected to be found within a non-democratic crisis context.

Second, previous contingency studies (Cho & Cameron, 2009; Choi & Cameron, 2005) mostly discussed corporations as one type of organization, while NGOs were seldom studied. This study focused on RCSC, a Chinese NGO which was still largely state-controlled. It was

expected that a unique perspective to contemplate the stances and strategies of a state-controlled NGO during a nationwide credibility crisis could be depicted.

Third, in the conventional conceptualization of contingency theory, organization and the public were considered as two major interactive parties in the conflicts. However, in the RCSC case, social media seemingly played an important role and had democratized the public-media relationship (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). Through the social-mediated crisis communication, Chinese netizens were exerting their power in digital public sphere by creating posts or comments and leading the issue agendas. It was expected the growing social media and powerful Chinese netizens could contribute to the original conceptualization of contingency theory.

Finally, but not the least, this study adopted a longitudinal approach to trace actions of the three key players, i.e., the netizen, media, and RCSC within a 3-year time span. Instead of a cross-sectional investigation at certain point or temporal dimensions of crises, this study traced RCSC's stances within a dynamic process, intending to comprehensively explore all possible contingency factors, and differentiate them by the long-term or short-term influences.

Literature Review

The Contingency Theory of Conflict Management

The basic idea of contingency theory (Cancel et al., 1997; Cancel et al., 1999; Cameron et al., 2000) was that as crises change in a dynamic process, organizations' stance fell somewhere along a continuum from pure advocacy to pure accommodation. Contingency theory offered us an alternative to Grunig's (1992) four models of public relations, and posited a very practical way to view the public relations: two-way symmetrical dialogue between the organization and public could hardly be achieved in real practice, and organizations' advocacy-accommodation stances changed as crises developed.

Cameron et al. (1997) provided a list of around 87 external (e.g., threats of litigation, degree of social/political support for the organization, size and credibility of the contending public) and internal factors (e.g., organizational culture, organization's past experiences with the contending public, characteristics of the dominant coalition), which the stance of the organization depended on. These variables were further redefined and categorized as predisposing and situational factors. The predisposing variables included business exposure, the organization's size, and individual characteristics of the public. Situational variables included the urgency of the situation, potential costs or benefits for the organization from choosing the stances; threats, and characteristics of external public. To bring some parsimony to the large amounts of variables outlined in previous contingency research, Cameron et al. (2001) proposed 6 proscriptions as the factors limiting the accommodation, which included trying to appease multiple publics, being constrained by regulatory bodies, internal jurisdictional issues, and being constrained by legal counsel.

Testing of Contingency Theory in Global Contexts

When a growing number of studies tested and extended contingency theory in situations such as crises (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2006) or litigation public relations (Reber, Cropp, and Cameron, 2003), it was found that most of them focused on the United States (Cameron et al., 2001); external culture and social environment, political and regulatory environment were not supported as contingency variables (Cancel et al., 1999). To further test the impact of contingency factors within non-western countries, some scholars conducted research in South Korea (Cho & Cameron, 2009; Choi & Cameron, 2005; Shin & Cameron, 2006) and found new

factors such as the fear of media, local culture, nationalism, and extensive Internet community activities by netizens.

However, until now, only a few studies tested contingency theory in China. For example, Zhang, Qui & Cameron (2004) focused on the U.S. government's stance in resolving the conflict with China in an intercultural setting; Jin, Pang & Cameron (2007) compared the practices between Singapore and Chinese governments in crises. A unique contextual study which examined contingency theory within the mainland China remained lacking; an in-depth analysis of the interactions among the Chinese NGO, media system and publics in crises deserved further exploration.

The Nature of NGO in Contingency Theory

Compared with the large quantities of public relations research on corporations, NGOs received less attention in contingency theory. While, as one type of organizations, they organized non-profit and voluntary activities, transmitted reliable messages to communities or general public, and participated actively in global value creation and governance (Duhalm, & Alecsandri, 2010; Teegen, Doh, & Vachani, 2004). NGOs' non-governmental properties and crisis communication strategies deserved more attention.

In China, one contextual background that should be noted was the bewildered definition of NGOs. Terms such as "non-profit organization", "popular organization" were often used interchangeably. Lu in 2008 clarified two major types of NGOs: one was the "officially organized" initiated by the government and received government subsidies; the other was the "popular NGO", initiated by private citizens and received no government subsidies. This research aims to fill the gap in previous contingency studies and focuses on the subject named by RCSC, one representative among "officially organized" NGOs in China.

Social Media and Citizen Journalism in Crises

With the rapid diffusion of various social media (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook), a new kind of citizen journalism platform was emerging at the aggregate in the context of such "crisis" situations, which has enabled the public to perform "an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" (Bowman & Willis, 2003, p. 2). Distinguished with the professional journalism, citizen journalism might lack credibility, but it allowed no editors between the readers and authors (Carpenter, 2008), and provided an open platform for sharing, interacting with, and producing news. Consequently, organizations were losing their dominant social and media control in crises.

In China, with the emerging of new technology, local software companies successfully cloned and created new Chinese Social Network Sites (SNSs), such as Renren (Chinese version of Facebook), and Weibo (Chinese version of Twitter), serving as active "live" reporting tools. These SNSs provided chances for Chinese citizens to discover unofficial information and publish it at the first time (MacKinnon, 2008; Yang, 2009). Currently, the number of Chinese internet users were 618 million, which will hit 730 million in 2016 and nearly double the U.S. population (Rapoza, 2014). Sina Weibo, as one of the largest social media platforms in China, had up to 60.2 million active users (Millward, 2013). These large amounts of social media users exerted their rights to freedom of speech and actively participated in digital public sphere, by receiving and sending posts, comments or videos (Goode, 2009). There was an optimistic view among Chinese netizens that online public opinion was omnipotent "if all netizens yell together, there would be three earthquake in China" (Ou, 2004; Zhou & Moy, 2007).

The large quantity of social media users and the active online citizen journalism complicated the application of contingency theory to the online context that empirical evidence remained ambiguous. This study aims to fill the gap by studying the social mediated crisis communication within an interesting case study in China.

The Stance and Reputation Repair Strategy (RRS)

For decades, the RRS has been a focus of scholars (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 1999, 2014). According to Coombs's (2014) master list of reputation repair strategies, organizations could adopt various strategies in crisis communication to repair damaged images, which included denial, scapegoat, attacking the accuser, correction, and full apology etc. The stance an organization took lied between a pure advocacy and pure accommodation continuum and corresponded to the reputation repair strategies (ibid). For example, an organization can adopt defensive strategies, which include scapegoat, attacking the accuser, excuse and denial; or accommodative strategies such as ingratiation, correction, cooperation and full apology (Coombs, 2007). This study used the RRS suggested by Coombs and examined what strategies and stances were applied within a social-mediated crisis, which firstly occurred on Sina Weibo, and quickly erupted as a nationwide issue.

Research Questions

To recap, the RCSC case occurs in a context with a state-run charity organization and a high level of online civic engagement. We propose the following research questions to identify stances of RCSC during the crises, and what contingency factors may impact RCSC's stances.

RQ1: During the crisis, how did the stances of RCSC towards the public change over time?

RQ2: What contingency factors (e.g., cultural dimensions) were impacting RCSC's stances in the crisis with local public?

Methods

Research Design

To test the applicability of western-originated contingency theory in a Chinese context, this study used a case study approach. This method was most suitable for research questions that were required to investigate a "temporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real-world context, especially, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context might not be clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, p. 19). For this exploratory study, the case itself referred to the main subject (ibid, 2014), and the qualitative content analysis was applied to analyze in detail the RCSC responses, media coverage, and public opinion.

Data Collection

Data were collected longitudinally from June 22, 2011 to August 4, 2014 that spanned over 3 years. Two searchable databases and one website were included for analysis (i.e., *WiseneWS*, Sino Weibo tweets, and the RCSC responses from *ifeng.com*).

WiseNews, which covers more than 1,500 full-text news in the Greater China allows keyword search with prompt results of related news reports. Keyword search of "Guo Meimei" or "Red Cross" was conducted from June 22, 2011 to August 4, 2014 on *WiseNews* bounded to mainland Chinese newspaper. 576 news articles (including the state-run media, and non-state-run media articles) were randomly sampled for analysis.

Data of online public opinion were collected from Sina Weibo. Only the posts and comments mentioned “Guo Meimei” or “Red Cross Society” were counted for analysis, and a total of 1,300 microblog tweets were randomly sampled for analysis. *Ifeng.com*¹ was selected for the contents of RCSC’s activities. A designated webpage documented “Guo Meimei Incident” was selected for analysis, which collected RCSC’s responds on a daily basis.

Results

RQ1 asked how the stances of RCSC towards the public changed during the crisis. As shown in Table 1, initially RCSC adopted a pure defensive stance during the period of June 22-28, 2011. The outbreak of the incident was on June 21, 2011. RCSC made its first response denying any connection with Guo Meimei and issued a firm statement that “[we] oppose to those sensationalized behavior seeking to achieve individual fame by making false information.” Two days later, RCSC followed up with an even stronger defensive stance by releasing a statement showing that legal actions would be taken against those who spread the rumors. On June 28, 2011, RCSC applied legal actions by reporting Guo Meimei to the police office, and adopted the strategy of excuse by stressing that RCSC was also the victim within this incident. One day later, RCSC announced measures for rectifying their financial problems by claiming that these issues were simply the result of operational negligence and mistakes in account auditing. Corruption, according to RCSC, was not a factor.

[Table 1 here]

Since July 1, 2011, RCSC changed its stance towards the accommodative direction and adopted a series of justification and corrective actions to address public’s grievances. For example, RCSC announced to suspend all commercial sector operation for investigation, and promised to enhance information transparency by opening the donation, distribution, bidding, and purchase information to the public. On Jul, 21, 2011, RCSC notified the country Red Cross branches about the pledge of transparency of donation information in aim of reputation restoration. Additionally, an attempt was made to enhance information transparency by launching a donation information release platform on July 31. When this platform failed to materialize, public apologies were made and RCSC pleaded for more time and patience on August 2, 2011. On December, 31, 2011, RCSC admitted its problems in the management and supervision for the commercial sector in the investigation report. Within the next two years from 2012 to 2014, continuous actions were applied to accommodate the public: for example, RCSC invited a third-party to supervise the process of donation cooperatively; the spokesman in the supervisory committee replied to the public’s requests and agreed that a re-investigation for “Guo Meimei incident” could be conducted.

On August 3, 2014, RCSC suddenly changed its stance and remained an advocacy position again: its website issued an official statement, which criticized that Guo Meimei’s actions brought tremendous harmful effects on the social justice, public welfare, humanity, and philanthropy. Citizens became victims in the incident. RCSC was an innocent, time-honored organization, and rejected any relationship with Guo Meimei.

In answering the RQ2 about what contingency factors (e.g., cultural dimensions) were impacting RCSC’s stances in crises with local public. This study took into account specific

¹ Owned by the Phoenix Television, *ifeng.com* is one of the top 5 most influential websites in mainland China (China website ranking, 2009).

societal, political and social media elements and put forward six distinguishing contingency factors: Three main short-term factors (see Figure 1) were first identified to drive the stance of RCSC from “advocacy” to “accommodation”, which included the public-led agenda, negative media publicity, and low-trust society. Second, China’s central political control, media censorship, and the quasi-governmental nature of RCSC constituted three long-term forces to determine the final stance of RCSC moving from the “accommodation” to “advocacy”.

[Figure 1 here]

The Powerful Public-led Agenda

This section examined the public’s stance towards RCSC’s reputation repair strategies in “Guo Meimei Incident”. The concept of “public-led agenda” was proposed to describe how the public, as a key player, influenced the agenda of RCSC and the media. Figure 2 summarized the agenda process of the crisis across three stages in 2011. Arrows indicated the direction of agenda-setting effects. Solid and dotted lines respectively represented the capability and incapability of influencing other players.

[Figure 2 here]

In stage 1 (June 22-24, 2011), at the crisis outbreak point, the public agenda was already self-formed that was crystallized by the number of Weibo comments and posts. Within 2 hours, Guo Meimei’s posts were shared over 1,000 times in expressing netizens’ concern and negative perception towards RCSC’s credibility. The issue salience of public agenda was “who was Guo Meimei and how she was connected to RCSC”, which push RCSC to formulate its agenda: RCSC had no connection with Guo Meimei, and the incident was a malicious rumor.

In Stage 2 (June 25-28, 2011) as shown in Figure 2, accumulating negative emotion from the previous stage, the public continued to criticize RCSC, and set its agenda as “where did the donation money go”. Facing the adverse situation, RCSC excused and responded that “RCSC is a victim resulted from the social sentiment of distrust”. Meanwhile, netizens grew enraged and collaborated by constructing, archiving, tagging, and editing news stories to uncover RCSC’s questionable activities, which subsequently captivated newspaper media attention for investigative reporting on the issue. From this point onwards, media agenda was set by the public that the newspaper coverage became more independent from RCSC influence. It was evidenced among the newspaper coverage of the increasing use of wordings such as “information on the Internet/Weibo”, and direct quotes of Weibo comments. For example, on June, 30, *Nan Fang Daily* criticized RCSC by quoting a Weibo users, “RCSC’s response was always delayed and was just some empty messages.”

Since early July, the crisis entered stage 3. Public’s anger and disappointment arose to its peak, and RCSC’s messages were ignored. The public agenda was about “concrete solutions that included returning donation money to the donors”, which set the media agenda that RCSC’s image repairing effort was questionable, and urged RCSC to improve transparency and restore public trust.

As a result, RCSC admitted that there were auditing loopholes and insufficient transparency of operation and financial system. It fully adopted the accommodative stance and its issue salience was about a series of corrective or cooperative strategies, such as the suspension of all the work of the Red Cross Society of Commercial System in July, 2011; a

public promise of improving information transparency by setting up an information release platform in July, 2011, and an cooperation with the third-party in Dec, 2012.

Negative Media Publicity

In “Guo Meimei incident”, the media publicity also played an important role in influencing the stance of RCSC. Initially when RCSC adopted a defensive stance and denied its relationship with Guo in 2011, the news media generally mirrored RCSC’s crisis communication, or even positively related to the organizational agenda by stating that “RCSC denied any connection with Guo Meimei”.

Empowered by the high sharing and re-tweet rates with targeted dissemination via Sina Weibo, netizens highly engaged on social media instead of traditional media, enjoyed the strong personal connections, massive discussion and interaction in cyberspace, which created a negative online public sphere. Under this situation, it was found that non-state-owned media such as the *Beijing Youth Daily*, *Western China Urban Daily* was led by the public and waded into the RCSC controversy and remained a negative tone: not to defend RCSC or appease public opinion but to criticize the government by crying for reforms of state-controlled NGOs; while the state-owned media such as the *People’s Daily* was under rigid control by the government and tended to report comparatively fewer negative stories than the non-state-owned media (Cheng, Huang & Chan, 2013).

In this way, when social media cooperated with the traditional media to legitimate the public outcry, large quantities of negative publicity brought a serious reputation threat to RCSC, which played as a predominant factor that moved the RCSC’s stance from advocacy to accommodation.

Low-trust Society

The qualitative content analysis of online public opinions helped to find the third contingency factor: low-trust society. The following presented how public’s distrust emerged across stages, and what those questioned subjects were within the case.

During June 22-24, 2011, when RCSC denied everything and local media spoke with one voice, donators showed their “distrust” towards RCSC. Public comments found on Sina Weibo commonly questioned the “credibility” of RCSC such as “#Red Cross should be called Black Cross,” “(RCSC) Do you still think you have any credibility left?” “A quick denial, but credibility is questionable.” On June 27, 2011, the National Audit Office of the People’s Republic of China released a report convicting that RCSC had problems in budget execution and fiscal revenue and expenditure. This led to a flood of criticisms on social media. Weibo users commented, “No transparent budget system... it is impossible to have supervision of the audit.”

From July, 2011 to April, 2013, although RCSC adopted an accommodative stance, netizens’ adverse sentiment was escalated. They collaborated to apply the powerful social media searching beyond Guo Meimei to unearth the suspicious malpractice of RCSC, and showed their distrust toward the government and the whole charitable system. A Weibo user stated, “It’s not that we are reluctant to let ‘Guo Meimei’ go, we just do not want to let RCSC go.” Others said, “Government is accountable for such things happened,” “What the incident ignited is public’s distrust towards RCSC and the entire system of government controlled charitable organizations in China.” A Weibo users said, “No one would trust you (RCSC) again,” “I just want to say to all government organizations that I curse you all!”

On April 25, 2013, a re-investigation of “Guo Meimei” incident was proposed by the

spokesman in the committee for social supervision of RCSC, but was disproved finally. Netizens strongly questioned the supervision ability of the third party, the use and value of the non-profit organization. Negative sentiment continued to dominate the Weibo space such as, “why does this committee exist?” “The @RCSC and this committee belong to the same family?” “The charitable organizations in China are all polluted.”

Finally, on August, 4, 2014, when Guomeimei was arrested and apologized to the public and RCSC, large amounts of public online showed their strong “distrust” towards Guo’s apology, RCSC, official media and the whole society. They insisted their “distrust” towards RCSC and refused to donate again by saying that, “Why CCTV reported her? I will never donate to the @RCSC,” “the Guo comes back again, I cannot believe her tears, so many liars now!” Besides, the public showed their anger towards the official media and the whole society by posting comments such as, “this society is unbelievable, the earthquake happened, but CCTV still talked about GuoMeimei!”, “This country is too polluted and cannot be saved,” “The moral fabric of our society is decaying.” By coding and categorizing these online comments, it was found that the factor of low-trust society did not only confine to interpersonal trust but also included institutional (i.e., RCSC, government, official media, and other NGOs) trust at a societal level. The crisis of RCSC ignited by “Guo Meimei Incident” materialized in a distinctive social and cultural context where the low-trust was rooted in the whole society.

One step further, this low-trust society could help explain the existence of a public-led agenda and the long-time buzzing of social media: The underlying low-trust orientation and real life experience intensified public’s dependence on social media as the medium of information source and dissemination. Thus citizen journalism could happen, and the public in crises led the media and RCSC agenda.

Closed Culture of a Chinese NGO

Another contingency factor that influenced the stance of RCSC should be its closed culture as a Chinese NGO. Distinguished with the Western-style NGO, the autonomy of the Chinese NGO from the government was lower than those in other societies (Krupp, 1997).

RCSC thus operated as a state-owned organization in China: its employees were similar to government officials; funding mainly came from the governmental subsidy, rules stuck to the governmental policies, organization itself obeyed a hierarchical power structure. In this way, RCSC tended to maintain its defensive position since no matter how, it was protected and supported by the central government and state-owned media.

Heavily Censored Media Landscape

Within this case, some interesting findings emerged when we traced a longitudinal analysis of the media contents. As we presented before, the negative media publicity and powerful online public opinion pushed the stance of RCSC moving from the advocacy to accommodation. However, as the time spanned from 2011 to 2014, heavy media censorship became evident when “Guo Meimei incident” evolved into a serious credibility crisis. It was found that “Guo Meimei” has been added into the list of sensible words, which means all the reports containing this word will be supervised and censored by online policemen. Social media accounts of citizen reporters were disabled, and lots of negative posts or comments about the “RCSC” were deleted from local social media. Until October 1, 2014, a keywords research on Sina Weibo only found 138,004 treats since June 22, 2011; while three years ago, a 42-day time span from June 22 to August 2 in 2011 yielded 165,693 treats.

Recently, instead of updating emergency information from the Yunan earthquake, the CCTV China selectively reported “the aired images of Guo’s stripped of makeup and clad in a prison-orange vest” (Beech, 2014, p. 1). Another state-owned web, *Xinhuanet* purposely quoted one alleged gambling-ring member and described Guo as “particularly evil, unscrupulous” (ibid). The heavily censored media publicity promoted and legitimated the government’s policies and the Communist regime, protected the reputation of RCSC, and supported its advocacy stance on August 3, 2014.

Central Political Control of China

Finally, we found an underlying political factor to explain the strong media censorship and state-owned feature of RCSC in this case. As China is still within the communist political system, the current small group of leaders in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) highly control the ideology of media, public, and NGO system, which generate heavily censored media landscape, controlled public, and state-run NGO. This factor may further illustrate why at the end, RCSC can return to its original advocacy stance, since the ultimate purpose of citizen participation is just to support a supreme, unified national interest defined solely by the CCP (Chou, 2009).

Discussion and Conclusion

The RCSC case examined the western communication theories in an alternate Chinese context. Through theoretical sampling, the current case study discussed the stances of a state-controlled NGO and contingency factors within a credibility crisis by adopting a dynamic and process-specific approach. Scholastic insights and practical implication of the results are three-fold.

Contingency Theory Pertaining to China

The research results extended previous research by prompting reflection on contingency theory in a Chinese NGO credibility crisis. First, the basic position of contingency theory was supported: instead of holding interactive and symmetrical crisis responses, RCSC’ stances changed reciprocally between the pure advocacy and pure accommodation stance, which showed a dynamic pattern of crisis communication. Moreover, six contingency factors including 1) powerful public-led agenda, 2) negative media publicity, 3) low-trust society (important new factor), 4) heavily censored media landscape, 5) closed culture of a Chinese NGO, and 6) highly central political control were identified as major forces in influencing the organizational stances.

Among the six factors, some of them (e.g., powerful netizens) corresponded to Cho & Cameron’s (2009) findings in South Korea. Results in this study showed that in China, empowered stakeholders were setting their own issue agendas. As the Internet technology evolves, the scope and power of netizens in China have become a noticeable phenomenon. Evidences from large quantities of negative publicity showed that the public devoted themselves to a quest of information seeking outside the realm of traditional state-run media, which supported the argument that online public opinion has become a competing agenda-setting force in contemporary China (Luo, 2014). Organization wise, RCSC was regarded as a proxy Chinese public administration. Its property of quasi-official determined a closed organizational culture and a defensive stance in crisis communication.

Second, this study found a new contingency factor - China’s cultural and social orientation as a low-trust society. Different from the “trust” as the relationship characteristic

(Cameron et al, 2002) in contingency theory, the low level of trust here means the distrust towards the whole society (including the government, RCSC, official media etc.). As the different issues developed in “Guo Meimei incident”, results showed how the low-trust society influenced the attitude and behavior of the public, which further forced the change of RCSC’s stance. This factor was also supported by statistics from a recent Chinese social report (Wang & Yang, 2012), which stated that this level of trust within the whole Chinese society reached almost the lowest within past 5 years.

Previous research further explained how the cultural elements such as family bonds in Chinese Confucianism (Fukuyama, 1995) and political instability (Liu, 2008) influenced the level of trust in societies. As Fukuyama argued that “the essence of Chinese Confucianism was the elevation of the family bonds above all other social loyalties” (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 29). In the contemporary Chinese communities, family still took a central role as a social system, and constituted the trust. In other words, the trust among individuals might not be easily established unless they were bonded by the family relationship. This low-trust phenomenon in China was also reflected in the economic pattern of kinship-based business, where within economic enterprises, the leader and successor always belonged to one family; while others out of the family could hardly be trusted as successors. Liu (2008) stated that the idea of trust in China was embedded in the particular context of Chinese political system and was intertwined with political instability. In the process of being converted from emperor systems to communist principles, then to market socialism, China has endured ranges of devastating revolutionary movements of destruction and reconstruction. Infringement of property right, jobless industrial workers and civil servants due to privatization of state-run institutes, rapid economic reforms and marketization all deepened the sense of distrust between people and the government.

Different Impacts among Contingency Factors

As scholars suggested that some contingency factors might be more influential than others (Cancel et al., 1999), results of this case study supported this argument by differentiating the long-term and short-term effects of contingency factors. In the RCSC credibility crisis, it was found that the powerful public-led agenda and negative media publicity were very strong within a specific short-time during the crisis, and successfully pushed RCSC’s stance from “advocacy” to “accommodation”. However, under the long-time effects of China’s central political control and heavy media censorship (Hassid, 2008), we noticed that the upper level of the political leadership and power determined the result of whole crisis: finally the stance of RCSC returned from “accommodation” to “advocacy” in August, 2014.

In this way, we proposed that Cameron’s around 87 contingency factors should vary in their long-time or short-term effects and be organized as the upper-level and low-level variables. For instance, the political, media, legal and cultural system may stay at the upper level out of organizational control, and play a longer time effect than other factors (e.g., the size of public relations department, the degree of line managers involved in external affairs) at the lower level within organizational range of control.

Practical Implication

By filling the gap of previous literature and testing contingency theory in a context of social mediated crisis communication, findings also suggested practical implications: first, when channel was limited in infusing public opinion and popular influence into the administrative decision and operation, it should be reasonable to infer that the social media-savvy public would

tend to assemble on the virtual space to amplify their individual voice and even spring up as a powerful agenda setter to lead media and governmental agenda. Therefore, organizations must monitor the online public activities in the stage of pre-crisis, examine not only “likes” or “links” on Twitter, but also the contents of social media for strategic decision making (Kent & Saffer, 2014); second, the study provided a lesson for practitioners that even successfully implementing accommodation strategies might hardly reduce negative opinions. As RCSC learned, establishing a good quality of relationship and maintaining the trust with the public could be very important before any implementation of reputation repair strategies.

Future Research Direction

Although this case study adds on the rich literature of contingency theory and reputation repair strategy, and contributes to the international crisis communication, still some limitations have to be mentioned here: first, as this study focuses on in-depth description of a contextual case, the direct influence of contingency factors may further be supported in experiment studies. Second, as social media and traditional media both play important roles in influencing the stances of organizations and publics, we suggest that future studies could explore the latent contingency variables from the media perspective (e.g., the public’s social media dependency; the fusion of online and offline media contents) and extend the framework of contingency theory. Finally, the public-led agenda process in this unique case demonstrates an example that the agenda setting power resides in the online public opinion to lead Chinese media and even a quasi-governmental organization. Yet, to confirm the tendency that the Chinese media and public opinion are moving towards a democratic direction in taking on a monitoring role, the public-led agenda may further be tested in empirical studies.

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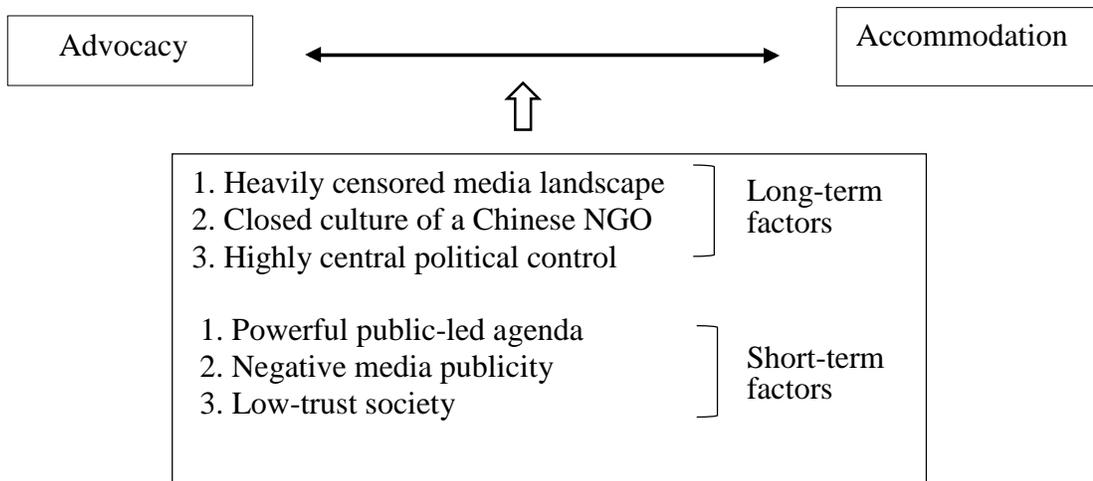


Figure 1. The main forces that move the RCSC's stances

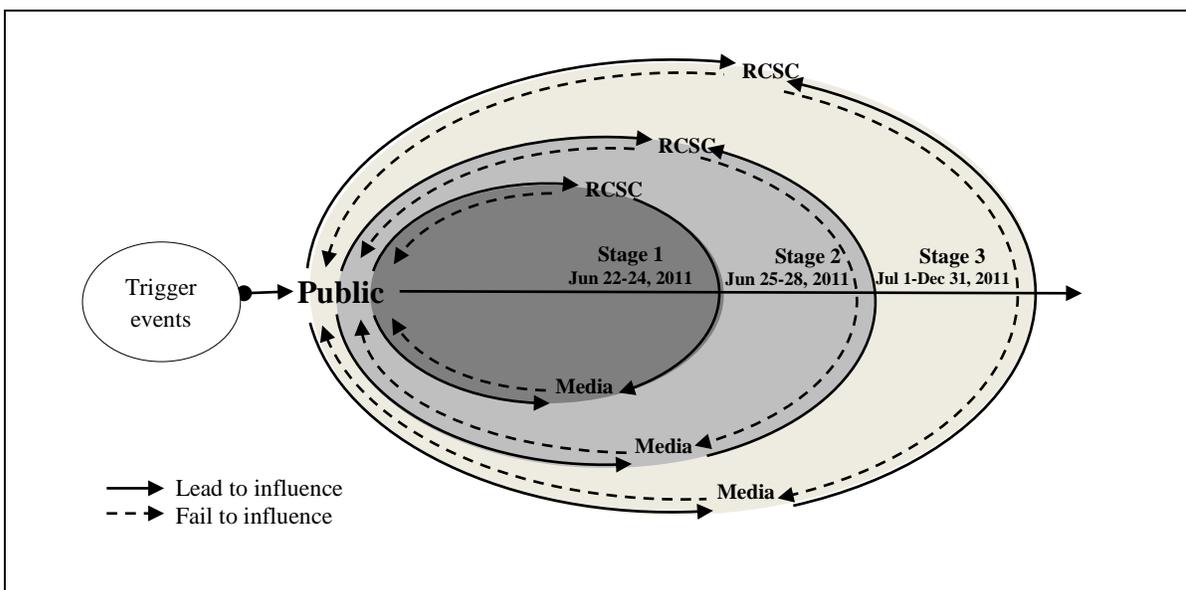


Figure 2. The public-led agenda process in the crisis

Table 1. RCSC's Stance and Crisis Communication Strategy

RCSC's stances	RCSC Response	Date	RCSC responses
Advocacy	Denial	Jun, 22, 2011	Declared on RCSC website denying any connection with Guo Meimei.
	Attack accuser	Jun, 24, 2011	Expressed anger and stated that the incident was a malicious rumor. Stressed that legal actions would be taken against those who spread fabricated information.
	Excuse, Legal actions	Jun, 28, 2011	Report GuoMeimei to the police. Conducted a media interview to stress RCSC was a victim of an outburst of social sentiment of distrust toward NGOs in China.
Accommodation		Jul, 1, 2011	Announced to suspend all commercial sector operation for investigation.
		Jul, 7, 2011	Promised to enhance information transparency by opening the donation, distribution, bidding, and purchase information to the public.
		Jul, 21, 2011	Notified the Country Red Cross Branches about the pledge of transparency of donation information in aim of reputation restoration.
	Correction, Justification	Jul, 31, 2011	Launched the donation information release platform. Made the Yushu earthquake donations information and fund balance available for public review.
		Dec, 31, 2011	In the investigation report, RCSC emphasized its independence with GuoMeimei, justified the function of commercial sectors, but admitted its problems in the management and supervision.
	Cooperation	Dec, 7, 2012	The third-party, committee for social supervision of the RCSC was established.
	Ingratiation	April, 23-25, 2013	The spokesman in the committee for social supervision of the RCSC said a re-investigation of the Guomeimei incident would be conducted, but was disproved by the committee finally.
Advocacy	Excuse, Scapegoat	August, 3, 2014	Guomeimei was arrested in July and fully apologized to the RCSC and the public on August

4. RCSC issued a statement, criticized that GuoMeimei's actions bring tremendous harmful effects on the social justice, public welfare, humanity, and philanthropy. Citizens became victims in the incident. RCSC was an innocent, time-honored organization, and rejected any relationship with GuoMeimei.

Gaining Influence: Perspectives from Female Public Relations Managers Working in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

This study explored how female public relations (PR) managers working in higher education institutions perceive that they gain influence in their jobs as communicators. To this end, the researcher conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with female, senior-level, PR professionals who work in colleges and universities. The researcher analyzed interview data using thematic analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) and uncovered that female PR managers gain influence in their higher-education institutions through collaborative relationships, managing issues/crises and through the personality characteristics of honesty, decisiveness and tenacity. Although they have management positions, the women who were interviewed remained outnumbered in male-dominated, academic administration and lacked advanced degrees possessed by many other college and university leaders. Feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1983), which emphasizes studying power relations from the perspectives of marginalized individuals, guided this study. Additionally, Berger's (2005) formulations of power-over, power-with and power-to relations provided the framework for discussions of power in this study because of their gendered characterizations. Used together, Berger's (2005) forms of power and feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1983) provide a more complete picture of the realities women face in organizations.

The female PR managers who participated in the study have proven themselves in crisis communication yet still lack influence in strategic decision-making, which suggests further change is needed to move them beyond their roles as crisis communicators so they can become trusted counselors during their institutions' strategic planning and policy-making. When female PR managers have consistent seats at their institutions' decision-making tables, their influence can grow.

Introduction

Previous research (Spicer, 1997) has evaluated the marginalization of PR practitioners within organizations, but research examining how gender might exacerbate the marginalization of practitioners and the profession remains limited. Feminist scholars (Hartsock, 1981, 1983; Buzzanell, 1992) have asserted women continue to be marginalized in workplaces, and some scholars (Lauzen & Dozier, 1992; Rakow, 1989) have suggested that since women dominate the PR industry, the industry also is marginalized.

Although PR is a female-dominated profession, men hold most top positions. A 2010 Public Relations Society of America report shows nearly 85 percent of PR practitioners are women, yet men represent 80 percent of top management positions. In addition, women communicators earn less than males at the same organizational levels, which is consistent with pay differences between men and women in other industries (Sha, 2011).

Prior research has examined how gender affects female PR managers' influence in business and organizational settings. However, work addressing how female communicators within higher education institutions gain influence remains limited. Nonetheless, research examining women's involvement in higher education administration found the academic environment to be more favorable to men's career advancement (White, Riordan, Ozkanli & Neale, 2010; Ballenger, 2010). In addition, colleges and universities have been resistant to increase women's participation in administration (American Council on Education, 2007). This research may suggest female PR managers working in higher education institutions face distinct sets of challenges worthy of further investigation. Examining the experiences of female practitioners who work in higher education will help illuminate how they gain influence in the male-dominated environments of college and university administration.

Organizational structure is one reason attributed to the lack of women in management (Kanter 1976, 1977). For instance, exclusion from influential networks, a lack of mentors, and male-dominated organizational environments contribute to the marginalization of female PR practitioners in organizations (Hon, 1995). In addition, female communicators most often hold low-level positions as technicians, and these positions limit their inclusion in strategic decision-making and access to decision-makers (Toth et al., 1988).

Discussions of power and influence undergird the examination of women's absence in PR management, and this study sought to contribute to existing literature in this area. Berger's (2005) formulations of power-over, power-with and power-to relations will provide the framework for discussions of power in this study because of their gendered characterizations. Power-over refers to authoritative, masculine expressions of power while power-with refers to relationship-focused, feminine expressions of power. Power-to relations refer to power that seeks to challenge and counteract gendered expressions of power through activism.

The forces that contribute to women practitioners' influence are varied and complex, and the purpose of this study was to explore how female PR managers perceive they have gained power as senior-level communicators. Used together, Berger's (2005) forms of power and feminist standpoint theory provide a more complete picture of the realities women face in organizations. Feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1981, 1983) has provided a course of inquiry for the study of women's marginalization in organizations. Like Berger's (2005) power-to relations, activism is an essential component of this feminist approach; in addition, a goal of the feminist standpoint theory is to expose injustices so they can be addressed and the marginalized can be empowered. Feminist standpoint theory has framed the researcher's analysis of and her attention to the ways in which gender shapes female PR managers' experiences of

power. Thus, the research question that guided this research was: How do female PR managers in higher education institutions perceive that they gain influence in their jobs? Studying how these women gain power will allow practitioners and researchers to develop deeper understandings of the complex factors that keep female public relations managers' in higher education settings from gaining influence.

For the study, the researcher conducted one face-to-face and 11 phone, semi-structured interviews with senior-level, female PR practitioners who work in higher education institutions. The researcher explored how these women perceive that they gain and exert power as communication managers. Obstacles and opportunities communicators confronted as they assumed and carried out the role of communication managers were also of interest to this study. The researcher analyzed interview data using thematic analysis (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002).

The following section presents the literature review. The review examines female practitioners' presence in management, the structuralist perspective of gender in organizations, feminist standpoint theory, power and influence in the context of public relations, Berger's sources of power, additional sources of power, power that comes from practitioners' roles within organizations and, finally, female PR practitioners' ascent into management.

Literature Review

Female Practitioners' Presence in Management

Research has addressed some of the challenges women face in the workplace, such as discrimination and sexual harassment, as well as the difficulties of maintaining a work-life balance (Hoffman & Cowan, 2010; Buzzanell, Meisenbach, Remke, Liu, Bowers, & Conn, 2005). Women numerically dominate the PR industry, yet their struggles to balance work and family demands while climbing the corporate ladder mirror those of women in male-dominated industries, such as engineering and business.

Previous literature (O'Neil, 2003; L. A. Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001; Hon, 1995; Hon, L. A. Grunig, & Dozier, 1992; Tam, Dozier, Lauzen, & Real, 1995; Toth, Serini, Wright, & Emig, 1998) addressed the gendered nature of PR and how organizational structures reinforce men's authority and exclude female practitioners from management. O'Neil (2003) found female communicators reported to organizational leaders less often than male practitioners, which suggests women have less access to decision-makers. This finding is troubling because previous research has posited, for public relations practitioners' influence and professional status within organizations to improve, involvement in decision-making teams is essential (Berger & Reber, 2006). Without management positions and with limited access to decision makers, female practitioners face pressures to adopt masculine behaviors so they will be seen as like-minded by organizational leaders and gain more access to executives (O'Neil, 2003).

Research on gender and public relations has examined practitioners in a variety of settings, yet research evaluating the experiences of female communicators in higher education institutions remains limited. Weaver-Lariscy, Cameron and Sweep (1994) examined gender differences among PR officers in colleges and universities using a survey of nearly 400 PR practitioners. The researchers found that female communicators were more likely to serve as the "consciences of the organization," and as such, more often participated in discussions about social responsibility. Male communicators, on the other hand, were more likely to serve as "dominant insiders," and considered themselves able to argue with others in decision-making circles about policies that affected their institutions.

For women who work in higher education administration, career paths to management

positions still follow traditional models that make it easier for men to advance. Men receive more assistance moving into administration while women's advancement is slowed (White, Riordan, Ozkanli & Neale, 2010). Ballenger (2010) studied the exclusion of women in higher education leadership and found women took slower career paths, for which they faulted prescribed advancement through formal positions in the institutional hierarchy such as assistant professor, associate professor, assistant dean, dean, provost, etc. Men's advancement did not necessarily follow prescribed advancements through formal positions. In addition, a lack of mentors and "good old boy networks," groups of men who look out for each other and themselves, contributed to women's exclusion in higher education administration.

As in other fields, higher education administration provides challenges for women who wish to ascend to their institutions' highest-ranking management positions. This study helps fill the gap in research by addressing how female communicators in academic institutions become managers and how the male-dominated environment contributes to their influence.

Structuralist Perspective of Gender, Power and Organizations

Kanter's (1976, 1977) work on men and women in organizations established the structuralist perspective, which posits that individuals' power within organizations is determined by the way in which organizational environments are structured. According to Kanter, power is established by the entire organizational environment, or system, which consists of individuals' formal positions in the organizational hierarchy, informal relationships among organization members and the gender ratios of groups. The difference between formal and informal, in this structuralist context, is that formal refers to conditions outside of individuals' control, while informal refers to conditions within individuals' control. Kanter (1977) asserted that studying the organizational system allows differences in power between men and women to be uncovered because individuals' behaviors are related to their formal positions, their informal relationships or their place as "tokens," or the only women, in the groups to which they belong. The parts of the system Kanter identifies are interconnected and difficult to dissect. Together, these systemic factors contribute to women's lack of power in organizations.

Organizational structures and stereotypes about the roles men and women should fill in the labor force repress women and are at fault for limiting the advancement of female PR practitioners (Hon et al., 1992). Female public relations practitioners might be marginalized within the formal structures of an organization. This, in turn, limits their ability to make connections to those in higher positions of authority with whom they could network to bolster their influence and advance up the career ladder. Even women who become PR managers face additional struggles, as researchers (Berger, 2005; O'Neil, 2003) have suggested that access to leaders and membership in organizations' decision-making teams does not automatically guarantee PR practitioners will influence an organization's direction. Exclusion from informal networks for female PR managers in higher education institutions could look like female practitioners' absence from donor or alumni events after work or their omission from golf and other sports games among colleagues or with department heads and deans. These informal activities increase relationships among co-workers, and when women are absent from these activities, they miss the opportunity to network with their peers and thereby limit their abilities to gain influence. Finally, the low number of women in management and in certain departments has given them "token" status. For a female PR manager, this might mean that she gains membership in her organization's decision-making team, but she finds herself the only female manager among a group dominated by male executives. Working in male-dominated environments brings

additional challenges to female communicators, especially if masculine behaviors and ideals are equated with competence. For PR practitioners to have “seats at the table,” they must show managers that they are competent, valuable and trustworthy (Bowen, 2007).

Interrelated formal and informal power structures as well as women’s underrepresentation in work groups have kept women on the sidelines of organizational play. Gendered organizational structures may be a contributing factor to why women in general and female PR practitioners in particular fail to ascend organizational ranks into management positions.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

The structuralist perspective helps contextualize how factors within organizational systems contribute to female practitioners’ powerlessness in organizations. To understand female practitioners’ perceptions of what hinders their power struggles, feminist standpoint theory has informed this study. In her early works on feminism, Hartsock (1981) situated feminism as a mode of analysis through which to approach life and politics and asserted that feminism’s power as a method comes from its ability to connect life with the societal institutions that shape life (Heckman, 1997). Hartsock (1983) later introduced feminist standpoint theory in her book, *Money, Sex, and Power*, and says the theory, “expresses female experience at a particular time and place, located within a particular set of social relations” (p. 303).

Hartsock’s original formulation of feminist standpoint theory situated knowledge in the material lives of individuals. For feminist standpoint theorists, the social groups within which individuals are situated powerfully shape their experiences and knowledge as well as how they understand and communicate with themselves, others and the world (Wood, 1997). Further, “when people speak from the opposite sides of power relations, the perspective from the lives of the less powerful can provide a more objective view than the perspective from the lives of the more powerful,” (Harding, 1991, p. 269-270). In other words, feminist standpoint theorists believe that studying the experiences of individuals who are marginalized, such as women, gives a more complete understanding of power.

Research within public relations also has noted women’s acknowledgements of power imbalances that go unnoticed by men. Weaver-Lariscy, Sallot and Cameron (1996) studied practitioners’ perceptions of professional standards and found that female and male practitioners disagreed about whether “justice and equity for all” practitioners existed. Male practitioners reported more justice and equity than female communicators did. Female practitioners did not observe a “just and equitable” standard in the profession because, for them, it did not exist. In a survey of public relations educators and practitioners, Sallot, Cameron and Weaver-Lariscy (1998) noted significant differences between men and women’s appraisals of whether men and women in PR were paid equally, with women perceiving a wider gap. In addition, female educators were more likely than men to see inequalities in the profession based on gender; a possible explanation is that women experienced the inequities while male educators did not. Because of their marginalized position, the women were able to observe injustices that went unnoticed by their male peers.

Public relations managers typically are positioned on the fringes of management structure and have less access to decision-makers. What is more, women working in higher education also are marginalized. Female public relations managers in colleges and universities face distinct challenges because of their gender and their jobs and have standpoints deserving of study. Although the women in this study are not necessarily marginalized to the same extremes as other

groups, such as entry-level female communicators who completely are absent from organizations' decision-making groups, female managers' disadvantaged positions on the sidelines of dominant coalitions enables them to offer insights to how power is accumulated among leaders in higher education administration.

Feminist standpoint theories not only seek to develop understandings of differing standpoints. Another essential component of feminist standpoint theory is its emphasis on political activism. As such, standpoints help create important personal and social change (Dougherty, 1999). Studying the experiences of female communication managers in colleges and universities will help expose the struggles the women face. Exposing these struggles is the first step in reforming environments so that women have more power. Feminist standpoint theorists have asserted that women's experiences can vary and that women do not necessarily have the same standpoint; however, some commonalities may exist due to group membership (Buzzanell, 1992; Heckman, 1997). Despite varying standpoints, women can come together to work toward shared goals, such as more participation in organizations' decision-making teams (Buzzanell, 1992; Heckman, 1997). Heckman (1997) argued for a revised understanding of feminist standpoint theory in which the feminist standpoint is positioned as "situated and engaged knowledge, as a place from which feminists can articulate a counterhegemonic discourse and argue for a less repressive society," (p. 363).

Taking a feminist standpoint approach to this analysis seeks to give voices to female PR managers who may have difficulty gaining access to management or becoming managers. Further, feminist standpoint theory offers a framework to explore the varied experiences of women in PR and expose ways in which changes are needed so women can have more power. Pompper (2007) used standpoint theory and uncovered that Latina practitioners felt their gender and ethnicity marginalized them, and they did not feel valued or trusted to do the same kind of job as their White male peers. Further, the women felt they had to suppress their bicultural identities and behave in ways that were "normal" to their Anglo men co-workers.

By studying female PR practitioners' standpoints, the researcher hoped to gain a deeper understanding of how the women experience power in their jobs. Exposing the women's struggles gaining power will allow researchers and practitioners to acknowledge, respond to and reform the practices that continue to keep female public relations managers trapped beneath glass ceilings in higher education administration.

Power and Influence in PR

Previous literature using feminist standpoint theory to address how gender affects female PR practitioners' marginalization in management positions remains limited; however, research examining gender, influence and power in PR practice abounds. Carli (2001) posited that gendered ideas of how men and women leaders should behave in the workplace contribute to women's difficulty gaining and exerting influence. Further, Weaver-Lariscy, Cameron and Sweep (1994) asserted that, "within the structural environments of the organizations in which we work, there are strongly held perceptions of differences, derived from gender, that offer quite different interpretations of roles within the management workforce." Studying power and influence in the context of PR is of interest to many academics and professionals because of the need for practitioners to effectively convince organizational leaders of their competence as communicators and of the value of the communication strategies they develop on behalf of their organizations.

Exploring how practitioners perceive that they gain influence in their jobs will expand

theorizing about what having power means to female practitioners. In addition, feminist standpoint theory will give voice to the experiences of underrepresented female communication managers, who represent a small segment of female practitioners who have ascended organizational hierarchies yet remain beneath glass ceilings.

Essential to the study of power and influence in PR is knowledge of how researchers have used the terms within research on organizational behavior. Previous literature (Mintzberg, 1983; Spicer, 1997; Kanter, 1977) on power and influence has defined the concepts within the scope of organizational structures. Kanter (1977) and Mintzberg (1983) asserted that influence occurs when individuals use power to accomplish something that serves an organizational purpose. For PR practitioners, this may mean successfully communicating leaders' messages to reporters during a crisis and garnering favorable media coverage on behalf of the organization. Power also can turn into influence through "legitimate, sanctioned organizational bases, such as those that formally come with any position or accrue through perceived expertise," (Spicer, 1997, p. 142). In other words, practitioners might gain influence when they move to a higher-level position or become well known for their talent writing speeches for executives.

Researchers (Berger & Reber, 2005) have noted the subtle difference between power and influence. Power is defined as an individual's capability to get things done or to get others to do what the individual wants them to do (Barbalet, 1985; Berger & Reber, 2005; L. A. Grunig, 1992; Hay & Hartel, 2000; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992). When power is defined as the capacity to get things done, influence often is defined as the exercise of power (Berger & Reber, 2005; Mintzberg, 1983; Salancik, 1977). Similarly, Pfeffer (1992) described influence as the process in which power is used or realized. In a study of practitioners, PR professionals defined influence as the ability to shape organizational strategy and decisions, having access to management and having their opinions listened to (Berger and Reber, 2005). More recently, Place (2012) conducted in-depth interviews with female practitioners who perceived power existing as influence, relationships, knowledge and information, access, credibility and empowerment. These descriptions of power refer to that which enabled the women to have power. For example, relationships are not necessarily power, rather, the possession of and access to relationships affected the female practitioners' power. In addition, practitioners' perception of power as empowerment "reflects an evolution of the definition of power in public relations and suggests that power is perceived as something not given, but something shared by individuals. Combined, evidence refutes traditional notions of power as simply a commodity that can be given and that some individuals possess and some do not," (Place 2012, p. 446).

Although often defined separately, power and influence have also been used as synonyms in more recent literature (Berger and Reber, 2006; Aldoory et al., 2008). Thus, this research also will use the terms interchangeably. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, a specific definition of power/influence does not guide this research. Rather, the formulations of power-relations proposed by Berger (2005) will inform this research.

Berger's Types of Power

Berger (2005) placed power in the context of PR using three types of relations: power over, power with and power to. Berger (2005) asserted that power-over, power-with and power-to relations exist in a constant state of shared change. In power-over relations, control, instrumentalism and self-interest characterize the decision-making process. In a power-over system, practitioners do as they are instructed to do by those in authority (Aldoory et al., 2008). Conversely, power-with relations emphasize dialogue, inclusion, negotiation and shared power

in decision-making (Berger, 2005). Communicators in a power-with system serve as organizational advocates and help build relationships between the organization and its audiences (Aldoory et al., 2008).

Inside dominant coalitions, a tension exists between power-over and power-with relations because of the gendered nature of each style. Power-over relations align with masculine traits of independence and power-with relations embody feminine ideals of community (Dougherty, 1999). Finally, power-to relations refer to types of resistance practitioners might use to counteract the gendered dialectic between power-with and power-over relations. Practitioners of power-to relations are activists who work to improve their power in advising dominant coalitions (Berger, 2005). As activists, PR professionals attempt to influence managements' decisions by sharing audiences' attitudes toward the organization with leaders during the decision-making process (Grunig, 2006). For public relations practitioners to increase their power, they must employ activist practices that work on behalf of the whole organization and oppose authoritarian systems of dominance (Place, 2012).

Berger (2005) positioned power-to relations as the type of influence practitioners should employ. This type of power aligns with feminist empowerment-based formulations of power and departs from masculine notions of power-over, or power as domination. In a power-to system, practitioners are political actors and, as such, "they must use political intelligence, resources, and willpower to push back on the forces, processes, practices, and structural arrangements that otherwise constrain their abilities to help organizations do the right thing in a complex world," (Berger & Reber, 2006, p. 69). In power-to relations, communicators challenge dominant forces and empower those who may have been silenced by power-over systems.

Additional Sources of Power

For PR practitioners to increase their influence, they must understand the sources of power within organizations. In an influential study of power in organizations, French and Raven (1960) proposed five bases of social power: authoritative or legitimate power, coercive power, expert power, referent power and reward power. Authoritative or legitimate power refers to an individual's assigned position or title within the organization's structure. Those working as executives have higher authoritative power than those in entry-level positions. Coercive power comes from the ability to impose punishments. Conversely, reward power comes from the ability to give rewards and resources. Often times, coercive power and reward power come from managers who can dole rewards and punishments to their direct reports. In addition, certain groups within organizations can have reward or coercive power. The budget committee can give funding to certain departments while taking monies away from other departments. Those with specialized knowledge or skills have expert power. This power, arguably, is what PR practitioners most often possess because of their technical skills as writers and communicators. Referent power refers to an individual's personal characteristics, such as charisma and attractiveness. As persuasive communicators, PR professionals likely have referent power as well. Information power, the authority that comes from access to or control over important information, was added to French and Raven's (1960) original set of five power sources by Bachrach and Lawler (1980). PR practitioners have information power when they are charged as the organizations' spokespersons, especially during crises.

Power as a Function of Practitioners' Assigned and Perceived Roles

PR practitioners are likely to possess expert power because of their technical skills, but

authoritative power typically only resides with PR managers who have higher positions in the organizational structure. Depending on the organization, PR managers have varying degrees of involvement in strategic planning and advising the dominant coalitions, (Dozier et al., 1995). This is troubling because, without consistent access to coalition members, communicators' authoritative and information power can wane.

Previous research (Dozier & Grunig, 1992; Dozier et al., 1995; Grunig, J.E. 1992) has found that PR is best when those who practice it are members of dominant coalitions or directly report to one of their members or, in other words, when practitioners have authoritative power. Having authoritative power makes communicators more likely to have consistent access to coalition members. Conversely, when communicators do not have authoritative power, they may gain access to coalition members using other types of power, such as expert or referent power.

Using two separate studies, Berger and Reber (2005) completed semi-structured interviews with 162 PR practitioners and found practitioners had the most influence during crises and when developing communication messages or plans. In other words, practitioners had expert power because coalition members sought the practitioners for their abilities to create communication products, such as news releases. Communicators who were interviewed said they had the least influence during strategic decision-making and during interactions with organizational executives. Practitioners lamented that coalition members perceived them as technicians rather than managers, which suggests the professionals lack authoritative power. When organizational leaders need a communication product, PR practitioners have power; however, according to the practitioners who were interviewed, their technical skills alone are not sufficient to gain them positions as strategic counsel (Berger & Reber, 2005).

Women may be less likely to be included in strategic decision-making because they are more likely to have formal roles as communication technicians than they are to have managerial positions (Toth et al., 1988). Technicians help produce content or perform duties delegated to them, duties that can include writing press releases, planning events or making media contacts (Berger, 2005). Technicians have low authoritative power, which might contribute to their absence at organizations' decision-making tables. Dozier and Gottesman (1982) asserted that PR managers, who more often are men, earn more than technicians, have higher education levels and are more likely to participate in organizational decision-making. Weaver-Lariscy, Cameron and Sweep (1994) found women practitioners were significantly more likely than their male colleagues to classify themselves as technicians rather than managers.

Current research has failed to fully uncover why few female practitioners transition from the technician role to manager role and what challenges face women who become managers. Although managers have more influence than technicians, having a position as PR manager does not guarantee influence (Aldoory et al., 2008). Even practitioners' inclusion in dominant coalitions does not automatically guarantee leaders will heed the communicators' advice (Berger, 2005; O'Neil, 2003). Gaining influence as communicators may be difficult for women because they practice a gendered, female profession in male-dominated environments. Female communicators have lower positions in organizational hierarchies, which stymie their advancement into leadership when combined with limited access to coalition members and absence from seats at the decision-making table. In addition, women's exclusion from "good old boy" networks keeps them alienated from informal networks in the workplace that, for men, help establish mentoring relationships that aid in career advancement. Together, many factors work against female practitioners' advancement and hinder their influence as communicators.

Understanding Female PR Practitioners' Ascent to Management

The present study sought to explore how female PR practitioners gain power and thereby ascend to management positions in higher education institutions. In addition, the researcher sought to understand the standpoints of female PR managers. Feminist standpoint theory ascribes value to understanding women who are marginalized, such as female PR managers who, because of their gender, are the minority among managers within their field and within their higher education workplaces. This study strove to understand more clearly the types of influence that have helped female PR managers obtain their current positions. In order to explore the factors that contributed to female practitioners' influence as communication managers, the researcher proposed the following question:

RQ: How do female PR managers in higher education institutions perceive that they gain influence in their jobs?

Method

The researcher conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with senior-level female PR practitioners who work in higher education institutions. To participate in the study, women had to meet at least three of the four following criteria: currently be working as PR managers, have more than 10 years of experience working in the communication industry, be members of senior leadership or directly report to members of their institutions' senior leadership teams, provide in-house PR counsel for the college or university for which they work.

Because of their organizational rank and years of experience, the women in this study represent those who have ascended the ranks of their organizations' hierarchies and, in doing so, have made it farther than many of their female peers. They represent a relatively select and highly successful group of communicators, yet the women report that they still lack influence among institutional leaders in certain situations. Because of their marginalized place in organizations, they are uniquely positioned to provide insight into power and gendered relations in dominant coalitions.

Sampling Procedure

The researcher used purposive and network sampling to recruit participants. The researcher used her professional networks to identify key informants who met the qualifications to be included in the study or who could recommend others who would meet the criteria. The researcher followed up with the suggested participants via email and/or phone calls to confirm they met the inclusion criteria. The purposive and network sampling did not yield sufficient participants, so the researcher also used snowball sampling to gain more participants. The researcher obtained oral consent from participants at the beginning of the interviews, which allowed her to avoid additional written links connecting participants to the data. The researcher also obtained the participants' oral consent before beginning digital recordings of the interviews. No compensation was offered to the participants.

Because of geographic constraints, 11 of the interviews were conducted via phone and one interview was conducted face-to-face. The researcher conducted the phone interviews at times convenient to the participants, and she conducted one face-to-face interview at a location of the participant's choosing. On average, the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, as many of the women used their lunch hours to talk to the researcher.

Interview Procedure

The researcher used semi-structured interviews and followed a predetermined interview guide to ask interviewees a series of questions about their experiences with power and their career paths. Additionally, the interview guide used a “funnel-approach,” in which the beginning questions were broad and impersonal and the questions gradually transitioned into more pointed, sensitive questions (Lindlof, 1995). In order to generate more detailed descriptions, the researcher asked probing questions, such as “How did that make you feel?” and “Can you explain that situation in more detail?”

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) caution that sample size is difficult to predetermine in qualitative studies; therefore, researchers should continue sampling until no new information is added. After 12 interviews, the researcher saw themes emerging in the data, and the interviews did not continue to reveal new information or challenge previous data collected, which indicated the researcher had reached a critical threshold of interpretation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 129).

Data Analysis Procedure

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, the researcher used thematic analysis to interpret the data collected from the interviews. Thematic analysis, also known as thematic interpretation (Owen, 1984), is grounded in how participants perceive communication episodes.

In textual data, themes are identified based on recurrence, repetition and forcefulness. These three criteria helped the researcher identify the salient issues and the extent of the issues’ salience for the women she interviewed (Keyton, 2006).

To make sure the researcher’s interpretations aligned with the participants’ experiences, the researcher used member validation during the interviews (Keyton, 2006).

The PR Managers

Although the women all held management positions, they had a variety of titles, ranging from director of media relations to vice chancellor of marketing and strategic communications. In addition, the women had an array of professional experiences, such as careers in journalism, government relations and small-business ownership, before entering the field of higher education. On average, the women had more than 20 years of experience in the larger communication industry practicing PR or journalism, and about half of the participants had more than 10 years practicing PR in the higher education setting. The majority of the women worked at colleges and universities in the Midwest, although four participants worked at universities in southern states and one woman worked at an institution on the West Coast. Most of the women worked at public research universities, although a few women worked at private institutions and one worked at a community college. The women ranged in age from 34 to 62, and all but two were married. Eleven of the 12 participants had children that ranged in age from infancy to adulthood, although most of the children were in their late teens or early twenties.

Angela. Angela has worked at the same Midwestern public university for more than 20 years. She’s in her late forties, is married and has two children who are 18 and 20.

Anita. After spending two decades advancing through the newsroom ranks at a metropolitan daily, Anita accepted the senior communication position at an urban, Midwestern public university. She is 48, married and has three children who are in their late teens and early 20s.

Holly. Holly has worked the same mid-sized public university in the Midwest for more than 20 years. She has been married for nearly the same amount of time and has two children, one in high school and the other in college.

Janet. Janet joined the staff at a small, private university in the Midwest almost a year ago after spending a decade running her own public relations and marketing business out of her home. She is in her late thirties, is married and has three children at home.

Kim. Kim directs media and internal relations at a large research university in the Southeast. She has more than 20 years of experience in the communication industry, with nearly a decade practicing PR in the higher education setting. Karen is in her late forties, is single, and has two college-age children.

Linda. Linda is 55, married and has two children in their twenties. She works for a public research university in the Southeast and has more than 30 years of professional experience.

Lauren. Lauren worked as a newspaper reporter and editor for more than a decade and has spent the past 15 years in PR at two research institutions on the West Coast. She is in her late forties and, after time as a single mother, recently remarried. She has two children who are 20 and 17.

Marilyn. Sixty-year-old Marilyn has spent the last 10 years in PR but worked in television news for 25 years prior. She is the senior communication administrator at a large public university in the Southeast. She is married and has no children.

Melanie. The youngest of the participants, Melanie is 34, married and has a baby. She manages communication efforts at a large, community college system in an urban Midwestern area.

Nora. Nora has spent two decades advancing through the communication ranks at a large research university in the Southeast. She now is the senior communication administrator at the university. Nora is in her late fifties, unmarried and has no children.

Sharon. Sharon has worked in PR for almost 40 years and has been married for nearly the same amount of time; she has an adult child. Now in her sixties, Sharon directs communication efforts for a school at a large Midwestern public university and also has a faculty appointment.

Vera. Vera has held a variety of positions during more than 20 years at the same small, private university in the Midwest. She now co-directs the institution's marketing and communication efforts. She is in her late forties, married and has three children, who are 24, 21 and 16.

Results

The researcher conducted 11 phone interviews and one face-to-face interview with female PR managers working in colleges and universities. The interviews gave the women an opportunity share their experiences practicing PR in the nuanced higher education setting. Women shared a passion for public relations and for working in higher education. In particular, emphasis was given to collecting descriptions from participants about the relationships they had with their internal constituents, co-workers, administrators and campus colleagues. However, many women also voluntarily shared information about their personal lives, particularly with regard to their families and spouses.

Power and Influence: Subtle Differences Shaped by Connotations

In order to place the participants' responses within the necessary context, a discussion of how the female public relations managers viewed power and influence follows.

Participants overwhelmingly said that 'power' had a negative connotation and was related to individuals wielding power over others. Holly explained it this way, "Influence to me

is certainly a more positive word and can be used to bring people along whereas the word power may imply that, whether you like it or not, this is the way it's going to be." The majority of the participants said something similar when asked about what influence and power meant to them. Perhaps, the women's negative association with the word 'power' is related to women's discomfort with labeling themselves as 'powerful.' The participants don't view themselves as powerful because they construct power as overpowering and authoritative, which doesn't seem to align with their communication or leadership styles. Additionally, women may not like the word 'power' because of the perpetuation by media and society that women are not supposed to be powerful. Men are supposed to be powerful, strong and authoritative while women are supposed to be sexy, submissive and sensitive, according to media and societal messages.

Perhaps the women have been acculturated to think that, even if they are successful, they are not powerful. To label themselves as powerful would be boastful and could cause others to label them with the B-word, as careerist women sometimes are labeled.

Nearly all participants disassociated with the word 'power' and much preferred using 'influence' to label their own successes or the achievements of those whom they admired. Kim explained:

"I am more drawn to the word 'influence' than I am 'power.' Power sounds like it's more of a...like it's more attached to a person's personal ego, I think. I think 'influence' is a little bit more about—you earn respect by being a hard worker. Power is more, you know... "I'm the 'fat cat,' who is sitting in the big office." And that doesn't define me at all, I don't think."

In her response, Kim distances herself from power. To her and other participants, 'power' is authoritative, self-important, unfeeling and related to high positions within organizations. Influence, on the other hand, is associated with working hard and proving oneself, thereby earning the respect of others.

Although the majority of the women viewed 'power' negatively and did not use the word to describe themselves, the data do not support simplifying 'power' as bad and 'influence' as good. Rather, the two words remain complex and interrelated concepts with nuanced and gendered distinctions. Angela described the interrelatedness of the two terms:

"I think they are definitely related because it feels that the more power that you wield, the more influence that you have. I think that the power tends to go along with the hierarchy of structure at the university, and so maybe, the higher up you are the more power you have and the more power you have the more influence that you have."

The previous response also suggests Angela associates power with organizational structure, which many participants mentioned.

In summary, participants prefer to use 'influence' rather than 'power' when talking about themselves and their work. Perhaps, the women dislike and disassociate from the word 'power' because it has a more authoritative, masculine connotation, whereas they associate 'influence' with something earned through hard work and proven skill. They don't necessarily distance themselves from power because they are afraid of making the tough decisions; rather, the participants seemed to want to have more of a voice in decision-making. To label themselves as powerful or to behave in powerful ways would be to push themselves outside of what society expects of them as women. By distancing themselves from power, the women are acting according to their assumptions that women should be nice and get along with everyone, which contrasts sharply with their idea of power. The women's understandings of 'power' relate to Berger's (2005) conceptualization of power-over relations in which power is related to getting others to do what one wants them to do, whereas their understandings of 'influence' more closely align with Berger's power-to relations and feminist empowerment-based definitions of power. In

a power-to relations, power is referred to as the capacity to do something, such as provide expertise or counsel.

What Gives Individuals Influence?

Several themes emerged about what gives PR managers influence in the higher education setting. These themes include collaborative relationships, issues/crisis management, and the personality traits of honesty, decisiveness and tenacity.

Collaborative relationships. Nearly all of the participants mentioned that possessing good working relationships with members of the media, colleagues and university administrators was important for gaining influence or being influential. In particular, collaboration also emerged as a key feature of their relationships and their leadership styles. To the female practitioners, collaboration facilitates relationship development and thereby helps individuals gain influence. Some women were hesitant to admit collaboration was an inherently female leadership quality, although many recognized collaboration as a skill at which women excel. As Anita said:

“What women do bring to the table is they assist more, it’s not always about winning—it’s certainly not always about winning as a human being, as an individual—it’s more about, ‘how can we get people around the table to figure out a solution to this? What ideas do you have? Let’s talk about this.’ Umm, you still have to be able to make decisions, so you still have to, you know, be ready to call the shots as a leader when the time comes, and I don’t see any hesitation in women to do that.”

Anita’s explanation refers to women’s ability to collaborate by asking for input from others while problem-solving to make decisions. For her, collaboration and decisiveness are not mutually exclusive.

Issues/crisis management. One major component of the women’s track records is their ability to handle negative issues facing their institutions appropriately so that their institutions’ reputations can be upheld. As Vera noted, “Crisis communication is probably the single most important thing that a PR individual representative can do for an institution if they do it well.” Many women echoed this sentiment through stories they shared of their own experiences handling issues that could be potentially negative for their university or college. Kim said, “You know, I carry a lot of influence in handling emergencies because our department is so dependent on how quickly we can push out information and how quickly we can respond to the media.” Many women shared concrete examples of crises they had managed when the researcher asked them to, “Tell me about a time when you felt particularly influential or powerful.” Overwhelmingly, the women shared stories about managing media coverage during issues that had the potential to damage their institutions’ reputations.

In particular, Angela said she felt influential when she handled reporters after members of the national media descended on her university’s campus after a former student was accused of plotting to set off a bomb in a metropolitan area. Anita shared how she coordinated external and internal communication for her university after a student was murdered during a home invasion near campus. She noted that her efforts and communicating timely information to faculty and staff helped her and her team gain influence with administrators and others across campus. The responses from Angela and Anita are just two examples of how the women provided communication counsel to their institutions’ leaders and implemented the crisis communication.

In addition, Anita’s story also indicates that others noticed and respected how she handled the situation, which helped her gain credibility.

Event and campaign planning, although not necessarily negative, produce highly visible

products, which often carefully are scrutinized by members internal and external to the university or college. A few women, including Melanie and Holly, shared event management as instances in which they felt influential. In particular, Melanie shared that she helped prepare remarks for college administrators for a high-profile event attended by President Obama. The college administrators were pleased with the outcome of the event, which, according to Melanie, made her feel influential.

When discussing crisis communication, many women noted their ability to think strategically when managing issues. In addition, they said they provided counsel to university administrators when developing messages and when determining the best ways to communicate those messages to key constituents. In particular, Kim noted how her past experience managing crises helps her forecast potential negative issues, which allows her to plan ahead. Kim and others referred to women's advantages using intuition and emotion in their decision-making and their ability to see the big picture. Men, they noted, seem to have a more "cut-and-dry" approach and rely more on facts than gut instincts in decision-making. Many of the participants emphasized that handling many crises over time helped them "prove" themselves and earn the respect of others, particularly administrators. It seemed that cumulative experience, rather than managing one individual event, is what helped the women develop influence.

Although the women noted they regularly are sought out for advice in managing crises, they still feel excluded from other conversations in which they could offer counsel. Female practitioners, and perhaps PR managers in general, have proven themselves within the scope of media relations. However, their influence in strategic decision-making about university policies is lacking, partly because practitioners are excluded from these decision-making conversations. In addition, the practitioners often were called in after the big decisions were made and important audiences did not like the decisions. The women had to fix the "messes" that administrators had made. Had the PR managers been included in the initial decision-making conversations, perhaps the backlash to the decisions and negative publicity could have been avoided because the communication professionals could have advised their organizations on how to communicate the changes effectively or advised against policies that would be perceived negatively by key audiences.

Participants overwhelmingly said successfully managing negative crises had helped them gain influence. Handling an issue well could speed up a PR managers' accumulation of influence. However, poorly managing crises could cause individuals' influence quickly to deteriorate. For the women's influence to increase, college and university administrators as well as other constituents had to be pleased with how the issues were handled by the PR managers. Although none of the participants explicitly mentioned an example of a crisis they'd handled poorly, they described the high-stakes nature of crisis communication, such that managing one issue poorly could cause the women to lose their influence and, perhaps, their jobs.

Personal characteristics: honesty, tenacity and decisiveness. In the participants' responses about what gave them influence emerged a theme of three personal characteristics: honesty, tenacity and decisiveness. They reported honest communication with leaders to whom they provided counsel, as well as tenacity in making sure information was communicated appropriately to key constituents in a timely manner. In addition, the women did not fear making decisions and expressed a need to be decisive. These women did not let fear of becoming unpopular with leaders hinder the counsel they provided. Lauren said:

"You need to be really strong. You need to be able to tell people what they don't want to hear. You need to be able to take these roles seriously. You are a magnet for criticism, and you

need to be able to withstand that because, sometimes, you are criticized for being a messenger. So it [PR] is not a profession for anybody who is sensitive. You need to be tough—male or female—and you need to be decisive.”

Lauren’s comments show a resolve for making tough decisions and providing sound counsel without fear of repercussions associated with hurting the feelings of others or having their own feelings hurt. In addition, Lauren uses the gendered words, ‘sensitive,’ most often associated with femininity, and ‘strong’ and ‘tough,’ which are typically masculine characteristics. Lauren’s word choices suggest she has bought into the societal idea that, in order to be successful, women must suppress or abandon their feminine traits and adopt more masculine behaviors in order to advance in their careers. Because she has individualized the cultural norm that successful professionals behave in masculine ways, she has lessened her ability to counteract society’s ideology of how upwardly mobile female professionals should conduct themselves and reinforced the idea that masculine traits are preferred in the workplace.

Later, Melanie likened herself to the female administrator she admires: “Well, she is confident and tenacious. [...] But based on how I see her is that she is not only confident and very well-spoken and well-educated—she has a Ph.D and she is very sharp—but she is also someone who has matured out and, at her point in her career, [...] she has figured out how to maintain that professionalism in situations where a lot of people would lose their minds, and I consider that to be an important attribute of professional strength.”

Melanie’s response suggests the leader had become an inspiration among younger women who worked at the university, who shared tales of the administrator’s struggles and courage and aspired to be like her.

Discussion

This section discusses how the results contribute to understanding how female public relations managers working in higher education institutions gain influence and how theory possibly can explain the results. In particular, this section connects the results to Berger’s (2005) formulations of power and Hartsock’s (1983) Feminist Standpoint Theory.

Overwhelmingly, women preferred the term ‘influence’ to ‘power’ when describing themselves or those whom they admired. The participants also noted power had a negative, masculine and authoritarian connotation. The participants’ definitions of ‘power’ seemed to align with Berger’s (2005) formulation of ‘power-over relations,’ which represents a more domineering leadership style in which those with authority make decisions and pass them down to subordinates. Perhaps, some of the women’s discomfort with ‘power’ also came from society’s idea of how women should behave: as nice, caring individuals who get along with everyone. Conversely, society tells men that, “nice guys finish last,” and perpetuates the idea of men as ‘powerful,’ ‘tough’ and ‘strong’ individuals who should be decisive and get things done. It may be that the women did not feel comfortable stepping outside of societal norms and labeling themselves as ‘powerful’ for fear that they would be perceived negatively. Perhaps, they accept – and thereby perpetuate – society’s hidden assumptions about how individuals should enact their gender roles.

The women said they gained ‘influence’ through crisis communication, facilitating and maintaining collaborative relationships and employing collaborative decision-making. These formulations of influence relate to Berger’s ‘power-with relations,’ which emphasizes dialogue, inclusion, negotiation and shared power in decision-making. However, the participants’ influence seemed to accumulate over time through displays of their expertise, particularly in

managing communication during crises. Their specialized knowledge of crisis communication gives them expert power (French and Raven, 1960). Berger's third power formulation, 'power-to' relations, describes power that seeks to challenge and counteract gendered expressions of power through activism. The women's stories of their own honesty, decisiveness and tenacity indicate they are not afraid to advocate for themselves or their ideas when providing counsel to administrators. Berger's conceptualization of power-to complements feminist empowerment-based formulations of power and also seems to reflect in participants' responses.

The women gained influence through issues/crisis management, collaborative relationships and through their honesty, decisiveness and tenacity. Previous research (Berger & Reber, 2005; Grunig, 1992; Grunig, 2006) also found that practitioners had the most influence during crises and when developing communication messages or plans. Perhaps, this is because the expertise and technical skills of communicators most often are needed when issues arise and administrators need help communicating with members of the media and other key constituents. However, some of the women still felt excluded from the table when decisions about institutional policies were being made. They felt most needed when they were asked to fix situations on the backend, such as responding to negative media coverage about unfavorable institutional policies or decisions. This is consistent with previous research (Berger & Reber, 2005) that found communicators had the least influence during strategic decision-making and during interactions with organizational executives. Perhaps, if the female PR managers were included more often in institutional decision-making, they could help administrators understand the consequences of their choices and how constituents and the media will perceive their decisions. If communicators were included earlier and more frequently in decision-making conversations, they could suggest different policies or advise the best ways to communicate policy changes, which could help avert and possibly lessen negative feedback from the media and other key audiences.

The biggest challenge for the female PR managers' career paths was balancing career responsibilities and family lives. Some had made choices about their career, such as turning down promotions, so that they could have more work-life balance. Women noted that power came to those in administrative positions, so women who had self-selected not to advance may have limited their capacity to earn or increase their influence. Many of the women were married, and they acknowledged the help they received from their husbands; however, single mothers did not have additional help at home, which presented them with additional challenges in maintaining balance between their professional and personal lives. The women also acknowledged it was difficult for them to disconnect from work when they were at home. In particular, the practitioners noted they needed to be accessible and "on call" at all times, and technology is making it increasingly difficult to separate their free time from their time on the clock.

Feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1983), emphasizes studying power relations from the perspectives of marginalized individuals and asserts those with the least amount of power can provide the richest descriptions. The participants had relatively more access to leaders and more responsibilities than women in entry-level PR positions and, therefore, were not the most marginalized practitioners. However, the women reported that they remained outnumbered by men in senior leadership teams at their institutions. In addition, they did not possess doctoral degrees like other members of their institutions' leadership teams, which also may lessen their influence in the academic setting. Therefore, the women still were speaking from a place of minority status, and as their descriptions of 'power' and 'influence' exemplified, the women bought into the societal ideas of how women are supposed to act. Their discourse reveals the

assumption that ‘power’ means overpowering and being authoritative, descriptions that do not align with feminine gender roles. To them, influence was okay to possess because it was earned through hard work and expertise. Women could identify themselves as experts, but they did not want to go outside gender role expectations and be ‘powerful’ because they did not want to be viewed negatively, as they have been taught as women that they should get along with others so everyone will like them.

Future Directions

Based on the participants’ disassociation with the word ‘power,’ future research should further investigate, perhaps empirically, if and to what extent women in public relations prefer the word ‘influence’ rather than ‘power’ to describe themselves and those whom they admire. Furthermore, future research could examine the perceptions of women in other fields, such as engineering, healthcare or education, and study how they perceive ‘power’ and ‘influence.’ Perhaps, understandings and definitions of power and influence vary by gender, industry and workplace. In-depth qualitative studies could further examine why women practitioners reject the word ‘power.’ These future directions of research could help expand feminist theory about women’s understandings of power and help theorists refine current definitions of ‘power’ and ‘influence’ to more accurately reflect the views of women.

Future research also should examine how technology and constant accessibility via smartphones, etc., perhaps contributes to female practitioners’ difficulty separating work and home lives. The women in the study said technology made it more difficult for them to disconnect from work, and perhaps other female practitioners feel the same way. Women working in public relations face a special set of challenges because they are expected to be accessible at all times and able to respond quickly when issues arise.

Most of the women in the study had children, and of those women, only one was not married. Further research is needed to explore the additional struggles single mothers face when they try to advance their careers in public relations. Single-mom Lauren offered poignant insight into the added challenges of climbing the career ladder while independently raising children.

Perhaps, future research could further examine the standpoints of single mothers who are trying to advance their careers while raising children on their own.

The results indicate female PR practitioners working at higher education institutions gain influence through managing crises and issues that could potentially negatively affect their institutions. Many women noted they were not always consulted during their institutions’ strategic planning, and they would like to increase their input. Future research should examine why practitioners, and female practitioners in particular, are excluded from these types of administrative conversations. Understanding why practitioners are excluded from these conversations could provide clues as to how female practitioners might be able to increase their influence in strategic planning. Although female practitioners in higher education seem to have influence in managing crisis communication, more study is needed to understand why they still lack influence in institutions’ policy-making and strategic-planning conversations.

Limitations and Future Research

In order to be transparent, the researcher works as an entry-level PR practitioner for a higher education institution. The researcher did not interview anyone to whom she reports; however, her direct supervisor recommended potential participants. Additionally, one participant formerly supervised the researcher during an internship. The other participants were unknown to

the researcher before the study.

The study has several limitations that could be areas for future research. This study is limited, in part, because of its methodological design. One design limitation is choosing only to talk to senior-level women practitioners. Perhaps, women who remain working in lower levels of the PR organizational structure have encountered more obstacles to career advancement and could provide better insight into gendered struggles in PR. Additional participants who work in the lower ranks of PR could have provided insight into gendered barriers that prevent them from becoming PR managers.

The PR managers in the study reported communicating with senior administrators on a daily basis, which gave them adequate opportunities from which to provide insight into communication going on in the senior leadership teams. According to feminist standpoint theory, those with the least power can provide a more objective view than those with more power (Harding, 1991). Perhaps, entry-level female employees or Latina or African-American practitioners would have different views of how influence and power are gained as PR practitioners in higher education institutions. However, many of the women reported men outnumbered them in higher education administration, so the women still were speaking from a place of minority status.

Another potential study limitation includes the small sample size and lack of diversity among participants and the universities they represent. Many of the participants came from Missouri and had similar ethnicities, ages and years of experience. Although the data are not generalizable, the data provide value because of the thick descriptions from a small, homogeneous group of women who have successfully risen to senior-level PR positions in colleges and universities.

Conclusion

The goal of the research was to explore how female PR managers working in higher education institutions gain influence in their jobs. The exploratory nature of the study helped illuminate female PR managers' experiences of gender and power within their college and university workplaces. Using Feminist Standpoint Theory as a frame, the research embraced the perspective that talking to those with limited or no power is how knowledge about power is gained; however, this research did not address race or class, which further could contribute to individuals' experiences and understandings of power.

The female PR practitioners shied away from the word 'power' but seemed to connect with the word 'influence' because, to them, it has a more positive connotation is earned through hard work and expertise. Power, on the other hand, is given to individuals in positions of authority and has a negative connotation because of individuals who have misused or abused power for selfish gain. In addition, the women's views of power and influence relate to the ways in which they have accepted society's ideas of how men and women should act. Men can be described as powerful, but women cannot since they are supposed to be submissive and obliging. These results seem to suggest that women and men may understand power and influence differently, and these possible gendered differences are worthy of future examination.

In addition, more research is needed to understand the complexity of how female practitioners define 'influence' and 'power.' This study sought to begin filling that gap in research by exploring how women gain influence/power. For practitioners, this study indicates continued challenges for new generations of female public relations practitioners who aspire to become successful, powerful communication managers. Most of the women's challenges came

from trying to handle work and family responsibilities. Perhaps, by choosing to spend more time with their families or not staying late at the office, women are limiting their potential to gain influence. Notably, the women reported technology and the 'on call' nature of the PR business made it difficult for them to disconnect from work. Perhaps the younger generation of PR practitioners who are working mothers will have an ever more difficult time separating their work and home lives because of the prevalence of technology such as smartphones. Future research should continue to examine how women in public relations handle the additional challenges of raising a family while being expecting to be 'on call' at all times.

Overall, the women enjoyed their careers practicing PR in higher education and found their jobs both challenging and rewarding. Although the women remained outnumbered in the institutions' leadership teams, they said the higher education culture in general and their institutions in particular accept and encourage women in leadership positions. As in other industries, practicing PR in higher education institutions presents practitioners with novel challenges for women who wish to ascend to senior-level PR management positions. This study helps fill the gap in research by addressing how female PR managers in higher education institutions gain influence.

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Digital Publics, the Spiral of Silence, and Communicative Actions in an Organizational Crisis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore effective crisis communication regarding the silent minority users of social media, a group that has been paid little attention in terms of crisis management, by testing an integrated way of using the Spiral of Silence theory and Communicative Action in Problem Solving (CAPS). Based on a real crisis situation, this study examined digital publics who have incongruent opinions and their communicative behaviors toward the organizational crisis. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) indicates that this study supports the predictions of the Spiral of Silence theory in the given crisis. Furthermore, digital publics who discuss a crisis issue are not only more likely to attribute crisis responsibility to the organization but also take, select, and transmit information about the organizational crisis.

Introduction

In the digital age, the number of social media users has been increasing at an incredible rate; more than 73% of adults in the United States often go online (Pew Research Internet Project, 2013). Specifically, social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, have become the most utilized online communication tools due to the benefits their two-way communication provides. Using these sites is regarded as an effective way to prevent and deal with crises (Fearn-Banks, 2011; Wright & Hinson, 2008). Moreover, it has become imperative for PR practitioners to monitor the formation of public opinion among digital publics using internet-based technology regarding a given crisis issue and to predict their communicative behaviors during times of organizational crisis.

Despite the importance of understanding digital publics, the extant studies have mainly focused on how public relations practitioners or organizations use social media during crises (Liu et al., 2011; Liu, Jin, Briones, & Kuch, 2012). In addition, there is little research providing a theoretically sound approach as the efforts to comprehensively understand the formation of public opinion and the communicative behaviors of digital publics in a crisis situation (Jin & Liu, 2010; Liu et al., 2012). When considering the mechanisms of information diffusion and interaction in digital media, we should not only rethink even the minority opinions of digital publics, but also classify their communicative behaviors because they could lead to disaster in a given situation, interweaving negative issues with an organization. For this reason, minority publics have the potential to become key publics who influence inactive publics positively or negatively.

The purpose of this study is to explore effective crisis communication methods regarding the silent minority users of social media, a group that has been paid little attention in terms of crisis management, by testing an integrated way of using the Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) theory and Communicative Action in Problem Solving (Kim, Grunig, & Ni, 2010). The premise of the Spiral of Silence (SOS) theory is that, if people believe their opinions are in the majority, they speak out, contributing to the marketplace of ideas, whereas if they believe themselves to be in the minority, they may render themselves mute – refusing to exchange their personal opinions actively and freely (Ho & McLeod, 2008). What constitutes a willingness to speak out? Does digital publics' unwillingness to speak out of SOS yield none of the communicative action in an organizational crisis? How can PR practitioners predict individuals' actions online?

In addition to the SOS theory, Communicative Action in Problem Solving (CAPS) helps PR practitioners to answer the question by using three important domains of communicative actions: information acquisition (attending and seeking), selection (forefending and permitting), and transmission (forwarding and sharing) with problem solving (Kim & Grunig, 2011; Kim, Grunig, & Ni, 2010). This study investigates digital publics' perceptions of incongruent opinions of a given issue and uncover how digital publics who attribute crisis responsibility to an organization show communicative action toward the organization (SOS → Crisis Outcomes → CAPS). The findings of this study will not only contribute to building new theories, but will also help PR practitioners to understand communicative behaviors about digital publics in times of organizational crisis.

Literature Review

Spiral of Silence Theory and Digital Publics' Perception of the Opinion Climate about a Crisis

The Spiral of Silence (SOS) theory is based on the premise that “Public opinion is a matter of speaking and of silence,” (Noelle-Neumann, 1974 p. 44). Public opinion is based on the free expression and accumulation of these individual voices regarding social issues. While individuals express their own opinions in a society, in reality, some choose to speak out, whereas others do not (Matthes, Morrison, & Schemer, 2010). Thus, the question of why individuals are willing or hesitant to express their opinions is a very important one to mass communication and public opinion research (Matthes, Morrison, & Schemer, 2010). In the crisis communication realm, this question is also important because the essential role of crisis communication is to influence the public opinion process, coping with the organizational crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2011).

SOS theory assumes that the perception of the opinion climate surrounding an issue influences people’s willingness to express their own opinions (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993). For example, individuals who believe that they hold a majority opinion are more likely to express those opinions publicly, while people tend to keep silent and conceal their views in public if they believe their opinion is in the minority. People who hold the majority viewpoint speak up, while those who have the minority opinion keep silent in a spiral where the majority becomes increasingly louder. The formation of this public opinion process is illustrated by a “spiral”: over time, majority voices become loud and dominant, but minority voices disappear from public discourse (Kim, 2012).

What makes people keep silent, finding themselves holding a minority opinion? Our social nature also causes us to fear separation from our peers (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p. 41). As the causal mechanism, “fear of isolation” has been introduced (Noelle-Neumann, 1984; Scheufele & Moy, 2000; Kim, 2012). Noelle-Neumann (1984) called this “fear of isolation” (FOI) and described it as the engine that drives and accelerates the Spiral of Silence. Fear of isolation (FOI) also motivates individuals to constantly scan their environment with the purpose of gaining information and assessing the climate of opinion on controversial topics (Neuwirth, Frederick, & Mayo, 2007). Prior research has found that a fear of isolation leads to the Spiral of Silence (Kim, 2012; Neuwirth, Frederick, & Mayo, 2007; Price & Allen, 1990). Recently, some scholars have tested the theory with fear of isolation as a measured variable rather than an assumption (Neuwirth et al., 2007; Shoemaker et al., 2000; Kim, 2012). Notably, Kim (2012) suggested future research building on his study by examining the mediating role of fear of isolation between the perceived opinion congruence and willingness to speak out.

An individual’s perception of the public opinion on a given topic comes from directly through intrapersonal connections as well as indirectly through the mass media (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). While the Spiral of Silence theory was formulated in the early 1970s when many scholars believed the new medium of television caused strong effects (Noelle-Neumann, 1984), nowadays, digital media environment have provided multiple communication channels as well as two-way communication chances. Especially, social media such as Twitter and Facebook have become critical tools for individuals to communicate and receive news. According to the Pew Research Center (2013), 50 percent of audiences cite the Internet as a main news source, while consuming news via social media and mobile devices continues to grow in scope and popularity. Therefore, it is necessary to understand digital publics using social media in the context of crisis communication and public opinion process. Based on the literature reviewed, the study proposes the following additional hypotheses (see Figure 1):

Hypothesis 1(H1): Digital publics who perceive opinion incongruence of the organizational crisis will be positively associated with fear of isolation.

Hypothesis 2(H2): Digital publics who perceive who perceive fear of isolation will be negatively associated with one's willingness to speak out.

Digital Publics and Their Attribution of Crisis Responsibility toward an Organization

When a crisis occurs, crisis communication is essential to crisis management because effective communication strategies can not only reduce the crisis but also change to more positive reputation to the organization (Fearn-Banks, 2012). Crisis communication should also be grounded in efforts to implement a strategic communication between the organization and its publics to reduce the harm to both (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). Notably, communicating with key publics in a crisis is critical because they have a potential to shape evaluations of organizational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Ni & Kim, 2009). Key publics in a crisis not only respond to the crisis faster than other publics, but also influence inactive publics positively or negatively (Kim, Hung-Baesecke, Yang, & J.E. Grunig, 2013). That is, the organizations have attempted to strategically communicate with key publics for the purpose of minimizing damage to the image of the organization and reducing a negative reputation (Coombs, 2007).

In addition, when seeing media landscape, it is imperative for PR practitioners to understand digital publics who use Internet-based technologies in terms of communication with key publics. According to the Pew Research Center (2013), two thirds of Internet users (67%) in the United States population have accessed a social network site such as Facebook and Twitter. This trend is expected to grow as the using ratio of smart phones and tablets continue to increase (Holiday, 2013). Social media, especially, has grown as a source for news. 34% of young adults (18-30s) replied that they read the news or news headline on social networking sites (Caumont, 2013). Individuals who access news via social media are not only news consumers but also news transmitters at the same time. Social media is dominated by user created content, and individuals using social media are able to diffuse information easily. For example, in Facebook, they can share information by pressing a button, for example "like" and "sharing" and writing a "comment." Moreover, the use of digital media brings a variety of media options. In digital media environment, people access or upload individual ideas through smart phones and tablet PCs that have Internet access.

Not until we are perceived do we begin to think an event as a crisis (Coombs, 2012; Penrose, 2000). An event often becomes a crisis as how news media describe and treat it (Lerbinger, 2012). The public's perception has an effect on how much an organization takes responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 1995). In this vein, PR practitioners in a crisis situation have interested in news media for crisis management based on the belief that the public experience crisis via the news media (Coombs, 2012). SCCT adapting Weiner's (1986) attribution theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding and predicting how to maximize reputational protection through crisis communication by using the appropriate response strategies to help prevent the reputational threat and/or repair the reputation (Kim & Cameron, 2011; Coombs, 2012).

Although previous research have attention to key publics who influence organizational reputation negatively, little research show digital publics who perceive opinion a given issue differently against public opinion climate in the context of the public opinion process related to the organizational crisis. Social media is a great source of information and news, at the same time, whereas a person who has a minority opinion diffuses it in digital media environment (i.e.

misinformation and rumor). Thus, PR practitioners should understand the relationship between digital publics who have incongruent opinions and crisis outcomes such as attribution of crisis responsibility and organizational reputation. Therefore, this study posits one hypothesis and one research questions as follows:

Research Question 1(RQ1): How minority digital publics' opinion expression are associated with the attribution of crisis responsibility toward the organization?

Hypothesis 3(H3): Attribution of crisis responsibility toward an organization will be negatively associated with organizational reputation.

 Insert Figure1 about here

Communicative Action in Problem Solving in an Organizational Crisis

Communicative Action in Problem Solving (CAPS) is a new concept of communication behaviors of problem solvers (Kim, Grunig, & Ni, 2010). While prior social scientific theories view communicators as information consumers, CAPS proposes communicators as problem solvers (Kim & Krishna, 2014). In order to solve a given problem, individuals in a problem situation not only take and select information to solve a given problem, but also transmit information to others as a prominent communicative behavior. Moreover, individuals in a problem are engaged in intercommunication in problem solving by transmitting and acquiring information to solve a problem (Kim, Grunig, & Ni, 2010). Thus, CAPS is a model to describe an overall view of the communicative behaviors of individuals during a problematic situation.

When it comes to a research of communication behaviors, there has been a limitation to understand communicative behaviors of individuals. For example, prior research has long relied on respondents' behavioral intentions as a close predictor of actual behavior (Lee & Sundar, 2013; Hu & Sunder, 2010) based the argumentation of theory of reasoned action (TRA) that behavioral intentions are the best and most proximal psychological predictor of actual behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Intention to information seeking was suggested (Wei et al., 2008). By using the predictors, it is hard to to predict information transmission and information selection in the context of social media. When considering the diffusion mechanism in online, transmission and selection behaviors would be critical to predict actual behavior as well as to understand communicative actions of people in a crisis situation. For this reason, the CAPS model is a useful framework to predict communicative action of people using social media.

In CAPS, there are three domains of communicative action such as information acquisition, selection, and transmission, classifying six communication variables with proactiveness and reactiveness in problem solving. The proactive dimension is active that the problem solver initiates communication behaviors, whereas the reactive dimension as passive communication behaviors refers to the problem solver waits for others to start acts (Kim et al., 2010). First, information selection involves information forefending (active) and information permitting (passive). Second, information transmission entails information forwarding (active), information sharing (passive). Third, information acquisition consists of information seeking (active) and information attending (Kim et al., 2012; Kim & Grunig, 2011). Three factors of information selection, transmitting, and acquisition have six sub variables as follows.

Information acquisition: Information seeking and information attending: Information acquisition states the effort of information-collecting for problem solving (Kim, 2006). In general, people become active when they exert efforts for information acquisition. Information

seeking is defined as “the planned scanning of the environment for messages about a specified topic” (Grunig, 1997, p. 9), whereas information attending refers to unplanned discovery of messages (Grunig, 1997, 2003, 2005).

Information selection: Information forefending and information permitting: Information selection refers to the stage which pursues available and applicable information in problem solving (Kim, 2006). Information forefending indicates that individuals choose relevant and useful information with subjective judgment for solving a problem (Kim et al., 2012; Kim & Grunig, 2011). On the other hand, information permitting describes the extent to which individuals generally accept any information related to the situation (Kim et al., 2012; Kim & Grunig, 2011).

Information transmission: Information forwarding and information sharing: While information forwarding indicates a problem solver’s purposeful offering of information to others, information sharing refers to reactive sharing of information (Kim et al., 2012; Kim & Grunig, 2011). Thus, the distinction between these two variables relies on communicator’s efforts whether or not communicator tries to proactively share own expertise and knowledge with others.

In the process of public opinion related to a crisis situation, individuals using social media have two opinions regarding the given crisis issue. In the beginning of a crisis, they have their own opinion about the issue; however, as passing time, he or she continually scan or monitor the climate of opinion. Thus, individuals have two different perceptions about the attribution of crisis responsibility on the organizational crisis. After attributing the crisis responsibility, digital publics who have incongruent opinion show communicative action regarding the crisis issue to solve the problem. In this study, the problem is crisis responsibility of the government. People concern about who have a responsibility on the given crisis. In this vein, communicative action is very important to understand how minority publics communicate. This study therefore proposes research questions as follows: (see Figure 2):

Hypothesis 4(H4): Perception of personal opinion about the organizational crisis will be positively associated with the attribution of crisis responsibility.

Research Question 2(RQ2): How individuals who have incongruent opinion about the organizational crisis associated with the attribution of crisis responsibility.

Research Question 3(RQ3): How individuals who attribute crisis responsibility to the organization are related variables of information acquisition (i.e. information seeking and information attending).

Research Question 4(RQ4): How individuals who attribute crisis responsibility to the organization are related variables of information selection (i.e. information forefending and information permitting).

Research Question 5(RQ5): How individuals who attribute crisis responsibility to the organization are related variables of information acquisition (i.e. information forwarding and information sharing).

 Insert Figure 2 about here

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were 347 people living in South Korea. They were recruited

from the largest Asia Panel Network firm (macromillEmbrain: Embrain) with a diverse subject pool, which maintains more than 1.8 million registered panel members (embrain.com, 2014) during October, 2014. Participants were individuals who use social media in that this study is of digital publics. Thus, digital publics are defined as a person using social media. The ages ranged from 20 to 69 years old, with the average age of 41.2. Females were 48.4% (n = 168) of the sample, while males were 51.6% (n = 179). Regarding education level, 15.9% of respondents (n = 55) had a high school degree or less, 10.4% (n = 36) had a two-year associate degree or less than associate level, 65.2% (n = 216) had a bachelor's degree or less than four year university level, and 10.7% (n = 37) had a post-graduate degree or some graduate education.

Measures

This study is based on the Issue of Sewol ferry disaster in South Korea. On April 16, 2014, the overloaded ferry, Sewol, carrying 476 passengers and crew, capsized off South Korea's southwestern coast. Nine victims remain missing after the ferry sank, killing at least 295 people, which include dozens of high school students on a field trip (Kwon & Park, 2014). The tragic disaster, one of the worst maritime accidents in South Korea, has dealt a serious blow to the administration of President Park Geun-hye over the botched initial response, lack of safety measures, and cozy link between authorities and the ship's operator. (May18, 2014 Sunday, Yonhap). Critics have said the government should have had a better disaster-response system in place and more closely regulated the shipping industry to prevent such accidents.

After briefly introducing the crisis event through an official statement, participants were then instructed to answer multiple questions. In this study, all items used a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from not at all (=1) to very much (=5). The perception of the public opinion climate in the media (e.g., how do you think about the general attitude of the media toward president Park and the government regarding the *Sewol* ferry crisis?) and the participants' personal opinions (what is your attitude toward President Park and the government regarding the *Sewol* ferry crisis?) were measured on a 5-point bipolar Likert scale, 5 representing strongly favorable and 1 representing strongly unfavorable. The perception of congruent opinion was calculated by difference between measures of public opinion climate and personal opinion. The measure was reversed coded to make congruent opinion, so that higher scores on the measure indicated perceptions of greater opinion congruence between participants' opinions and the public opinion they perceived through the media. Fear of isolation was measured with three items (Lee et al., 2014). In regard to CAPS variables, respondents rated information forefending, information permitting, information forwarding, information sharing, information seeking, and information attending with each three questions. In regard to crisis outcomes, attribution of crisis responsibility on the organization was measured with two items and an organizational reputation was measured with four statements by asking how people think about the government. Detailed descriptions of items and reliability are shown in Table 1.

Analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis using AMOS program was conducted to examine H1 to H9. To evaluate the structural equation model proposed, the Hu and Bentler (1999) joint criteria was used. According to Hu and Bentler, a model is considered tenable when it achieves a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) $\geq .96$ and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) $\leq .10$, or root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) $\leq .06$ and SRMR $\leq .10$

When models usually achieved a reasonable model-fit, it was interpreted that their paths to evaluate the hypotheses and research questions.

 Insert Table 1 about here

Results

This study, first, provides results regarding Spiral of Silence (SOS) theory (H1 and H2) and its' relationship with crisis outcomes (attribution of crisis responsibility and an organizational reputation) (RQ1 and H3). Next, it will be suggested that how digital publics' perception about the organizational crisis is associated with attribution of crisis responsibility (RQ2 and H4) and their communicative behaviors toward the organization (RQ3 to RQ5).
SOS theory and its' relationship with crisis outcomes in a crisis: H1 to H3 and RQ1

In regard to spiral of silence theory and its' relationship with crisis outcomes, the conceptual model test using Structural Equational Modeling (SEM) shows $\chi^2_{df} (90) = 164.337$, CFI = .977, RMSEA = .056 (see Figure 3). As structural models reached good data-model fit, this study proceeded to interpret the hypotheses. This study posted two hypotheses of SOS in the organizational crisis (H1 and H2) and postulated three bridging a research question of crisis outcomes and one hypothesis between the attribution of crisis responsibility and organizational reputation (RQ1 and H3). Finding for the structural testing models are summarized in Figure 3.

H1 expected a positive association between individuals' perception of incongruent opinion and fear of isolation in the organizational crisis. The path between the two variables was positive and significant ($\beta = .16, p < .01$), which supported the hypothesis. H2 postulated a negative link between fear of isolation and individuals' opinion expression about the issue. The path was statistically significant ($\beta = .17, p < .01$) and the hypothesis was supported. The study also examined how SOS theory is associated with crisis outcomes. As a research question, this study tested the relationship between opinion express and attribution of crisis responsibility. The path shows positive and significant ($\beta = .24, p < .001$), which indicates that the more individuals using social media speak out the crisis issue, the more they are likely to attribute crisis responsibility to the organization. H3 posted a negative path from the attribution of crisis responsibility to organizational reputation. The path is positively significant ($\beta = -.73, p < .001$); the prediction was supported. Therefore, the results state that SOS theory in the organizational crisis explains that when individuals using social media have incongruent opinion against general public opinion, they are less likely to express their opinions, and then, they attribute crisis responsibility on the organization and it leads to negative organizational reputation.

 Insert Figure 3 about here

Digital Publics' Perception and Communicative Behaviors about the Organizational Crisis: H4 and RQ2 to RQ5

SEM was conducted to examine how two perceptions (perception of incongruent opinion and perception of personal opinion) of the organizational crisis predict the attribution of crisis responsibility and this study, furthermore, explored that how the attribution of crisis responsibility of digital publics brings out their communicative action in the organizational crisis (i.e. information acquisition, information selection, information, and transmission). Through this

mode testing, it is expected to understand perception of digital publics and their communicative action regarding the organizational crisis.

As the structural models reached good data-model fit (see Figure 4): model fit of the first time shows that $\chi^2_{df} (90) = 164.337$, CFI = .980, RMSEA = .049, this study proceeded to interpret the hypothesis and research questions. H4 expected a positive association between perception of personal opinion and their attribution of crisis responsibility to the organizational. The path between the two variables was positive and significant ($\beta = .40, p < .001$), which supported the hypothesis. On the contrary, RQ2 indicates negative and significant relationship between perception of incongruent opinion and the attribution of crisis responsibility ($\beta = -.11, p < .05$). Thus, the public opinion climate strongly affects individuals' perception toward the organization, changing the attribution of crisis responsibility to the organization. In research question 3 to 5, this study aims to discover the communicative action of digital publics in the organizational crisis. As shown in Figure 4, the results indicate significantly positive path between the attribution of crisis responsibility and communicative behaviors. The path of research question 3 is significant and positive (H3a: $\beta = .77, p < .001$; H3b: $\beta = .79, p < .001$). The path of research question 4 is also statistically positive (H4a: $\beta = .64, p < .001$; H4b: $\beta = .83, p < .001$). Finally, the path of research question 5 shows positive and significant (H5a: $\beta = .94, p < .001$; H4b: $\beta = .90, p < .001$). Hence, digital publics who attribute crisis responsibility to the organization are likely to not only seek and select information, but also to transmit information regarding the organizational crisis.

 Insert Figure 4 about here

Discussion and Conclusion

This study provides an understanding of minority digital publics who have incongruent opinions regarding the climate of opinion and their communicative behaviors in organizational crisis communication by using the spiral of silence (SOS) theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and communicative action in problem solving (CAPS) (Kim, Grunig, & Ni, 2010). Major findings can be summarized as follows. First, this study supports the predictions of the spiral of silence theory among digital publics. Second, digital publics who discuss or give their own views about a crisis issue are more likely to attribute crisis responsibility to the government, and, then, have a negative impact on organizational reputation. Third, the more individuals attribute crisis responsibility to the government, the more they take, select, and transmit information about a given organizational crisis.

One important contribution of this study is testing the spiral of silence theory in crisis communication based on digital publics (this article defines individuals who use social media as "digital publics") in the context of a government crisis. In public relations, an organization should know which people will express themselves or be hesitant to speak their opinions on the issues, in order to maintain proper relations with its publics (Lee et al., 2014). A central assumption of SOS theory is that, if people perceive that their own opinions are congruent with dominant public opinion (the majority), they are more willing to express them. On the contrary, if they perceive that their opinions are incongruent with others' opinions (the minority), they are unwilling to speak out because they fear isolation from other people. This study's results provide further support for this claim in terms of digital publics facing government crises. The more people fear being isolated if they perceive their opinion as incongruent with others, the less they

express their opinions on the given crisis issue. This finding suggests that the fear of isolation makes digital publics less willing to express their opinions regarding government crisis issues.

As shown in Figure 3, connecting SOS theory to crisis communication variables (the attribution of crisis responsibility and organizational reputation) predicts that people attribute crisis responsibility to the government and report negative opinions about the government. This connecting model suggests the importance of public discussion and exposes the implications of organizational crisis management.

After discussing or expressing their own opinions with other people, digital publics are more likely to attribute crisis responsibility to the government. The crisis issue discussed herein, the Sewol Ferry disaster in South Korea, was very controversial in terms of ascribing responsibility for the crisis. It was one of the worst maritime accidents in South Korean history, killing almost 300 people. Public discussion has motivated people to rethink the issue and express their opinions. Even though individuals may perceive an incongruent opinion and hesitate to express it, they still ascribed responsibility for the crisis to the government after discussing the issue with others. That is, the attribution of crisis responsibility after public discussion led to the sullyng of the government's reputation.

In addition, the findings of this study suggest that minority opinions can evolve to include the attribution of crisis responsibility to the government, leading to a negative effect on the government's reputation. In a digital media environment, individuals can express their own opinions via Internet-based technologies. For organizational crisis management, it is necessary for PR practitioners to monitor online public opinion because issues emerging online can be more unpredictable than those offline (Coombs, 2008). If digital publics become key publics in a crisis, they can often respond to the crisis faster than non-digital publics and influence inactive publics (Ni & Kim, 2009). Online opinions formed by individuals can negatively influence the formation of offline publics' opinions (i.e., rumors, negative words of mouth). In regard to this phenomenon, Kim and Lee (2006) introduced two models, "agenda-rippling" and "reverse agenda-setting," based on the advent of the active public via the interactive features of the Internet. Internet-mediated "agenda-rippling" is an anonymous person's opinion (originator) that spreads to the important agenda on the Internet on the grounds of the internet-mediated public agenda. It can affect traditional media and thus can be considered reversed agenda setting. Thus, a government facing a crisis issue should listen to the minority voices of digital publics in the initial stages of a crisis.

Notably, individuals attribute the responsibility for a crisis to organizations differently based on their perceptions of differences. As shown in Figure 4, digital publics who have incongruent opinions are less likely to attribute the crisis responsibility to the government, while digital publics that do not compare others' opinions are more likely to attribute the crisis responsibility to the government. Hence, people are more or less willing to attribute crisis responsibility to an organization depending on their perceptions of the public opinion climate.

Another important contribution is to apply the CAPS approach to organizational crisis communication. Despite the attention paid to using social media in public relations, research to provide evidence-based guidelines is still needed to integrate social media into crisis management practices (Jin et al., 2014). Responding to this need, this study helps PR practitioners predict the communicative actions of digital publics during an organizational crisis by using the three domains of communicative action and its six subvariables. The CAPS model illustrates how one person who is engaged in problem solving can also be engaged in information seeking, selecting, and forwarding data (Kim, et al., 2010). As shown in Figure 4,

the findings of this study state that digital publics who attribute crisis responsibility to the government are more likely to take in, seek out, and transmit information regarding the crisis issue. Therefore, digital publics facing an organizational crisis become communicators to solve the crisis situation. It is necessary for the organization to identify their communication behaviors to understand and predict the formation of public opinion related to the crisis.

The six CAPS indicators provide clues to predict their communicative actions and implications in terms of crisis management. Particularly, information transmission is the strongest predictor among three dimensions: on two levels of information transmission, information forwarding as a proactive dimension ($\beta = .94, p < .001$) and information sharing as a reactive dimension ($\beta = .90, p < .001$). Talking about a crisis problem related to the crisis responsibility of the organization increases information transmission and collective behavior (Kim, et al., 2010). In the mechanism of digital media, crisis information can be spread quickly and precipitate collective behaviors both online and offline. In particular, social media have the potential to enable individuals to band together and share information, providing emotional supporting during crises (Choi & Lin, 2009; Stephens & Malone, 2009). Furthermore, collective action through online participation during crises often leads to offline participation (Dutta-Bergman, 2006) and reverse agenda setting (Kim & Lee, 2006). Consequently, organizations should carefully take into account the high information score of transmission before it can evolve into a more serious crisis influencing offline public opinion.

The findings of this study also suggest that PR practitioners of the organization need to more engage in the formation of public opinion by communicating with key publics in the given crisis. In the domain of information selection, the model states that information permitting ($\beta = .83, p < .001$) is higher than information forefending relatively ($\beta = .64, p < .001$). Information forefending refers to fend off certain information by evaluating its value, whether information permitting means the behavior of taking information pertaining to a problem (Kim, et al., 2010). Accordingly, digital publics in this study are assumed that they tend to permit any information related to the given crisis issue: they are also less likely to discriminate information. The organization should provide crisis information with them to prevent rumors or negative information for the organization when individuals accept information of the crisis. If ill-guided information about the organization continually spread out during the crisis, crisis management of the organization would be failed eventually. In this regard, PR practitioners need to more actively engage in the given situation by communicating and giving information.

In spite of the important findings and implications, there are some limitations that should be addressed for future research. First, the data used for this study came from a nonprobability sample based on online research. Regardless of the quality of the sample, this could limit generalizability of the findings. Second, this study could not clearly explain overall change of public opinion regarding the given crisis issue because this was based on not design longitudinal design but cross-sectional design. In order to understand digital publics' perception and opinion climate, longitudinal study should be considered in the future. Using panel data about the same issue will be helpful to understand digital publics and predict their communicative changes in the organizational crisis. Third, this study is a case of the government crisis, so that this result could not be generalized to all organizations. Future research, thus, needs to deal with various crisis situations and organizations. Despite these limitations, the study serves as one of the first to explore the application of the spiral of silence theory and the communicative action in problem solving (CAPS) to organization crisis communication, so as to understand digital publics and their communicative behaviors.

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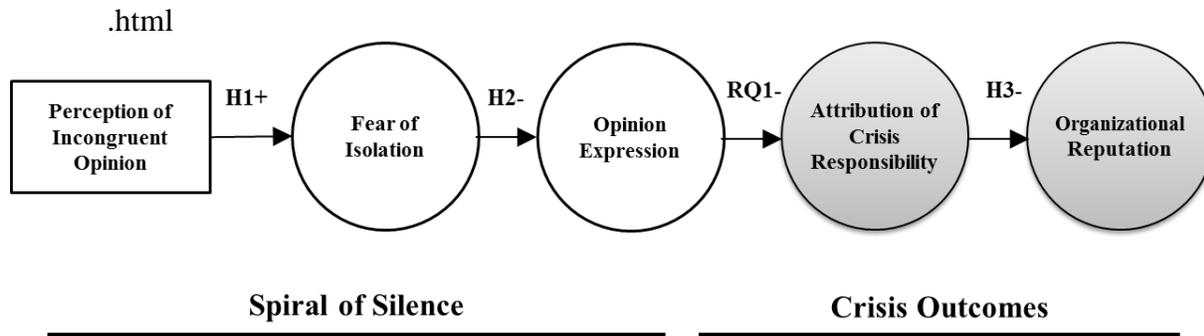


Figure 1. The relationship between SOS and crisis outcomes in an organizational crisis

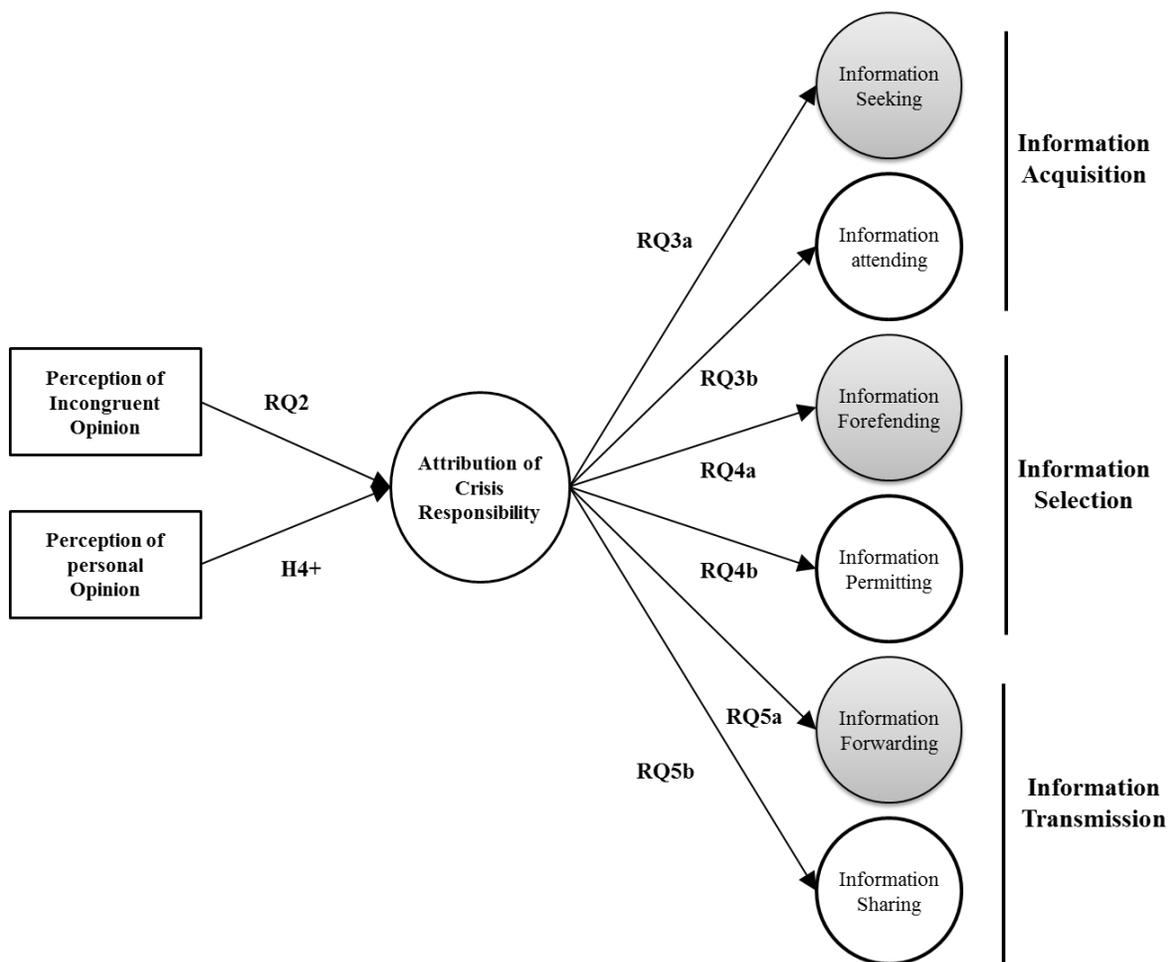


Figure 2. Digital publics' perception and communicative behaviors about the organizational crisis

Table 1. Measurement Model Parameter Estimates ($N = 347$) ^aReversed item

<i>Latent variable</i>	<i>Measurement item</i>	<i>Parameter Estimate</i>	<i>R²</i>
CAPS variables			
<i>Information seeking</i> ($\alpha = .91$)	I regularly check to see if there is any new information about this problem on the Internet.	.92	.83
	I actively search for information on this topic.	.91	.85
<i>Information attending</i> ($\alpha = .92$)	If I saw something on the news about this problem in surfing Internet, I would click and read it.	.90	.82
	I attend to news when they cover this problem.	.94	.88
<i>Information forefending</i> ($\alpha = .84$)	I have studied this problem enough to judge immediately the value of information.	.84	.70
	I have a selection of trusted sources that I check for updates on this problem.	.85	.73
<i>Information permitting</i> ($\alpha = .91$)	I want to know about this topic from multiple sources.	.90	.82
	I am interested in all views on this problem.	.93	.86
<i>Information forwarding</i> ($\alpha = .85$)	I love to start a conversation on this problem with others.	.91	.84
	I talk about my opinions about this problem with my friends and coworkers.	.81	.66
<i>Information sharing</i> ($\alpha = .91$)	I would be willing to talk to someone about this problem if they asked me.	.93	.87
	I participate casual conversations about this problem.	.77	.60
Crisis outcomes			
<i>Attribution of crisis responsibility</i> ($\alpha = .70$)	The blame for the crisis lies with the government.	.79	.62
	The blame for the crisis lies in the circumstance, not the government. ^a	.69	.81
<i>Organizational Reputation</i> ($\alpha = .94$)	I have a good feeling about the government.	.84	.71
	Government stands behind services.	.87	.76
	Government has a clear vision for the future.	.93	.86
	Government has been managed well.	.90	.81
The spiral of silence			
<i>Fear of isolation</i> ($\alpha = .83$)	I worry about being isolated if people disagree with me.	.72	.51
	I avoid telling other people what I think when there's a risk they knew my opinion.	.87	.75
	I'm concerned that people might act differently toward me somehow if they disagree with me.	.78	.61
<i>Opinion Expression</i> ($\alpha = .82$)	Discuss with these people your opinions about the issue.	.71	.50
	Give your own view about the issue.	.98	.95
<i>Perception of in Congruent Opinion</i>	Single measurement was used by calculating from general opinion and respondents' own position on the issue (favorite vs. unfavorable).	-	-

NOTE. ^aReversed item, $p < .001$

**Context, Context, Context:
Priming Theory and Attitudes Towards Corporations in Social Media**

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Abstract

Social media is one of the most contextually based media ever created, as it connects people with both the creation and reception of the media content. As such, the effects expected by priming theory would be expected to be especially strong. Using an online experiment, this study assessed the effects of linguistic tone and message relatedness present in the context of social media on publics' attitudes towards organizations. It was expected that positive and negative tone would have positive and negative effects, respectively, and that the relatedness of the contextual prime would enhance those effects. About 100 participants in the study were randomly assigned to an experimental group to see a prime in the format of the popular social media site, Twitter. An analysis of the results showed that only negative primes had a significant effect on publics' attitudes towards organizations, possibly reflecting an expectancy violation effect. As a result, public relations professionals are encouraged to engage in broader environmental monitoring to ensure their messages will be most effective and not released during a time in which negative primes may seriously impact their messages.

If there has been one new technology that has enamored the public relations field of late, it has been social media. From scholarly research to self-declared “gurus,” there are almost as many prevailing theories of the best way to harness this new technology. James Grunig and Todd Hunt’s four models of public relations (1984), called for a shift in the profession towards their two-way symmetrical model. Social media, ranging from Twitter to Facebook to blogs and beyond, have enabled these symmetrical conversations to take place on an unprecedented scale.

The embrace of social media has not been without its issues, to be sure. From the offensive, such as Kenneth Cole’s tweet from September 2013 that made light of the conflict in Syria (O’Toole, 2013), to the poorly timed, such as the NRA’s “Good morning, shooters” tweet in the aftermath of the theatre shooting in Aurora, Colorado (Fitzpatrick, 2012), organizations on Twitter still have a long journey in front of them of learning how to use social media effectively.

One matter currently in hot debate is the applicability of traditional media effects models, such as framing, agenda setting, and priming (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), in the world of social media. Some evidence exists to suggest that priming theory may still be a powerful tool in the web era (Mandel & Johnson, 2002), but more work is still needed. It is difficult to determine how social media context (contextual primes) affects the response of publics to corporate postings on social media. Many public relations departments are on various social media outlets having these symmetrical conversations, but are many times paying little attention to the context in which they are taking part in these conversations.

In this vein, this research will attempt to take an experimental look at contextual primes and how they can affect individual’s attitudes towards corporations in social media. There is a need for information regarding how the context in which a social media post is viewed affects the perception of that post. Is priming at work in social media today, and if it is, how? Let’s look at what the literature has to say.

Literature Review

Social media is drastically transforming the balance of power in the realm of corporate brand management. Prior to these new media, the power was primarily concentrated in the hands of the organization that held the brand and the few news media outlets accessible to any given consumer. Today, however, public relations professionals find themselves in a place where “the ‘nobodies’ of the past are now the new ‘somebodies’” (Booth & Matic, 2011). Now that the consumer has a louder, direct voice, communicators feel like the control of their brand is out of their hands more than ever. The corporation is no longer an elevated entity, rather, the postings of a company receive the same emphasis in a user’s social media feed as postings from their friends and family. With the exception of advertising in social media, the distinction between the “institutional and personal arenas” (Aula & Laaksonen, 2010) is incredibly low.

Even in the early days of the web, studies found that an organization’s online behavior and audience perceptions of that behavior was far more important than the organization’s philanthropic efforts, donations to charity, impressive websites, or corporate social responsibility reports (Neef, 2001, as cited in Jones, Temperley & Lima, 2009). Barnes (2008) further confirmed this idea with research that found that 74% of consumers made purchase decisions based at least in part on the experiences of others that were shared online. This requires a shift in communication from a monologic model to a dialogic model—we’re more responsible than ever for conversation management, not just sending out news releases and talking to shareholders (Lewis, 2001).

With an estimated 70-80% of American online adults engaging with social media on at

least a monthly basis (Duggan & Smith, 2013; Booth & Matic, 2011), social media isn't going anywhere any time soon, but presents great risk to the attitudes individuals hold towards our organizations. Thus, we must consider how the context of social media is affecting the attitudes of our publics towards our organization. In the field of marketing, attitudes towards advertisements or brands are referred to as Aad or Abr, respectively. These are two of the most vital measurements for a marketer. As seen in Hallahan (1999), these measurements can be co-opted somewhat for research in public relations, with Aad being revised as a construct of Am, or attitude towards the message. An important study relating priming, framing, and corporate social responsibility's affects on attitude (Wang, 2007) will be discussed in detail later.

The increased contextualization of social media (Marwick & boyd, 2010) over other computer-mediated communication, such as email (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) can create risk, as already mentioned, but it can also create potential benefits. Social media is creating more connections than ever between the internet and the physical world (Qi, Aggarwal, Tian, Ji & Huang, 2012; Kennedy, Naaman, Ahern, Nair & Rattenbury, 2007). If we can better grasp how the context of social media affects message reception and thus attitudes towards organizations, we should be able to mediate the potential risk and actually use social media to increase positive attitudes.

One of the primary theories used to study the effects of media context is priming, a theory communications researchers have borrowed from the psychological field (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Priming holds that the human brain likes to take shortcuts, in essence. If it can use a recently employed structure to interpret a new piece of information, it will do so (Valenzuela, 2009). This effect has been shown to be especially strong when the recently employed structure came from a respected figure, such as government official or news reporter (Veenstra, Vraga, Edgerly & Kim, 2010). Most important, however, is the fact that this priming effect often takes place completely unconsciously. Many times people are completely unaware that they are interpreting information differently as a result of this priming (Herr, 1989).

There is not an extensive amount of literature directly studying priming as it relates to either public relations or digital media, but there is some that can provide helpful guidance in analyzing these effects. From a public relations perspective, we can look to Wang (2007) for a premier example of this research. Participants were variously exposed to messages that contained priming, framing, priming and framing, or none of the above. The study found that those who were exposed to priming messages used those messages in analyzing a later piece of information about an organization. (In this circumstance, an article about corporate social responsibility primed participants to have a more favorable attitude towards Blockbuster's "no more late fees" program.) Wang argues that public relations practitioners are primarily "prime and frame strategists," emphasizing the importance of understanding these effects.

Research on internet messaging and priming has also been performed. Mandel & Johnson (2002) performed a study in which participants were primed for either price or another product factor, then given an option of product choices, one of which was stronger in the area of the prime than the other. Their research found that even a subtle prime like a page background had a significant effect on the participant's choice. Those primed with a price-related background were more likely to choose a cheap sofa than a comfortable sofa, while those primed with a comfort-related background were more likely to choose the comfortable sofa. However, they do suspect that their use of fake brands may have increased the priming effect, as the participants had no other context on which to base their decisions.

While there may be limited literature when it comes to public relations and priming, there

is an immense amount of literature related to advertising and priming. This is a particularly prominent issue for marketers, primarily concerned with getting the most “bang for their buck,” to borrow the colloquialism. A substantial amount of research has been put into how the tone of a television program affects the reception of the advertisements contained within that program. Initially, this research seemed to indicate that advertising in happy television programs was consistently more effective than advertising in sad television programs (Goldberg & Gorn, 1987). It was believed that the emotion of the television program primed these participants to respond to the advertisements differently.

Later research, however, showed that it might have been a deeper effect doing the priming. Rather than simply looking at emotion, these later studies looked at the participant’s liking of the program. This research showed that equally important with the tone of the program was the viewer’s liking of the program (Murry & Dacin, 1996). This reflects Uses & Gratifications theory. People may watch programs with a negative tone, but if they do so willingly because they like the program, the negative tone will not have a negative effect on the advertising (Coulter, 1998).

There were other contextual priming factors that marketing researchers also had an effect on the reception of the ad. Viewers found advertisements more effective when they matched the tone of the program—they did not, for instance, want to see a comedic ad in the middle of their suspenseful drama (Lajos, Ordabayeva & Chattopadhyay, 2007). There is disagreement over whether high or low levels of involvement and knowledge affect the priming effects of programming. Yi (1993) found that those with too much knowledge or too little knowledge about the content of an advertisement demonstrated decreased levels of contextual priming (specifically with print advertisements). Murry, Lastovicka & Singh (1992), however, found that those with high involvement in the product category mentioned in a particular ad were affected more strongly by contextual priming. De Pelsmacker, Geuens & Anckaert (2002) similarly found that those with high involvement were affected more strongly by contextual priming, but only when the ad was non-congruent with the prime. (For instance, a mother of a newborn would have a strong negative reaction to a funny diaper ad placed in the middle of a sad soap opera.) Similarly, they also found that those with low involvement were strongly affected by contextual priming, but in this case only when the ad was congruent with the prime.

From this research, we can see that there is an ongoing debate over whether emotional primes have an influence on consumer attitudes towards brands and ads, but that there is a leaning towards support for this idea.

We can also see from research that the tone of social media postings is a fair assessment of actual opinions and emotions (O’Connor, Balasubramanian, Routledge & Smith, 2010). Thus, combining this knowledge with what we know from other research, it does seem that the tone of the context surrounding corporate social media postings does have the potential to prime for a positive or negative reception of those messages, and therefore have a positive or negative impact on attitudes towards organizations.

From those findings, the following research question and hypotheses are proposed:

RQ: How will the priming effect change an individual’s reception of an organization’s social media posting, and thus their attitude towards the organization?

H1: When an individual experiences a social media contextual prime that is positive in tone, they will have more positive attitudes towards corporations whose postings may be in their social media feed.

H2: When an individual experiences a social media contextual prime that is negative in

tone, they will have more negative attitudes towards corporations whose postings may be in their social media feed.

H3: When an individual experiences a prime that is positive in tone towards a corporation, and then encounters a post from that organization, their perception of the organization's posting will be affected positively, but more so than if the prime was unrelated.

H4: When an individual experiences a prime that is either negative in tone towards a corporation, and then encounters a post from that organization, their perception of the organization's posting will be affected negatively, but more so than if the prime was unrelated.

Method

Design and Procedure

To test this study's hypotheses and research questions, an online experiment was conducted using a 2x2 between-subjects factorial design. The independent variables tested in this design were positive and negative tone on one axis, and related and unrelated posts on the other axis. Participants were recruited using a convenience snowball sampling technique.

For the purposes of this study, using a corporation that a wide variety of people would have experience with was important. As such, the technology company Google was purposively chosen as the focus of this study. Many people have an interaction with the company's products, ranging from email to search, on a daily basis. Participants were asked if they had past experience with any Google products, to which 100% of them responded positively.

All participants were given a pre-test to assess their current attitudes towards Google as a corporation, using the measures from Hallahan (1999) that are described in the measures section below, as well as demographic questions about social media usage, age, gender, and education level. Participants were then automatically assigned to an experimental group by the online experiment software.

The five groups participants could be exposed to were:

1. n_1 - positively-toned related posts,
2. n_2 - negatively-toned related posts,
3. n_3 - positively-toned unrelated posts,
4. n_4 - negatively-toned unrelated posts,
5. n_c - and the control group.

Participants were told at the beginning of the study that they were participating in a study about the impact of social media on attitudes towards corporations. This information was provided as part of the IRB-approved informed consent form. A copy of this form, the questionnaire, and the stimulus can be seen in the appendix.

Stimuli

On the stimuli page, participants were first shown a set of social media postings in an environment designed to look like the popular social networking site, Twitter. Each set contained 10 tweets that were crafted for tone using the O'Connor et al. (2010) linguistic tone system, as well as one additional tweet that was randomly selected from the last week of tweets posted on Google's @Google Twitter account. All of the tweets within a set were designed to be either positive or negative in tone. For experimental conditions including relatedness as a variable, four of the tweets in the set were crafted with messages about either the technology or search industries, and six were unrelated but consistent in tone. These tweets were pre-tested to demonstrate that members of the sample population found these tweets to match the prescribed

tone. Two posts were found to not match the desired tone, and were discarded. To adjust the experimental condition to control for as many variables as possible, all conditions were adjusted down to 9 posts and the Google Twitter account.

After exposure to the stimuli, a post-test was given that is described in the methods section below. This used the same attitude measures as the pre-test, to allow for easy comparison between the pre- and post-test conditions.

Measures

This study had just one dependent variable, attitudes towards corporations, or, in this particular case, Google. Existing measures were adopted from Hallahan (1999) to measure this variable. This consisted of two bivariate semantic-differential scales using a seven-point scale. Participants were asked how well they felt each word described Google. The first measure consisted of six polar pairs: good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, high quality/low quality, like it/don't like it, desirable/not desirable, and committed/uncommitted. Half of the items were reversed in polarity to ensure accuracy, and the order of the items was randomized. The second measure looked at attitudes about corporate believability, and consisted of five polar pairs: informative/not informative, trustworthy/untrustworthy, accurate/inaccurate, convincing/unconvincing, and believable/not believable. Two of these items were reversed in polarity, and all items were randomized in order.

Two covariates were also used: usage of Google products and familiarity with Google as a company. Usage of Google products was presented as a simple yes/no measure, while familiarity was measured using a seven-point Likert scale as described in Wang (2007). These covariates will assist with data analysis.

Data Analysis

This study used a blended design for data analysis. Paired-sample t-tests were used to check for significant differences between the pre- and post-tests within single IV groups. A mixed two-way ANOVA was also used to simultaneously check for within-subject and between-subject variances between the experimental groups. This allowed for the exploration of whether more than one of the IVs had an impact on the results simultaneously.

Results

Demographics

Data collection resulted in a study population of $n=46$ males and $n=52$ females for a total of 98 valid participants. (107 total responses were collected, but 4 were discarded due to incomplete data, and 5 were discarded for being outliers as assessed by inspection of a boxplot for values greater than 1.5 box-lengths from the edge of the box.)

The population was found to be normally distributed for the three demographic variables collected, gender ($SD=.502$), age ($SD=1.02$), and education level ($SD=1.06$). Age distribution was: 18-24, $n=49$; 25-34, $n=25$; 35-54, $n=22$; 55-64, $n=6$; 65+, $n=1$. Education distribution was: high school or equivalent, $n=10$; 2-year college degree, $n=3$; some college, $n=45$; 4-year college degree, $n=38$; master's degree, $n=5$; PhD, $n=1$; professional degree, $n=1$.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the five experimental groups (four treatment groups and one control group). The valid population of each group was $n_1=20$, $n_2=18$, $n_3=21$, $n_4=19$ and $n_c=20$.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1. This hypothesis was analyzed using a paired-samples t-test, as it was analyzing just one level of one IV between a pre- and post-test. Pre-test scores showed attitude to be $M=5.95$, $SD=.802$. There was a slight uptick in participants' attitudes towards Google in the post-test, but this miniscule difference ($M=5.97$, $SD=.914$; a difference of $M=.022$) was not enough to show any significance. (These results are displayed in Table 1 below.) The null hypothesis fails to be rejected, indicating that a positive contextual prime does not have a significant positive impact on the attitudes of target corporations, in this case Google.

Table 1
Differences between Pre- and Post-test for Positive/Negative Measures

	Pre-test		Post-test		Difference		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Diff.	<i>SD</i>	Sig.
Positive	5.95	.802	5.97	.914	.022	.309	.648
Negative	6.15	.767	5.93	.771	-.216	.534	.013
Control	5.99	.706	6.10	.753	.115	.279	.089

Hypothesis 2. As above, this hypothesis was tested using a paired-samples t-test. The pre-test of these participants showed that attitude towards Google was $M=6.15$, $SD=.767$. Post-testing indicated a drop to $M=5.93$, $SD=.771$, a difference in $M=-.216$. This difference was shown to be significant at the $p<.05$ level. (Results are also available in Table 1 above.) Participants exposed to a negative social media prime, whether related or unrelated to Google, showed a significant decline in their attitudes towards the organization.

Hypotheses 3 & 4. A mixed ANOVA was used to assess these hypotheses with two IVs and both within- and between-subjects effects proposed. A summary of these findings can be found in Table 2 below. The ANOVA reflected the results of the above two hypotheses, demonstrating that positive primes have no effect and negative effects have a slight significant effect. However, incorporating the relatedness of the tweets did not have a significant impact on the within-subjects attitude scores, whether considered alone ($p=.576$) or together with tone ($p=.984$) in the model. Support was also not found for the between-subjects ($p=.413$) effects proposed. Thus, the null hypotheses fail to be rejected, indicating that relatedness of the prime does not have a significant impact on attitude in response to primes.

Table 2. Differences between the pre- and post-tests by tone and relation

	Pre-test						Post-test						DiffRel
	Related		Unrelated		Control		Related		Unrelated		Control		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Pos	5.98	.699	5.91	.905			5.98	.801	5.96	1.03			-.004
Neg	6.03	.860	6.25	.672			5.79	.818	6.06	.718			-.244
Con					5.98	.687					6.05	.759	.070

Discussion

The results of this research demonstrate that the priming effect of contextual tone is at play in social media as it is in other forms of media, like television. The lack of support for the first hypothesis is somewhat surprising, given the results of Goldberg & Gorn's (1987) research, which supported this kind of effect with television advertising. There was significant support, however, for the second hypothesis that negative contexts would result in more negative attitudes

towards organizations.

This kind of result may be understood through the framework of users' liking of the content they encountered. Murry & Dacin (1996) and Coulter (1998), as mentioned in the literature review, found that the negative effects of a prime that did not match the context were mitigated when the viewer liked the content they were consuming and it met a media use or gratification for them.

Past research shows that the majority of social media users take part in the networks as a way to connect with others (Smith, 2011) and escape from the realities of their everyday lives (Cha, 2010). Cha found the escapism motivation to be especially strong in younger users—a substantial portion of the study population. These uses would seem to suggest that people engage in the use of social media for positive reasons, and thus expect positive content to be presented to them. An early analysis of the tone of content on Twitter found that over half of content on the platform is positive, while just about a third is negative (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009).

Thus, these results may be a result of expectancy violation. Expectancy violation theory finds that individuals have certain expectations of the interpersonal communication activities they engage in, and when those expectations are violated, they have to more actively process information, often, but not always, leading to negative assessments of those they are engaging in conversation with (Griffin, 2011). As an interpersonal medium, Twitter is subject to this effect. Much like we may have a bad response to someone making depressing comments at a fun party, the same kind of response may be taking place here. Users expect a positive context on social media, thus it does not significantly impact their perspective. When their expectations of escapism and positivity are violated, however, their analysis is changed significantly.

This idea would support the findings of De Pelsmacker, Geuens & Anckaert (2002), but applied to social media. As 99% of respondents in this study indicated that they currently use Google products, there is a high level of involvement for them in this context. Thus, the appearance of the positive message from Google in the midst of a negative contextual prime violated expectations and resulted in a more negative assessment.

The third and fourth hypotheses, about the relatedness of context having a significant impact on attitude towards an organization, were not supported. This seems to violate the findings of Wang (2007) in the area of priming and framing in public relations. That research showed that related primes had a significant impact on attitude towards organizations. It did not, however, show any unrelated primes. It is possible that had relatedness and tone been considered together in Wang that results similar to this study would have been found.

An explanation for this phenomenon is harder to develop. Common sense thinking in public relations would seem to suggest that negative news about your organization would have the most significant impact on attitudes towards your organization and its messaging. However, the findings here violate that common thinking—overwhelmingly negative contexts, regardless of relatedness, matter! Releasing a positive message into this environment may be seen as flippant towards the negative context—resulting in the outcomes seen here.

The results found in this research demonstrate that tone, not relatedness, is the main prime that matters in public relations practice in social media. The implications of this finding are discussed in more detail below. While just a small piece to the broader puzzle of understanding social media best practices, this research hopefully provides a solid foundation for future exploration into how priming effects are present in social media.

Implications for Practice

The results of this research help us to understand better how to perform public relations in the social media realm. The results clearly demonstrate that a negative environment, regardless of those negative messages being related to the organization, have a negative impact on publics' perceptions of our organizations. Thus, the first and most basic implication that can be taken away from this research is to ensure that your messages are released into a positive environment. This may require more intentionality in posting that public relations teams have traditionally used in scheduling their messages. Instead of just scheduling messages days or weeks in advance, public relations professionals may have to take a more responsive approach to messaging.

Second, this reiterates the idea that public relations is primarily a profession of environmentally responsive storytelling (Dozier, 1986; Scheufele, 1999). We have to understand that the priming effect is at work, even in social media, and must be taken into account. It is critically important that we do what we can to assess the environment into which our messages are released. While practitioners cannot know exactly what is present on their followers' streams, they can gain a general sense of the environment and adjust tactics accordingly. It is imperative that practitioners keep up with a wide variety of publics on social media to know what kind of conversations they are having, even if unrelated to the organization. This is unlike much public relations practice which just tracks the messages in social media about one particular organization. This may require a dedication of additional resources to social media monitoring above what currently takes place in many organizations.

Third, we learn that, interestingly, bad news for anyone is bad news for your organization. This is especially pertinent as the bad news does not have to be a business or organization—the negative tone used in the study was just that of individuals' negative experiences. There may be some chance, as seen in the television advertising research done by De Pelsmacker, Geuens & Anckaert (2002), of mitigating the negative tone effect by matching it, but further research is needed to be certain.

Limitations

There are challenges for any social media research using an experimental design, as it separates the media from the very context that makes it “social” media. This limitation is far more difficult to mitigate, as the research must be conducted using posts from strangers the participants do not know. There are also challenges in that real world environments are seldom completely positive or completely negative. A trend may be present, but it is unlikely that in average circumstances this would happen.

Additionally, the number of posts used may need to be increased to fully assess the effects of tone. It may take more than nine posts to firmly establish a given tone for participants. Initial testing, however, did seem to indicate that people found the tone to be supported in these groupings, so this limitation may be minimal.

Finally, not considered was the tone of the organization's post. The post used in this study was positive in tone, but a negative post could create different results. This presents an opportunity for future researchers.

4/19/14, 6:25 PM

Brian @brian123456 · 25m
Feeling ambitious today. Might try and beat my own personal record on the bench at the gym today! #gymlife

Stacy @stacy123456 · 29m
Beyoncé is absolutely elegant in this new dress: <http://smp.le/xxxxxx> #QueenB

Austin @austin123456 · 34m
I love having a neat house. Makes life simpler, and you're always ready to have people over.

Amanda @amanda123456 · 40m
Celebrating Mike and I's annual tradition of a bike ride around the state starting today! I can't wait.

Leslie @leslie123456 · 45m
Spending time with really uplifting friends is always encouraging. The wine couldn't have hurt either.

Google @google · 1h
Google RISE Awards: giving \$1.5M to 40 organizations providing girls/ underrepresented students w/ computer science programs <http://smp.le/BRQX>

For the question below, choose the bubble on each line that best represents where you would fall on the scale. Consider the organization as a whole, not just your attitude toward one particular product or service.

When Google says something, I am likely to think of it as:

Informative	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Not Informative
Believable	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Not Believable
Inaccurate	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Accurate
Trustworthy	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Untrustworthy
Unconvincing	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Convincing

4/19/14, 6:26 PM

For the question below, choose the bubble on each line that best represents where you would fall on the scale. Consider the organization as a whole, not just your attitude toward one particular product or service.

I would describe Google as:

Desirable	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Not Desirable
Low Quality	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	High Quality
Unpleasant	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Pleasant
Good	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Bad
Like it	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Don't Like it
Unfavorable	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Favorable

Hegün

Carefully read the series of social media posts below, then answer the questions at the bottom of the page.

Steven @steven123456 · 1m
There are some days that I just feel so sad with everything in life. Today is one of those days.

Lindsay @lindsay123456 · 9m
My roommate must be delusional thinking that I'm going to take out the trash for her... #fail

Alan @alan123456 · 14m
Angry at work today... Got passed over for a big promotion.

Sharon @sharon123456 · 19m
This hotel I'm staying in is absolutely deplorable... Pretty sure these sheets haven't been changed since the Nixon administration. #gross

Brian @brian123456 · 25m
Did you see that ludicrous display at the game last night? Ugh! #thissucks

Stacy @stacy123456 · 29m

4/19/14, 6:26 PM

I'm going to be really hard-nut by this professor's grading scale... 98 is an A+! #notworking

Austin @austin123456 · 34m
I've been on hold with the IRS for over two hours... I passed impatient a long time ago.

Amanda @amanda123456 · 40m
I hate needy people. Just live your own life and stop feeding off of me.

Leslie @leslie123456 · 46m
I was so terrified by that movie I watched last night... still having terrible nightmares.

Google @google · 1h
Google RISE Awards: giving \$1.5M to 40 organizations providing girls/ underrepresented students w/ computer science programs <http://smp.le/BRQX>

For the question below, choose the bubble on each line that best represents where you would fall on the scale. Consider the organization as a whole, not just your attitude toward one particular product or service.

When Google says something, I am likely to think of it as:

Believable	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Not Believable
Unconvincing	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Convincing
Inaccurate	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Accurate
Informative	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Not Informative
Trustworthy	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Untrustworthy

For the question below, choose the bubble on each line that best represents where you would fall on the scale. Consider the organization as a whole, not just your attitude toward one particular product or service.

I would describe Google as:

Unfavorable	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Favorable
-------------	---------------------	-----------

4/19/14, 6:26 PM

Low Quality

Desirable	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	High Quality
Good	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Not Desirable
Unpleasant	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Bad
Like it	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Pleasant
	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Don't Like it

Control

For the question below, choose the bubble on each line that best represents where you would fall on the scale. Consider the organization as a whole, not just your attitude toward one particular product or service.

When Google says something, I am likely to think of it as:

Trustworthy	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Untrustworthy
Inaccurate	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Accurate
Informative	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Not Informative
Believable	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Not Believable
Unconvincing	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Convincing

For the question below, choose the bubble on each line that best represents where you would fall on the scale. Consider the organization as a whole, not just your attitude toward one particular product or service.

I would describe Google as:

Like it	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Don't Like it
Unpleasant	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Pleasant
Low Quality	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	High Quality
Good	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Bad
Unfavorable	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Favorable
Desirable	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Not Desirable

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**#Ebola on Instagram and Twitter:
How health organizations address the health crisis in their social media engagement**

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Abstract

Since the Ebola outbreak in West Africa was officially declared on March 22, 2014, more than 21,000 have been infected, and the virus has taken more than 8,300 lives. Along with this infectious disease pandemic, a pandemic of fear has surfaced, especially on social media platforms. Yet little is known about how public health organizations address this outbreak on social media: the types of communications, the larger context, and the associated risk perception factors that are present in the social media discussion. This study focused on social media platforms Twitter and Instagram and analyzed tweets and posts through the lens of risk communication theory. Instagram appears to be a helpful tool to engage publics in time of global health crisis like the Ebola outbreak. Using more positive/solution-based messages is crucial, as is the use of images and reassuring publics while informing them of the necessary details.

Introduction

The current Ebola outbreak in West Africa is the most severe of its kind in history: as of January 7, 2015, a total of 21,121 cases had been reported and 8,304 deaths had been confirmed (CDC, 2015). Public health and nonprofit health organizations have been struggling to address the public's concerns as well as the need for accurate information regarding the outbreak as a global public health threat. Social media and mobile technologies play an ever-increasing role in the dissemination of information to and from these organizations, leading to many public relations professionals viewing these platforms as both an effective and essential avenue for strategic health communications. However, not much is known about the content of online social media discussions about the current Ebola outbreak. Since the arrival of the first Ebola patient in the U.S, tens of thousands of messages using the hashtag #Ebola have been published on Twitter and Instagram combined, showcasing both the importance of this topic to society as well as a need for proper messaging from public health and nonprofit health organizations.

Therefore, to examine how large health organizations, facing those challenges, utilized social media to engage their external publics, this study analyzed how Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, World Health Organization, and Doctors without Borders addressed the ongoing Ebola crisis on Twitter and Instagram. Key variables from risk perception theories were identified to assess how Ebola risk content had been communicated or not to these organizations' external publics via their official social media channels.

Literature Review

History and Description of Ebola

Ebola, named after the Ebola River in then-Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), is a rare and deadly virus transmitted via blood and other bodily fluids. Ebola has an incubation period of between 2-21 days, with initial symptoms such as high temperature, shivering and headache, followed by gastric problems and dehydration. During the second week, rashes, throat lesions, bleeding and renal failure begin. Within the following days, the patient starts hallucinating and death tends to follow quickly thereafter. There is no known cure at this point in time, and while a vaccine is under development, it is not available for general use, yet.

The first known outbreak of Ebola struck near then-Zaire between August and November of 1976, with a mortality of 90%. Shortly afterward, a different strain of the virus infected two areas of Sudan; this time with a mortality rate of 40%. Approximately 400 people died as a result of these early occurrences (Joffe & Haarhoff, 2002). After another outbreak in Sudan in 1979, the next known outbreak happened in Reston (Virginia, United States) when monkeys were lethally affected. The end of the 20th Century saw outbreaks in Zaire, Gabon, South Africa, and Uganda (Joffe & Haarhoff, 2002). An outbreak in Congo and Uganda in 2012 resulted in an estimated 46 fatalities (Green, 2014).

The current Ebola outbreak started with a March 2014 report of cases in Guinea, West Africa. In April 2014, 100 patients were reported as infected, and 70 of those had died. By June of 2014, 528 patients had been infected and 337 had died (Dixon & Schafer, 2014). By November 24, 2014, a total of 15,351 confirmed, probable and suspected cases of Ebola were reported. By the beginning of 2015, more than 8,000 people had died of Ebola, making the current outbreak by far the largest Ebola outbreak since the virus' discovery in 1976 (CDC, 2015).

Infectious Disease Outbreaks (IDO) and (Social) Media

Social media platforms are creating new challenges and opportunities for communications during crises such as pandemics. While social media provide an opportunity for real-time dialogue and limit the lag in information flow from traditional mass media to individuals as well as between individuals, they also are prone to the spreading of rumors and unsubstantiated or even misinformation.

During the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, the disease spread from a province in China to individuals in 37 countries around the world (Smith, 2006). While public health organizations and governments were concerned that SARS' morbidity and mortality would end up on the level of the 1918 influenza pandemic, which killed 40 million people, SARS ultimately infected nearly 10,000 and caused around 1,000 deaths (Smith, 2006). Muzzatti (2005) concluded that, during the SARS outbreak, the media contributed to public fear and distrust by manufacturing SARS-related public health threats, Hansen (2009) found that the Norwegian media, in spite of the fact that no cases of SARS were ever diagnosed in Norway during the 2003 outbreak, often compared SARS with the Black Death (the plague that killed half of Europe's population in the mid-fourteenth century), thereby portraying SARS as an uncontrollable threat that could change the demography and economy of an entire continent.

A 2011 study conducted by Tirkkonen and Luoma-aho sought to determine Finnish citizens' perceptions of authorities as crisis managers during the H1N1 epidemic. The study examined the success of authority interventions on online discussion forums, and concluded that the high level of trust for authority figures in general was not extended to the online environment and the authorities' interventions on the online forums aimed at correcting misconceptions seemed to fail because the intervention was carried out too late.

In a study of both the traditional and social media communications practices of 13 corporate and government organizations affected by the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic, Liu and Kim (2011) found that while the H1N1 crisis was often listed as the first global crisis situation where social media was effectively used to respond to crisis concerns, most organizations tended to rely heavily on traditional media to frame the crisis.

Similarly, in a study of 5,395 tweets sent during the 2009 H1N1 outbreak, Chew and Eysenbach (2010) found that H1N1-related tweets were primarily used to spread information from credible sources and that news websites were the most often-used sources (23.2%), while government and health agencies were linked only 1.5% of the time.

While social media may limit the lag in information flow from traditional mass media to individuals as well as between individuals, public health organizations have often been slow to respond to pandemic and other health concerns on social media platforms (Li, Vishwanath & Rao, 2014; Tirkkonen & Luoma-aho, 2011). Additionally, while it has been concluded that social media platforms allow nonprofit organizations to penetrate new constituents, more quickly mobilize stakeholders and develop a dialogue, this is not how they are being used (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009; Muralidharan, Rasmussen, Patterson & Shin, 2011; Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012).

Ebola and the Media

Specifically, looking at how Ebola has been represented in the media, various studies have concluded that messaging and tone have been inconsistent and, at times, questionable. Joffe and Haarhoff (2002) focused on the way the Ebola virus threat was presented in two types of British mass media outlets after the mid-1990 Ebola outbreaks, and concluded that while the first Ebola outbreaks in 1976-1977 received relatively little attention from the British public, the mid-

1990s outbreaks received significant media coverage. Joffe and Haarhoff showed that both newspapers and tabloids presented Ebola as a remote, almost fanatical illness, and the British population was represented as impervious to the Ebola virus. Additionally, the researchers found a strong parallel with the documentation of the AIDS virus in the mid-1980s.

In a content analysis of the 1995 Ebola Zaire outbreak coverage of three U.S. television stations and nine English-language newspapers, Ungar (1998) found that the mention of Ebola in the coverage was always accompanied by the words “killer” or “deadly.” In just two days, the New York Times’ coverage in Unger’s study started with the concept of Ebola being a highly contagious disease with a 90% mortality rate and a potential quick worldwide spread to Ebola being a disease that is much harder to catch than measles or the flu. The same pattern was visible in the reports by the Times of London (Ungar, 1998).

Public Health and Humanitarian Organizations

Many organizations have been and are involved in the current Ebola outbreak, but three of the most significant ones are the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, also known as Doctors without Borders). The CDC is the national public health institute of the United States, WHO is the coordinating health authority within the United Nations, and MSF is an international humanitarian aid organization that provides emergency medical care to millions of people caught in crises and catastrophic events in more than 70 countries worldwide. All three organizations have a long history of dealing with and responding to epidemic and pandemic outbreaks of infectious diseases (CDC, undated; Doctors without Borders, undated; WHO, undated). All three organizations have been and are involved in fighting the Ebola outbreak, but their efforts have been hampered by limited budgets and decisions that are questioned and criticized by the public. Only MSF has been on the ground in West Africa from the early stages of the epidemic. The organization started its response in Guinea in March of 2014 and currently employs around 300 international and more than 3,000 locally hired staff in the region (Butler, 2014; Doctors without Borders, 2014). WHO, traditionally responsible for coordinating international responses to these types of outbreaks, was crippled by recent budget cuts and did not declare a global emergency until August 8, 2014 – almost five months after the documented start of the epidemic (Gostin & Friedman, 2014; McCoy, 2014). And the CDC received widespread criticism when in late September Thomas Eric Duncan, a Liberian visiting Dallas, was sent home after a hospital visit despite a high fever and his stated travel history, only to be admitted with a suspected diagnosis of Ebola two days later. Two nurses who cared for Duncan, Nina Pham and Amber Vinson, contracted Ebola a few weeks later, with Vinson traveling by plane when she had a slight temperature after the CDC told her she was cleared to fly. Less than 24 hours later, Vinson became the fourth American to be diagnosed with Ebola (Berman, 2014; Berman, Sun, & Achenbach, 2014; Steenhuisen, 2014).

Considering the limited budgets of these organizations as well as the public’s criticism of their efforts related to the recent Ebola outbreak, it is important for public health organizations to reach necessary publics where they are looking for information and to provide them with consistent, clear and accurate messaging.

Twitter and Instagram

Social media platforms (including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest) have changed the way organizations can communicate with their stakeholders as well as provided new

opportunities for stakeholders to engage in direct dialogue with both organizations and each other (McAllister-Spooner, 2009; Sommerfeldt, Kent, & Taylor, 2012). However, all social media platforms are not created equal. They differ greatly in their conventions and characteristics. This study chose two very different social media platforms as its focus: the microblogging platform Twitter and the photo- and video-sharing platform Instagram.

Twitter, which launched in 2006, has quickly grown to one of the most popular social media platforms in terms of use. In late 2014, 23% of adult Internet users in the U.S. were using Twitter, with many tweeting daily (Pew Research Center, 2015). Twitter is particularly popular among those under 50 and among the college-educated, but also saw significant increases among a number of other demographic groups, such as men, Caucasians, those ages 65 and older and college graduates (Pew Research Center, 2015).

The mobile social networking platform Instagram, which was founded in 2010 and acquired by Facebook in 2012, is an emerging new form in this realm. Instagram is a photo- and video-sharing platform as well as a social networking channel that allows users to take and share photos after applying a choice of digital filters to their pictures via an Instagram smartphone app. The resulting images are easily shared on other social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr. Instagram has been growing rapidly, reaching 300 million monthly active users (Smith, 2015). Instagram is only available as a mobile application and has thereby become the visual engagement platform for mobile phones and tablet computers. Based on the aforementioned study by the Pew Research Center (2015), in 2014 Instagram surpassed Twitter in popularity with 26% of U.S. online users using the platform. As of late 2014, 53% of young adults ages 18-29 now use Instagram, compared with 37% in 2013. In addition, women are particularly likely to use the service, along with Hispanics and African-Americans (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Beyond the fact that Twitter and Instagram are among the most popular social media platforms for general use, Twitter has a history of use during an infectious disease pandemic. During the 2009 H1N1 outbreak, Twitter was one of the most popular public information sources (Freberg, 2013). Instagram, which did not exist during the H1N1 outbreak, has since overtaken Twitter in U.S. user-popularity and provides the contrast of a visual-focused service versus Twitter's 140 characters.

People increasingly search for health information on the Internet, and the information they find tends to influence medical decisions they make (Kata, 2010). It is therefore crucial to understand what health-related information is available online. Web 2.0 has opened the Internet for user participation. Now, anyone can participate, access data, contribute stories and connect with like-minded people (Wittman & Zikmund-Fisher, 2012). While timely and accurate health information is present online, misinformation and rumors are equally present. When it comes to Ebola, many social media users are tweeting, posting, and pinning as if the outbreak is in their backyard, while in reality only 10 cases of Ebola have been diagnosed and/or treated in the U.S., and most infected recipients have survived. Last August 10, for example, Yahoo's Twitter account was hacked and posted a tweet to its 1.3 million followers that 145 people were infected with the Ebola virus since "doctors carrying the disease were flown in from Africa" (Blair, 2014). The Department of Public Health in Iowa had to issue a statement dismissing rumors that Ebola had arrived in their state (Sarmah, 2014).

Prominent content themes related to Ebola and broadcast via traditional and new media include topics like Ebola symptoms, preventative measures targeted toward Ebola, misinformation like the virus being airborne and patients being contagious before they are

symptomatic, the issue of closing the borders to protect nations and their citizens from the Ebola virus, and the issue of mandatory quarantine for travelers originating from countries with current Ebola outbreaks. The CDC, WHO, and MSF all are active on both Twitter and Instagram, and endeavor to educate the public about Ebola and answer the publics' questions. However, little is known about the content of these social media posts, about any differences between the different platforms and about public engagement with these posts. This, combined with the gravitas of the disease and the observed panic surrounding Ebola in the Western world, leads to this study's first research question:

RQ1: How do leading health-focused organizations communicate about Ebola on Twitter and Instagram?

The potential for interactivity is one of social media's greatest contributions to the communications field, even though that promise does not always become a reality (Alhabash & Mcalister, 2014; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012). Virality – how many times a post is shared, liked and commented on – can both be seen as an outcome measure as well as a message feature (Yuan & Alhabash, 2014). The greater the virality of the post, the greater the tone and magnitude of the posts that others on these platforms will perceive (Yuan & Alhabash, 2014). Virality can be considered an expression of social norm, of perceived acceptance and endorsement of the post and its message. It is therefore important to determine the virality of the posts in this study:

RQ2: How do publics respond to tweets and Instagram posts about Ebola by leading health-focused organizations?

Twitter and Instagram are significantly different social media platforms. Twitter imposes a 140 character-limit on its tweets, thereby forcing the user to be concise and often use a Twitter-specific form of shorthand. Instagram knows no such limit, but instead is focused on photos and videos with the text/caption taking a secondary role. In addition, Instagram is an entirely mobile platform. While posted photos and videos can be viewed on a desktop or laptop computer, content can only be posted via a smartphone or tablet.

Evidence from the field of cognitive psychology suggests that text and images are processed differently. Corner, Richardson and Fenton (1990) suggest that images can exert “positioning” influence on a viewer, which may be resistant to subsequent commentaries that challenge the feelings they produce. Pictures seem to play an especially significant role in health topic communications. Pictures that are closely linked to text significantly increase attention to and recall of health education information compared to text alone (Houts, Doak, Doak, & Loscalzo, 2006). In a study on the effect of images on women's comprehension of cervical cancer prevention information, Michielutte, Bahnson, Dignan, & Schroeder (1992) found that brochures with pictures were not only rated more positively than those containing only text, but their content was also comprehended at a higher rate. Considering the differences between these two social media platforms, the third research question of this study is:

RQ3: What are the differences, if any, between Ebola-focused posts by leading health-focused organizations on Twitter versus Instagram?

Risk Communication Theory

One of the fields related to public relations and crisis communications is risk communication. Risk communication is a science-based approach for communicating effectively in high-concern situations, and provides a set of principles and tools for doing so (Covello, Peters, Wojtecki, & Hyde, 2001). The successful resolution of any type of health crisis depends at least in part on effective communication about health risks to the public. At the same time, these types of situations are often accompanied by strong negative emotions such as fear, distrust and anger, which in turn form considerable barriers to effective communication (Covello et al., 2001). Risk communication is based on several different models: the Risk Perception Model, the Mental Noise Model, the Negative Dominance Model and the Trust Determination Model. These models together explain how risk information is processed, how risk perceptions are formed and how risk decisions are made.

The risk perception model is a risk communication theory that focuses on how risks are perceived, which is particularly relevant to this study. For example, risks that evoke fear, terror or anxiety will be perceived as greater than risks that do not; risks associated with institutions or organizations that are lacking in credibility and trust are perceived as greater than risks associated with trustworthy entities; and risks that produce fatalities or have irreversible, catastrophic consequences are perceived as greater than risks that have less catastrophic effect potential (Covello et al., 2001). When a serious threat is perceived, people's ability to process information is significantly impaired. In addition, these types of risks are often accompanied by so-called mental noise. Mental noise occurs when people feel threatened and are in a state of high concern. This mental agitation creates mental noise and interferes with one's ability to engage in rational discourse (Cairns, de Andrade, & MacDonald, 2013; Covello et al., 2001). The negative dominance model explains that negative information receives significantly greater weight in people's perceptions. This means that in practice a negative message should be counterbalanced by a larger number of positive or solution-focused messages (Covello et al., 2001).

The fourth risk communication model is the trust determination model, which builds on the principle that trust is needed to communicate effectively in crisis situations. Without trust, the public may ignore important health information or recommendations (Reynolds, 2009). Perceptions of trust are decreased by actions or communications that indicate disagreement among experts, lack of coordination in crisis situations, unwillingness to acknowledge risks, unwillingness to share information in a timely manner, and irresponsibility in handling risk management situations (Covello et al., 2001). Both the CDC, and to a lesser extent WHO, have received broad criticism for their handling of the Ebola crisis (Gostin & Friedman, 2014; Jaffe, 2014). As mentioned earlier, the CDC authorized nurse Amber Vinson's air travel plans when she called in for advice. Once the first patients were diagnosed in the U.S., calls increased for travel bans and closed borders for anyone traveling from a country with a currently active Ebola outbreak. Such calls were contrary to WHO's recommendations, which in turn infuriated those calling for travel bans (Gostin & Friedman, 2014; Green, 2014).

Considering the fact that negative emotions often hinder effective communications as well as the ability to receive and process crisis messages, it is therefore important to determine the presence of certain risk perception factors in Ebola-focused social media posts, and how social media users respond to these posts. Therefore, this study's fourth and fifth research questions are:

RQ4: To what extent do Ebola-focused tweets and Instagram posts contain risk perception variables?

RQ5: How do publics respond to tweets and Instagram posts about Ebola and risk perception factors?

Method

To analyze information relating to the recent Ebola outbreak on social media, this study conducted a content analysis of how leading health-focused organizations utilized Twitter and Instagram, two popular social media platforms, in Ebola communications to their external publics. The Twitter and Instagram accounts of CDC, WHO and Doctors without Borders were chosen for the sample of this study as they were at the forefront of the efforts to contain the Ebola outbreak internationally and in the United States. A total of 779 Twitter posts (hereafter referred to as “tweets”) sent by the CDC (@CDCgov), WHO (@WHO) and Doctors without Borders (@MSF) between September-December 2014 were randomly selected from a larger sample of tweets. This timeframe was selected because September 2014 is the month the first patients were diagnosed with Ebola on U.S. soil. In addition, all Instagram posts by the three organizations between September and December of 2014 were collected, resulting in a total of 107 Instagram posts. Drawing upon existing literature this study identified two hashtags/keywords to select the tweets and pins for the sample: #Ebola/Ebola and #EbolaOutbreak/EbolaOutbreak (Joffe & Haarhoff, 2002).

Coding protocols for tweets and Instagram posts relating to the topic of Ebola were developed, tested and implemented for the coding process. Each tweet was coded for the timeframe of the tweet, the handle of the Twitter user, whether a tweet was retweeted and how many times, whether a tweet was favorited and how many times, and whether the tweet included a hyperlink and if so, the type of website it linked to. Each Instagram post was coded for the timeframe of the post, the handle of the Instagram user who posted, whether a post was liked and the number of likes, whether a post received comments and number of comments, whether the post linked to another website and if so, what type of website? In addition, both tweets and Instagram posts were analyzed for eight risk perception variables (see Table 1).

Finally, all tweets and Instagram posts were coded for 13 Ebola-specific variables: news about Ebola, Ebola symptoms, the spread of Ebola, Ebola being contagious, preventative measures against Ebola, Ebola being deadly, misinformation: Ebola is airborne, misinformation: Ebola patients are contagious before they are symptomatic, other types of Ebola-related misinformation, the issue of closing borders, the issue of mandatory quarantine, whether reassurance about Ebola is expressed, and mention of an Ebola vaccine.

Two coders were trained to establish intercoder reliability. The first coder coded all of the posts (N=880), while the second coder coded approximately 10% of the sample (N=100). After pre-testing and subsequent changes to the coding protocol, intercoder reliability was assessed with the ReCal statistical program using *Scott's Pi* (Scott, 1955), which was on average .83, with no coefficients below .70. The coefficients were all considered to be reliable.

Frequencies were gathered for all variables in the study. T-tests were conducted to address the relationship between engagement variables on Twitter and Instagram as well as the Ebola risk perception variables. Chi-square tests were utilized to address the relationship between the Ebola news variables and the different platforms and organizations, as well between Ebola risk perception variables and the different platforms and organizations. Adjusted residuals

were used to determine the direction of the associations found. For the chi square tests, variables that included a N/A option were modified to exclude that option. SPSS statistical software (version 22) was used for all statistical analyses.

Results

Research Questions 1, 2, and 3

The first three research questions asked how three large health-focused organizations – the CDC, WHO, and MSF - communicate about Ebola on Twitter and Instagram, how publics respond to those posts, and what the differences are between these posts on the two social media platforms.

Twitter provides two main ways for people to interact with tweets and with other Twitter users: “retweeting” (comparable to Facebook’s “sharing” function) and “favoriting” (comparable to Facebook’s “like” function). In addition, one can use “direct replies” (directly addressing another Twitter user by placing their handle at the start of the tweet), mentions (using someone else’s Twitter handle anywhere in the tweet except at the beginning) and hashtags (although not exclusively an engagement tool, hashtags can help guide and categorize conversations and help connect with other Twitter users). Instagram provides two ways for people to interact with photos or videos: “liking” and posting comments. In addition, Instagram also facilitates the use of hashtags and mentions.

Two content analyses on Twitter and Instagram yielded a sample of 886 posts – 779 tweets and 107 Instagram posts. Of the tweets, the CDC sent 385, WHO sent 330, and MSF sent 64. Of the Instagram posts, 70 originated with the CDC, 21 with WHO, and 16 with MSF.

Focusing on public engagement with the posts in this study, while almost all tweets were retweeted at least once, the mean number of retweets for tweets sent by MSF was only 45.30 while the mean number of retweets for tweets by the CDC and WHO was 143.06 and 146.70, respectively. Similarly, the mean number of favorites for MSF tweets was 18.45 while the mean number of favorites for CDC and WHO tweets was 39.32 and 47.81, respectively. MSF Instagram posts, on the other hand, yielded a mean of 1424.50 likes, compared to 61.79 mean likes for CDC posts and 391.14 mean likes for WHO posts.

Another interesting result is that while the CDC and MSF both used the retweet function in approximately 35% of their tweets, WHO only used this function once in 330 tweets (.3%). MSF used mentions more on Twitter than CDC and WHO, while the CDC utilized the reply function more than both MSF and WHO. MSF used more hyperlinks and also more photos in their tweets than both CDC and WHO. When looking at Instagram, both MSF and WHO got comments on all or almost all their posts, but the CDC’s posts yielded comments on about 40% of their photos (see Tables 2 and 3).

Instagram posts by MSF were more likely to mention the deadly nature of Ebola than the CDC’s and WHO’s Instagram posts. In addition, WHO was more likely to mention a potential Ebola vaccine on Instagram than the other two organizations. Finally, MSF was more likely to mention Ebola’s deadly nature in their Instagram posts than in their tweets (see Table 4).

Research Questions 4 and 5

The last two research questions focused on the presence of risk perception variables in the tweets and Instagram posts in the study sample, as well as whether these variables affect the

public's engagement with tweets and Instagram posts.

Risk perception variables, in general, were present at a higher percentage on Instagram than on Twitter: 57.9% of all Instagram posts mentioned the organization's credibility or trustworthiness while only 24.8% of all tweets did so. In addition, 10.3% of all Instagram posts mentioned a negative emotion (fear, anger, frustration), while only 1.2% of tweets did; 12.1% of Instagram posts mentioned an identifiable victim, while only 2.6% of tweets did (see Table 5).

Both negative emotions in general and fear specifically are present more frequently on Instagram than on Twitter for all three organizations. Both MSF and WHO mentioned danger more frequently on Instagram than Twitter, with the CDC mentioning danger more on Twitter than Instagram.

The levels for certain risk perception variables for MSF often seemed to be different from the CDC and WHO but were too small (N=3) to be included for statistical analyses. However, 93.8% of all MSF Instagram posts referred to the organization's credibility/trustworthiness, while only 58.6% of the CDC's Instagram posts and 28.6% of WHO's Instagram posts did.

Both MSF and WHO mentioned the adverse, irreversible consequences of Ebola in almost 50% of their Instagram posts, unlike the CDC. None of three organizations mentioned this variable in their tweets. All three organizations send significantly more positive and solution-focused tweets and Instagram posts.

Finally, a series of independent sample t-tests were carried out to compare the public engagement of the study's tweets and Instagram posts that mentioned one of eight risk perception variables and those that did not (see Table 6). On Instagram, posts that mentioned the organization's credibility, mentioned an identifiable Ebola victim, mentioned irreversible, adverse outcomes, and mentioned reassurance all showed a significant association with the level of public engagement: if any of these factors was present in a post, that post tended to be liked more and receive more comments. On Twitter, the same dynamic was present, but less pronounced: tweets that mentioned reassurance about the Ebola outbreak were retweeted and liked significantly more often, and tweets that mentioned an identifiable victim were retweeted significantly more often.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to analyze the posts by three major health-focused organizations about the current Ebola outbreak on social media platforms Twitter and Instagram in order to gain an understanding of how public health organizations address the current Ebola outbreak on popular social media platforms.

Instagram as a Prominent Tool to Engage the Publics with Images and Visuals

Results from the content analyses of 779 tweets and 107 Instagram posts showed that, across the three health organizations, Instagram seems to have elicited more engagement than Twitter, especially when comparing the most used engagement variables, "retweets" and "likes." Given the trend that Instagram surpassed Twitter in active users in 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2015), Instagram seemed to play an increasingly important role in engaging active users, utilized by CDC, WHO and MSF, when it comes to discussing health risk issues such as an Ebola outbreak.

Among the three health organizations analyzed, MSF is particularly strong in risk communication on Instagram: Although MSF sent fewer posts than the CDC and WHO, and it mentioned what was likely the most severe characteristic of Ebola – its deadly nature – more

frequently in its Instagram posts, MSF also in almost all its Instagram posts referred to its own credibility and trustworthiness by portraying its staff members as dedicated to serve Ebola patients and helpful to other agencies, as well as referring to its extensive experience in the areas most affected by Ebola. In addition, MSF in its Instagram posts mentions reassurance about the Ebola outbreak in more than 50% of its posts. These messages in turn yield significantly higher levels of public engagement. MSF's strength in visual communications is also displayed on Twitter, where the nonprofit uses more photos and other visuals like infographics than either of the other two organizations.

Like MSF, WHO received comments on all or virtually all their Instagram posts, but the CDC's posts yield comments on only approximately 40% of their photos.

Different Levels of Twitter Engagement

The three organizations differed in their use of engagement tools on Twitter: MSF used mentions more on Twitter, while the CDC uses the reply function (one of the strongest communication tools available to a social media manager) more than both MSF and WHO. This implies that CDC engaged with the publics on Twitter at the highest level, based on the form and depth of interaction its social media team has utilized in Ebola related public communication: By "replying" more frequently, the CDC seemed to have addressed the health issues and other public concerns more timely and tailored to individuals' needs.

Although the CDC and MSF both used the retweet function in approximately 35% of their tweets, WHO only used this function once in 330 tweets (.3%). It appears that the level and extent of information sharing on Twitter differed drastically between WHO and the other two health organizations: WHO seemed to have focused on one-way information dissemination, while the CDC and MSF tended to be more likely to not only produce and distribute information the organization generated, but also actively seeking and sharing verified information via Twitter.

Strategic Use of Positive Messages in Combating Negativities on Social Media

According to best practices of risk communication and based on the negative dominance model (Covello, 2001), negative information tends to receive significantly greater weight in people's risk perceptions; negative messages should be counterbalanced by a larger number of positive messages. Our findings show that all three health organizations adhered to these guidelines on both Twitter and Instagram in their Ebola communication practices, as evidenced in sending out more positive and solution-based tweets as well as Instagram posts than neutral or negative tweets or posts. Given the negative sentiments associated with Ebola as a health crisis and criticism health organizations received in their communication activities, the CDC, WHO and MSF seemed to have mindfully taking the control of the tone and direction of their information production and distribution, with a strong focus on positivity and instruction, capitalized on their established credibility as trustworthy health information authorities.

Implications for Practitioners

In closing, there are several recommendations for the practice of public relations during health crises that can be derived from this study. First of all, use several social media platforms. Discussions and messages of fear and danger related to Ebola and other global as well as local health crises are taking place on multiple social media platforms, and the platform a practitioner uses most often may not be the only appropriate one for a particular purpose. A social media

intervention would target these audiences at the place they already are spending their time, which may help the message reach its desired goal. Secondly, use photos, even on non-visual social media platforms. Visuals are processed differently in people's minds and stay longer in their memories. Finally, be mindful to send out more positive/solution-based messages than negative/problem-based messages. This can be challenging, especially in a crisis like the current Ebola outbreak, but too many negative posts can cause an organization's publics and stakeholders to no longer hear the message intended for them.

Limitations and Future Directions

Finally, there are a number of limitations and future considerations to this study. First, while this study focused on Twitter and Instagram, future studies in this field should consider Facebook and Pinterest to study the same topic and build a more robust field of literature regarding the messaging around Ebola on social media platforms. Also, MSF (Doctors without Borders) sent fewer tweets and Instagram posts than the other two organizations, sometimes yielding results that were too small to draw definitive conclusions. An equal, larger sample from all organizations would likely have prevented this. Finally, future research should examine the content of the public's comments to determine the relevance of individual remarks, as this study limited itself to the number and presence of comments and did not attempt to analyze their content. Global and local health challenges are a part of our society, and through engaging the public with more interactive and timely risk communication messages, public relations practitioners can play a leading role in this emerging field of social media health communications.

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Table 1. Risk perception variables for Twitter and Instagram

Variable	Related factor²	Rationale
Negative emotion (fear, anxiety, frustration)	Dread	Risks that evoke fear, anxiety, danger are less readily accepted and are perceived as greater than risks that do not arouse such feelings or emotions
Fear expression	Dread	Risks that evoke fear, anxiety, danger are less readily accepted and are perceived as greater than risks that do not arouse such feelings or emotions
Danger expression	Dread	Risks that evoke fear, anxiety, danger are less readily accepted and are perceived as greater than risks that do not arouse such feelings or emotions
Irreversible, adverse outcomes	Reversibility	Risks perceived to have potentially irreversible adverse effects are less readily accepted and are perceived as greater than risks perceived to have reversible adverse effects
Own credibility or authority in providing credible/trustworthy information	Trust in institutions	Risks associated with institutions or organizations lacking in trust and credibility are less readily accepted and are perceived as greater than risks associated with trustworthy and credible institutions and organizations
(In)equity from poster's perspective	Equity	Risks perceived as unevenly and inequitably distributed are less readily accepted than risks perceived to be equally shared
Mention of identifiable victim	Victim identity	Risks that produce identifiable victims are less readily accepted and are perceived as greater than risks that produce statistical victims
Reassurance	(Countering) Dread	(Calming feelings about) risks that evoke fear, anxiety, danger (which are less readily accepted and are perceived as greater than risks that do not arouse such feelings or emotions

² Based on study by Covello et al. (2001)

Table 2. Twitter and Instagram engagement variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Platform</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>CDC</i>	<i>MSF</i>	<i>WHO</i>
Mean:	Twitter	136.57	143.06	45.30	146.70
Retweets		(SD=286.93)	(SD=320.06)	(SD=68.76)	(SD=269.16)
Mean:	Twitter	41.20	39.32	18.45	47.81
Favorites		(SD=86.43)	(SD=96.63)	(SD=42.49)	(SD=79.20)
Mean:	Instagram	330.20	61.79	1424.50	391.14
Likes		(SD=502.56)	(SD=31.01)	(SD=380.32)	(112.84)
Mean:	Instagram	7.73	2.07	32.31	7.86
Comments		(SD=16.19)	(SD=4.63)	(SD=30.30)	(SD=5.57)

Table 3. Presence of platform and engagement variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Platform</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>CDC</i>	<i>MSF</i>	<i>WHO</i>
RT	Twitter	21.7% (N=169)	37.7% (N=145)	35.9% (N=23)	.3% (N=1)
Retweeted		99.6% (N=776)	99.5% (N=383)	100.0% (N=64)	99.7% (N=329)
Favorited		88.7% (N=691)	81.6% (N=314)	82.8% (N=53)	98.2% (N=324)
Mention		16.2% N=(126)	14.5% (N=56)	37.5% (N=24)	13.9% (N=46)
Reply		21.1% N=(164)	27.0% (N=104)	6.3% (N=4)	17.0% (N=56)
Link		50.2% N=(391)	61.3% (N=236)	87.5% (N=56)	30.0% (N=99)
Photo		16.8% N=(131)	19.7% (N=76)	43.8% (N=28)	8.2% (N=27)
Video		2.2% N=(17)	3.6% (N=14)	4.7% (N=3)	0.0% (N=0)
Liked	Instagram	100.0% N=(107)	100.0% (N=70)	100.0% (N=16)	100.0% (N=21)
Commented		62.6% N=(67)	44.3% (N=31)	100.0% (N=16)	95.2% (N=20)
Mentions		1.9% N=(2)	2.9% (N=2)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)

Table 4. Presence of Ebola news variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Platform</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>CDC</i>	<i>MSF</i>	<i>WHO</i>
News	Twitter	29.4% (N=229)	22.6% (N=87)	31.3% (N=20)	37.0 (N=122)
	Instagram	22.4% (N=24)	14.3% (N=10)	50.0% (N=8)	22.4% (N=24)
Symptoms	Twitter	5.0% (N=39)	5.7% (N=22)	0.0% (N=0)	5.2% (N=17)
	Instagram	9.3% (N=10)	7.1% (N=5)	12.5% (N=2)	9.3% (N=10)

Spread	Twitter	14.4% (N=112)	20.8% (N=80)	6.3% (N=4)	8.5% (N=28)
	Instagram	20.6% (N=22)	25.7% (N=18)	12.5% (N=2)	20.6% (N=22)
Contagious	Twitter	5.1% (N=40)	5.5% (N=21)	0.0% (N=0)	5.8% (N=19)
	Instagram	10.3% (N=11)	11.4% (N=8)	18.8% (N=24)	10.3% (N=11)
Preventive measures	Twitter	16.4% (N=128)	15.6% (N=60)	0.0% (N=0)	20.6% (N=68)
	Instagram	29.0% (N=31)	31.4% (N=22)	25% (N=4)	29.0% (N=31)
Deadly	Twitter	4.9% (N=38)	1.8% (N=7)	10.9% (N=7)	7.3% (N=24)
	Instagram	12.1% (N=13)	4.3% (N=3)	43.8% (N=7)	12.1% (N=13)
Airborne	Twitter	2.2% (N=17)	2.1% (N=8)	0.0% (N=0)	2.7% (N=9)
	Instagram	3.7% (N=4)	2.9% (N=2)	0.0% (N=0)	3.7% (N=4)
Contagious without symptoms	Twitter	1.9% (N=15)	1.8% (N=7)	0.0% (N=0)	2.4% (N=8)
	Instagram	1.9% (N=2)	2.9% (N=2)	0.0% (N=0)	1.9% (N=2)
Misinfo: other	Twitter	1.0% (N=8)	1.3% (N=5)	0.0% (N=0)	.9% (N=3)
	Instagram	2.8% (N=3)	2.9% (N=2)	6.3% (N=1)	2.8% (N=3)
Close border	Twitter	2.8% (N=22)	2.6% (N=10)	0.0% (N=0)	3.6% (N=12)
	Instagram	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)
Quarantine	Twitter	.4% (N=3)	.8% (N=3)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)
	Instagram	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)
Vaccine	Twitter	7.8% (N=61)	1.3% (N=5)	6.3% (N=4)	15.8% (N=52)
	Instagram	.9% (N=1)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)	.9% (N=1)
Treatment	Twitter	2.1 (N=16)	1.0% (N=4)	4.7% (N=3)	2.7% (N=9)
	Instagram	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)

Table 5. Presence of Ebola risk perception variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Platform</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>CDC</i>	<i>MSF</i>	<i>WHO</i>
Danger	Twitter	13.5% (N=105)	13.0% (N=50)	7.8% (N=5)	15.2 (N=50)
	Instagram	14.0% (N=15)	10.0% (N=7)	25.0% (N=4)	19.0% (N=4)
Negative emotions	Twitter	1.2% (N=9)	.8% (N=3)	9.4% (N=6)	0.0% (N=0)
	Instagram	10.3% (N=11)	7.1% (N=5)	18.8% (N=3)	14.3% (N=3)
Fear	Twitter	.5% (N=4)	.8% (N=3)	1.6% (N=1)	0.0% (N=0)
	Instagram	4.7% (N=5)	2.9% (N=2)	6.3% (N=1)	9.5% (N=2)
Trustworthiness	Twitter	24.8% (N=193)	20.0% (N=77)	59.4%	23.6%
	Instagram	57.9% (N=62)	58.6% (N=41)	(N=38) 93.8% (N=15)	(N=78) 28.6% (N=6)
Involuntary	Twitter	.6% (N=5)	1.3% (N=5)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)
	Instagram	2.8% (N=3)	1.4% (N=1)	0.0% (N=0)	9.5% (N=2)
(In)equity	Twitter	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)
	Instagram	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)
Identify victim	Twitter	2.6% (N=20)	3.9% (N=15)	7.8% (N=5)	0.0% (N=0)
	Instagram	12.1% (N=13)	2.9% (N=2)	37.5% (N=6)	23.8% (N=4)
Adverse, irreversible	Twitter	1.2% (N=9)	.3% (N=1)	4.7% (N=3)	1.5% (N=5)
	Instagram	20.6% (N=22)	5.7% (N=1)	43.8% (N=7)	47.6% (N=10)

Negative dominance variable (positive, neutral, negative)	Twitter	59.2% (N=461)	68.6% (N=264)	37.5% (N=24)	52.4% (N=173)
		16.8% (N=131)	10.4% (N=40)		
		24.0% (N=187)	21.0% (N=81)	23.4% (N=15)	23.0% (N=76)
	Instagram	80.4% (N=86)	82.9% (N=58)	39.1 (N=25)	24.5% (N=81)
		5.6% (N=6)	2.9% (N=2)	75% (N=12)	12.5% (N=2)
		14.0% (N=15)	14.3% (N=10)	12.5% (N=2)	76.2% (N=16)
				9.5% (N=2)	
				14.3% (N=3)	
Reassurance	Twitter	11.0% (N=86)	12.5% (N=8)	12.5% (N=8)	5.2% (N=17)
	Instagram	0.0% (N=0)	14.3% (N=10)	56.3% (N=9)	28.6% (N=6)

Table 6. T-test results for risk perception variables and engagement

<i>Platform</i>	<i>Measure</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Indicate danger</i>				
Twitter	Retweet frequency	-1.484	115.098	.028
Instagram	Likes frequency	-.886	105	.861
	Frequency comments	-.636	105	.665
<i>Negative emotion</i>				
Twitter	Favorites frequency	1.020	777	.148
	Retweet frequency	1.020	777	.168
<i>Fear or terror</i>				
Twitter	Favorites frequency	.695	777	.360
	Retweet frequency	.655	777	.389
<i>Identifiable victim</i>				
Twitter	Retweet frequency	-2.168	777	.633
Instagram	Likes frequency	-3.210	12.793	<.0001
	Frequency comments	-2.342	12.155	<.0001
<i>Involuntary/out of one's control</i>				
Twitter	Favorites frequency	-1.082	4.001	<.0001
	Retweet frequency	-1.220	4.001	<.0001
<i>Adverse, irreversible outcomes</i>				
Twitter	Favorites frequency	.352	777	.413
	Retweet frequency	.019	777	.590
<i>Negative loss neutral</i>				
Twitter	Favorites frequency	.797	646	.951
	Retweet frequency	-.848	646	.091
<i>Reassurance</i>				
Twitter	Favorites frequency	-2.543	90.552	<.0001
	Retweet frequency	-2.074	89.227	<.0001
Instagram	Likes frequency	-3.404	27.174	<.0001
	Frequency of comments	-2.617	25.012	<.0001
<i>Indicate danger</i>				
Twitter	Favorites frequency	-2.543	90.552	<.0001

	Retweet frequency	-2.074	89.227	<.0001
<i>Involuntary/out of one's control</i>				
Twitter	Favorites frequency	-1.082	4.001	<.0001
	Retweet frequency	-1.220	4.001	<.0001
<i>Own credibility/trustworthy</i>				
Instagram	Likes frequency	-2.807	76.511	<.0001
	Frequency comments	-1.986	70.268	<.0001

**Sustained Risk Communication and the Wally Campaign:
Risk Infrastructure and Fully Functioning Society**

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Abstract

Risk communication is one of the more mature lines of research within the public relations literature. The purpose of this paper is to present a risk communication case study of the Wally program in Deer Park, Texas, based on 18 years of longitudinal data (Heath & Abel, 1996; Heath & Palenchar, 2000; Heath, Lee & Palenchar, 2014), including new 2012 survey data (N=400), to demonstrate how a well-developed, research-based strategic risk communication campaign can work in a community when the appropriate resources are put into the effort as part of a risk infrastructure approach to communicating about the dangers of living in a community with a dense concentration of industrial facilities. The paper's discussion focuses on the role of an infrastructural approach to risk communication as part of the fully functioning society theory.

Key findings include reaching secondary target adult stakeholders through a children's campaign; sustained community risk communication campaign increases the likelihood that community members are aware of and understand self-efficacy efforts residents can initiate in the event of a crisis; that a mix of risk communication tactics is an integral part of effective, long-term risk communication campaigns. Key discussion points related to the findings include a demonstration of three premises of Fully Functional Society Theory (management working to bring order to uncertainty in a manner that fosters legitimacy, instrumental corporate responsibility, organizational communication is vital to a fully functioning society) that highlights how risk societies are a complex infrastructure ideally working toward enlightened choices and that communities grow and are more fully functional through the collective understanding and management of risk and uncertainty.

If risk is the rationale for society, as argued by Mary Douglas (1992) and others, risk communication and risk management are partially determinative of the quality of risk society; especially as a myriad assortment of stakeholders become increasingly involved in efforts to understand and communicate about risk probabilities in their communities. One of those industry-based risk communication efforts is the Wally Wise Guy program. Wally is a turtle mascot that teaches children and their parents how to shelter-in-place in the event of a chemical emergency. Originally developed by a consortium of Houston Ship Channel Local Emergency Planning Committees, the campaign has expanded to 28 states and approximately 119 members.

The purpose of this paper is to present a risk communication case study of the Wally program in Deer Park, Texas, based on 18 years of longitudinal data (Heath & Abel, 1996; Heath & Palenchar, 2000; Heath, Lee, & Palenchar, 2014), including new 2012 survey data (N=400), to demonstrate how a well-developed, research-based strategic risk communication campaign can work in a community when the appropriate resources are put into the effort as part of a risk infrastructure approach to communicating about the dangers of living in a community with a dense concentration of industrial facilities. The paper's discussion focuses on the role of an infrastructural approach to risk communication as part of the fully functioning society theory.

Risk Communication

Researchers and practitioners have long been focused on better understanding, developing, and implementing the infrastructural processes by which risk bearers' are better informed about risk, maintain appropriate levels of vigilance related to such risk, and develop effective self-efficacy knowledge to respond to the manifestation of risk as a crisis. At times appearing similar to traditional public relations practices, sustained risk communication efforts, measured over a long-term period of time, are not common in the industry nor as subjects of study for public relations scholars. In general, the management of risk has always included various levels of communication expertise in the forms of public meetings and discussions, whether legally mandated or held voluntary; matrix of warning systems at high-risk facilities and throughout a community; evacuation and shelter-in-place notifications; special events based on educating about self-protective measures individual residents, organizations and industries should take; and the use of various media including legacy and new.

Risk communication is one of the more mature and sophisticated lines of research within the public relations literature. The National Research Council (1989) in many ways helped usher in the modern era of risk communication when they described risk communication as "an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions" (p. 2). Heath (1994) wrote a few years later that, "risk communication deals with risk elements, whether they are appropriately tolerable, and risk consequences" (p. 257). Fundamentally, risk communication practices attempt to inform potential or actual risk bearers about a potential future harm and related dangers so that they may be in a position to take action to better manage and ideally mitigate the risk to themselves, their families and friends (e.g., Seeger, 2006).

Sandman's (e.g., 2002) model of risk factored on outrage (cultural, socially constructed risk perspective) and hazard (technical, scientific risk assessment) has been frequently used as a model to measure risk communication efforts and guide professional practice efforts to communicate about various risks to communities. The tension between these two orientations has become a long line of research focus in risk communication studies. Partially as a result of this critique and conflict, according to Steelmart and McCaffrey (2013), two approaches

developed in the field concerning the differences in risk perceptions: mental models and social constructivism. In explaining mental models, Morgan, Fischhoff, Bostrom, and Atman (2002) explained that it starts with scientific assessment of the likelihood, cause, impact, and most responsible response to risk. It uses science to presume the level of risk, the entities most likely to benefit or to be harmed, and the best assessment of what should be done, by whom, and in what way to mitigate and/or prevent risk or its impact. Risk communication research from a social construction perspective extends beyond the mental model approach to assess the social and cultural context, including the risk communication infrastructure, concerning how risk is understood and communicated (e.g., Heath, Lee, & Nan, 2009).

Infrastructural Approach to Risk Communication

The infrastructural risk communication perspective features discourse-based agentic and structural aspects of risk perceptions and meaning that are essential for creating long-term, ongoing relationships among companies that create risks, the community government that partners in emergency management, and the stakeholders and risk bearers in each community (Heath, Lee, & Palenchar, 2014). “The essence of planning and execution of such communication and action structures depends on shared meanings amid eclectic and multiple constituencies over the relevant issues, facts, policies and multi-levels of understanding” (p. 4).

Infrastructural approach to risk communication advocates for a myriad of stakeholder voices, and in particular risk bearers, being brought together to create systems and shared perspectives that appropriately assess, mitigate and respond to risks that are often unequally and unfairly faced by various members and geographical regions of communities. In all, the challenge is to have infrastructures that are sufficiently robust and collaborative to achieve maximal individual, expert, and community efficacy that can help make society more fully functioning regarding risk and crisis (Heath & Palenchar, in press).

Heath and Palenchar (in press) argue that an infrastructural approach to risk communication can incorporate the other major paradigms of the field (e.g., mental models, critical and cultural, risk perception/expressed preference) into a coherent whole. Its orientation acknowledges and uses the strengths that the “merited” privilege of sound science has a valued role in knowing and responding to risks. It builds on key psychometric variables such as trust and control, dread and uncertainty, combined with a community construction of the meaning and the communication and management of risk through the lens of rhetorical heritage. Science and lay perspective work in a collaborative effort, privileging both scientific research as important and risk bearers’ experiences as important and meaningful.

Fully Functional Society Theory

According to fully functional society theory (FFST), the organizational role of public relations is the core of modern public relations where organizations, for good or bad, have replaced individuals in the citizenship roles needed for a fully functioning society (Heath, 2006). “Society is a complex of collectivities engaged in variously constructive dialogue and power resource distribution through meeting socially constructed and shared norm-based expectations whereby individuals seek to make enlightened choices in the face of risk, uncertainty, and reward/cost ambiguity” (p. 108).

From a public relations management perspective, the premise of FFST is to help society become more fully functioning. FFST is built on eight premises detailed by Heath (2006), including: (1) management working to bring order to uncertainty in a manner that fosters

legitimacy; (2) effectively implemented corporate responsibility constitutes the core of each organization's legitimacy by meeting or exceeding the normative expectations of stakeholders; (3) applying the principles of symmetry to address power resource management through concern for the responsible use of control; (4) understanding community as conflicting and conjoined interests that affect coordinated action; (5) relationships are symmetrical when the fit among stakeholders mirrors the elements of *communitas* as opposed to *corporatas*; (6) the important role of organizational communication as society is a complex of collectives engaged in variously constructive dialogue and power resource distribution; (7) responsible advocacy; and (8) narrative and other forms of rhetoric leading to enlightened choices.

From a power resource management perspective, FFST strengthens public relations by exploring and applying principles of symmetry to address power resource management through concern for the responsible use of control to make society fully functional. In particular to risk communication, "a fully functioning society is aware of risk or at least does its best to be aware of, assess, and discuss, and develops plans tailored to particular risk-bearing communities, and their individual and group unique risk decision heuristics" (Palenchar, 2013a, p. 453).

Several public relations papers have addressed FFST, including Marsh's (2013) discussion of social harmony paradigms, Waymer's (2012) exploration of a real-world example (Black congregations) of a fully functioning society, and Penaloza de Brooks and Waymer's (2009) critical discourse analysis of the Las Cristinas mine case in Venezuela.

Local Emergency Planning Committee Efforts

Part of this infrastructure, for example, are local emergency planning committees (LEPCs), which are required under the Emergency Planning and Community-Right-to-Know Act of 1986 (EPCRA), section three of The Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986 (SARA Title III). LEPCs serve as monthly community forums where residents, government officials, industry representatives, health and safety officials, and any other concerned individuals and organizations can request information and voice concerns. Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPC) are a vital part of the communication infrastructure and emergency planning efforts in the City of Deer Park and the chemical industry. Several questions addressed the awareness of residents regarding Wally, a costumed character used to publicize shelter-in-place instructions.

Wally Wise Guy

Wally Wise Guy, a turtle mascot, was originally developed by a consortium of Houston Ship Channel Local Emergency Planning Committees to teach elementary children, from kindergarten to 4th grade, and their parents how to shelter-in-place during a chemical emergency. Wally does not speak and is gender neutral, and therefore, could be any nationality or gender. An assistant accompanies Wally to answer questions and communicate the simple steps to shelter-in-place. As a turtle mascot, Wally demonstrates that the safest place to go in the event of an emergency is inside the shell. The shell symbolizes the first step of sheltering in place – go inside, close all windows and doors, and turn off the heat and air conditioners. This step is followed by turning on the radio, staying off the phone, and waiting until officials communicate that the chemical energy has been resolved.

Wally makes personal appearances at schools, daycare centers or community events, and following the training, children have the opportunity to participate in an interactive quiz to test their knowledge on sheltering in place. The Wally Wise Guy program uses tangible items to

advertise the program (i.e. trading cards, mouse pads) and an interactive website where parents and children can read riddles, color in their own Wally Wise Guy, view the photo album and take the safety quiz with the purpose of informing families about chemicals (i.e. where chemicals come from and what they are used for) and the appropriate steps to take during a chemical disaster. The Wally Wise Guy program has demonstrated success teaching children and the parents how to respond to chemical emergencies and currently has 119 member organizations in 28 states.

From this perspective on risk communication, the following research questions were asked from a longitudinal perspective of communication and management efforts:

RQ1: How familiar are residents with a costumed character named Wally?

RQ2: What kind of animal is Wally?

RQ3: What does Wally want people to do in the case of an emergency?

RQ4: What does the phrase “shelter in place” mean to you?

RQ5: How did you become aware of “shelter in place” (as a concept)?

RQ6: How exposed are you to LEPC activities?

RQ7: Are you aware of a telephone service called the CAER Line that you can call to get information about a chemical release or the chemical industry?

RQ8: What telephone number would you call to reach the CAER Line?

RQ9: Are you aware that an LEPC exists in Deer Park/Pasadena?

RQ10: Which of the following communication tools are you aware of?

Method

In 1995, a U.S. southwestern city’s local emergency planning committee (LEPC) along with Heath and Abel (1996) began to survey its community residents to determine the strengths and weaknesses of its community awareness/community relations program. A second similar study was conducted in 1998 by Heath and Palenchar (2000), and a third similar study was completed in 2002 by the same authors.

A fourth such study was conducted in 2012, with parts of its findings presented at the IPR Conference in 2014. This study uses additional results not presented in the previous paper that focus on the Wally Wise campaign. Using a professional survey company, 400 telephone interviews were conducted in the same city. The survey was conducted so that men and women were equally represented and respondents needed to be at least 18 years of age. The survey instrument used a 4-point Likert scale for most questions, with strongly disagree = 1, somewhat disagree = 2, somewhat agree = 3, and strongly agree = 4. Other questions tested knowledge by asking respondents what they would do in specific events, and several questions were unprompted. Analysis includes descriptive statistics for comparison of studies.

Results

Familiarity and Knowledge about Wally

RQ1 asked residents how familiar they were with the LEPC’s costumed character named Wally (see Table 1). Fifty-five percent of Deer Park residents knew Wally in 2002. Campaign efforts have been positive, with respondents indicating a 39% increase in awareness of Wally since 1998 and a 115% increase since 1995, while 2012 shows continued increase in familiarity (60.3%).

Table 1: Familiarity with Wally

	Deer Park (N=400) 1995	Deer Park (N=400) 1998	Deer Park (N=403) 2002	Deer Park (N=400) 2012
Yes	25.5	39.5 (+54.9% from 1995)	54.8 (+114.9% from 1995) (+38.7% from 1998)	60.3 (+136.5% from 1995) (+52.7% from 1998) (+10% from 2002)
No	74.0	60.5	45.2	39.8

RQ2 asked residents what kind of animal is Wally (See Table 2). This campaign uses a turtle's natural response to danger, which is to "shelter in place," to withdraw into its shell; therefore, increased awareness of the turtle can be a useful part of the shelter-in-place campaign.

Table 2: What kind of animal is Wally?

	Deer Park (N=400) 1995	Deer Park (N=400) 1998	Deer Park (N=403) 2002	Deer Park (N=400) 2012
Turtle/ Tortoise	9.0	28.5 (+216.7% from 1995)	40.2 (+346.7% from 1995) (+41% from 1998)	28.8 (N =115) (-28.4% from 2002)
Alligator	0.5	0.0	1.5	2.0 (N=8)
Bear	0.0	0.3	< 1.0	(N=12)
Beaver	0.7	0.0	< 1.0	< 1.0 (N=2)
Bee	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0
Bug	0.3	0.3	< 1.0	< 1.0 (N =1)
Chipmunk	0.0	0.5	0.0	< 1.0 (N =1)
Coyote/Fox	0.3	0.3	0.0	< 1.0 (N=2)
Dinosaur	0.0	0.3	< 1.0	< 2.0 (N=6)
Dog	0.0	1.0	< 1.0	2.0 (N=8)
Frog	0.0	0.0	< 1.0	< 1.0 (N =1)
Gopher	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0
Green Thing	0.0	1.5	< 1.0	< 1.0 (N=2)
Hippo	0.0	0.5	0.0	< 1.0 (N =1)
Kangaroo	0.0	0.0	< 1.0	< 1.0 (N =1)
Moose	0.0	0.0	< 1.0	< 1.0 (N =1)
Owl	5.7	1.7	< 1.0	< 2.0 (N =4)
Owl	0.0	0.0	< 1.0	< 1.0 (N =3)
Penguin	-	-	-	< 1.0 (N =1)
Platypus	-	-	-	< 1.0 (N =1)
Rabbit	-	-	-	< 1.0 (N =1)

Raccoon	0.3	0.0	0.0	< 1.0 (N=1)
Rat	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0
Robot	0.0	0.0	< 1.0	0.0
Seal	0.0	0.0	< 1.0	< 1.0 (N=1)
Snake	0.0	0.0	< 1.0	0.0
Space Creature	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Squirrel	-	-	-	< 1.0 (N=1)
Walrus	0.0	0.3	0.0	< 2.0 (N=5)
Weasel	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0

Data reported were unprompted. *Percentage changes not noted for items with a less than 5% response.

The level achieved of correct awareness in 2012 dropped since 2002 and is now closer to what it was in 1998.

RQ3 asked residents about what Wally wants them to do in case of an emergency (see Table 3). In addition to being aware of and knowing what kind of animal Wally is, it is important to determine if the Wally campaign is educating residents of shelter-in-place directions. During the 1998 study there was a marked improvement in knowledge of what Wally wants people to do in case of emergency, despite the fact that the shelter-in-place concept was known by less than 4% of residents. The 2002 study (and reinforced in 2012) demonstrated a significant increase in residents' knowledge that Wally wants people to "shelter in place" in case of an emergency.

Table 3: What does Wally want people to do in the case of an emergency?

	Deer Park (N=400) 1995	Deer Park (N=400) 1998	Deer Park (N=403) 2002	Deer Park (N=400) 2012
Shelter in place	2.0	3.8	30.5	31.8 (N=127)
Go Inside/Stay Inside	4.0	21.0	7.2	7.3 (N=29)
Listen to Radio	1.5	10.3	2.2	< 2.0 (N=7)
Be WISE	N/A	N/A	2.2	< 1.0 (N=1)
Take cover/be safe	N/A	N/A	< 2.0	< 2.0 (N=6)
Be prepared/aware	-	-	-	< 2.0 (N=4)
Call 911/Get help	0.0	0.0	< 1.0	-
Don't Panic	2.0	0.0	< 1.0	-
Evacuate	0.0	0.0	< 1.0	-
Listen for sirens/alarms	N/A	N/A	< 1.0	< 2.0 (N=6)

Listen For/Follow Instructions	0.0	4.0	< 1.0	2.3 (N=9)
Turn Off AC/Heat	1.2	7.3	< 1.0	-
Watch TV	0.0	0.8	< 1.0	-
Close Windows/Door	0.0	4.8	0.0	-
Stay Off Phone	0.3	3.3	0.0	-

*Percentage changes not noted for items with a less than 5% response.

Overall, the level of awareness for 2012 is higher than previous years. Additionally, the answers are more correct for the specific shelter-in-place steps.

Shelter in Place

RQ4 asked residents what does the phrase “shelter in place” mean to them (see Table 4). As mentioned above, the term “shelter in place” is an emergency response concept that is becoming increasingly familiar within the community. More and more residents are aware of the concept, but do not know all the components of the essential message. People may have an intuitive sense of the emergency responses they would take rather than knowing the specific “shelter in place” emergency measures. The specific practices of “shelter in place” are not particularly well known, except for go inside/stay inside, but the situation is improving.

Table 4: What is “shelter in place.”

Options	Deer Park (N=400) 1995	Deer Park (N=400) 1998	Deer Park (N=403) 2002	Deer Park (N=400) 2012
Go Inside/Stay Inside	10.8	52.8 (+388.9% from 1995)	83.9 (+676.8% from 1995) (+58.9% from 1998)	83.5 (N=334 identified this option over time)
Close Windows/Doors	6.3	14.0 (+122.2% from 1995)	17.4 (+176.2% from 1995) (+24.3% from 1998)	49.3 (N=197)
Turn Off AC/Heat	4.5	14.8	16.9 (+14.2% from 1998)	56.8 (N=227)
Turn On Radio	0.3	3.5	< 2.0	4.0 (N=16)
Turn On TV	0.0	1.0	< 2.0	2.3 (N=9)
Stay Off	0.0	0.0	<1.0	<2.0 (N=5)

Phone				
Go to Deer Park LEPC website	-	-	-	<1.0 (N=1)
Other (next table)	46.5	23.0	4.7	23.0 (N=92)
Don't Know	44.5	25.75 (-42.1% from 1995)	3.7	2.8 (N=11)

* Percentage changes not noted for items with a less than 5% response.

RQ5 asked residents how they became aware of “shelter in place” as a concept (see Table 5). The workplace and from school/school children are the highest sources of knowledge about SIP. Media combined is a factor, but one has to be cautious since people often attribute knowledge to media when in fact that is not the case. However, Wally is not to be an identifiable source of SIP information as a concept.

Table 5: How residents became aware of “shelter in place” as a concept.

	Deer Park (N=400) 1995	Deer Park (N=400) 1998	Deer Park (N=389) 2002	Deer Park (N=389) 2012
Work/ Job	0.0	8.7	17.2 (+97.7% from 1998)	6.0 (N=24)
City Newsletter	N/A	N/A	15.9	3.0 (N=12)
School/Kids from School	6.5	6.0 (-7.6% from 1995)	16.2 (+149.2% from 1995) (+170% from 1998)	14.5 (N=58)
Newspaper	3.0	4.3	11.6	2.8 (N=11)
Family/Friends	0.0	3.8	7.2	3.5 (N=14)
City of Deer Park (non-specific)	< 1.0	< 1.0	5.5	12.3 (N=49)
Living Here Long Time	N/A	N/A	4.1	8.5 (N=34)
Common Sense	N/A	N/A	3.9	< 2.0 (N=6)
Alarm/PA/Siren/ Speaker	N/A	N/A	3.0	< 2.0 (N=5)
Chemical Plant - working, training	0.0	3.3	2.3	18.0 (N=72)
News, news media	-	-	-	4.5 (N=18)
TV/Radio	< 2.0	3.0	2.3	3.0 (N=12)
Advertisements	N/A	N/A	< 2.0	< 1.0 (N=2)
Brochures, pamphlet	N/A	N/A	< 2.0	< 2.0 (N=6)
Calendar	< 1.0	3.0	< 2.0	< 2.0 (N=7)

Community Meetings	N/A	N/A	< 2.0	< 1.0 (N=1)
Ballpark	N/A	N/A	< 1.0	0.0
Billboard	< 1.0	0.0	< 1.0	< 1.0 (N=1)
Chamber of Commerce	0.0	< 1.0	< 1.0	0.0
Fire Department	< 1.0	< 1.0	< 1.0	0.0
Police Department	N/A	N/A	< 1.0	0.0
Poster	< 1.0	< 1.0	< 1.0	0.0
Signs, Including Signs in Parks	0.0	2.2	< 1.0	< 2.0 (N=6)
Video	N/A	N/A	< 1.0	0.0
Wally Wise Guy	2.5	< 2.0	< 1.0	3.8 (N=15)
Water Bill	N/A	N/A	< 1.0	0.0
Book Cover	< 1.0	< 1.0	0.0	0.0
CAC	0.0	< 1.0	0.0	0.0
Grocery Bags	0.0	< 1.0	0.0	0.0
Hurricane Information	0.0	< 1.0	0.0	< 2.0 (N=4)
LEPC	< 1.0	0.0	0.0	< 2.0 (N=4)
Movie	0.0	< 1.0	0.0	0.0
Street Banner	< 2.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Don't Know/ Don't Remember	N/A	33.5	16.9	7.0 (N=28)

* Percentage changes not noted for items with a less than 5% response.

Local Emergency Planning Committee

RQ6 asked about residents' exposure to LEPC Exposure (see Table 6). On average, Deer Park residents saw about 3 types or items of LEPC activities (Mean = 3.25, SD = 2.37).

Table 6: Exposure to LEPC activities

Number of LEPC Activities	Frequency	Percent
0	55	13.8
1	50	12.5
2	64	16.0
3	58	14.5
4	60	15.0
5	47	11.8
6	26	6.5
7	18	4.5
8	10	2.5
9	7	1.8
10	5	1.3
Total	400	100.0

RQ7 asked residents if they are aware of the telephone service CAER Line, which they can call to get information about a chemical release or the chemical industry (see Table 7). Results from 2012 are the highest of all studies with slightly more than half of Deer Park residents aware of the CAER Line.

Table 7: Awareness of CAER Line.

	Deer Park (N=400) 1995	Deer Park (N=400) 1998	Deer Park (N=403) 2002	Deer Park (N=400) 2012
Yes	47.5	38.5 (-18.9% from 1995)	45.9 (-5.0% from 1995) (+23.4% from 1998)	56.0
No	52.0	59.5	54.1	44.0

RQ8 asked residents about what telephone number they would call to reach the CAER Line (see Table 8). The latest study shows a rise from 2002, but a number lower than 1998. The data suggest that increased and continuing efforts are needed to inform the public of the CAER line number.

Table 8: Knowledge of CAER Line telephone number.

	Deer Park (N=400) 1995	Deer Park (N=400) 1998	Deer Park (N=400) 2002	Deer Park (N=400) 2012
281-476- CAER	7.8	39.0 (+400.0% from 1995)	10.4 (+33.3% from 1995) (-73.3% from 1998)	18.3
281-476- CARE	2.5	13.6	< 2.0	4.0
Other	3.5	7.1	< 1.0	19.6
On Speed Dialer	3.3	11.0	11.1	16.5
Don't Know/ Don't Remember	29.3	29.2	22.1	41.5

* Percentage changes, 1995 to 2002, are not noted for items with a less than 5% response.

RQ9 asked residents if they were aware that an LEPC exists in Deer Park/Pasadena (see Table 9). Fifty-eight percent of Deer Park residents said they were aware of an LEPC in their community, which is a decrease of 14% from 1998 but an increase of 7% from the original baseline survey in 1995, and 2012 shows a rise in knowledge of LEPC over 2002.

Table 9: Awareness of LEPC in Deer Park/Pasadena.

	Deer Park (N=400) 1995	Deer Park (N=400) 1998	Deer Park (N=403) 2002	Deer Park (N=400) 2012
Yes	54.3	67.8 (+24.9% from 1995)	58.3 (+7.4% from 1995) (-14.0% from 1998)	65.0
No	44.3	32.3	41.7	35.0

Communication Tools Effectiveness

One of the goals of this research project is to increase the communication ability of the LEPC to reach citizens with messages related to their health and safety. In this communication process, the LEPC may play one of the major roles. For that reason, RQ 10 asked respondents which LEPC communication tactics they recognized (see Table 10).

Table 10: Awareness of risk communication tactics.

	Deer Park (N=400) 1995	Deer Park (N=400) 1998	Deer Park (N=403) 2002	Deer Park (N=400) 2012
Calendar w/ Photos and Emergency Information	67.8	79.0 (+16.6% from 1995)	73.2 (+8.0% from 1995) (-7.3% from 1998)	75.5
Report Card Cover w/ “SIP” Instructions	19.8	19.0 (-4.0% from 1995)	31.5 (+59.1% from 1995) (+65.8% from 1998)	26.3
Refrigerator Magnet w/ Wally	4.5	19.3	39.0 (+105.2% from 1998)	-
Computer Mouse Pads w/ Wally	N/A	5.5	6.7 (+21.8% from 1998)	9.8
LEPC Newspaper Stories	39.3	51.8 (+31.8% from 1995)	59.6 (+51.7% from 1995) (+15.1% from 1998)	45.5
Park Signs w/ Nearest Shelter Locations	37.3	34.0 (-8.8% from 1995)	48.1 (+29.0% from 1995) (+41.5% from	45.0

			1998)	
LEPC Video with "SIP" Info	7.5	7.5	9.9 (+32.0% from 1998)	16.0
Business Signs w/ "SIP" Instructions	N/A	17.0	41.9 (+146.5% from 1998)	-
Refrigerator Magnet w/ Wally	4.5	19.3	39.0 (+105.2% from 1998)	-
Shopping Bag w/ "SIP" Instructions	27.8	25.5 (-8.2% from 1995)	37.7 (+35.6% from 1995) (+47.8% from 1998)	-
Trading Cards w/ Wally	N/A	4.8	9.7 (+102.1% from 1998)	-
LEPC Web Site	N/A	N/A	4.5	14.5
Costumed Wally Wise Guy in Community Events				35.3
New Apartment/ Resident Information Packet w/ "SIP" Instructions	N/A	N/A	3.5	22.5
Computer Screen Saver w/ Wally	N/A	3.0	2.2	-

* Percentage changes, 1995 to 2002, are not noted for items with a less than 5% response.
Note: Respondents were prompted by asking whether they had seen the items.

Several communication tools seem to be successful in providing knowledge of and creating awareness of the LEPC. Wally as a character does well in this regard.

Discussion

An infrastructural approach to risk communication and FFST intersect as "society is a complex infrastructure in which information flows and opinion is at odds with and supportive of

compatible and conflicting decisions and interests. Working for enlightened choice in the face of uncertainty, risk and competing views, public relations academics and practitioners face the wall they must climb... Society grows and diminishes through the collective understanding and management of risk and uncertainty” (Heath, 2006, p. 97). This intersection of theory and area of research has important theoretical and practical implications to public relations. As such, the results of the study will be discussed in relationship to three fundamental premises of FFST.

Management Working to Bring Order to Uncertainty in a Manner that Fosters Legitimacy

One premise of FFST is management working to bring order to uncertainty in a manner that fosters legitimacy. According to Heath (2006), this is carried out through numerous management functions working to bring order to uncertainty – managing risk for the organization/client, individuals and communities that potentially bear the consequences of those risks, and for society as a whole. This is accomplished: (1) through the managements of organizations (for profit, nonprofit, and governmental) demonstrating the characteristics that foster legitimacy, such as being reflective; (2) being willing to consider and instrumentally advance others’ interests; (3) being collaborative in decision making; (4) being proactive and responsive to others’ communication and opinion needs; and (5) working to meet or exceed the requirements of relationship management, including being a good corporate citizen. “In this way, organizations come to deserve support (giving of stakes) rather than opposition (with- holding of stakes) because the organization is seen as a worthy contributor to a fully functioning society” (p. 100).

From this perspective, risk communications that create an appropriate understanding of the sense of risk in living in a community along with self-efficacy to know what to do in case of a crisis event generates a legitimate function for its public relations department and for its practices. Previous research from the longitudinal studies (see Heath, Lee, & Palenchar, 2014) showed that residents’ sense of risk had a modest reliability coefficient (2012 alpha = .61; 2002 alpha = .68; 1998 alpha = .64; 1995 alpha = .67). This variable operationalized respondents’ sense of the likely occurrence of hazards in their community. A key factor in risk studies is the expectation that something unfortunate can and will occur. Traditionally, risk communication practices have been measured to reduce sense of risk. However, this study indicates that long-term risk communication efforts work to maintain an appropriate sense of risk that something might happen. Also, the research conducted on these activities also demonstrate a reflective management working to improve risk communication infrastructures to protect health and safety.

With that community sense of risk, from an FFST perspective, the only course of action is to also provide a sense of community engagement with information and self-efficacy knowledge. Previous research from the longitudinal studies (see Heath, Lee, & Palenchar, 2014) showed that cognitive involvement was created by combining items that measured respondents’ predictions that living in the community could affect their (a) safety and (b) long-term health. Combined into a single variable, these two survey items produced a weak reliability coefficient (2012 alpha = .68; 2002 = .48; 1998 alpha = .57; 1995 alpha = .50). Previous research has used this variable to predict the likelihood that people would seek or receive communication, such as read newspapers, attend meetings, watch television programs, and talk to friends and acquaintances on topics related to some issue. The variable assumes that if people believe that an issue affects their self-interest, they become more thoughtful, are more likely to engage in communication about the topic, and tend to take actions regarding the issue.

The long-term risk communication is based on this approach, providing the important

information needed to take actions. The data from the Wally study demonstrate those efforts with mixed results. Wally risk communication efforts, as part of an overall sustained community risk communication campaign, increases the likelihood that members of the community are aware of and understand self-efficacy efforts residents can initiate in the event of a crisis. For example, the Wally risk communication campaign from 1995 – 2012 demonstrated an increase in awareness of Wally (from 25.5% to 60.3%) and that he is a turtle (from 9.0% to 28.8%), which is important because turtles go into their shell in high-risk situations, similar to shelter-in-place procedures. It also demonstrated an increase in residents' knowledge that Wally wants people to "shelter in place" in case of an emergency (from 2.0% to 31.8%). Other findings from this study, such as increased knowledge of self-efficacy measure such as shelter in place, exposure to LEPC activities, awareness of emergency response communication channels such as the CAER Line add to this discussion.

Instrumental Corporate Responsibility

Another premise of FFST is that effectively implemented corporate responsibility constitutes the core of each organization's legitimacy by meeting or exceeding the normative expectations of stakeholders. "In this way, the organization achieves that level of good that warrants its constructive role in helping make society more fully functional. To this end, the highest standards of CR are instrumental rather than symbolic" (Heath, 2006, p. 103). This premise of FFST argues that corporate responsibility "requires proactive planning and management to make the organization good by meeting or exceeding the expectations of its stakeholders and stakeholders" (p. 103).

One normative expectation of stakeholders is a proactive as opposed to a communication approach as a standard of the industry's corporate responsibility measures. At its very core, risk communication is quite possibly the most proactive element of public relations, along with issues management. The development of a long-term risk communication campaign, including the creation Wally as a cornerstone tactic, demonstrates this commitment and the results of this study demonstrate some success. The study is a clear demonstration of reaching secondary target audiences (parents and other adult community members 18+) through a sustained risk communication campaign targeted toward kindergarten to fourth grade children. While 83.5% of residents in 2012 knew that shelter in place's means go inside/stay inside (the primary direction of shelter in place) as compared to 10.8% in 1995, 14.5% of residents over 18 learned this information from Wally, second only to working/training gained at the chemical plants (18.0%).

It also demonstrates how a mix of risk communication tactics (e.g., Wally magnets, Wally mouse pads, Wally trading cards) is an integral part of effective, long-term risk communication campaigns. On average, Deer Park residents have seen about 3 types or items of LEPC activities (Mean = 3.25, SD = 2.37). Table 10 also demonstrates multiple communication tactics used by the LEPC were recognized by the respondents.

Specifically, residents' awareness of Wally from 1995 to 2012 increased 136.5% with 60.3% familiar. By 2012 almost 30% (28.8%) knew what kind of animal Wally is, a more than three-fold increase from the baseline measurements of the campaign in 1995. This campaign uses the natural response of a turtle to danger, which is to "shelter in place," to withdraw into its shell; therefore, increased awareness of the turtle can be a useful part of the shelter-in-place campaign. More important, in 2012 almost 31% (31.8%) of residents knew Wally wanted people to shelter in place during an emergency, up from just 2.0% in 1995, and most important, 83.5% of residents in 2012 knew that shelter in place's means go inside/stay inside (the primary direction

of shelter in place) as compared to 10.8% in 1995.

Sustained risk communication campaigns strategically designed from an infrastructural approach to risk communication centers on the objective measurement and assessment of risks as well as the socially constructed meaning of risk for risk bearers. “Results of these surveys suggest that the communication and planning efforts of the LEPC show steady progress toward increasing the likelihood that members of the community know the actions and policies of industry and government regarding safety and health in Deer Park” (Heath & Lee, 2012, p. 2). These findings urge organizations to continuing such efforts over a sustained period of time, and for example in this study, more work can be performed to increase community knowledge and responsiveness. This observation is especially important given the fact that the population is not static.

Organizational Communication is Vital to a Fully Functioning Society

As Heath (2006) premised, “Society is a complex of collectivities engaged in variously constructive dialogue and power resource distribution through meeting socially constructed and shared norm-based expectations whereby individuals seek to make enlightened choices in the face of risk, uncertainty, and reward/cost ambiguity” (p. 107). As demonstrated in this study, such long-term risk communication campaigns focused on improving the health and safety of community residents who live near chemical manufacturing facilities is one part of the challenge of “developing an organization that can participate as a responsible rhetor adding value to the beliefs, attitudes, and values that define and direct individual and collective behavior” (p. 107).

This is accomplished as part of the management function in numerous manners, according to FFST, including but not limited to being willing to consider and instrumentally advance others’ interests and being proactive and responsive to others’ communication and opinion needs. This is demonstrated by community residents’ awareness of risk communication message and public relations tactics while at the same time awareness of the sponsoring organization is not necessarily as important to residents taking protective measures. For example, residents are aware that an LEPC exists in Deer Park/Pasadena. Fifty-eight percent of Deer Park residents said they were aware of an LEPC in their community, which is a decrease of 14% from 1998 but an increase of 7% from the original baseline survey in 1995. We suggest that this decrease might be a result from Deer Park LEPC’s efforts during the eight years of this longitudinal study to educate community residents about appropriate emergency response actions rather than to promote the LEPC. Thus, we speculate that residents are paying more attention to the components of the message rather than the messenger.

Conclusion

Overall, this paper provides detailed risk communication findings and discussion that can be used toward theory refinement and development, applied applications, and professional standards. It also demonstrates several premises of FFST in relation to risk communication and public relations in practice. This paper descriptively begins the discussion to demonstrate ways organizations come to deserve support rather than opposition for its manufacturing operations because the organization is seen as a worthy contributor to a fully functioning society by both its implementation and measurements of long-term risk communication activities.

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**Social amplification of problem chain-recognition effect on risk policies:
Escalated issue spillover from government distrust and media use**

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Abstract

Advanced management of risk controversies is of pressing need because risk controversies cause tangible and intangible losses to society as a whole. The current study tested the problem chain-recognition effect on policies involving highly-publicized risk controversies. Problem chain-recognition effect refers to the perceptual tendency that people are likely to recognize similar or related issues to an identified problem as problematic because problems are often connected together and embedded within a larger network of problems. This effect is easily triggered when an individual actively seeks, exchanges, and discusses information about a perceived problem. For this study, an online survey of 748 citizens in a Chinese society was conducted, employing Kim and Grunig's (2011) situational theory of problem solving and Kaspersen et al.'s (1998) social amplification of risks. Results indicated an existing problem-chain recognition effect from the US beef import policy (a food risk controversy) to the policy concerning nuclear power plant construction (a technological risk controversy) among the hot-issue public built around the US beef issue. The problem-chain recognition effect led to the public's paying attention to information on the nuclear power plant controversy but not to their seeking behavior for such information. The effect was amplified by individuals' low trust in the government rather than their level of media use. Theoretical and practical implications suggested by the findings were discussed for strategic risk management and a better understanding of hot-issue publics in risk situations.

Introduction

Risks are potential threats that cause losses to the affected party when the threats are realized. Threats are real but with uncertainty. Ironically, even as most nations in the globe have expended effort in the advancement of risk knowledge and technological breakthroughs, risk regulators have faced more, rather than fewer, challenges in managing risk controversies (e.g., nuclear power or food safety). Many members of the public perceive the controversial risk they are exposed to as more salient than in the past due to recent incidents, information flux of formal and informal sources with limited understanding, new definitions or meanings of the risk resulting from changing social norms, and declining public trust in government as a prevailing global trend (Van de Walle, Van Roosbroek, Bouckaert, 2008; Edelman, 2014). Concerned individuals become active publics who are likely to amplify public risk perception through initiatives to acquire, select, and exchange certain risk-related information with others. Immense risk concern leads to social and political pressure (e.g., disputes and confrontations, conflicts, public resentment, and social distrust) attributed to poor risk management and harmful consequences to the society as a whole. A nuclear power plant policy in Taiwan illustrates this point very well. The construction of Taiwan's fourth nuclear power plant began in 1980 but has been halted four times due to public disputes. The constant change of policy has resulted in an additional budget of more than 500 billion dollars (excluding other relevant costs), which will be paid by all tax payers if the plant is completed. There will be a loss of 330 billion dollars if the plant construction is terminated (Central News Agency, 2013). In addition, the changing policy has significantly diminished public trust in the government as the risk regulator.

A more important issue associated with risk controversies is a possible tendency that individuals' problem recognition of a risk triggers their problem recognition of a relevant or similar risk: the so-called problem-chain recognition effect. According to Kasperson et al.'s (1988), social amplification of risk (i.e., the unduly amplified perception of a risk) creates secondary impacts (e.g., enduring perception of and attitude toward a risk or stigmatization of the risk or risk manager) that may spread to relevant or similar issues, other parties, distant locations, or future generations. If the problem-chain recognition effect does exist as a facet of people's social psychology in risk perception that directly affects their response to risk policies, it requires further examination in theory and practice. The antecedents of such an effect should also be explored to fully address and build the effect into risk management.

The current study, therefore, aimed to test the problem-chain recognition effect in two controversial risk policies (i.e., US beef import resumption and the nuclear power plant construction) that attracted intensive media coverage in a Chinese society by applying the situational theory of problem solving (Kim & Grunig, 2011). It first investigated whether the effect is present in the two risk situations. It then scrutinized the relationship between the effect and active information acquisition of the chain risk. Lastly, it examined the roles of individuals' trust in the government and media use in the problem-chain recognition effect, if existent. The study contributes to the advancement of risk communication for the government and risk regulators. It also enriches the understanding of hot-issue publics in their communication behaviors.

Conceptualization

Risk Controversies

Individuals face numerous risks in their everyday lives. How they perceive a risk affects their (communicative and behavioral) reactions to the risk. Risk policies that fail to consider

people's risk perceptions result in public outrage, policy opposition, and negative affect (e.g., anger and distrust) toward the risk regulator (Frewer, Miles, & Marsh, 2002; Visschers & Siegrist, 2008). As Slovic (1999) explained, conflicts and controversies in managing risks are created by individuals' risk perceptions and psychological tendencies to reinforce distrust in risk situations, and are amplified by media and social changes. Risks (e.g., technological, food, and environmental risks) are complex, uncertain, and difficult to evaluate, leading to limited risk knowledge and subjective risk assessments (i.e., risk perception) by individuals, who in turn form their own views of how the risk should be managed. Media change refers to the advancement of information communication technologies that allow the media and individuals to instantly and widely spread news (especially bad news that demonstrates poor risk mismanagement) from all over the world to others. Social changes include the rise of activist groups and changes of values. The recent growth of powerful special interest groups bears witness to their effectiveness in using their own experts and the media to advocate their concerns and position to the general public to influence risk policy debates and decisions. The lobbying process is facilitated by changes of values (e.g., environmental sustainability outweighs economic development) among the public. These media and social changes are compounded by the fact that human societies tend to manage risks "within an adversarial legal system" that pits expert against expert through contradicting each other's risk assessments, and which further destroys public trust in the risk management (p. 698). Consequently, Slovic (1999) contended that when distrust is present, risk management based on scientific risk assessments can only feed public concerns by revealing bad news and contradicting evidence. Acceptance of risk policies is highly dependent on public trust and confidence in the risk manager (e.g., industry and institutions) and the risk regulator (i.e., the government) (van Dongen, Claassen, Smid & Timmermans, 2013).

Risk Policies of US Beef Imports and the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in Taiwan

These two chosen policies share some similarities. First, they have long been controversial in Taiwan for the prominent risks they pose to society, creating challenges for the administration, regardless of which party is in power. The two risks are of salient political meaning. These are signature issues for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) which is strongly anti-beef imports and anti-nuclear power. In addition, both policies became a heated issue again under the Kuomintang Party's (KMT) administration.

The import of US beef has been an intermittent policy issue in Taiwan since 2003, when mad cow disease was found in Washington State, posing communication challenges to the Taiwan and US governments. When the government's proposal to resume imports was sent to the legislative Yuan (US Congress equivalent) for policy amendment in February of 2012, the subject instantly became a hot issue again on the island. Without prior communication with citizens about the proposal, the issue attracted extensive publicity and large-scale protests by those concerned about beef safety. Beef imports (representing the economic interest of US beef farmers) were demanded by the US government as the prerequisite for restarting discussions on the ratification of a trade and investment framework agreement (TIFA) between the US and Taiwan. The proposed ban-lifting also served as a gesture to repair the relationship between the two governments, which had been weakened by the former DPP-led Taiwan regime striving for independence from China. The controversy was, therefore, not simply a risk issue but also a political and economic one. It was settled five months later by the passage of a regulation allowing imports under certain conditions, but this resulted in negative societal consequences

(i.e., political disturbances, strong public resentment, and public distrust in the government).

The construction of Taiwan's fourth nuclear plant (History of Taipower Company, 1990) was approved in 1980 to ensure the island's electricity supply. However, nuclear power has been controversial and the policy has been largely debated. The construction was first stopped in 1985 due to strong opposition from the local community at the facility site. Its second construction cessation was in 2000 with a shift of political power (from KMT to DPP) in the government. The construction was resumed the following year and completion was estimated for 2015. However, the accident at Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant triggered by the tsunami following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 caused overwhelming concerns about nuclear power safety in the minds of Taiwanese citizens. By the advocacy of anti-nuclear activist groups, the controversy over the plant became a heated issue again in the public communication arena, attracting extensive media coverage and leading to political conflicts and large-scale protests. Under immense political pressure, the KMT-led government decided to stop plant construction again in April, 2014.

Trust in the Government, Risk Perceptions, Risk Information Behaviors, and Risk Avoidance

Effects of trust on risk perceptions. Risk perceptions are individuals' subjective judgments of the probability (or uncontrollability) of occurrence of an event with consequent loss and of the severity of the loss (Griffin, Yang, ter Huurne, Boerner, Ortiz, & Dunwoody, 2008; Slovic, Fischhoff & Lichtenstein, 2000; Yeung & Morris, 2006) using facts, formal logic, basic heuristics (i.e., availability, representativeness, adjustment and anchoring; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), and/or the affect heuristic. Because of their direct impact on people's risk decisions and subsequent behaviors, risk perceptions have been the main focus of risk management research since the 1970s (Sjöberg, 2004). In general, people's perceptions of risk are socially constructed, affected by political, economic, cultural (e.g., worldviews and values), and psychological factors (e.g., affect and trust) (Slovic, 1999).

Trust in the risk manager and regulators plays a vital role in public acceptance of risk policies (Slovic, 1993; Siegrist, Earle, Gutscher, & Keller, 2005). Risk management is a social matter that involves various parties (e.g., the government, the industry, experts, the general public, and the media) and relationships and interactions among the parties rely significantly on trust (Slovic, 1999). Many empirical studies have revealed a strong correlation between distrust—low confidence in the government—and a higher level of risk perception (see Earle, 2010 for a detailed review), which, in turn, leads to negative affect (e.g., fear, worry, and anger) toward the risk (Griffin, Neuwirth, Dunwoody, & Giese, 2004; Griffin et al., 2008). Negative affect further triggers seeking and processing of risk information (Kuttschreuter, 2006; ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2009; Kellens, Zaalberg, & Maeyer, 2012) and risk avoidance (i.e., an opposition to a policy that accepts the risk by managing it; Flynn, Burns, Mertz, & Slovic, 1992; Sjöberg, 1999). The influence of trust on perception and acceptance of risks is positively moderated by individuals' unfamiliarity of the risks when they need to rely on cues for risk assessment (Frewer et al., 2002; Siegrist & Cvetkovich, 2000). Furthermore, trust in the government is the prerequisite for effective risk communication that aims to facilitate people's informed decisions of the risks and preventive behaviors (Kasperson et al., 1992).

Trust asymmetry—the fact that trust is much easier to destroy than to gain—is a phenomenon of human psychology that makes the issue of trust in risk management more challenging (Slovic, 1999). Trust asymmetry results from several psychological tendencies. First, people are more attentive to negative (trust-destroying) events than positive ones. Second, they

weight those negative events as more important than positive ones. Third, they view sources of negative news as being more credible than those of positive news. And finally, distrust tends to “reinforce and perpetuate” distrust (p. 698). The media system (as the gatekeeper so that trust-destroying events are extensively publicized) and the political system (where, in a democracy, experts are pitted against experts and people with various interests formulate their own definition of risk) further foster public distrust.

Dimensions of trust. Trust in the context of risk management has become one of the major research focuses of the past decades. However, by employing various theoretical approaches, there is no consensus on functions and determinants of trust among researchers. For example, Levine (1991) proposed five core elements of trust, namely perceived competence, objectivity (i.e., absence of biased information), consistency (between arguments and behaviors), faith (i.e., “good will” of the source), and fairness (by considering all viewpoints). Kasperon et al. (1992) proposed four components similar to Levine’s: competence, predictability, commitment (i.e., the extent the trustee is committed to the goal, mission, or obligation), and caring (i.e., the extent to which the trustee shows concern to people who trust him or her). Metlay (1999) argued that trust is a two-dimensional concept: affective beliefs (i.e., trustworthiness) about and competence in institutional behaviors. Similarly, Poortinga and Pidgeon (2003) examined public trust in government in risk cases and proposed two trust dimensions—general trust and scepticism. The general trust dimension concerns trust-related aspects, such as competence, care, fairness, and openness. The scepticism dimension concerns how a risk policy is brought about and enacted, such as through distorted facts, policy changes without good reasons, and industrial influence in policy making for risks. Finally, Earle (2010) conducted a systematic review of 132 empirical studies of trust in risk management published from 1986 to 2009 and argued that trust in all the reviewed studies could be conceptualized in either one of two ways: relational and calculative trust. Relational trust is based on “the relations between the trusting person and the other” with “indicators of intentions” (e.g., value similarity and positive affect) as its antecedents; while calculative trust (i.e., confidence) refers to “past behavior of the other and/or constraints on future behavior” and was determined by “indicators of abilities” (e.g., track record or expertise) (p. 568). All the proposed trust components in the risk management context are similar to those (i.e., competence, integrity, and dependability) used in the relationship management context in public relations (Huang, 1997; Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Media effects on risk perception and distrust in the government. News media serve as the main source of risk information (Tonn et al., 1990; Anderson & Larson, 1995). Ample evidence shows that media portraits of risk with information affect individuals’ knowledge and perception of, attitude to, and (possibly) behavior toward risk (Flynn, Slovic, & Kunreuther, 2001; McComas, 2006; Roxanne, Lewis & Tyshenko, 2009; Wahlberg & Sjöberg, 2000) because most people do not have direct experience with the risk (Siegrist & Cvetkovich, 2000) or are unable to validate the information due to limited literacy (Carducci, Alfani, Sassi, Cinini, & Calamusa, 2011). Several theoretical frameworks have been employed in investigating the function of media in perceived risks. Bandura’s (1973, 1977, 1983) social learning theory or social cognitive theory (1986) was largely used by psychological media researchers (e.g., Felson, 1996; Wiegman & Sjöberg, 2002). The core tenet of both theories is that reality is socially learned or constructed by symbols disseminated by social agents (e.g., the mass media) through people’s cognitive process (Bandura, 2002). In risk communication, the media have the potential for affecting people’s risk perceptions by conveying qualitative statements that transform scientific figures into personal stories with dramatic details and vivid imagery, which provoke

emotions and resonance. It should be noted that empirical research finds support for Tyler and Cook's (1984) impersonal impact hypothesis, which argues that media coverage of risk information largely influences individuals' risk perceptions of societal risks rather than personal risks, which they usually have direct experience with (Coleman, 1993; Wiegman & Gutteling, 1995). That is, higher-order information (i.e., personal experience) suppresses low-order information (hearsay from friends or relatives or public information in the media) in risk perceptions and judgments.

Tversky and Kahneman's (1974) availability heuristic and the affect heuristic (Finucane, Alhakami, Slovic, & Johnson, 2000; Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001; Slovic, 1999) provide another attribute to the relationship between media and risk perception. Availability heuristic is a cognitive schema applied by people to estimate the probability of risks with uncertainty. When people find an event highly available (i.e., the occurrence of a particular event is easily recalled), they tend to perceive themselves as highly likely to be exposed to it. When media extensively report a risk, the public tends to form a higher level of risk perception or risk recognition as a problem when they are exposed to and retain the risk message via media use. Affect serves as a common heuristic used for evaluating risk dread. Media may influence individuals' risk perception when they recall the vivid imagery of risks that provoke (positive or negative) affect in news stories or entertaining programming and associate such affect with the risk in the cognitive process.

Kasperson et al.'s (1988) social amplification of risk (SAR) provides another perspective that explains media effect on risk perceptions. As a comprehensive tool for analyzing risks in social contexts, the theory posits that consequences of a risk (e.g., public reactions to the risk) can be amplified by social stations through information and response mechanisms. Social stations can be individuals, groups, organizations, or media that generate, transmit, and interpret the "filtered" information on a risk event. Information receipts may also become active in risk amplification, thereby serving as another social station. Three information attributes are the sources of SAR: volume (i.e., the amount of information flow), dramatization (i.e., "the degree to which information is disputed"), and symbolic connotations (i.e., specific terms or concepts used in the risk information) (Kasperson et al., 2000, p. 241). Response mechanism involves "the social, institutional, and cultural contexts in which the risk information is interpreted, its meaning diagnosed and values attached," including heuristics and values, social group relationships, signal values, and stigmatization (Kasperson et al., 2000, p. 243). SAR, contended by Kasperson et al. (1988), spawns behavioral responses, which in turn, result in secondary impacts, such as enduring mental perceptions, local impacts on business sales, social disorder, lower public acceptance of technologies, and erosion of public trust in social institutions.³ The impacts triggered by SAR tend to spread or "ripple" to other parties, distant locations, and future generations that cause substantial consequences of risk beyond the affected individuals.

Slovic (1999) pointed out that media foster public trust in risk management because they are prone to report bad news (i.e., trust-destroying events or accidents) that reinforce or even amplify the perceived distrust in the minds of the public. All in all, media can amplify the level of risk perception (or problem recognition) and distrust in the government with extensive coverage focusing on certain risk-related information (Berger, 2003; Slater & Rasinski, 2005). Therefore, the media have the potential to create a hot-issue public around a risk who are "active only on a single problem that involves nearly everyone in the population and that has received

³ See Kasperson et al., (1998) for a complete list of proposed secondary impacts.

extensive media coverage” (Grunig, 1997, p. 13). This power of media is especially significant in crises or emergencies where the media can grab audiences’ attention to a single risk problem, such as the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) or the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident.

Situational Theory of Problem Solving and Risk Information Behaviors

As an extension of Grunig’s (1966, 1997) situational theory of publics and the generalized situational theory (Kim & Grunig, 2011; Kim & Krishna, 2014), the situational theory of problem solving (STOPS) posits that people’s activeness in information behaviors (i.e., information acquisition, information selection, and information sharing) for solving a problematic situation is a result of their motivation to fix the problematic situation (i.e., situational motivation in problem solving)—measured by their problem recognition, involvement recognition, and constraint recognition— and their activation of cognitive frames. The situational theory of problem solving serves as an effective tool for predicting individuals’ risk information behaviors based on their perception of the risk situation because of the interrelation between risk management concepts and public relations concepts. Evidence shows that people’s risk perceptions are closely related to their recognition of the risk as a problem while perceived dread of and affect toward risks are related to involvement recognition (Aldoory, 2001; Anderson, 1995). Self-efficacy in the framework of risk information seeking and processing (FRIS) proposed by ter Huurne (2008) is interrelated with constraint recognition. As FRIS argues that individuals’ risk perception, affect toward the risk, and self-efficacy lead to their seeking and processing of risk information, situational motivation in the situation theory of problem solving predicts one’s risk information behaviors.

Problem-Chain Recognition Effect on Risk Perception

Kim, Shen, and Morgan (2011) discovered the problem-chain recognition effect in the health communication context of organ donation; that is, when an individual is aware of an anchoring issue problem (i.e., shortage of organ donation) and motivated in fixing the problem, he or she is likely to perceive a related or similar issue (i.e., shortage of bone marrow donors and shortage of egg donors) problematic through their engagement in information seeking for solutions. They explained the effect based on the tendency of issues being tied together in clusters and their solutions being “recyclable to the linked problems” (p. 176). Evidence of previous research seems to suggest that the effect may also be present in risk evaluation in certain contexts. For example, participants of Poortinga and Pidgeon’s (2003) study reported a highly similar level of low public trust in government across five rather different risk situations (i.e., climate change, radiation from mobile phones, radioactive waste, genetically modified food, and genetic testing) that contributed to a highly similar level of trust in each of the risk policies among them. The problem-chain recognition effect (i.e., trust in policies for five different risks) is triggered by the trust in the government (i.e., the risk regulator) and may be well explained by the associative mode of the dual-processing model of judgment. Smith and DeCoster (2000) proposed two modes of processing that link to two human memory systems with distinct properties (for detailed discussion, see Schacter & Tulving, 1994): associative and rule-based modes. Associative processing mode, based on the slow-learning memory system, takes the form of “pattern-completion or similarity-based” characteristics or affective reactions (i.e., representations or stereotypes) of previous experiences to automatically fill in the information for the current situation (Smith & DeCoster, 2000, p. 111). Rule-based processing mode, based on

the fast-learning system, uses “symbolically represented and intentionally accessed knowledge as rules to guide processing” (p. 111). When people have limited capability of and/or little motivation in risk judgment as it is usually the case in reality, they engage in associative processing mode. In this vein, as they perceive one risk policy extensively covered by the media as problematic and are motivated to solve the problem, they are likely to recognize another widely-publicized risk policy made by the same government as problematic and closely relevant. The problem-chain recognition effect is likely to be amplified by individuals’ level of trust in the government and their media use. Thus, it is arguable that secondary impacts of the amplified risk may ripple outward to similar or related risks or issues in addition to other parties, remote locations, and future generations.

The reviewed literature suggests the following research questions and hypotheses:

- RQ1: Does a problem-chain recognition effect exist in risk communication?
- H1: The more situationally motivated people are over the US beef import policy, the higher level of problem recognition (H1a) and involvement recognition (H1b) they have toward the nuclear power plant policy, both of which lead to their information seeking (H1c/H1e) about and information attention (H1d/H1f) to the nuclear power plant policy.
- RQ2: What is the function of trust in government in the problem-chain recognition effect on highly publicized risks?
- H2: Low trust in government leads to a higher level of problem-chain recognition effect leading from the US beef import policy to the nuclear power plant policy (H2a/H2b), which stimulates more information seeking (H2c/H2e) about and information attention (H2d/H2f) to the nuclear power plant policy.
- RQ3: What is the function of media use in the problem-chain recognition effect on highly publicized risks?
- H3: More frequent media use leads to a higher level of problem recognition chain effect leading from the US beef import policy to the nuclear power plant policy (H3a/H3b), which stimulates more information seeking (H3c/H3e) about and information attention (H3d/H3f) to the nuclear power plant policy.

Method

Participants

A total of 748 citizens in a Chinese society participated in an online survey. Participants were recruited by faculty members at three universities in Taiwan. Solicitation messages with the online survey link were sent to faculty members, staff and undergraduate students and their acquaintances. Participants were also encouraged to forward the invitation to their network friends on social media sites. The final sample consisted of 28.5% (n = 213) females and 71.5% (n = 535) males. Age distributions was 27.9% (n = 209) aged 18-19, 38.5% (n = 288) 20-29, 16% (n = 120) 30-39, 8% (n = 60) 40-49, 5.1% (n = 38) 50-59, 2.9% (n = 22) 60-69, and 1.5% (n=11) 70-79.

Measures

The main hypotheses and RQs were about problem chain-recognition effect which is captured through the variables in the situational theory of problem solving (Kim & J. Grunig, 2011). They are problem-specific *situational motivation* of an anchored target issue and *problem recognition, involvement recognition, information seeking* and *information attending* of the related issue but not salient as the anchoring issue. We selected the anchoring issue as one of the

most recent major hot-issues in Taiwan, that of US beef safety and the policy to resume the imports, which attracted massive media attention and public protests. We then selected another risk policy issue but drawing less media spotlight, the issue of constructing Taiwan's fourth nuclear power plant and its impact on humans and environment. The problem chain-recognition was expected to be observed between US beef safety issue and the nuclear power plant construction issue; from a major safety issue to a less-salient safety issue related to the nuclear power plant.

Distrust in government was evaluated using Hon and Grunig's (1999) measures on trust. Seven measures on dependability, integrity, and competence were used. All measures were summed and dichotomized using median (3.5) to classify samples into high and low government trust groups to test RQ2 and its hypotheses. Another major research question is to investigate media-triggered risk amplification of the related other safety issue. The effect of media exposure was assessed by the amount of time spent on all types of media use: Internet participative activities such as reading online news and sharing opinions on various issues, newspaper and TV/Radio media consumption on political news, economic news, social news, and science and technology. The media use measures were all parceled into a single variable and then dichotomized using median (4.0). Two subgroups of high and low media use groups were developed to test the RQ3 and its hypotheses. All these conceptual variables were measured with a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = "not at all" to 7 = "extremely").

Analysis

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and multi-group SEM were conducted to test the hypotheses using EQS. First, we constructed single composite measures for the five key constructs in problem chain-recognition effect. Figure 1 shows the first set of hypotheses (RQ1, H1a-H1f) which were specified. Figure 2 summarizes the five key variables tested for differential problem-chain recognition effect by the level of government trust (RQ2, H2a-H2f). Figure 3 summarizes the key variables of the problem chain-recognition effect by the extent of total media use (RQ3, H3a-H3f). In model evaluation, we used the most widely used index, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), which is considered robust when it exceeds .90 or higher.

Results

The hypotheses and research questions and the standardized beta coefficients from the estimated from the tested structural models are summarized in Figure 1-3. All structural models reached a good model fit (i.e., CFI \geq .90). The first set of hypotheses (H1a-H1f) was tested using the total N = 733. Whereas the total sample size was N = 748, the subsequent analyses after constructing two groups for trust and media use, the sample sizes were reduced after the Listwise deletion for non-response participants for some survey measures. All hypotheses except H1c (from problem recognition to information seeking) were supported. In problem chain-recognition effect, the most important hypothesis is H1a and H1b, the paths from the situational motivation of the anchoring issue to the problem and involvement recognition about the related issue. As summarized, there was an observed significant effect from the situational motivation of the US beef import issue to problem recognition (.24, $p < .001$) and involvement recognition (.44, $p < .001$) of the fourth nuclear power plant building issue. Therefore, for RQ1 the test results show the presence of the problem chain-recognition effect. The paths from problem and involvement recognition to information seeking and information attending were supported except H1c between problem recognition and information seeking (-.11, $p < .01$). Careful examination of

Pearson's correlation coefficients suggests that there is positive correlation between problem recognition and information seeking (.15) but in the structural model with controlling theoretical variables there is a weak opposite effect. This could be due to the weak relationship between the two variables and/or due to the issue-specific characteristic. However, all the other predictions were consistently supported and show strong positive path coefficient: H1d, problem recognition to information attending (.54, $p < .001$), H1e, involvement recognition to information seeking (.18, $p < .001$) and H1f, involvement recognition to information attending. Thus, it is suggested that in general the problem chain-recognition effect is present strongly between the two safety issues.

[Insert Figure 1]

The second set of hypotheses and RQ2 question the function of trust in government in the problem-chain recognition effect on highly publicized risks. The government trust was measured using 6 survey items (Hon & Grunig, 1999) and was then parceled to a single composite variable. We first conducted two separate SEM tests for two groups. The high trust group reached a good model fit (CFI = .92, $n = 353$) and similarly the low trust group was (CFI = .92, $n = 371$). Then we conducted multi-group tests between high and low government trust publics. Specifically, in multi-group SEM analysis, we posed equality constraints for all six hypotheses between two groups and examined whether each path coefficient was statistically equivalent in its effect size between groups. We summarized the path coefficient for both groups and then reported the significance testing results in Figure 2.

[Insert Figure 2]

The results showed as predicted a significant difference between situational motivation to problem recognition (H2a, .16 of government trust group vs. .32 of government distrust group, $p = .02$). There is no difference in the path between situational motivation to involvement recognition (H2b). In the remaining H2c-Hf, we expect little or no difference between the two groups. These path estimates just indicate the correlations between situational perception to motivated information acquisition tendency, which were not central to the problem chain-recognition effect. Therefore, we found that there is a spillover effect or escalated risk perception from the major safety hot-issue to another safety issue. Government distrust tends to problematize citizens' problem recognition once they have recognized and been motivated to think about a hot-issue. It implies a punishing effect of lack of government trust when major hot-issues arise through mass media and amplifies the risk perception and imposes greater governance risk for related issues.

The third set of hypotheses and RQ3 examined the function of media use in the problem-chain recognition effect on highly publicized risks. We expected that more frequent media use may lead to a higher level of problem-chain recognition effect of the US beef import policy on the nuclear power plant policy (H3a/H3b), which leads to more information seeking (H3c/H3e) and information attention (H3d/H3f) about the nuclear power plant policy.

As in RQ2 and H2a-H2f, we first conducted two separate SEM tests for two groups. The high media use group reached a good model fit (CFI = .92, $n = 353$) and similarly the low trust group was (CFI = .92, $n = 371$). The path coefficients are summarized in Figure 3. We then conducted multi-group tests between high and low total media use publics to test whether media use would amplify problem chain-recognition of a related safety issue.

[Insert Figure 3]

Results indicated that there are no significant differences in H3a and H3b, which are the two main paths to observe the existence of the problem chain-recognition effect. Although the remaining four hypotheses (H3c, H3d, H3f) were significantly different, the differences are tangential to the problem chain-recognition effect (H3a and H3b). Therefore, it was concluded that the media use alone does not amplify the risk perception of a hot-issue public to other similar issues. In summary, the government distrust held by citizens imposes greater risks to government as prior history of distrust tends to amplify problem chain-recognition of related safety issues. The issue spillover effect would be a problem for government and its leaders by incurring greater social risks and governance costs as it spins off to another set of related issues.

Discussion

Unlike most situational theory research that focuses on identifying active communicators in a given situation, the current study extended the situational theory of problem solving's utility to uncover the problem chain-recognition effect in risk situations, information behaviors of hot-issue publics resulting from the effect, and the effect's possible antecedents (public distrust in the government and personal media use) in a non-Western context. In addition, the study explored the role of organizational trust in risk situations rather than in the frequently examined situations of crises (e.g., Huang, 2008) or employee communication (e.g., Thomas, Zolin, & Hartman, J. L. (2009) in the public relations literature. Data supported most hypotheses that suggested an existing problem-chain recognition effect from the beef-import policy to the policy for the nuclear power plant construction, which led to the public's paying attention to the policy-related information but not to their seeking behavior for such information. The problem-chain recognition effect was amplified by individuals' low trust in the government rather than their level of media use.

The problem-chain recognition effect reported for hot-issue publics provides evidence of such an effect in highly publicized risk situations, which extends Kim et al.'s (2011) finding. More importantly, this finding supports our assumption that risk amplification (by extensive media coverage) can introduce not only substantial temporal and geographical extension of impacts (Kasperson et al., 1988) but also substantial topical extension (i.e., from an anchoring risk to another similar or related risk) of impacts. In addition, this finding enriches our understanding of the hot-issue public after the media attention subsides. Building on Aldoory and Grunig's (2012) argument, such a public will not only remain aware of the hot issue after the coverage fades but is also likely to form problem recognition of issues relevant or similar to the hot one, especially when a contextual similarity (e.g., distrust in the government in this study) that associates the issues together in a chain exists. Practically, the proven effect suggests that risk communicators for government policies should take a more proactive approach to anticipate the possible consequences on other related or similar issues. The problem-chain recognition effect serves as a crucial contextual factor in risk management. When such an effect is possible to occur, risk managers should apply to more participative process of delivering risk decision and their communication strategies should be engaging and dialogic.

Extending previous studies of its influence on risk perception, our findings highlighted the vital role of organizational trust in the problem chain-recognition effect (as the effect's antecedent) in risk situations. When distrust in a government is high, publics become highly

motivated in solving a risk situation and are very likely to consider other similar risk situations regulated by the government as problematic. This implies that perceived trust is the essential asset of a risk regulator and that the government should always make great efforts in trust maintenance and cultivation. Hon and J. Grunig's (1999) dimensions of trust (i.e., integrity, dependability, and capability) explicate the nuances of trust cultivation. That is, the government should demonstrate fairness, responsibility, and the ability to solve problems for its citizens. In particular, perceived commitment, knowledge and expertise, openness and honesty, and concern and care contribute to perceived trust in government in risk communication (Peters, Covello, & McCallum, 1997). Furthermore, individuals' risk perception is subjective and therefore, likely to be diverse in democratic societies with open information and multi-cultural composition. Therefore, the government in practice should acknowledge the diverse ideological approaches and viewpoints among publics in risk management, legitimate their risk perceptions, listen to their concerns, establish engaging discussions with them on risk issues, and incorporate their participation in risk decision making. It should be noted that public engagement in risk communication and/or in risk decision-making does not guarantee the building of public trust (Petts, 2008). Petts further contended that the following elements should be explicitly informed in the engagement process to regain trust: identity of those engaged and their representing interests, an open and collaborative discussion frame, and a direct and clear relationship between engagement and how the risk decision is to be made. Specifically, the government should make risk decisions based on informed risk characterization through an analytic-deliberative process that satisfies the government, interested parties, and affected parties by well representing their viewpoints and information, properly consulting them, and allowing their participation to affect how the risk is defined and understood (Fineberg & Stem, 1996). In addition, Poortinga and Pidgeon (2003) contended that facilitating desirable interaction between the risk regulator and the citizen is also fruitful to cultivate trust. This well reflects the contribution of public relations in risk management.

In contrast with the finding of Kim et al. (2011), the characteristics of the nuclear power plant issue and the context in which the issue was highly debated in 2011-2014 provide plausible explanations of the insignificant association between the effect and information seeking. First, the fourth nuclear power plant construction has been a prominent controversy in Taiwan for several decades. Nearly every adult in Taiwan has been exposed to this issue via media reports, advocates, or political discussions, or personal conversations with friends and relatives. Most people who are interested in the controversy have a good level of familiarity with it. Second, possible risk decisions (i.e., problem solutions) seem clear and limited; that is, either to allow the government to complete the construction so that energy shortage can be avoided by using nuclear power, or to demand the government terminates the construction and explores alternative sources of energy (e.g., solar energy). Third, the issue regained momentum following the disastrous Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident. The risk event, therefore, became the dominant risk signal that people recall and associate with in risk judgments and reactions. As a result, seeking additional information becomes of little necessity even if one recognizes the current policy as problematic.

The unexpected weak effect of media use on the problem chain-recognition effect might be explained by the associative mode of processing. Evidence of the problem chain-recognition effect, and the contribution to the effect of public distrust in the government, suggests that participants engage in associative processing based on their distrust in the government to infer that the nuclear power plant policy is problematic. Thus, the impact of individuals' media use in

the process is weak. Another explanation is to do with the saturation coverage by news media on the Island. Taiwan has seven 24/7 non-stop TV news channels that predominantly cover local issues (Fuchs, 2014). Considering Taiwan is a small sovereign state with a population of 13 million people, each piece of news can be aired at least once in every hour on a single day (Fuchs, 2014). Hot news items on the media agenda would in fact be reported multiple times in every hour for several days. Thus, the Taiwan TV audience is not required to spend much time in the media to be aware and have a good understanding of the important news of the day.

This study had some limitations. Principle among these was the use of a non-representative sample. Even though we managed the age make-up of the sample to largely reflect that of the general population, the sample does limit the generality of our findings. In addition, the issues we selected for this study were hot risk controversies (the US beef imports and the building of the fourth nuclear power plant) with a long history, which had been widely discussed by the media, the government, opinion leaders in the public arena and by one's friends and relatives via interpersonal communication channels. This may be why the findings did not show the salient significance of the media use difference. These limitations do not diminish the significance of the research, but shed light on future research directions. Studies on problem chain-recognition employing a random sample are necessary to test the generality of the findings. A promising research direction can be to further explore the influence of media use on the problem chain-recognition effect in risk situations that are emerging and with limited media coverage or in other types of situations. Another direction is to explore the influence of distrust on the problem chain-recognition effect on issues related to corporate social behaviors.

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Problem Chain-Recognition Effect

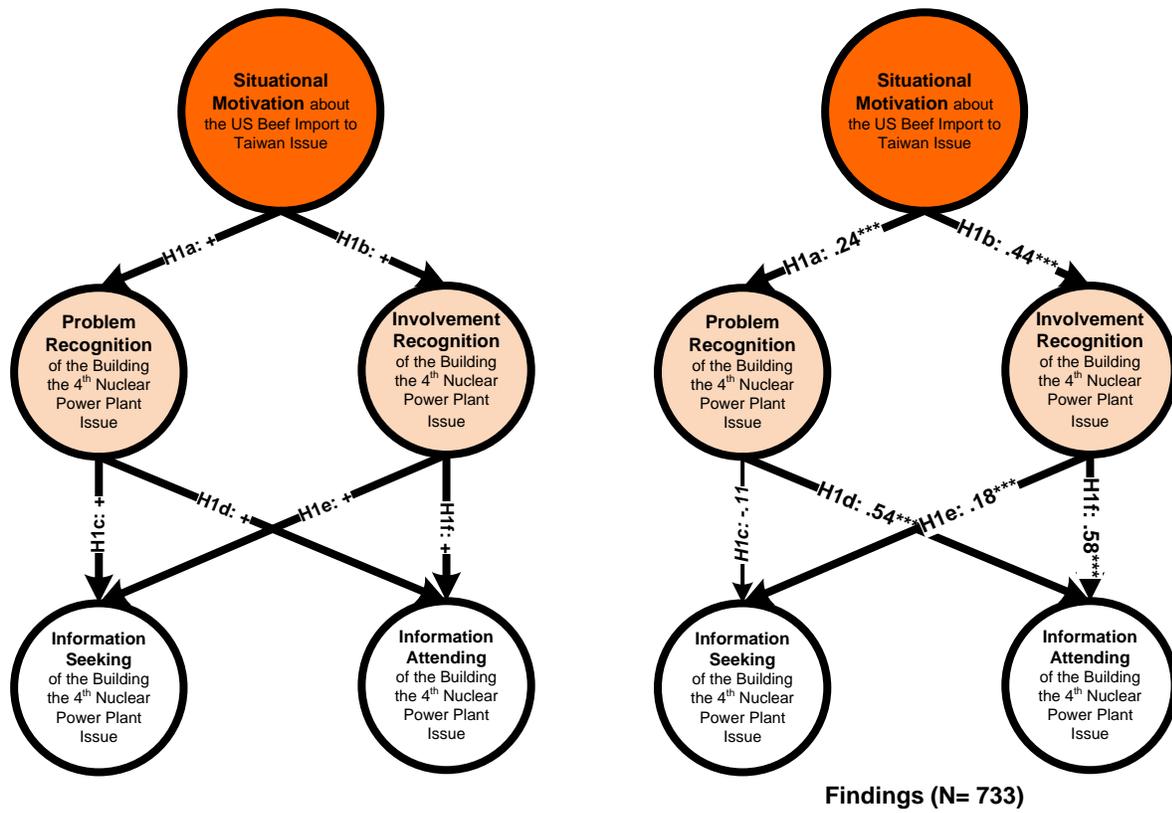


Figure 1. Conceptual model for problem chain-recognition effect

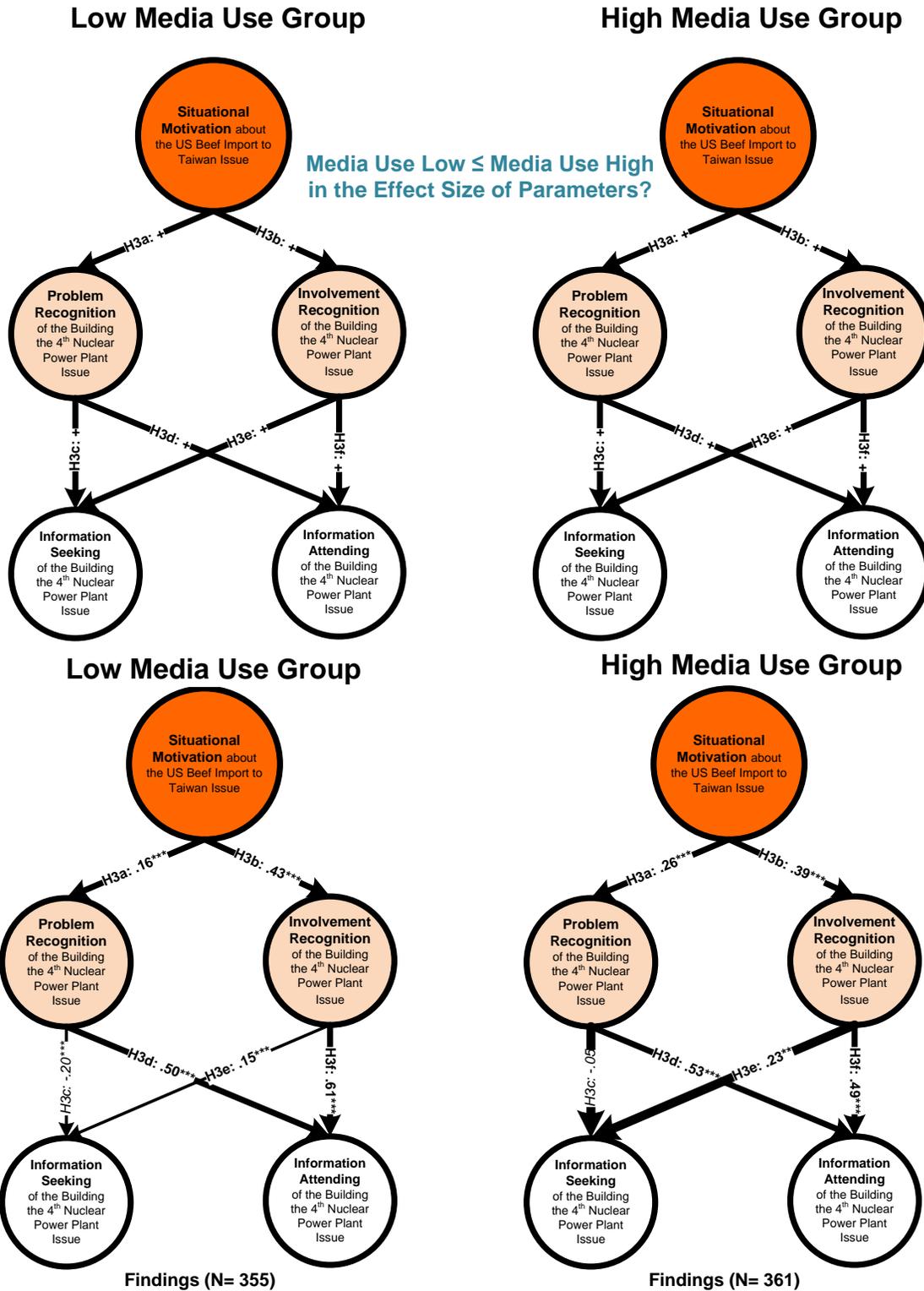


Figure 2. Prediction of government trust impact on problem chain-recognition effect
 Figure 3. Prediction of media use impact on problem chain-recognition effect

Understanding activism 2.0 and its influence on crisis communication: Conceptualizing digitalized activists and their communicative behaviors for effective crisis communication

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the digitalized activists, their communicative behaviors, and its effects on crisis communication in the new media landscape. Adopting a new theoretical framework based on Communicative Actions in Problem Solving (CAPS) in Situational Theory of Problem Solving, the current study demonstrates that activists in a crisis situation are more likely to actively engage in information acquisition, selection, and transmission than other publics. In addition, this study finds how activists in a crisis are affecting an organization negatively in terms of strong attribution of crisis responsibility to the organization, negative reputation, and less supportive behavioral intentions. Practical and theoretical implications are discussed.

Activism is the efforts to “promote, hinder, or direct social, political, economic, or environmental change” (Jordan, 2002; Smith, 2005; Uysal & Yang, 2013, p. 460). The activism has been conceptualized by two different perspectives, functional and cocreational approaches, in public relations (Botan & Talyor, 2004). In the functional approach to activism, activists are regarded as obstacles of corporate goals and problems or issues that managers need to learn to deal with (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1989). With the functional perspective to activism, the recent scholars have recognized value of activism as cocreators of the relationships between organizations and their publics (i.e., cocreational approach) and increasingly paid more attention to how activists utilize public relations tools, especially the Internet (Reber & Kim, 2006; Yang & Talyor, 2010).

The public relations researchers have found that Internet has allowed the activists to become more powerful (Coombs, 1998; Coombs & Holladay, 2012a; Heath & Palenchar, 2009). The new media using the Internet provide better tools such as virtual space (e.g., Website) and social media (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) for activists to shape messages and mobilize resources such as money and collective group (Zoch, Collins, Sisco, & Supa, 2008). Such activists’ empowerment and their communicative behaviors become more important in the context of crisis communication (Uysal & Yang, 2013). Activists use social media to organize collective actions and exert their pressure power, aiming to achieve negative campaigns and boycotts (e.g., WikiLeaks) (Coombs, 2015; Ludlow, 2010). Thus, the digitalized activists based on such activism 2.0 have triggered the need of more research for effective crisis communication (Uysal & Yang, 2013). The demand for activism research, especially conceptualizing digitalized activists and its influence on crisis communication, is still remained unmet (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a; Smith & Ferguson, 2010).

Against this backdrop, this study aims to fill the dearth of theoretical framework for the activism study. Using the South Korea ferry disaster, killing 304 people, occurred on April, 16, 2014, a national online survey was conducted to 545 social media users living in South Korea. To identify who are the digitalized publics, this study adopted a new theoretical framework for segmentation based on Communicative Actions in Problem Solving (CAPS) in Kim & J. Grunig’s (2011) Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS). In terms of three characteristics, openness, the time or history, and the extent of activeness, this study conceptualized and defined different types of the digitalized activists, how they are communicating in a crisis, and how they affect crisis outcomes for effective crisis communication. By doing so, the current study will help researchers and practitioners understand dynamic nature of activism 2.0 and its influence on crisis communication.

Literature Review

Digitalized Activists and Crisis Communication

Activists are defined as “two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or public through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion tactics, or force” (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 446). Activists try to influence how organizations behave; that is, they are a group that attempts to exert external pressure on an organization in order to alter its behavior (L. Grunig, 1992). The primary purpose of activist organizations is to “influence public policy, organizational actions, or social norms and values” (Jackson, 1982; Smith, 1997; Smith & Ferguson, 2001, p. 292). To achieve their goals and exert their power, the activists employ public relations tools and tactics which other organizations use for strategic communication (Reber & Kim, 2006; Smith & Ferguson, 2001). Specifically, the

activists make and distribute press releases, contact with the media or use their own media to set public agendas as well as convey legitimacy (L. Grunig, 1992; Ragas, 2013). The activists also conduct letter or telephone campaigns directed toward “legislators or members of the public, lobbying, public forum, petition drives, litigation, picketing, boycotts, and sit-ins” (Harris, 1982; L. Grunig, 1992, p. 516). In this sense, the activists, as “barriers to overcome or challenges to meet,” are potentially damaging to the organizations regardless of their group sizes (Coombs & Holladay, 2007a, p. 52; Mintzber, 1983).

In the era of digitalized and virtualized media environment, the activists’ specific tactics using the Internet have drawn special attention from public relations researchers in the past two decades (Coombs, 1998b; Coombs & Holladay, 2012a; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Sommerfeldt et al., 2012). Such new media environment called Web 2.0 has promoted interaction and sharing of user-generated content and laid the foundation for the advent and spread of social media (O’Reilly, 2005). The Web 2.0 has facilitated internal and external communication as well as network and relationship-building (Mitra, 2005; Yang & Taylor, 2010), reduced costs for organizing collective actions (Bimber, 1998), and allowed organizations to manage information flows and constantly communicate with the publics (Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007). As such, activists have taken full advantages of the new media environment (i.e., Web 2.0) for agenda building in media relations leading to successful their campaign (Ragas, 2013; Reber & Kim, 2006), educating members, the public, and the media through websites for environmental movement (Yang & Taylor, 2010), and acquiring easy access and resource mobilization for more effective their actions (Sommerfeldt, 2011, 2013; Uysal & Yang, 2013). Accordingly, “Internet and Web capabilities have been boon to activists” (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, p. 181). The Internet activism called activism 2.0 has empowered the activists, being sustained by a variety of communication tools and distribution outlets based on the instantaneous and inexpensive Web 2.0 tools and tactics (Smith & Ferguson, 2010; Zoch et al., 2008).

In the context of crisis, however, the empowered activists by the Internet activism can be the potential as the reputational threat more than other publics (Coombs, 1998b; Coombs & Holladay, 2012a; Heath, 1998). Crisis is defined as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectation stakeholders” and can generate negative outcomes (Coombs, 2015, p. 3). In other words, crises are avoidable events and always a threat to the reputation of an organization (Utz, Schultz, & Glock, 2013). Crisis communication is a strategic dialog between the organization and its publics prior to, during, and after the crises in order to prevent, minimize, and restore the organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007; Fearn-Banks, 2011). The crises are amplified by digitalized communication technologies and tools, especially social media, which make the transmission of crisis information easier and faster (Coombs, 2015). Even unconfirmed negative information (e.g., bad rumor) or non-relevant social media messages hinder organizations from implementing effective crisis communication via social media (Freberg, 2012; Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2013). Organizations are often challenged by such negative user-created contents because publics are more likely to seek than organizational messages in crisis situations (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012). Moreover, social media messages can shape post-crisis organizational reputations (Conway, Ward, Lewis, & Bernhardt, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Thus, social media bring about more opportunities to reveal the crises for organizations than ever before (Coombs, 2015).

Since activists are more likely to actively acquire, select, and disseminate information, their information behaviors using social media become more powerful and influential as the reputational threat in online crisis communication (Kim, Grunig, & Ni, 2010). In fact, the

digitalized activists have obtained opportunities to exchange information and gain resources by using effective low-cost tools such as Websites and social media (Coombs, 1998b; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). Activists can disseminate their own and unfiltered information to bypass other organizations or gatekeepers and make publics engage in their communication directly in the crisis situations (Freberg, 2012; Muralidharan, Dillistone, & Shin, 2011). Further, the activists' communication using direct channels can empower diversifying their online mobilization tactics as well (Kim & Ni, 2010). A recent case of WikiLeaks shows how the dynamic of the empowered activism generated a crisis, resulting in negative outcomes on the organizational reputation (Ludlow, 2010; Uysal & Yang, 2013). Sometimes, activists' negative comments online board or blogs make organizational crisis response messages ineffective, leading crisis managers to refine their crisis strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b, 2014).

Despite the increasing importance of digital activism in crisis communication, the scholars have yet to fully embrace identifying digitalized activists and their communicative behaviors (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b; Kim & Ni, 2010; Smith & Ferguson, 2010). The extant literature of digital activism has heavily focused on the existing activists through the content analysis of their websites (e.g., Reber & Kim, 2006; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Zoch et al., 2008) or interviewing them (e.g., Sommerfeldt et al., 2012), not public evolution into activists as issues or crises arise (Kim, Kim, Tam, & Kim, 2014). Subsequently, there has been a gap in theoretical research on who are digitalized activists and how they use digital and social media to enhance power and resources in crisis situations (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b; Kim & Ni, 2010). To fill the gap, this study adopted a new theoretical framework, Kim and colleagues' Communicative Actions in Problem Solving (CAPS), to identify digitalized activists and explain their communication behaviors using new media in a crisis (Kim & J. Grunig, 2011; Kim & Ni, 2009). *Conceptualizing Digitalized Activists in Communicative Actions in Problem Solving (CAPS)*

To describe communicator's heightened communication behaviors during a problematic situation, Kim and J. Grunig (2007) proposed a new construct model, Communicative Actions in Problem Solving (CAPS). CAPS originated from Grunig's (1968, 1997) the situational theory of publics rooted in Dewey's (1927) notion of publics (Ni & Kim, 2009). Publics emerge when groups of people perceive problems in similar way and organize to resolve those problems (Dewey, 1927). The Situational Theory of Publics (i.e., STP: theory of publics) provided a theoretical framework of the publics, helping predicts their communication behaviors through perceptual variables (Grunig, 1997, 2003). STP has been extensively used in public relations research and practice (Aldoory & Sha, 2006; Kim & Ni, 2013). The communicative activeness in STP, however, focused on "information consumption potential" (i.e., information taking dimension: seeking and processing) (Ni & Kim, 2009, p. 222), not explaining how a public selectively "interpret, produce, and transmit information to other publics" (Kim, 2011, p. 299; Kim & Grunig, 2011). To increase theoretical power and practical utility, the situational theory of publics has evolved to Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) (Kim & Grunig, 2011; Kim & Krishna, 2014).

STOPS provides theoretical concepts of CAPS through six communication behavioral variables in three domains, explaining how communicant's activeness will increase the three domains of information selecting, giving, and taking (Kim & J. Grunig, 2011). STOPS conceptualizes three domains as information acquisition, information transmission, and information selection in CAPS, consisting of proactive or active information behaviors - information seeking, information forwarding, and information forefending - and reactive or passive information behaviors - information attending, information sharing, and information

permitting (Kim & J. Grunig, 2007; Kim et al., 2010; Kim & Krishna, 2014). STOPS assumes “greater problem-solving effort will increase information behaviors in all the three domains” (Kim & J. Grunig, 2011, p. 125)

In CAPS, specifically, *information seeking*, as a first step in problem solving, refers to active and proactive information acquisition describing “one is more likely to initiate the collecting of information proactively,” but passive and reactive information acquisition is *information attending* meaning “one tends to remain passive and reactive in gaining only information that is easily available” (Kim & J. Grunig, 2011; Kim et al., 2010, p. 130). *Information forefending* is the process of selecting more specific, systematic, and relevant information (i.e., active information selection) refers to “the extent to which a communicator fends off certain information in advance by judging its value and relevance for a given problem-solving task” (Kim & J. Grunig, 2011, p. 126). Publics, nonetheless, can be less likely to discriminate information when they are not active in problem solving, i.e., passive information selection: information permitting. Thus, *information permitting* is the extent to which a communicator accepts any information related to a problem-solving task (Kim & J. Grunig, 2011; Kim et al., 2010). *Information forwarding* refers to active information transmission as one called “a planned and self-propelled information giver,” forwards information proactively even if no one solicited (Kim & J. Grunig, 2011, p. 127). Others, however, are less likely to initiate information transmission by themselves because they shares when someone else request s his or her expertise in problem solving, i.e., *information sharing*: passive information transmission (Kim & Krishna, 2014; Kim et al., 2010).

CAPS helps public relations scholars reconceptualize and break down different publics, in particular the active publics and activists, in response to the importance of such publics as “*the key groups*” mainly responsible for the emergence of an issue (Ni & Kim, 2009, p. 220). In the framework of CAPS, there are three characteristics, the openness to approaches, the time or history, and the extent of activeness, identifying the active publics and activists (Kim & Grunig, 2007; Ni & Kim, 2009). Based on such characteristics, Ni and Kim (2009) proposed eight types of publics: closed-situational activist public, closed-chronic activist public, closed-situational active public, closed-dormant passive public, open-situational activist public, open-chronic activist public, open-situational active public, and open-dormant passive public. The eight types publics engage in different communicative behaviors in terms of their activeness, history or time, and openness to problem solving (Kim et al., 2014; Ni & Kim, 2009). Due to using qualitative interviews with a small number of participants (e.g., 34 and 24 interviews), the previous studies tested failed to demonstrate how activists are different from other types of publics, resulting in the need of quantitative testing (Ni & Kim, 2009; Kim et al., 2014). Moreover, there has been no research testing CAPS in crisis communication (See Figure 1).

 Insert Figure 1 about here

Due to using qualitative interviews with a small number of participants (e.g., 34 and 24 interviews), the previous studies tested failed to demonstrate how activists are different from other types of publics, resulting in the need of quantitative testing (Ni & Kim, 2009; Kim et al., 2014). Moreover, there has been no research testing CAPS to identify the activists in crisis communication. Accordingly, this study adopted segmented eight types of publics’ characteristics, including activists closed-situational activists, open-situational activists, closed-chronic activists, and open-chronic activists, using CAPS as a new theoretical framework of

activist research (Kim & Ni, 2010). To test theoretical framework based on CAPS in crisis situation, this study attempted to identify activists' communicative behaviors in the crisis, thereby helping crisis managers predict how digitalized activists acquire, select, and transmitting crisis information (Kim & J. Grunig, 2011; Ni & Kim, 2009). Therefore, this study proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): In a crisis situation, activists are likely to have higher communicative actions in all three domains, acquisition, selection, and transmission than other types of publics have.

In crisis communication research, in particular Coombs's (1998a, 2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), crisis responsibility is a critical factor shapes the reputational threat and further results in less supportive behavioral intentions toward an organization, including reduced purchase. SCCT research has consistently demonstrated that strong attribution of crisis responsibility to an organization leads to negative outcomes, low reputation and less supportive behavioral intentions (e.g., Coombs, 1998a, 2007, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2007b, 2014). Following SCCT assumptions within a context of the literature conceptualizing activism as obstacles of corporate goals and as problems (L. Grunig, 1992; Uysal & Yang, 2013), accordingly, this study posited the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): In a crisis situation, activists are more likely to negative outcomes, *H2a)* high crisis responsibility, *H2b)* low reputation, and *H2c)* low supportive behavioral intentions toward the organization, than other types of publics have.

Furthermore, previous research has found that qualitative differences of the activist in term of communicative actions in problem solving (CAPS) (e.g., Kim et al., 2014; Ni & Kim, 2009). As the first attempt to quantitatively find different activists' communicative behaviors and their effects on crisis outcomes in crisis communication, this study asked the following research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How will each type of activists be different in term of communicative actions in problem solving (CAPS).

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How will each type of activists be different in terms of crisis outcomes, crisis responsibility, reputation, and supportive behavioral intentions toward the organization?

Case Background: South Korea's Sewol Ferry Disaster Case

On April 16, 2014, the overloaded ferry *Sewol* carrying 476 passengers and crew capsized off South Korea's southwestern coast. Nine victims remained missing after the ferry sank, killing at least 295 people, which include dozens of high school students on a field trip (Kwon & Park, 2014). Members of the crew, including the captain, were indicted on charges of murder, abandoning the ship and violating a ship safety act. The tragic disaster, one of the worst maritime accidents in South Korea, has dealt a serious blow to the administration of President Park Geun-hye over the botched initial response, lack of safety measures, and cozy link between authorities and the ship's operator (May 18, 2014 Sunday, Yonhap). Thus, the sinking of the *Sewol* has resulted in widespread social and political reaction within South Korea.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 545 people living in South Korea. They were recruited by the biggest Asia Panel Network firm (macromillEmbrain: Embrain) with a diverse subject pool, which maintains more than 1.8 million panel members registered (embrain.com, 2014). For this study, Embrain subjects were paid with approximately three dollars (3,300 South Korean Won) to complete the questionnaire.

Using a filtering question, this study ensured to have the participants currently using social media such as Twitter or Facebook ($N = 545$). The age ranged from 20 to 69 years old, with the average age of 39.66. Female was 48.4% ($n = 281$), and male was 51.6% ($n = 264$). Regarding education level, 14.9% of respondents ($n = 81$) had a high school degree or less, 10.8% ($n = 59$) had a two-year associate degree or less than associate level, 63.7% ($n = 347$) had a bachelor's degree or less than four year university level, and 10.6% ($n = 58$) had a post-graduate degree or some graduate education.

Procedure

The questionnaire was created on the website of survey firm, and the link was sent to its panel members. After a pre-test ($N = 50$) to check wordings and validity in questionnaire and reliability of measurement items, a main-test was conducted in August, 2013. Participants viewed a brief statement selected from a news article covering the Korean government's botched initial response and lack of safety related to the 2014 South Korea's Sewol Ferry disaster which occurred in April, 2014. First, participants answered questions measuring their online communicative action variables related to information acquisition, selection, and transmission (i.e., CAPS variables). In addition, their three dimensions of problem solving, including openness, activeness, and history, were measured for the segmentation procedure. After measuring CAPS and three dimensions of problem solving, another news story in which the South Korean government was "blamed" for mishandling the disaster was presented and participants answered questions measuring the dependent variables, crisis responsibility, reputation, and behavioral intention. Demographic questions asking age, education, income, and race were followed. All variables were measured on a five-point Likert scale.

Measurements

This study adopted Kim and Grunig's (2011) Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) scales to measure CAPS and three dimensions of problem solving. Each CAPS variable was measured by two items. The participants indicated how much they acquire the information by seeking (e.g., I regularly check to see if there is any new information about this problem on the Internet) ($\alpha = .89$) and attending (e.g., If I saw something on the news about this problem in surfing Internet, I would click and read it) ($\alpha = .88$). They also answered how much they select the information in terms of information forefending (e.g., I have a selection of trusted sources that I check for updates on this problem) ($\alpha = .78$) and permitting (e.g., I want to know about this topic from multiple sources) ($\alpha = .89$). Regarding information transmission, the participants indicated how much they forward (e.g., I love to start a conversation on this problem with others) ($\alpha = .85$) and share the information (e.g., I would be willing to talk to someone about this problem if they asked me) ($\alpha = .78$).

Extent of activeness in problem solving was measured by the participants' proactive (e.g.,

I have been thing on this issue before it became a media spotlight) and reactive (e.g., I will not do anything about this issue until it really affects me) questions. For openness in problem solving, open approach was assessed by a questions asking about “I avoid taking sides or overcommitting to one aspect,” and closed approach was asked by a question of “there are not much left to be learned about this issue.” Regarding history of problem solving, situational, “I have recently become active on this issue,” chronic, “I have remained involved in this issue for a long time, and dormant, “I currently do not feel strongly enough to pursue this issue,” questions were asked.

To measure dependent variables related to crisis outcomes, this study used the SCCT scales (Coombs, 1998a; Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Crisis responsibility was measured by how strongly participants agreed that the blame for the crisis lies with the organization (Coombs, 1998a; Coombs and Holladay, 1996). For reputational scales, four items ($\alpha = .936$) from the Harris-Fombrun Reputation Quotient (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever, 2000) were used to measure government reputation (e.g., I have a good feeling about the government and I trust the government). Supportive behavioral intentions were measured by four items, including “I would say nice things about the organization to other people” and “I would attend a rally designed to show public support for the organization” ($\alpha = .83$).

Result

Segmentation

For the segmentation of a new typology, eight types of publics, this study used Kim’s (2011) summation method. As an alternative method of canonical correlations used for segmentation in STP studies, Kim (2011) recently introduced summation method. Due to its simplicity and accessibility for practitioners and researchers and increasingly, it has been growingly used as a powerful method for public segmentation studies (Kim, 2011; Kim et al., 2011; Lee, Oshita, Oh, & Hove, 2014). In this study, specifically, the survey question items measuring three dimensions such as activeness, history, and openness were recoded into a dichotomous scale indicating high and low.

By taking the midpoint of the survey scale (e.g., 3 on a 5 point Likert-type scale), openness, activeness, and history questions were recoded into high (1: closed, 0.1: proactive, and 0.01: situational) and low (0: open, 0.0: reactive, and 0.00: chronic and dormant). Decimal fractions were assigned to distinguish and segment publics exclusively based on segmentation criteria; that is, the decimals were not meaningful by themselves (Grunig, 1989). To find a closed-situational activist (CSAt) group, for instance, each high score was summed in activeness - proactive (0.1: high), history-situational (0.01: high), and openness-closed (1: high), thereby one group has 1.11 (0.1+0.01+1) as the actual closed-situational activist public. Similarly, eight types of publics were segmented exclusively: closed-situational activist public (CSAt: 1.11), closed-chronic activist public (CCAt: 1.1), closed-situational active public (CSA: 1.01), closed-dormant passive public (CDP: 0.01), open-situational activist public (OSAt: 0.11), open-chronic activist public (OCAAt: 0.1), open-situational active public (OSA: 0.01), and open-dormant passive public (ODP: 0.00).

Within the participants, the eight types of publics can be identified as *closed-situational activist public* (CSAt) ($N = 15, 2.8\%$), *open-situational activist public* (OSAt) ($N = 26, 4.8\%$), *closed-chronic activist public* (CCAt) ($N = 90, 16.5\%$), *open-chronic activist public* (OCAAt) ($N = 41, 7.5\%$), *closed-situational active public* (CSA) ($N = 46, 8.4\%$), *open-situational active public* (OSA) ($N = 60, 11.0\%$), *closed-dormant passive public* (CDP) ($N = 136, 25.0\%$), and *open*

dormant passive publics (ODP) ($N = 131$, 24.0%)

Hypotheses Testing

To test hypotheses, eight types of publics were recoded into two groups, activists (CSAt, OSAt, CCAAt, and OCAAt) and others groups (active and aware public: CSA, OSA, CDP, & ODP). For H1, a series of Independent Sample T-tests were run to examine differences of communicative behaviors (CAPS) between activists with other publics. As Table 2 shows, activists group showed significantly higher level of six communicative behaviors in all three domains that aware and active group. In information acquisition, activists' information seeking ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.02$) and attending ($M = 3.99$, $SD = .86$) was higher than other publics' those behaviors (seeking: $M = 2.79$, $SD = .97$, attending: $M = 3.47$, $SD = .93$). The differences were statistically significant, $t_{\text{seeking}} = 6.60$, $p = .00$ and $t_{\text{attending}} = 6.18$, $p = .00$. Activists group's information selection (forefeeding: $M = 3.48$, $SD = .76$, permitting: $M = 3.92$, $SD = .81$) was also statistically higher than aware and active publics group (forefeeding: $M = 3.08$, $SD = .74$, permitting: $M = 3.55$, $SD = .91$), $t_{\text{forefeeding}} = 5.84$, $p = .00$ and $t_{\text{permitting}} = 4.92$, $p = .00$. In the domain of information transmission, activist group's communicative behaviors (forwarding: $M = 3.76$, $SD = .86$, sharing: $M = 3.72$, $SD = .88$) were significantly higher than other group's those behaviors (forwarding: $M = 3.27$, $SD = .91$, sharing: $M = 3.27$, $SD = .83$) as well, $t_{\text{forwarding}} = 5.86$, $p = .00$ and $t_{\text{sharing}} = 5.74$, $p = .00$ (See Table 2). Therefore, H1 was supported.

H2 assumed activists' negative outcomes in a crisis situation in terms of crisis responsibility, reputation, and supportive behaviors toward the organization. To test H2, a series of Independent Sample T-tests were conducted. The results revealed that activists group's crisis responsibility ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.05$) was significantly higher than aware and active group ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.11$), $t = 4.54$, $p = .00$ (H2a). In reputation (H2b) and supportive behavioral intentions (H2c), activists group's mean scores ($M_{\text{reputation}} = 2.03$, $SD_{\text{reputation}} = .92$, $M_{\text{behavioral}} = 2.16$, $SD_{\text{behavioral}} = 1.03$) were lower than active and aware group's means ($M_{\text{reputation}} = 2.36$, $SD_{\text{reputation}} = .98$, $M_{\text{behavioral}} = 2.38$, $SD_{\text{behavioral}} = .94$). There were statistically significant, $t_{\text{reputation}} = 3.72$, $p = .00$ and $t_{\text{behavioral}} = 2.33$, $p = .02$. Accordingly, H2 was supported.

To answer research questions, only activist groups, CSAt, OSAt, CCAAt, and OCAAt, were drawn from the eight types of publics, and a series of one-way analysis of variances (ANOVAs) were conducted. Regarding RQ1, ANOVA tests revealed that there was significant difference of those activist groups only in information permitting, $F_{\text{permitting}}(3, 168) = 7.05$, $p = .00$, $\eta^2 = .11$. CCAAt ($M = 4.18$, $SD = .65$) was more likely to increase information permitting than others, CSAt ($M = 3.67$, $SD = .72$), OSAt ($M = 3.65$, $SD = .83$), and OCAAt ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .95$). Post-hoc comparisons using Bonferroni test indicated that the mean score of CSAt was statistically different from other activist groups' means at a .01 level of significance. However, there were no significant differences in other communicative behaviors, $F_{\text{seeking}}(3, 168) = .44$, $p = .72$, $F_{\text{attending}}(3, 168) = 2.50$, $p = .06$, $F_{\text{forefeeding}}(3, 168) = 2.67$, $p = .05$, $F_{\text{forwarding}}(3, 168) = 1.37$, $p = .25$, and $F_{\text{sharing}}(3, 168) = 1.65$, $p = .18$.

When it comes to only activists' difference in terms of crisis outcomes (RQ2), ANOVA tests revealed that there was no statistically significance in crisis responsibility ($F_{\text{responsibility}}(3, 168) = 1.31$, $p = .27$), reputation ($F_{\text{reputation}}(3, 168) = 2.45$, $p = .07$), and supportive behavioral intentions toward the organization ($F_{\text{behavioral}}(3, 168) = .26$).

Discussion

This study aimed to identify how the publics can evolve to different types of activists in a

crisis by using a new theoretical framework based on Communicative Actions in Problem Solving (CAPS). Further, the current study illuminated how the activists are affecting crisis outcomes, crisis responsibility, organizational reputation, and supportive behavioral intentions toward the organization in crisis communication.

The finding of this study indicates that activists are more likely to acquire, select, and transmit crisis information than less active, aware or active, publics. As Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) studies has demonstrated, the result revealed that greater problem-solving effort, i.e., activists, will increase communicative behaviors in information acquisition, selection, and transmission in a crisis situation (Kim & J. Grunig, 2011; Kim & Krishina, 2014). In terms of organizational reputation, specifically, the finding substantiates how the activists become more powerful and influential in the new media environment (i.e., Web 2.0). The activist's active communication behaviors are more likely to determine the content, amount, and tonality of what people remember and talk about with regard to an organization (Kim et al., 2013). What people remember and talk about the organization is what constitutes reputation, stakeholders' perceptual construct or the distribution of cognitive knowledge about an organization (Fombrun, 1996; Helm & Tolsdorf, 2013). In other words, the activist's active communication behaviors will influence the organizational reputation more than other types of publics. That is, the activists' perception, cognition, and communicative behaviors can be the primary source of the organizational reputation (Kim et al., 2013).

When it comes to crisis outcomes, this study shed more light on how the activists and their communicative behaviors affect the organizational reputation. Compared to other types of publics, aware or active, the activists were more likely to strongly attribute crisis responsibility to an organization and less likely to have positive reputation of the organization in a crisis situation. In addition, the activists' supporting behavioral intentions were lower than other publics. The findings demonstrate how the activists become a reputational threat and suggest the need of communicating with them for effective crisis communication. When taking full advantages of Web 2.0 tools, the activists can effectively build negative agenda related to a crisis and disseminate the negative contents to other publics (Ragas, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2010).

In particular, this study found that *closed-chronic activist public* (CCAt) were more likely to engage in more active information permitting (i.e., passive selection) than other activists. The finding contradicts previous qualitative research (e.g., Ni & Kim, 2009), indicating CCAt in active information transmission (forwarding) and selection (forefending) as the conceptual characteristics. In other words, this study found that any information is still permissible to CCAt even though such activist already possessed plenty of information. In a crisis situation, CCAt is more likely to consider merely information as potentially useful without judging criteria even if the information is irrelevant to the crisis (Kim et al., 2010). Since all activists are in active information transmitting, the information, especially unconfirmed information by the organization, which CCAt permitted can be forwarded and shared on the new media platforms facilitating interacting and sharing with others.

The results give a plausible explanation why the organizations are having difficulties when they are trying to reach and communicate with the publics in a crisis. In the Web 2.0, the activists can easily exert their powers in terms of direct dissemination of information and resource mobilization, affecting the organization negatively. As a result, the communicative efforts of the organizations may be challenged by activists' negative rumors or unconfirmed information in online crisis communication (Freberg, 2012; Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2013). Further, an organization in a crisis may have to deal with negative words of mouth online

because the activists are more likely to lash out at the organization than other publics (Coombs, 2007, 2015). In this sense, this study provides meaningful insight into how crisis managers understand the activists and communicate with them for more effective crisis communication in the era of new media environment.

Implications

As a practical implication, this study demonstrates how easy and powerful the summation method is to identify the digitalize activists. Due to the limited accessibility and difficulty to canonical correlations using statistical programs (Kim, 2011), the summation method was suggested and frequently used in the recent studies. For the segmentation to find the activists in crisis communication, however, the method was not applied yet. This study shows how the summation method could be conducted easily to identify the activists in accordance with the criteria for the segmentation, “mutually exclusive, measurable, accessible,” and reachable with communication in an affordable way (Grunig, 1989, p. 203). Using CAPS, crisis managers can use the summation procedure for public segmentation to predict different characteristics of the publics, especially activists, in a crisis situation, as well as implement more specific strategies / tactics for each strategic subgroup (Kim et al., 2010).

In addition, the segmentation based on CAPS provides another practical implication for the crisis communication managers. As previous public segmentation research has suggested, active or activist publics are not same (Ni & Kim, 2009; Kim et al., 2014). More specifically, activists’ communicative behaviors are not same even though they are all engaging in active information acquisition, selection, and transmission. Crisis managers can identify and focus on strategic communication with certain activists who are more likely to become the spread of the buzz, especially negative word of mouth online. Consequently, the crisis communicators can alleviate somewhat challenges by negative rumors or unconfirmed information in a crisis,

The findings of this study should be added into theoretical efforts for conceptualizing the digitalized publics in terms of strategic management approach to crisis communication. This study attempted to empirically test the concepts of different activists and their communicative behaviors by using a new framework, CAPS, in Kim & Grunig’s (2011) Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS). By doing so, this study advances a step in the right direction to develop crisis communication theory in the evolving media landscape, especially activism 2.0 in crisis communication. In terms of strategic approach to crisis communication, segmenting publics and communicating with the key publics are critical and integral steps (Grunig, 2011). In other words, this study put an effort to identify and conceptualize the digitalize publics and their communicative behaviors in the new media environment by adopting strategic management perspective (i.e., STOPS), not focusing on image repairs, dominant crisis communication theory, as scholars recommend (Liu & Fraustino, 2014).

Limitations and Future Research

The current study has some limitations that should be addressed in future studies. This study used a single crisis case, in particular South Korea government. Testing and comparing with other crises in U.S. government can produce more fruitful implications for government public relations. Different findings from previous research should be retested in other crisis types as well. The findings of this study are limited in convenient sample, not representative of general population. Future research should be based on probability sampling method (e.g., quota sampling) to provide more generalizable results.

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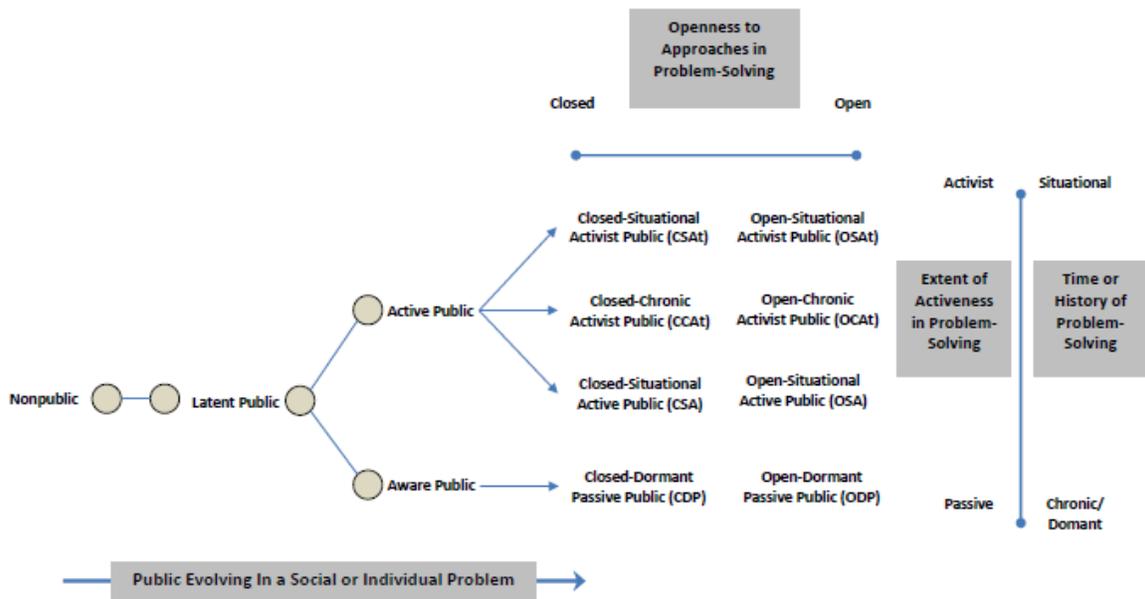


Figure 1. Illustration of public evolving from three key problem-solving characteristics. Adapted from “Classifying publics: Communication behaviors and problem-solving characteristics in controversial issues,” by L. Ni, and J.-N. Kim, 2009, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 3, p. 221.

“Re-Inspired”: Using Social Media to Encourage Internal Stakeholders

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Abstract

Teach For America (TFA), a nonprofit focused on providing quality education to U.S. students, has 2400 staff members supporting TFA teachers. For this case study, internal communicators shared their strategies, and employees were interviewed about their use of social media tools and their impact on job contentment.

Teach For America (TFA), a nonprofit focused on providing high quality education to all U.S. students, was founded by Wendy Kopp in 1989. The organization is based in New York City. In addition to thousands of corps members (aka teachers) on the ground working with students, the organization has more than 2400 staff members spread around the country to support those teachers. TFA finds and develops great people to be successful teachers in high-need classrooms, and more than 60% of the organization's alumni corps members continue to work in education. The staff is focused on recruiting, supporting and connecting those teachers in 50 U.S. regions through programs like independent pre-work for new teachers, summer training, student teaching, and one-on-one coaching ("Choose More. Teach," 2014).

With such a large organization, it is especially important for TFA staff members to feel like they are part of the same community, pursuing the same goals. According to Kline and Alex-Brown (2013), "Implementing social media and forming communities of practice will increase the value of the connections within the organization. . . . The intersection of community formation and social media outcomes translates into formation of deep and lasting social connections" (p. 289). The use of social media to help connect internal stakeholders is rising. Zielinski (2012) said "a joint 2010 survey by the American Society for Training & Development and the Institute for Corporate Productivity found managers in 80 percent of 3,800 global businesses planned to increase their use of social media for employee learning during the next three years" (p. 49). Besides the positive feeling of being connected to one's co-workers, that sense of community can be an encouragement when crises hit.

In addition to general social media usage for internal communication, there has been an increase in the use of video sharing within organizations. According to Zielinski (2012), "Video has gained traction as an employee learning tool, fueled by the growth of smart phones with high-definition video and broadband networks. As a result, more organizations are creating YouTube-like repositories on enterprise networks where employees post videos created for knowledge-sharing purposes" (p. 52). TFA has made use of both social media and video to engage internal stakeholders.

Because of the increasing growth of social media and their use for internal audiences, the purpose of this case study of Teach For America is to provide an example for other organizations, nonprofits in particular, on how social media can help them communicate and build community with their internal stakeholders.

Background

Teach For America (TFA) has more than 2400 staff members, not including corps members, which number more than 11,000. TFA's mission is that "One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education" ("Our Organization," 2014, n.p.). During the past school year, "corps members [reached] more than 750,000 students while 32,000 alumni [continued] to deepen their impact as educational leaders and advocates" ("Our Organization," 2014, para. 4).

The Mission

The mission for the internal communicators who hope to inspire those 2400 staff members to keep up the good work is:

- to inform, engage and inspire the Teach For America staff community by:
- telling inspiring stories through various media forms
- uniformly distributing organizational news across multiple channels

- connecting people to the mission, to each other and to senior leadership
- providing opportunities to explore broader education issues
- fostering a sense of unity and pride. (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, December 17, 2015).

The internal communication staff includes Aaron French, managing director, Kirk Scarbrough, director, and Alison Knowlton, manager. This team has made use of social media and video to communicate with stakeholders around the organization. With so many staff members spread across 50 regions, the team has had to be creative to reach them and inspire them to continue when the road gets difficult. Because of their efforts, TFA has been recognized for using emerging communication tools like Yammer to connect its internal audience (Gohring, 2014).

Flagship Initiatives

Scarbrough explained that the internal communication team has nine “flagship initiatives” to achieve its mission. The Monday Minute is “a weekly all-staff bulletin that shares fresh news and information in a concise email” (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, December 17, 2015). One of the newest initiatives is the Weekly Tie-Up, which is a weekly video recapping the latest events in only 1 minute. Education On Tap is also a newer venture; it is a bi-weekly podcast focusing on issues in education. The Blank Show highlights stories from across the Teach For America community in a 30-minute video that is broadcast about once every 6 weeks. Besides the recorded programs above, there are live video broadcast events from time to time. These generally feature TFA leaders and seek to prompt “discussion and excitement” (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, December 17, 2015). The Chat, a conference call hosted by the co-CEOs, is done monthly and “focuses discussion on one organizationally-relevant topic” (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, December 17, 2015). In addition, Yammer is used as an “internal social community with a focus on collaboration, information sharing and celebration” (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, December 17, 2015). TFA also has an internal website with resources for staff called TFA Hub (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, December 17, 2015). Often these tools are used simultaneously. For example, staff members might watch one of the videos and chat about it on Yammer as it is broadcast.

According to Scarbrough, the internal communication before these tools were implemented was uninteresting and infrequent. The former internal communication vice president saw the need for the “organization to loosen up” some in an effort to change the communication format (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, April 2014). French explained that the internal communication team began with one person, Justin Fong, in 2010. French said, “As I understand it, his initial charge was to figure out at least a few ways to improve culture by (1) breaking down barriers between leadership and staff [and] (2) bridging the gap of communication among staff themselves” (personal communication, January 8, 2015). When Fong arrived, there was a monthly newsletter that had existed for years. According to French, it “was pages upon pages upon pages long. No one read it, it was steeped in overly complex language, and it wasn't a way to rally staff together” (personal communication, January 8, 2015). Scarbrough explained that in 2010, “staff communication lacked the passion, connectivity, and fun that is needed to make day-to-day work inspiring and sustainable” (personal communication, January 8, 2015). French boiled down the problem to this: “in essence, we needed to fix the fact that staff felt like they had no idea what was going on, and when they did, we needed to be able

to connect them with information easily. And it had to have an element of candidness and fun to boot” (personal communication, January 8, 2015). In addition, French said, “The products coming out of the Internal Communications team were great, but the process lacked rigor and planning. It was much more fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants, and the quality could be increased by having more foresight and developing processes and guardrails for the deliverables we create” (personal communication, January 8, 2015). These realizations led to major changes in the strategies and tactics the team used to communicate with the staff.

Strategy & Tactics

In order to unite the staff and better communicate timely announcements, the growing internal communication team expanded the use of video and added an important social media channel, Yammer. They also increased their focus on planning. According to French, this was one of the reasons he was hired; “I originally joined the team to bring more rigor to that entire process” (A. French, personal communication, January 8, 2015). Besides project planning, French oversees Yammer and the Education on Tap podcast. Scarbrough manages the video strategy and execution, and Knowlton covers graphic design and written content (including the Monday Minute). French said, “Our marketing team's job is to bring people into the TFA family. Our job is to keep them there and engaged. So we've started producing almost all of our content with that in mind, including segments from The Blank Show going public and the creation of an iTunes listed podcast (Education on Tap)” (personal communication, January 8, 2015).

Key Internal Communication Tools

Scarbrough said the three key internal communication elements for TFA are Yammer, YouTube and the Monday Minute. In the Monday Minute, announcements are kept brief along the lines of Twitter, but with a 180-character limit. The purpose of this weekly email blast is “so everyone’s not working in silos” (K. Scarbrough, December 17, 2014). Because not everyone can send emails across the entire organization, the Monday Minute serves as the best way to reach all of the staff. The Monday Minute has become a regular routine for many employees. According to Scarbrough, “there is a certain cadence and tradition to getting it every week” (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, December 17, 2015). According to Houston staff member Jamie Lonie, the Monday Minute has improved email communication within TFA. Lonie said, “Over the past year and a half since it began, there are less mass emails from random departments. People have started to funnel information through the Monday Minute” (personal communication, December 23, 2014).

Yammer. Yammer has opened up opportunities for the CEOs and the staff to communicate directly and for the effectiveness of communication efforts to be measured. According to Fong, Yammer is used at TFA to ask for help, for inspiration, to make announcements, to share relevant articles, to have “critical conversations,” and for collaboration (personal communication, April 2014). Yammer has helped build community. For some staff members who work from home or far away from others, they do not have daily contact with their teams and, thus, have less of a sense of community. Yammer has helped fill those gaps and connected everyone. Not only has it connected them professionally, but they have been able to connect on a personal level by creating sub-groups on personal interests.

YouTube/Video. In addition to French’s work with Yammer, Scarbrough has made use of YouTube to communicate with the TFA community. According to Scarbrough, “using video for the staff has been instrumental in a culture change; many were reinspired” (personal

communication, March 19, 2014). The previous main channel of communication for staff news was a long, “overly complex” monthly newsletter (A. French, personal communication, January 8, 2015). French explained that the team realized changes were needed: “Enter The Blank Show’s first iteration. It eliminated that newsletter entirely, was in a format that Millennials are known to enjoy, and put faces and names with initiatives and emotions” (personal communication, January 8, 2015). The Blank Show was proposed as “a monthly live event for all of us” (J. Fong, personal communication, March 2014). It was designed to be an hour-long talk show that would cover both regional and national information and allow for live questions from the audience. The live aspect was seen as a benefit by Fong because of the “minimal production time,” lack of a script, interactivity and the excitement it would prompt (personal communication, March 2014). Fong posed these questions: “How do we connect people with our mission? Create a sense of unity? Tell a compelling story? Evolve our internal brand?” His strategies were to be “honest about what wasn’t working, [get] buy-in from senior leadership and [appeal] to the masses” (J. Fong, personal communication, March 2014). The Blank Show began and immediately received positive feedback. For example, staff members said, “it was a beautiful mix of information and connection,” and it “brought tears to my eyes and gave me the chills” (J. Fong, personal communication, March 2014). Fong said The Blank Show “creates excitement about our work, liberates people to laugh more and broadens understanding of our work” (personal communication, March 2014). To create the program was a “big risk” that led to a “big reward” (J. Fong, personal communication, March 2014). Not everything worked perfectly, but they learned from it. One of the key lessons was that authenticity was the “draw” (J. Fong, personal communication, March 2014). Fong saw an impact on culture: “a more engaged staff, a more invested staff” (personal communication, March 2014). According to Scarbrough, “people were so excited to be getting information live, asking questions and calling in online” (personal communication, March 19, 2014).

Regional staff members support teachers directly, so they have a better sense of the daily mission in action; however, the national staff members are distant from the teachers and students who are benefitting from their work. Scarbrough said, “They don’t see our mission being lived out every day, so The Blank Show gives them a glimpse” (Scarbrough, personal communication, December 17, 2014).

The Blank Show has evolved over time; “our first show looks drastically different from today’s” (J. Fong, personal communication, April 2014). It has shifted from a live production to a recorded version. According to Scarbrough, “we’re sacrificing a live element for a higher quality production” (personal communication, March 19, 2014). Most of the organization still watches the program at the same time, though. It also shifted from an hour-long program to a 30-minute show. Scarbrough said he’s “never at a shortage of stories.” After each Blank Show, he receives “a bunch of emails with suggestions” and also hears ideas at TFA conferences (personal communication). The Blank Show has a holiday version, too, that is made from user-submitted content. This edition of The Blank Show has one of the highest viewing rates because “people love to see themselves,” and it is a good time to “come together and be reminded of why we’re here” at the end of the year (Scarbrough, personal communication, December 17, 2014).

Another video element, the Weekly Tie-Up is a news update shared on Fridays. According to Scarbrough, if it were not for The Blank Show, the Weekly Tie-Up “wouldn’t have been born” (personal communication, December 17, 2014). The staff found that the emotional stories shared on The Blank Show were not meeting the craving for news. We were “trying to feed that news crave we were seeing,” and thus, the Friday video news update was created with

Scarbrough wearing his signature bowtie.

Scarbrough combs Google for relevant information and has Google Alerts set for TFA-related terms. He looks for stories related to corps members, staff, and relevant events and issues. He sorts these by date to be sure he is sharing fresh news from the most recent week. Scarbrough says, “If it was 2 weeks ago, I should have already covered it.” He looks through Twitter, too, and often finds news shared on regional TFA accounts.

Video is also used for conferences and holiday greetings from the CEOs. Video and phone conferences with the CEOs “gives them an authentic voice” (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, December 17, 2015). When challenging times hit, the CEOs have spoken to the staff via live broadcast. Scarbrough said it “means a lot that they’re tapping into our skills to share the message, calm the nerves, and help get questions answered” (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, December 17, 2015).

Monday Minute. The Monday Minute is designed as an email blast for a quick read and includes links to the previous week’s video content. Each entry is 180-characters, and it is sent out at 9 a.m. Monday. Scarbrough described it as the best way of disseminating weekly information. “It’s the anchor that links all of them together.” (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, January 8, 2015). Staff members are not allowed to email everyone, so the Monday Minute is described as the best, easiest, fastest way to reach everyone. Scarbrough said, “We want everyone to be able to read it in a minute,” (personal communication, January 8, 2015). Viewership of Weekly Tie-Up (from Fridays) increases on Mondays because the link is included in the Monday Minute. Some people wait until Monday morning to watch.

Based on the increasing growth of social media and their use for internal audiences, this cooperative study of Teach For America seeks to provide an example for other nonprofits on how social media (in particular, free tools) can help them communicate with all of their stakeholders. For 4 straight years, TFA has been named one of FORTUNE’s “100 Best Companies to Work For” (Scarbrough, personal communication, March 19, 2014), so the current tools appear to be working well. This knowledge could easily be transferred to for-profit entities as well.

Evaluation

In partnership with TFA, current employees were interviewed about the use of social media within the organization. These employees were recruited using a snowball sample starting with Scarbrough and French. The authors aimed for maximum variation in the type and location of these employees. Interviews were conducted by phone and email. Multiple in-depth interviews were conducted with Scarbrough to better understand how social media is used within Teach For America, the best tools he has found to reach TFA’s internal audiences, how his department measures success, department goals and any recommendations for other organizations. Staff members outside of the internal communication office were asked which communication tools were part of their routine, why they were seen as valuable, how they used them individually, as well as how they are used by their co-workers and by the larger organization. They were also asked to explain why certain communication tools/channels were not part of their routine.

In addition to the internal communication team, 10 staff members from across the country shared their thoughts on communication tools within TFA. They work in Appalachia-Kentucky, Maryland, Montana, New Mexico, New York, Ohio and Texas. Five were women; five were men. Five were regional staff; five were national staff. We asked them how the various internal communication tools served them.

Interviews: What Do Internal Communications Do For You?

Several participants spoke generally about how internal communication efforts help them. Crystal Kinser, who works in Appalachia, said:

I feel more informed about and more connected to the broader education conversation. As a team, it allows us to know what's going on in other parts of the country—it's so easy for us to work in a vacuum but these tools provide the broader context that we can then use when we talk to community members, teachers, school leaders, etc. (personal communication, January 8, 2015)

For Tara Sumrall, who works in New Mexico, internal communication tools allow her to stay in contact with people she has worked with across the organization (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Regional staff member Alan Brauer, who works in Baltimore, said:

It's really important to me to feel a sense of connection to our broader movement and the communications nationwide help make this happen. We become so focused on our day-to-day work and what is directly related to where we stand in the movement (and rightfully so because we have so much to accomplish for our students). The communication resources provide the birds eye view of our collective work that I need to ground me. (personal communication, January 7, 2015)

Kyle Krym, who is part of the national staff, said, on an individual level, "TFA communication tools allow me to disseminate information easily and creatively, receive concise information painlessly, and build stronger relationships" (personal communication, January 7, 2015). He added, "For the organization it helps build a community that allow different teams to interact with each other, helping eradicate the various silos of information that may otherwise exist" (personal communication, January 7, 2015).

Shannon Steffes, who also works on the national staff, said that most of her team is in New York, while she works from multiple sites. Steffes said it is:

important to remember there are lots of people out there working on our shared purpose. It also helps us to step back and learn about the education issues and efforts in our local regional offices that we (the national team) may not otherwise have an avenue to learn about. (personal communication, December 19, 2014)

For Sumrall, internal communication helps lift up the voice of the voiceless. She works with TFA's Native American Initiative. She began as a corps member in South Dakota, and now works in New Mexico.

Working in a Native region, I sometimes feel like we get a little bit forgotten; the structures often help to feel like the voices of the Native people I work alongside are elevated . . . and help me feel more connected to other communities within TFA that I might not directly work with or be a part of (personal communication, December 22, 2014).

According to Sumrall, "Maintaining hope and inspiration, and feeling connected to other people – these things matter a lot, and the structures [in TFA internal communication] absolutely do this for me" (personal communication, December 22, 2014).

Respondents also explained how they use specific communication tools, including Yammer, The Blank Show and the Monday Minute.

Yammer. Jamie Lonie, who works in Houston, likes how Yammer can be used alongside other communication tools. Lonie said, "Yammer can be used to engage with events in real time

like The Chat and other live events online. You can ask questions and post comments to the thread” (personal communication, December 23, 2014).

Steffes explained that Yammer is the most useful communication tool for her:

We are a large organization (in the number of staff and in the geography we cover). It isn't always easy to know what is happening. For example, I was able to find out that between two of our teams we were doubling over work with different vendors for the same work purpose. (personal communication, December 19, 2014)

Ron Jacobs⁴, who works in the national office in NYC, also shared how “invaluable” a resource Yammer can be:

When I had a question about our updated policy around travel receipts, I couldn't find the answer on our TFA Hub site, but I posted to Yammer, and got the answer I needed within a couple of hours. When I've been looking to connect with other staff members of similar background and beliefs, Yammer has provided a forum for connection and discussion. During some of the other communications (The Chat, live-streamed broadcasts), Yammer provides an opportunity for real-time interaction with people across the country who are listening to the same broadcasts. (personal communication, December 23, 2014)

However, Jacobs also pointed out some downsides to this internal social media tool:

The main drawback with Yammer is, as with a lot of social media, the volume. When we first started using Yammer at TFA, there were not a lot of people on it, and it was easy to keep up with what was going on. Now there are dozens of messages every day, and even if I wanted to participate at a high level, I don't have the time to weed through all the posts and find the ones that are relevant or interesting to me. (personal communication, December 23, 2014)

Peter Clark said, “Yammer is a space where people can connect and gain energy to do difficult work” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Like Clark, Krym sees Yammer as a way to connect on a different level: “it represents a slightly less formal medium in which to communicate. This doesn't mean that the information conferred there is any less important, but that it can be presented slightly more creatively, often with a touch of humor” (personal communication, January 7, 2015). Krym said TFA colleagues “no longer view us as just names, but rather as fully-formed people just like them. . . I [also] get to pair faces and, more importantly, personalities with some of the names of people I am supporting” (personal communication, January 7, 2015). Krym explained the importance of this connection: “As soon as relationships are built and the work becomes more personal, we stop simply understanding *what* we do, but also *why* we do what we do.” National staff member Ursa Scherer said, “Beyond the feeling of connection, and that it allows me to use a more casual tone than email always does – I find it can genuinely reduce email traffic when used well. That's my favorite part of it” (personal communication, December 19, 2014).

Krym said within his role in technical support, he sees Yammer as a helpful resource for TFA staff to ask questions; “I also imagine that there are some questions people feel more comfortable asking on social media rather than creating a formal support ticket regarding. Operationally, as soon as anyone asks a question that is technical in nature, somebody else will tag me so that I can respond” (personal communication, January 7, 2015).

Monday Minute. Many respondents said the Monday Minute is a crucial channel to read

⁴ This name has been changed at the request of the participant.

each week. According to Steffes:

Monday Minute is a great way to hold the staff accountable for knowing exactly what is going on in the org. There is accountability in it, but also the freedom to quickly scan the items and determine which apply to you so that you aren't wasting time on unimportant announcements. I think this helps keep people reading the items. It's efficient. (personal communication, December 19, 2014)

Jacobs also sang the praises of the Monday Minute. Jacobs said, "I appreciate having high priority items brought to my attention each week. I make it a point to go through this on Monday morning, so that I'm sure I'm up to date on any important happenings" (personal communication December 23, 2014).

Lonie also appreciates the brevity of the Monday Minute and its valuable links. According to Lonie, "It's short and sweet and has direct links to information. Over the past year and a half since it began, there are less mass emails from random departments. People have started to funnel information through the Monday Minute" (personal communication, December 23, 2014). Lonie said, "I like waking up on Monday morning and know what I need to do. It may not all be action items; it may just have interesting information, things we need to know for the week."

The Blank Show. According to Clark, The Blank Show is a key element in the internal communication toolbox:

The Blank Show provides a space for people to connect on a higher level in the work that we do. While it is easy for people to get brought down in the details of their work and what they do, The Blank Show provides a space for different teams to showcase things they're doing and for the people watching, a place to see what the impact we are making as a whole organization. (personal communication, December 22, 2014)

For Jacobs, the usefulness of The Blank Show depends on the topics shared. He watches every episode, but if content is not as relevant to him, he multi-tasks. Jacobs explained the value of the program:

I work on a support team, and have no direct interaction with any of our students, our teachers, or even with the people who work directly with our teachers. So this gives me an opportunity to learn more about our communities and the people in them. (personal communication December 23, 2014)

The Chat. Similar to other live broadcasts, attention to The Chat varies by topic.

According to Jacobs:

It's great to hear from the CEOs about topics of interest to the organization, and I really appreciate that they encourage participation from listeners. However, much like The Blank Show, sometimes the topics just don't grab me very much, and I feel I have better things to do with my time. When I do listen, though, I usually come away from it with a better understanding of and [appreciation] for the issue being discussed. And on occasions when there has been something very internal to the organization discussed . . . I've gotten very engrossed in it, and sometimes even motivated to further action. (personal communication December 23, 2014)

Weekly Tie-Up. Clark pointed to the efficiency of the Weekly Tie-Up. He said, "I watch The Weekly Tie-Up every week. It is helpful to watch this and see what is going on with the org as a whole. I also put links to this in our weekly staff emails" (P. Clark, personal communication, December 22, 2014). Lonie appreciates having the link inside the Monday Minute. Lonie said, "I don't actually watch it on Friday. It's a nice, feel-good overview of what's happening across the

nation. It helps us to keep in touch nationally and with other regions as the organization becomes more autonomous” (personal communication, December 23, 2014).

In addition to hearing what particular tools do for them, the participants were asked how internal communications were incorporated into their routine.

Interviews: Which Tools/Channels are Part of Your Routine? Why?

Each of the communication tools was mentioned as part of someone’s routine. Yammer was mentioned the most often.

Yammer. Steffes said Yammer was the biggest part of her daily schedule: “I check it at least twice a day. I admin 5 groups. I’d say I ask or answer a question or respond to a post 3-4 times a week. I try to like something every day” (personal communication, December 19, 2014). Steffes has made it such a central part of her routine because of the immediacy of the feedback. Scherer also checks Yammer multiple times a day (personal communication, December 19, 2014). Krym, who works in technical support, said he uses Yammer, “to communicate with the rest of the organization regarding upcoming maintenance windows, security threats, tech projects, best practices, and general well wishes” (personal communication, January 7, 2015). Lonie receives “automated highlights from my feed each morning. I might read some of them more in depth. I use it occasionally with The Chat. I might post comments [during the broadcast]. It’s a neat way to see what others are thinking” (personal communication, December 23, 2014).

Monday Minute. Most of the respondents mentioned reading each Monday Minute. Steffes said, “I read the Monday Minute every time it comes out as soon as I can. I leave it in my inbox until I’ve read and addressed all the items that apply to me” (personal communication, December 19, 2014). Brauer said the Monday Minute is a valuable part of his routine to “help me stay informed of both internal and external communications” (personal communication, January 7, 2015).

Live-streamed Broadcasts. Sumrall said, “If there’s a live-streamed broadcast I definitely watch it” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Clark also pointed to the importance of these broadcasts: “When the Live-Stream Broadcasts are important issues for the entire org, we come together as a team and watch these” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Sumrall said live-streamed broadcasts usually involve “some big decision or announcement has to be made, and I really appreciate that our leadership takes the time to tell us in a way that feels inclusive, clear, and personal” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). The live-streamed conversations are some of the most valuable communications to Lonie. Lonie said, “if I’m not at the office, I watch at home. It’s really cool. . . . The videos are accessible through the TFA Hub. You just click and there it is, easy to access both live or a recording” (personal communication, December 23, 2014). He said the openness and honesty expressed by the CEOs during these broadcasts “means a lot to people that they’re taking the time” and “listening to feedback” (J. Lonie, personal communication, December 23, 2014). Lonie said, “At another organization where I worked, I didn’t feel the same transparency. It’s an interesting way to leverage that technology to put a real face to the leaders of the organization” (personal communication, December 23, 2014).

Weekly Tie-Up. This new communication channel has grabbed staff members’ attention. Sumrall said she “almost always click[s] to watch the weekly tie-up” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Steffes said she likes “seeing what bow tie Kirk is rocking that week... and to quickly see what else is going on” (personal communication, December 19, 2014).

The Blank Show. Steffes regularly watches The Blank Show because it helps increase her knowledge about the regions. Steffes said, “Our team is supposed to service all regions and understanding their unique contexts is a must for the success of our work” (personal communication, December 19, 2014). Sumrall said when The Blank Show featured a region where she worked as a corps member it “made me feel fired up and re-invigorated about the work we do” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). She also said, “I LOVE the holiday blank show; it feels a little bit like looking at a yearbook.”

Education on Tap. Although most participants had not made Education on Tap part of their routine yet, Kinser said:

Education on Tap connects me to experts *outside* of our organization. An easy mistake to make is to keep recycling information and ideas within our org. But we’re not experts and doing so limits us. Ed on Tap pushes us in the right direction (personal communication, January 8, 2015)

The Chat. Most participants said The Chat was part of their routine. Steffes said it was valuable “hearing about what is happening at levels WAY above me and also with our external partners” (personal communication, December 19, 2014). According to Sumrall:

Some of the most emotionally charged moments at TFA have had a Chat associated with them, and I think that’s important. It helps me know and trust our leadership, which reinforces my belief that this is the right place for me (personal communication, December 22, 2014).

Clark said, “it is good to hear about issues that are affecting our organization and hearing different perspectives to push my thinking forward” (personal communication, December 22, 2014).

Interview: Why Aren’t Certain Tools Part of Your Routine?

Several themes emerged as to why they used or did not use certain tools.

Role. The tools used depend on each staff member’s role and location. Steffes works on the national team and uses all of the communication channels/tools, while her husband, who is on a regional team, uses almost none because he “is in the field, traveling, visiting schools, etc.” (personal communication, December 22, 2014).

Time. Krym explained that some tools, which may be very valuable, are not part of his routine because “I suffer from a severe shortage of time. In an ideal world I would have time for all of the various sources of communication and information, but my work keeps me too busy to rise above the bare minimum” (personal communication, January 7, 2015). Sumrall echoed those thoughts saying, “I just have a limited amount of time, and Education on Tap isn’t the most important thing to me. I have a couple of news and policy oriented friends, so I just look for what they post or look things up on my own” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Clark also mentioned Education on Tap as a tool that is not in his routine because of time: “While I know that I could probably listen to it while other things are going on, it feels hard to put any more of my time towards something when I have a lot on my plate to begin with” (personal communication, December 22, 2014). Scherer also mentioned a lack of time to use the tools she wanted to use; “I only look at the Weekly Tie-Up once in a while – I always like it when I do, but I’m often trying to get too many other things done when I see it released” (personal communication, December 19, 2014).

Topic. Lonie said, “The Blank Show varies on the content of the show. If I knew someone going to be in it, I would watch” (personal communication, December 23, 2014).

According to Kinser, “I listen to The Chat when it’s something I really care to hear about. The guests are always worth hearing about and I wish I had time for everyone, but it’s easy to prioritize doing something else instead.” (personal communication, January 8, 2015).

Not Live. Lonie said he does not always watch The Blank Show any more because there’s less urgency now that it is recorded and not live streamed (personal communication, December 23, 2014). Scherer communicated the same feeling; she watched The Blank Show “when it was a live broadcast – once it became a recording it felt less compelling to tune in. While we might have been watching it at the same time . . . it just lost a little magic when it wasn’t live” (personal communication, December 19, 2014). Kinser also said she stopped watching The Blank Show because of changes: “I’m confused on what it is anymore. I knew what it used to be and enjoyed it then. But the format got old, the team knew it, and changed it. But to what? I don’t know” (personal communication, January 8, 2015).

Outgrown. Kinser explained that she used to employ Yammer regularly, but it is no longer part of her routine: “As I’ve gotten more experienced in my role, I stopped using Yammer as a help tool and instead reached out directly to people I knew had the answers I needed” (personal communication, January 8, 2015).

Ignorance. Several participants were not familiar with Education on Tap, so it is not part of their routine yet. While most participants use Yammer heavily, Brauer said, “I REALLY REALLY want to become a much better user of Yammer! I simply don’t know what is “yammer worthy” and I have a hard time throwing something out to the entire organization without more clarification around some best practices” (personal communication, January 7, 2015).

Not yet a habit. Kinser said of the Weekly Tie Up “I’ve watched it a couple times and I like it a lot! It’s short! I get the big headlines! I just haven’t made a habit of checking it.” (personal communication, January 8, 2015).

Preference. Jacobs said he would rather read the updates than watch them in a video (i.e., Weekly Tie-Up, live-streamed broadcasts). Jacobs said, “I think that some of these things could be handled with email communication instead of live-stream broadcasts, especially when they start diving into details and numbers” (personal communication, December 23, 2014).

Internal Data

The TFA internal communication team has also evaluated their changes by looking at various data. The team tracks metrics in several formats for each channel. For the Monday Minute email, they monitor open rates and click-through rates. For Yammer, they monitor likes, comments and shares. For The Blank Show, they keep track of views. For The Chat, they look at listener numbers. For Education on Tap, they watch the number of streams/downloads. They also continue to seek qualitative feedback: “we’re always asking people what they think, what they love, and what we can do better” (A. French, personal communication, January 8, 2015).

According to French, they saw an increase in Yammer engagement in the past year “with more people signing up and more power users coming out of the woodwork” (personal communication, January 8, 2015). More than 100 people have attended Yammer 101 sessions since they started last summer. In addition to numbers for Yammer, “Monday Minute open rates have been steady, but recently saw an uptick” (French, personal communication). Scarbrough explained that MailChimp says nonprofit email engagement averages a 21% click-through rate, while TFA has 50%, so he is pleased. French says, “The Chat is up and down as far as engagement goes and really depends on whether it’s a topic people care about” (personal

communication). According to French, Education on Tap, which is a new podcast designed to be informal and informative related to education issues, “has seen a great launch. Since late August 2014, the podcast is up to 5200 unique streams, and December had its biggest listenership yet at almost 1800 unique streams. We're seeing engagement from both inside and outside of TFA” (personal communication, January 8, 2015). The Weekly Tie-Up, which is also new, is getting nice reviews and has a good number of loyal followers (A. French, personal communication, January 8, 2015).

The Blank Show views have increased in the past year “due to a shortened run-time and more sharable segments” (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, January 8, 2015). The last episode had more than 500 views, which represents more than 500 people as it is often viewed in office watch parties. Lately Scarbrough has begun separating pieces of The Blank Show into smaller video clips to prompt sharing. For example, he recently posted a 2-minute clip about teachers in New Mexico taken from an episode of The Blank Show. This segmentation allows for more hits. According to Scarbrough, several of these shortened segments had “between 1,000 and 5,000 views apart from the show’s run” (personal communication, January 8, 2015). Although these videos have been created for an internal audience, their presence on YouTube has allowed for external sharing as staff members tweet the links or post them on other social media. The fact that stories are constantly submitted to Scarbrough also suggests the value of The Blank Show to organization members. According to Scarbrough, “selecting content is pretty simple as regions get super excited about being involved” (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, December 17, 2015).

Data on the Weekly Tie-Up shows it to be “one of the top clicked items” within the Monday Minute (K. Scarbrough, personal communication, January 8, 2015). According to Scarbrough, each episode has between 300 and 500 views. Scarbrough said, “I am extremely excited about how consistent that has become since weekly content has the potential of quick burn-out. I’m hoping to bump those numbers up even more as we go into the Tie-Up’s sixth month of existence” (personal communication, January 8, 2015).

Just as staff members often use two channels at once, the internal communication staff also uses multiple channels at the same time. The CEOs did a live broadcast for all members in April 2014. Designed somewhat like a press conference, the social media team read the speeches beforehand. Then, they used the hashtags #TeachForAmerica and #WontBackDown during the speeches, and both became trending nationwide topics on Twitter. This was a first for TFA. The design also helped prepare the CEOs for questions from staff members.

Discussion & Conclusion

As Scarbrough expressed so well, “Nonprofit work is gritty and exhausting. We work a lot of overtime for no overtime pay,” which points to the great need to communicate well within the walls. Without a sense of being part of something worthwhile, staff members will become discouraged, and as Scarbrough pointed out, “Staff satisfaction helps public perception” (K. Scarbrough, December 17, 2014). Thus, the role of internal communicator is pivotal.

The respondent interviews point to several reasons staff utilize these tools. Most mentioned how internal communication tools built and maintained community. Because of these channels/tools, they felt a connection to the larger organization and its mission. They felt informed, connected, motivated, included and reminded of their shared purpose. They referred to internal communication tools as efficient. They saw internal communication channels providing a forum for discussion and a chance for interaction. Because of internal communication efforts,

they saw the impact of their work. To repeat Sumrall's description, she saw internal communication "maintaining hope and inspiration" (personal communication, December 22, 2014).

In contrast, the reasons for not using a specific channel included a lack of time, a lack of interest in a topic, a change made to the tool, that it was no longer needed, challenges due to their role at TFA, preference for a different format, and ignorance of the tool/channel.

Current Goals

TFA internal communicator Aaron French expressed the goals of his team for 2015: (1) create strong traditions for our staff and community to rally around. Things like live-streamed town halls with our co-CEOs; weekly, monthly, annual events/initiatives on Yammer; and consolidated communications for large communication streams (i.e. what people need to know always comes from our team, not various others across the organization). (2) Increase our audience to not only staff, but alumni and corps members as well (and maybe beyond) . . . (3) As we shift our operating model, understanding what our organization needs and developing the support necessary to keep us connected as one TFA. We're moving to a model where there will be more local control on the regional level. That, obviously, is a big plus in so many ways, but it also runs the risk of people feeling disconnected from each other. This is still very new, and we'll likely be figuring it out over the next year or two. (personal communication, January, 8, 2015)

Suggestions

Scarborough has suggestions for other nonprofits. First, "The big thing we've learned is that before you communicate, you have to listen. You can't go into internal communication with a pre-conceived idea of what they need" (K. Scarborough, personal communication, December 17, 2015). Scarborough described a listening tour conducted by their team in which a letter from the alphabet was selected and then everyone in TFA whose last name started with that particular letter was called and asked for their thoughts about content as well as gauging their vision. Second, "you don't have to have a big budget to make a big impact" because there are tools now that make your work "faster, cheaper and easier" (K. Scarborough, personal communication, December 17, 2015). For video, Scarborough has learned that "it's really all about the stories people want to hear" (personal communication, December 17, 2015). Thus, effective video can be created without fancy equipment or expensive editing programs. According to Scarborough, "they're forgiving of how it looks and sounds" if you are providing them with the information they want or need. Finally, it is important to connect your communication to the mission. Scarborough said, "Nonprofits are not always glamorous, but you're here for a reason" (personal communication, Dec. 17, 2014). Scarborough said it can be fun to personalize that for your community and remind them of why they are doing what they are doing; "I'm helping this group of people love their job" (personal communication, Dec. 17, 2014).

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Corporate Stewardship in Public Relations Here and Lá and/e Aqui e There: How Top Companies in the U.S. and Brazil Use Their Websites to Build and Maintain Relationships

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Abstract

Ninety websites of 45 top companies conducting business in the United States and Brazil were content analyzed to explore cultural sensitivity in use of stewardship strategies to engage stakeholders given apparent interests in global expansion. Results were mixed, but these top corporations tend not seek to distinguish cultural aspects, but rather to overlook them.

Literature Review

As organization-public interactions increasingly are transacted online via the World Wide Web, more research is being conducted to measure, analyze and understand relationship cultivation on Internet-based platforms. To date, interpersonal communication strategies commonly have served as measures of online organization-public relationships (Ki & Hon, 2006; Sweetser, 2010; Waters & Lord, 2009) along with dialogic approaches (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

However, according to Waters (2011), those measures have not successfully explored organizational performance in online relationship cultivation as thoroughly as they might have. He claimed stewardship strategies, originally explicated by Kelly (2001) for nonprofit organization fundraising applications settings, can be harnessed by for-profit corporations via their websites to nurture their online relationships with their various publics (Waters, 2011). Indeed, in content analyses, Waters (2011) found significant representations of the stewardship strategies on *Fortune* 100 corporate websites with Kelly's conceptualizations translating "remarkably well" (p. 134).

Despite the evolution from the one-way, static communication styles of the Web 1.0 to the ever-more interactive capabilities of the Internet, the challenges of cultural-difference implications apparently have remained. Until a few years ago, research indicated that local cultures are rarely reflected in online corporate communications (Goodman, 2009; Robbins & Stylianou, 2003). While Western corporations were among the first to adopt Internet technologies as a way to communicate their default business philosophies and practices to their global audiences, they had yet to adapt their messages and communication styles to individuals in local cultures they are attempting to engage (Robbins & Stylianou, 2003; Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003). Although the Internet exists as a global medium facilitating interactive communications, studies until now have suggested that users are more likely to employ online platforms to engage like-minded individuals in the same region, reinforcing regional cultural values and beliefs (Burgmann, Kitchen & Williams, 2006; Zahir, Dobin & Hunter, 2002). Even organizations with the most successful social media efforts have reflected local regions and cultures rather than adopting a more global approach (Stelzner, 2011). Scholars have been calling for a more blended approach, advocating glocal strategies to facilitate global interconnectivity while embracing differences in global cultures (Ess & Sudweeks, 2006). An overall question this study asks is: given top corporations' apparent interest in global expansion, are they becoming more culturally sensitive in their online stewardship strategies to engage target stakeholders?

More recently, Waters and Lo (2012) adapted some cultural concepts and dimensions from Hall (1976; Hall and Hall, 1995), Hofstede (1980, 2001) and the Global Leadership Organizational Effectiveness (GLOBE) study (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004) to frame their content analysis of Facebook profiles of 225 nonprofit organizations in the U.S., China and Turkey. Only one known study has extended Waters' (2011) online corporate stewardship research to an international setting, and that was by scholars in Turkey (Suher & Yesilyurt, 2012), who conducted a content analysis of the websites of the top 75 corporations listed in 2010 on *Fortune Magazine Turkey's* website. Although Kelly's (2001) stewardship strategies using Waters' (2011) measures were represented in the Turkish corporations' websites, they were not implemented effectively enough to stimulate dialogue with all intended stakeholders (Suher & Yesilyurt, 2012). On the global public relations practice front, studies have suggested that organizations no longer limit interactions within local communities but, instead, they have expanded simultaneous communication among transnational publics (Molleda,

Connolly-Ahern & Quinn, 2005; Wakefield, 2008). According to Curtin and Gaither (2007), contextual cultural differences alone might call for different public relations practices in the United States compared with Latin America. Further, Taylor (2000) argued the ways through which organizations effectively communicate with international publics depend on a variety of cultural and societal forces. These cultural and societal influences will affect style of the communications between MNCs and their publics in their host nations.

Hofstede (1980) drew several distinctions among cultures that may further explain differences in public relations practice in different countries. Following are descriptions of Hofstede's constructs along with scores across the constructs obtained for the U.S. and Brazil in two-country comparisons conducted via the Hofstede website on November 1, 2013 (<http://geert-hofstede.com/countries.html>):

Power distance expresses attitudes of a culture towards power and the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. With a score of 69, Brazil reflects a society that respects hierarchy and accepts inequalities among people, while a score of 40 for the United States reflects its "liberty and justice for all" values.

Individualism measures the degree of interdependence a society imposes on its members, how much individuals integrate into a group, and whether they define themselves as "I" or "we." Brazil's score of 38 suggests that from birth its people are integrated into strong, cohesive groups, such as extended families offering protection in exchange for loyalty; its score of 91 represents the United States' loosely-knit society in which individuals are expected to look out for themselves and their immediate families while enjoying great mobility and frequent interactions with strangers, making its citizens self-reliant.

Masculinity accounts for differences in distribution of gender roles in a culture with masculine individuals driven to be the best and feminine individuals motivated by liking what they do. Brazil's score of 49 recognizes a softer culture which values consensus and sympathy for the underdog; conflicts are avoided at home and work. Its 62 score reflects the United States' orientation to be the best it can and winner takes all; its people "live to work" and may boast of success and status; conflicts are resolved at individual levels with the goal to win.

Uncertainty avoidance measures how well a culture copes with ambiguity or difference and the fact the future can never be predicted nor controlled. With a score of 76, Brazil shows a strong need for rules and structure in society but its people are passionate, demonstrative and fun-loving, while a score of 46 for the United States suggests it accepts a degree of uncertainty along with new ideas, innovative products and tolerance for freedom of expression.

Long-term orientation measures the extent a culture displays a future-oriented pragmatism or a more conventional short-term perspective rooted in history and tradition. At 65, Brazil is oriented toward the long-term as are Asian societies; Brazilians accept more than one truth and accept change as part of life. The United States at 29 takes short-term views with an emphasis on absolute truth in all matters; individuals strive for quick results at work, and companies in the United States measure and report financial performance quarterly.

The Global Leadership Organizational Effectiveness (GLOBE) study (House, et al., 2004) ranked 62 societies on nine dimensions. Performance orientation—suggests that cultures high on performance orientation values results more than relationships, emphasizes performance and rewards achievement, and considers feedback essential for improvement (House et al., 2004). Like low-context cultures, those cultures high on performance orientation also value direct explicit communication while cultures low on performance orientation reverse

relationships, loyalty and belonging, while money is unacceptable as a motivator and assertiveness is avoided (House et al., 2004).

The present study set out to further examine online organization-public relationships through the theoretical lenses of stewardship applications (Kelly, 2001; Waters, 2011) and cross-cultural concepts and dimensions (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980, 2001; House et al., 2004) to evaluate how multinational corporations based in two different countries – Brazil and the United States – cultivate online relationships with their various publics via their websites at home and abroad, in other words, “aqui e there” and “here and lá.”

Research Question and Hypothesis

The overall question this study asked was: given top corporations’ apparent interests in global expansion, are they becoming more culturally sensitive in their online stewardship strategies to engage target stakeholders? Given the differences in cultures in the U.S. and Brazil postulated by Hofstede’s (1980, 2001) dimensions and the GLOBE study constructs (House et al., 2004), and by the review of public relations literature concerning multicultural best practices, this study’s hypothesis suggests that:

Methods

This study replicates and extends Waters (2011) study of stewardship strategies used in corporate online relationship nurturing. Brazil and the United States were the selected countries and both played host and home country. That is, Brazil-based companies were examined through their home websites in Brazil; in this case, the “host” country was the United States. Likewise, U.S.-based companies were investigated through home websites in the U.S., with Brazil as the “host” country. From the *Fortune* 2013 list of top 500 corporations, 23 U.S.-based corporations conducting business in Brazil and hosting independent websites, and from the *Exame* 2012 list of largest corporations operating in Brazil, 22 companies doing business in the U.S. were selected for analysis. (*Exame* is an important business and economy Brazilian magazine; a list of companies analyzed is available from the authors.)

A total of 90 websites of 45 companies were analyzed in their entirety as any level and subpage was visited. Each stewardship strategy’s set of items was examined for both home and host country. The presence or absence of each item was noted. Items were not necessarily a section on the website; they could appear either as a website section or as described within a website section. Data were collected on code sheets for each companies’ home- and host-country websites in December 2013 and January 2014. To calculate inter-coder reliability, 15% of the 90 data cases were systematically selected and re-coded on February 28, 2014, independent of the initial coding. The two sub-sets of data were compared using Cohen’s Kappa procedures to assess inter-coder reliabilities. Results for each of the four stewardship strategies were as follows: relationship nurturing, $K=.87$; reciprocity, $K=.85$; reporting, $K=.84$; and responsibility, $K=.84$.

Results

Reciprocity stewardship, characterized by recognizing and demonstrating gratitude toward stakeholders, was most often implemented on home-country websites (either U.S. or Brazil) through section for customers (100%), recognition of partnerships with other for-profit organizations (97.8%), and section for media (95.6%). Reciprocity was most frequent present on host-country websites (either U.S. or Brazil) through partnerships with other for-profit

organizations (95%), customers (91.1%), and media (91.1%).

Responsibility stewardship focuses on the importance of demonstrating organizations' commitment with their stakeholders by providing detailed information about their business. Home-country websites applied responsibility more frequently through information about products and services (100%), guiding philosophy (97.8%), and historical information (97.8%). Host-country websites applied more often information about products and services (100%), guiding philosophy (93.3%), and historical information (93.3%).

Reporting stewardship focuses on reinforcing positive organizational attitudes and behaviors toward stakeholders. In home-country websites, the most frequent items were annual reports (97.8%), fact sheets (93.3%), and audited financial information (93.3%). Less common were newsletters (24.4%), magazines (24.4%), and infographics (6.7%). In host-country websites, reporting was most frequent through annual reports (95.6%), green initiatives and environmental impact reports (91.1%), and news releases (88.9%).

Relationship Nurturing stewardship focuses on organizational "extra efforts" to consistently nurture public engagement. Relationship nurturing was most frequently used on home-country websites through providing a listing of job opportunities (100%), customer service outreach (100%), ability to request information from the organization (100%), and promoting the organization's social media accounts (82.2%) such as Twitter (77.8%), Facebook (75.6%), and YouTube (71.1%). Host-country websites applied relationship nurturing more often through customer service outreach (100%), ability to request information from the organization (100%), providing a listing of job opportunities (97.8%), and promoting the organization's social media accounts (60%) such as Facebook (60%), Twitter (53.3%), and YouTube (53.3%).

To test the hypothesis that multinational companies doing business in both the U.S. and Brazil will apply stewardship strategies in their home- and host-country websites differently, results for all four categories stewardship strategies were combined into a new "all strategies" dependent variable. An independent t-test of all the combined stewardship strategies by country showed no significant differences in applications used in US companies' websites ($M=71.43$, $SD=12.79$) and Brazilian companies' websites ($M=71.86$, $SD=10.69$, $t(43)=-.122$, $p=.903$). These results suggest that, overall, the four stewardship strategies were similarly applied in both home- and host-country websites of multinational corporations. Thus, the hypothesis was not supported. However, follow up tests for differences in expected frequencies among items within each of the four stewardship strategies found some differences; these are summarized in Tables 1 through 4, and are discussed next.

Discussion

It was assumed from the scholarly public relations literature (Molleda et al., 2005; Wakefield, 2008) that the cross-cultural theoretical perspectives cited above would impact expressions of online organizational-public relationship-building and would be polycentric in nature (Maddox, 1993; Curtain & Gaither, 2007; Taylor, 2000), with culturally-sensitive stewardship content on their websites in the two countries. That is, contrary to earlier scholarly literature in marketing and new media (Burgmann, et al., 2006; Goodman, 2009; Robbins & Stylianou, 2003; Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003; Zahir et al., 2002), it was expected in this study that home- and host-country websites of U.S. and Brazil-based companies would employ distinctly different stewardship strategies reflective of their specific, local publics. Previous studies had found differences on user perceptions of website design related to uncertainty avoidance, and country-specific economic and technological conditions (Cyr, 2013; Dinev et al.,

2006), and Cyr's (2008) study indicated differences between countries regarding website design related to trust, satisfaction, and website loyalty.

Contrary to expectations, the results from this study of home- and host-country websites of top multinational corporations doing business in the U.S. and Brazil suggest that selection of stewardship strategies for online organization-public relationship cultivation *generally* does not distinguish, or emphasize, cultural aspects of different nations, but rather overlooks them. When analyzed as a whole, there were no differences between the two countries overall, suggesting an ethnocentric approach to organization-public relationship cultivation (Maddox, 1993). At the same time, within each stewardship category, there were some interesting differences in cultural expressions by U.S. and Brazilian companies in how they conveyed responsibility, reciprocity, reporting and relationship nurturing stewardship strategies on their home- and host-country websites.

With but a few exceptions, in this study virtually all U.S. and Brazilian companies employed responsibility strategies on their home- and host-country websites. However, there were some nuanced differences. For example, Brazilian companies took greater care on their U.S.-version websites to try to win the support of their American publics in their host-country websites by expressing their commitment to ethics, and providing names and titles of corporate leadership, along with statements of visions for the future and guiding values, than did the American companies in their Brazilian-version websites. Perhaps the American companies believed their favorable reputations in the U.S. would translate to their Brazilian constituents.

On their respective home fronts, all of the American companies on their U.S. websites reported names and titles of leadership compared with a few more than half of the Brazilian companies' home websites, likely reflecting U.S. Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) regulations requiring public companies to disclose leadership, and perhaps the monochronic, low-context culture of the U.S. (Hall, 1976). At home, the Brazilian companies were more likely to provide mission statements and share visions for the future than their American counterparts. Additional information, such as overviews of global initiatives and recycling financial history, perhaps reflected the greater Brazilian long-term orientation and penchant to avoid uncertainty (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; House et al., 2004).

When expressing reciprocity – gratitude for the involvement of stakeholders – on both their home- and host-country websites, with few exceptions, virtually all the U.S. and Brazilian company websites make extra efforts by explicitly communicating with media and with other for-profit organizations with which they have partnerships. And when it comes to their customers at home, all U.S. and Brazilian companies acknowledged their appreciation to this major target public on their home websites. Interestingly, not all of the American companies expressed gratitude to their Brazilian customers on their host websites but, conversely, all of the Brazilian companies on their host-country websites expressed appreciation of their American customers, perhaps a reflection of the more collective culture of Brazilians who prize and reward loyalty more than Americans (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; House et al., 2004).

On their home-country websites, all U.S. companies specifically target investors, again likely reflecting U.S. SEC rules regulating public companies, compared with just over half of the Brazilian companies' home websites. Virtually all Brazilian companies do target investors on their American-version websites, possibly again due to tighter financial oversight by the U.S. government, although Brazil has an SEC-like government arm called "Comissão de Valores Mobiliários" (CVM). And, it should be noted that many Brazil-based companies trade their corporate stock on U.S. stock exchanges, such as Petrobras, which posts its stock's sales

performance on the New York Stock Exchange, São Paulo's Bovespa, and Buenos Aires' Latibex, and even compares its performance in live time with the Dow Jones and other indices.

However, at home – as well as in America – only two Brazilian companies expressed gratitude to their employees while half of the American companies at home extended appreciation to employees. With their greater collectivism culture, perhaps Brazilian companies view employees as part of their family or the “in group” with whom it might not be necessary to overtly express gratitude, compared with American companies who might have to work harder to earn the loyalty of employees in the “me first” American society (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; House et al., 2004). By comparison, only a very few of the U.S. companies recognized their employees in Brazil on their host-country websites – apparently in the American cultures, gratitude for the “in group” only applies at home – or in this instance, perhaps the U.S. companies are reflecting the more collectivist Brazilian culture (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; House et al., 2004).

U.S.-based companies did tend to recognize at-home employees' participation in contributions to corporate social responsibility (CSR) community outreach programs, such as General Motors' employee-based “teamGM Cares” program. Websites of the U.S.-based Walmart, Ford, HP, Procter & Gamble, Microsoft, PepsiCo, and Intel had similar expressions of appreciation to employees engaged in CSR activities. U.S. companies also recognized their employees' CSR engagement at home through storytelling strategies, strengthening reputations internally while showcasing corporate social responsibility outreach to external publics (Dowling, 2006; Mittins, Abratt, & Christie, 2011). One example was “Working at Walmart”; other examples involved Apple and PepsiCo in the U.S. while some Brazilian companies also acknowledged CSR contributions by “telling “employees' stories” of them including Petrobras, Vale and Gerdau.

Reporting – the stewardship strategy in which organizations volunteer information about themselves to earn publics' continued support and trust – was expressed with only very few exceptions by virtually all U.S. and Brazil-based companies on their home- and host-country websites by the inclusion of annual reports and reports of green initiatives and environmental impacts. At home, with few exceptions, virtually all U.S.- and Brazil-based companies also posted fact sheets and audited financial statements on their websites as part of reporting strategies. However, U.S. companies were less likely to post audited financial information on their Brazilian websites while the Brazilian companies did post audited financial information on their American websites, again perhaps as a function of differences in government oversight in the two countries, and possibly due to the monochronic, low-context culture of the U.S. where privacy is valued (Hall, 1976); it appears if U.S. companies are not required to disclose financial information, they might decide to withhold it. U.S. companies at home were more likely than Brazilian companies at home to post news releases and brochures to domestic websites along with options to subscribe to RSS feeds. The Brazilian companies at home were more likely to post “other” reporting items, such the social investment policy of IBM Brazil and “Truths and Myths” by Coca-Cola Brazil, although at home, IBM U.S. posted “other” items such as product security bulletins and Coca-Cola U.S.'s “Most Shared, Most Debated, Most Watched” feature.

Although U.S. companies were more likely to post brochures on their home-country websites than Brazilian companies, and that Brazilian companies were more likely to post fact sheets and newsletters on their host-country websites than U.S. companies, it should be noted that, overall, brochures, newsletters, and magazines were used less frequently by all companies' home and host-country websites than other reporting strategies. This could be the case because

other website content conveyed the stories and information more effectively or as well as brochures, newsletters and magazines could. Interestingly, only a few U.S. companies domestically used infographics on their websites, perhaps indicative of U.S. corporations' very recent attraction to them, but they weren't used on Brazilian websites, and Brazil-based companies apparently haven't discovered infographics at all. The U.S. companies' use of optional RSS feed subscription and infographics on their domestic websites may reflect the cultural lower levels of uncertainty avoidance with greater openness to new ideas and innovation (Hofstede, 1980, 2001), and greater performance orientations which values direct, explicit communications (House et al., 2004).

Although the reporting strategic item online newsroom did not present significant differences in neither country at home or abroad, it's noteworthy that most corporations' websites not only had online newsrooms, but some featured a complete range of media resources such as multimedia and external recognitions in addition to press kits and the like; companies with extensive newsrooms included Chevron, General Electric, Procter & Gamble, Caterpillar, and Petrobras. Yet, some Brazilian-based companies did not have any online newsrooms at home or abroad, including General Motors Brazil, Ford Brazil, INTL FCStone U.S., INTL FCStone Brazil, and Johnson & Johnson Brazil. Studies from the early 2000s found leading international corporations were resistant to adapt then-new Internet-based technologies for online media relations (Gower & Cho, 2001; Holtz, 1999; Porter & Sallot, 2003). Unfortunately, it appears some companies are still lagging in their adoption of these corporate communications strategies.

With only one exception, all U.S. and Brazil-based companies on their websites at home and abroad used three identical tactics to nurture relationships by demonstrating value of key stakeholders and acknowledgement of mutual benefits to the organization and its publics. These three tactics were: customer service outreach, providing mechanisms to request information from the company, and providing listings of employment opportunities.

There were some interesting differences between U.S. and Brazil-based companies when comparing their social media tactics choices to nurture relationships on their home-country websites. Twitter, YouTube, company blogs, LinkedIn accounts and mobile apps were more likely to be used on their home websites by U.S. companies. The U.S. companies' use of these very popular social media platforms (CNN Money, 2014) may reflect American's cultural lower levels of uncertainty avoidance with greater openness to new ideas and innovation (Hofstede, 1980, 2001), and greater performance orientations which values direct, explicit communications (House et al, 2004). On the other hand, half of the Brazil-based companies used Google+ on their American websites, which less than 25 percent of them used on their home websites, perhaps indicating the fact that Google+ has not yet caught on in the U.S., or indicating cultural-difference awareness regarding new digital media abroad.

Despite the exponential growth of social media networks and the important role social media have played in organization-public relationship nurturing (Sweetser, 2010), companies in both countries apparently have been slow to adopt some platforms, such as Flickr, Instagram, Pinterest, Slide Share, and Tumblr, and some of these haven't been adopted at all on host-country websites. Although corporate social media networks were not specifically analyzed in this study other than presence or absence on a company's website – with website being typically the primary communications tool used by organizations online (Stuart & Jones, 2004; Sullivan, 1999), if a company in this study did not promote a social media platform on its website, the assumption was that the company is not using that platform at all. As a strategy to nurture relationships and engage with target publics, some companies on their websites promoted and

drew attention to the company's use of social media networks by having a section showcasing them or reporting recent corporate tweets or YouTube video posts, as Boeing U.S. does in its social media center. Some corporate websites invited visitors to connect those with common interests via online discussion forums, such as Hewlett-Packard's "Join the Conversation" page.

Interestingly, just fewer than half of the Brazil-based companies offered relationship nurturing English-Portuguese (or vice versa) language translation options on their websites at home and abroad, while only two U.S.-based companies offered English-Portuguese language translation options on their Brazilian websites and only one U.S.-based company offered a language translation option on its website at home. This study expected, based on the public relations literature, that multinational corporations might take a more polycentric approach (Kinzer & Bohn, 1985) to online organization-public relationships by commonly providing language translation options on their websites to reach, not only local, but global audiences (Ess & Sudweeks, 2006). Instead, this study found that far fewer corporations offered translation options on their websites than anticipated, particularly the U.S. companies which appeared to be exhibiting ethnocentric values (Maddox, 1993) with regard to language. Cargill was an example of a Brazilian-based (but U.S.-owned) company offering language translation service. Some Brazilian companies also offer translation to other languages, such as Spanish, as does Petrobras.

Some companies – such as P&G – on their home- and host-country websites provide a link, usually located on the upper right side of the home page, connecting the website to others of the same company around the world; sometimes these are labeled "worldwide sites", replacing the language-translation choice through interconnectivity to different corporate websites around the world. However, this technique prevents potential website visitors in other countries from learning about Walmart in Brazil, for instance, if they do not read or speak Portuguese. Another explanation for the rare translation options in most of the corporate websites analyzed in this study might be related to costs of translation options and cultural contexts of the audiences (Harrison-Walker, 2002; Hillier, 2003; Nantel & Glaser, 2008). According to Nantel and Glaser (2008), even the best translation might not properly reflect the original message due to the "culture-specific frames of reference passed on to all individuals during their primary socialization" (p. 113).

In addition, it is important to highlight how some of the corporate websites used storytelling strategies to nurture relationships. For instance, the researcher noticed an apparent trend to make corporate websites resemble an electronic magazine, in which sections and pages devoted to specific topics seem designed to capture visitors' attention through copy and design that evokes a journalistic environment. Visitors to the website don't just learn about the company but they also interact with the company (or at least its website), and make selections among a diverse collection of information, such as "the next big thing in music" from Samsung U.S., "Human Energy Stories" from Chevron U.S., and "take the energy quiz" from Exxon Mobil. Microsoft, as another example, uses storytelling to promote its products online. On its homepage, for instance, different characters offer testimonials about a specific laptop, tablet, or cellular telephone as if they were customers satisfied with their acquisition. The website visitor is invited to learn more about each of these stories and consequently to learn about the product, its benefits and cost. Headlines beginning with the word "honestly" – are repeated as a media campaign mantra, as in "Honestly, I needed a laptop and a tablet, see my story"; and "Honestly, more megapixels, better camera, see my story." Coca-Cola, General Electric, and Ford, among others, also make use of storytelling strategies on their websites to nurture relationships.

Greater interactivity has apparently become a blanket approach to engage the website visitor in an interpersonal-type interaction in a bid to nurture relationships. However, increased interactivity just as well reflects the application of stewardship strategies to enhance online organizational relationship management and should not be interpreted only as the application of interpersonal communication strategies (Waters, 2011).

Nevertheless, while the research hypothesis was not supported, the mixed results within the stewardship categories suggest some influences on choices by multinational corporations of online stewardship strategies due to cultural differences. However, these instances are comparatively rare. Instead, top corporate websites of U.S.- and Brazil-based companies more generally reflect their offline home cultures even when, via the World Wide Web, those companies extend their reach through their own websites in each other's backyards meant to reach publics with different cultures.

Implications for Practice

The mixed results of this study suggest that, while reaching out to global audiences online, public relations practitioners' applications of stewardship strategies at present may be only somewhat sensitive to cultural differences. Culturally sensitive professionals who wish to practice international public relations with more polycentric approaches should endeavor to adapt their practices to accommodate different cultures by localizing their communication strategies. Understanding how this can be accomplished in the global environment of the Internet is the key for these public relations practitioners to maximize their online international organization-public relationship management.

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Table 1. Frequency distributions of reciprocity strategies in home- and host-country websites.

<i>Reciprocity in home-country websites</i>					
Item	Home country				
	Combined U.S./Brazil			U.S.	Brazil
	Present	Absent	Total	Present	Present
Customers	45	0	45	23	22
Partnerships with other for-profit orgs	44	1	45	22	22
Media	43	2	45	22	21
Other publics	43	2	45	21	22
Community relations	43	2	45	22	21
Partnerships with nonprofit organizations	38	7	45	19	19
Educational institutions	38	7	45	20	18
Investors*	36	9	45	23	13
Other	33	12	45	18	15
Nonprofit organizations	32	13	45	15	17
Government agencies	30	15	45	13	17
Becoming a member of/joining the website	19	26	45	10	9
Employees*	12	33	45	10	2
Offering special promotions for website visitors	8	37	45	3	5
<i>Reciprocity in host-country websites</i>					
Item	Home Country				
	Combined U.S./Brazil			U.S.	Brazil
	Present	Absent	Total	Present	Present
Partnerships with other for-profit orgs	43	2	45	21	22
Customers*	41	4	45	19	22
Media	41	4	45	22	19
Community relations	41	4	45	20	21
Other publics	40	5	45	19	21
Partnerships with nonprofit organizations	32	13	45	16	16
Educational institutions	32	13	45	16	16
Investors*	30	15	45	10	20
Other	21	24	45	9	12
Government agencies	20	25	45	9	11
Nonprofit organizations	18	13	45	10	8
Becoming a member of/joining the website	16	29	45	9	7
Offering special promotions for website visitors	7	38	45	3	4
Employees	4	41	45	2	2

* indicates differences in frequencies between companies doing business in the U.S. and Brazil at $p < .05$

Table 2. Frequency distributions of responsibility strategies in home- and host-country websites.

<i>Responsibility in home-country websites</i>					
Item	Home Country				
	Combined U.S./Brazil			U.S.	Brazil
	Present	Absent	Total	Present	Present
Information about products and services	45	0	45	23	22
Information about their guiding philosophy	44	1	45	22	22
Providing historical information	44	1	45	22	22
Description of the organization's guiding values	41	4	45	20	21
Vision for the future*	40	5	45	18	22
Providing a corporate goal	40	5	45	19	21
Providing names and titles of the leadership*	37	8	45	23	14
Other*	36	9	45	15	21
Statement of ethics	35	10	45	17	18
Statement of diversity and inclusive emp. practices	32	13	45	21	11
Providing a mission statement*	23	22	45	8	15
Contact information for executives	7	38	45	5	2
 <i>Responsibility in host-country websites</i>					
Item	Home Country				
	Combined U.S./Brazil			U.S.	Brazil
	Present	Absent	Total	Present	Present
Information about products and services	45	0	45	23	22
Information about their guiding philosophy	42	3	45	21	21
Providing historical information	42	3	45	21	21
Description of the organization's guiding values*	38	7	45	17	21
Vision for the future*	38	7	45	17	21
Providing a corporate goal	33	12	45	15	18
Providing names and titles of the leadership*	32	13	45	13	19
Other*	32	13	45	13	19
Statement of diversity and inclusive emp. practices	31	14	45	16	15
Statement of ethics*	27	18	45	10	17
Providing a mission statement	18	27	45	8	10
Contact information for executives	0	45	45	0	0

* indicates differences in frequencies between companies doing business in the U.S. and Brazil at $p < .05$

Table 3. Frequency distributions of reporting strategies in home- and host-country websites.

Reporting in home-country websites					
Item	Home Country				
	Combined U.S./Brazil			U.S.	Brazil
	Present	Absent	Total	Present	Present
Annual reports	44	1	45	23	21
Fact sheets	42	3	45	21	21
Audited financial information	42	3	45	21	21
Green initiatives/ environmental impact reports	42	3	45	21	21
News releases*	40	5	45	23	17
Online newsroom	40	5	45	22	18
Podcasts/webcasts	36	9	45	21	15
Subscription option for RSS feeds*	27	18	45	19	8
Other*	26	19	45	10	16
Subscription option to informational updates*	25	20	45	17	8
Brochures*	13	32	45	11	2
Newsletters	11	34	45	6	5
Magazines	11	34	45	7	4
Infographics	3	42	45	3	0
Reporting in host-country websites					
Item	Home Country				
	Combined U.S./Brazil			U.S.	Brazil
	Present	Absent	Total	Present	Present
Annual reports	43	2	45	22	21
Green initiatives/ environmental impact reports	41	4	45	21	20
News releases	40	5	45	21	19
Audited financial information*	37	8	45	16	21
Podcasts/webcasts	35	10	45	18	17
Fact sheets*	34	11	45	14	20
Online newsroom	32	13	45	17	15
Other*	25	20	45	8	17
Subscription option to informational updates	19	26	45	9	10
Subscription option for RSS feeds	15	30	45	7	8
Newsletters*	7	38	45	1	6
Magazines	6	39	45	1	5
Brochures	4	41	45	2	2
Infographics	0	45	45	0	0

* indicates differences in frequencies between companies doing business in the U.S. and Brazil at $p < .05$

Table 4: Frequency distributions of relationship nurturing strategies in home- and host-country websites

<i>Relationship Nurturing in home-country websites</i>					
Item	Home Country				
	Combined U.S./Brazil			U.S.	Brazil
	Present	Absent	Total	Present	Present
Providing a listing of job opportunities	45	0	45	23	22
Customer service outreach	45	0	45	23	22
Ability to request info. from the organization	45	0	45	23	22
Promoting the organization's social media accounts	37	8	45	21	16
Twitter account*	35	10	45	21	14
Facebook account	34	11	45	20	14
YouTube*	32	13	45	20	12
Other	31	14	45	17	14
Organizational blog*	24	21	45	18	6
Sharing content on social media	22	23	45	14	8
LinkedIn account*	19	26	45	15	4
Provision of a feedback form*	16	29	45	12	4
Google + account	14	31	45	9	5
Instant chat option	12	33	45	5	7
Translation service option	10	35	45	1	9
Mobile Apps*	8	37	45	7	1
Flickr	7	38	45	5	2
Instagram	7	38	45	3	4
Forums	6	39	45	5	1
Encouraging visitors to bookmark	5	40	45	1	4
Pinterest	3	45	45	3	0
Slide Share	3	45	45	2	1
Tumblr	2	43	45	2	0
MySpace	1	44	45	1	0
Foursquare	0	45	45	0	0
Other social media	0	45	45	0	0

Relationship Nurturing in host-country websites

Item	Home Country				
	Combined U.S./Brazil			U.S.	Brazil
	Present	Absent	Total	Present	Present
Customer service outreach	45	0	45	23	22
Ability to request info. from the organization	45	0	45	23	22
Providing a listing of job opportunities	44	1	45	22	22
Promoting the organization's social media accounts	27	18	45	14	13

Facebook account	27	18	45	13	14
Twitter account	24	21	45	12	12
YouTube	24	21	45	13	11
Other	23	22	45	10	13
Sharing content on social media	16	29	45	7	9
Google + account*	13	32	45	2	11

Relationship Nurturing in host-country websites

Item	Home Country				
	Combined U.S./Brazil			U.S.	Brazil
	Present	Absent	Total	Present	Present
Organizational blog	12	33	45	7	5
LinkedIn account	11	34	45	4	7
Translation service option	11	34	45	2	9
Flickr	9	36	45	5	4
Instant chat option	9	36	45	6	3
Provision of a feedback form	7	38	45	4	3
Forums	5	40	45	4	1
Instagram	3	42	45	1	2
Pinterest	3	42	45	0	3
Mobile Apps	3	42	45	0	3
Encouraging visitors to bookmark	4	41	45	2	2
Tumblr	1	44	45	1	0
Slide Share	1	44	45	0	1
Foursquare	1	44	45	1	0
Other social media	1	44	45	1	0
MySpace	0	45	45	0	0

* indicates differences in frequencies between companies doing business in the U.S. and Brazil at $p < .05$

**Rumor Control or Rumor Central: What the Handling of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370's
Disappearance Can Tell Us About the Impact of Interest and Ambiguity on Crisis
Response Over Time**

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Abstract

On Saturday, March 8, 2014 at 9:05 a.m. GMT, Malaysia Airlines announced it lost contact with flight MH370, which departed Kuala Lumpur at 12:41 a.m. that morning bound for Beijing. Initially, it looked like Malaysia Airlines was doing everything right, with more than six media statements in the first 24 hours. But very quickly, the airline lost any semblance of control and authority, which led to months of speculation, rumor and conspiracy theories dominating the news. How could the executives at Malaysia Airlines have gotten their crisis responses so wrong?

The researchers turn to a 67-year-old formula for answers. The mathematical equation, developed by two psychology professors at Harvard University, Allport and Postman, helps us describe the intensity of a rumor. The formula, written as $r = i \times a$, holds that the intensity of a rumor (r) is directly proportional to the interest (i) one has in a specific or topical proposition for belief and the ambiguity (a) or lack of news about an event. Allport and Postman's equation is multiplicative. That is, if either interest or ambiguity can be reduced to zero, the intensity of the rumor will likewise be reduced to zero.

We see great applicability to public relations in terms of the equation's relevance to crisis response. During the early hours of a crisis, the glaring *lack* of information operates much like rumor. This lack of information and the ambiguity that lack creates, along with interest, are important factors in understanding stakeholder and media demand for information. Missing in Allport and Postman's equation is the element of time (t), specifically how interest and ambiguity interact over time and what that interaction does to the demand for information.

Using a content analysis of the complete media timeline from Malaysian Airlines (including interview transcripts) and a systematic random sample of social media posts uncovered using Radian6, the researchers chart the rise and fall of rumors over time from the initial Malaysia Airlines media release to 120 days following the disappearance. Crisis type was included as an interest indicator, while 8 reactive strategies and 7 rumor categories were examined. Ultimately, we hope this examination will move us closer to a practical theory on the demand for information and improved responses to crises.

The one certainty that seems to be commonly accepted about the first few hours of a crisis is the fragmented nature of information. The information is a strange mixture of fact, speculation and rumor. In the worst cases, the situations that cause irreparable harm to an organization's reputation, this phenomenon exists well past the first hours, sometimes lasting weeks or months.

The loss of Malaysian Airlines Flight 870, which disappeared from radar screens in the early morning hours of Saturday, March 8, 2014, is the latest "worst case" scenario. Malaysia Airlines made the announcement it had lost contact about 9 a.m with the flight, which had departed Kuala Lumpur bound for Beijing. GMT. Initially, it looked like airline management was doing everything right, with more than six media statements in the first 24 hours. But very quickly, the Malaysian Airlines lost any semblance of control and authority, which led to months of speculation, rumor and conspiracy theories dominating the news. How could the executives at Malaysia Airlines have gotten their crisis response so wrong?

While examining this phenomenon, we happened upon a 1947 work by Gordon Allport and Leo Postman, two psychology professors at Harvard University. *The Psychology of Rumor* describes an experimental investigation into what Allport and Postman term the rumor principle. Through their investigation they were able to develop a formula to test for the intensity of rumor.

Indeed, it seemed to us that information in the initial stages of a crisis operates much like rumor. Facts are either lacking or insufficient to provide a complete picture of what happened. Information – and news based on that information – is conflicting. Often, people are either unable or unwilling to accept or comprehend the facts as they are set forth in the news or directly from the organization in crisis. Nature abhors a vacuum and there are sources only too ready to fill the void with inaccurate information, speculation and conspiracy theories (Note: for the purposes of this paper, we will collapse these terms for conflicting information into one category we will label "rumor").

Our response to information provided by the news media and/or the organization, how it is sifted and assimilated and the importance we assign to each tidbit is in direct proportion to how important that event is or becomes in our lives. If the event is of great importance to us, we seldom stop at simple acceptance of news of an event and seek greater explanation and deeper meaning. If we have no interest in an event, we pay less attention, if we pay any attention at all, to information about that event. Finally, when we have little or no interest in that event we are less likely to let information about that event change or influence our thinking. We tend to remain rooted in our initial impressions, provided we give the event any thought at all.

Many professionals acknowledge that speed is of the essence in successfully handling communications in a crisis. The common understanding is the faster information is released, the more quickly the situation clarifies and the less likely it is that rumor will take root in our understanding of the event. Time becomes a critical factor in our success or failure in keeping a crisis from spiraling out of control, with the usual impact of a hit to our organization's credibility and reputation.

In this paper, we will examine the impact of interest and ambiguity over time using Malaysian Airlines Flight 870 as the backdrop. Using a content analysis of the complete media timeline from Malaysian Airlines (including interview transcripts) and a systematic random sample from social media posts uncovered using Radian6, the researchers chart the rise and fall of rumors over time from the initial Malaysia Airlines media release to the reaffirmation of their commitment. Ultimately, we hope this examination will move us closer to a practical theory on the demand for information and improved response to crises.

Literature Review

To test their theory on the intensity of rumors, Allport and Postman (1947) composed an algebraic equation. The formula ($r = i \times a$, where “r” represents rumor intensity, “i” represents interest and “a” represents ambiguity) is multiplicative; therefore, if either importance or ambiguity is zero, then rumor doesn’t manifest. What isn’t represented in this formula is “time,” the all-important factor that drives not only our public relations response, but also the demand for information from the media and the public. From the literature and our own professional experience, we know that the more time we take to disseminate accurate information, the greater propensity for rumor to flourish in the void.

This literature review contains studies on rumor, ambiguity, interest, and time as they relate to crisis management. Rumor, ambiguity, and interest are factors in Allport and Postman’s equation, and time has been added as a factor because of its role in effectively the management of a crisis, which the review of literature will demonstrate. It was not uncommon for these four subjects to intersect throughout the review of literature. The literature review is presented in four sections: 1) rumor; 2) ambiguity; 3) interest; and 4) time.

For the purposes of this literature review, a crisis is described as “a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization’s high-priority goals” (Seeger, Selnow, and Ulmer 1998, 231). Crises disrupt employees and communities, damage corporate reputations, and cost hundreds of millions of dollars. A crisis is also a public event that creates media scrutiny and pressure for immediate explanations.

Rumor

Rumor has been one of the most elusive phenomena that social scientists have attempted to study (Bordia and Rosnow 1998). Scientific interest in rumor is essentially a product of the twentieth century (Rosnow and Fine 1976). Since the early 1900s, rumor has been studied, analyzed and reported on by scholars representing diverse areas of inquiry. Psychologists study the transmission process and the nature of recall; sociologists analyze rumor from the viewpoint of societal structure and the communication process; anthropologists and folklorists are intrigued for what is revealed about social control and rhetorical style; psychoanalysts see in rumor universal metaphors; historians attempt to unravel the effects that rumors have had in wars and economic crises; lawyers study rumor to understand the nature and limits of testimony; physicians work to understand its hysterical contagion; and the police and military attempt to prevent its violence and sabotage.

In their book, Allport and Postman (1947) define rumor as “a specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present.” The researchers go on to say that “although rumor spreading is at all times a social and psychological problem of major proportions, it is especially so in time of crisis. Whenever there is social strain, false report grows virulent” (Allport and Postman 1947).

Rosnow and Fine (1976) define rumor as information, neither substantiated nor refuted. They compare rumor to gossip, saying that gossip is small talk with or without a known basis in fact. The multiple functions that both serve are practically identical, but the motivational hierarchies appear to be different: rumors seem most often fueled by a desire for meaning, a quest for clarification and closure; gossip seems motivated primarily by ego and status needs.

Ogrizek and Guillery (1999) label rumors as the oldest media in the world. The researchers pointed out that rumors remain one of the main methods today for the broadcast of negative views within a social group. They offer two general rules of communication to be used to combat a rumor successfully. First, rational discussion does not work, particularly when it is impossible to prove the truth, when the technical complexity of the problem raised by the rumor is hard to explain to the general public, or when the rumor is highly emotional. Second, a credible source must be found if the struggle against rumor is to be successful, and that these days, most sources of information are not considered reliable by public opinion.

Fearn-Banks (2002) defines rumor as information usually passed by word of mouth with no verification of fact and no credible source. Rumors can be positive or negative. They can be absolutely false or partly false, or they can be undeniable true or premature facts. Rumors can cause the longest and most damaging of crises. Even outrageous rumors endure or repeat, and they are difficult to battle. The victim of rumor rarely knows how the rumor started or who has heard it. This makes it difficult to curtail its spreading, which happens quickly and often with disastrous consequences. There are six kinds of rumors in Fearn-Banks typology: intentional rumor; premature-fact rumor; malicious rumor; outrageous rumor; nearly true rumor; and birthday rumor (Fearn-Banks 2002). *Intentional rumor* is started to achieve a purpose. *Premature-fact rumor* is an early version of what will eventually become the truth. *Malicious rumor* is often started to damage competitors' businesses. The *outrageous rumor* is so unbelievable that people react by saying, "It has to be true! Who would create such a story?" The *nearly true rumor* is so named because it is partially true. The *birthday rumor* is one that has regular birthdays and continues to emerge over and over again.

Fearn-Banks suggests four steps that organizations may take to minimize the chances of a crisis caused by rumor:

1. Establish a rumor center in which various employees or volunteers enlist supporters to be on the alert for rumors.
2. Conduct rumor workshops prior to the circulation of rumors to advise personnel on what actions should be taken in the event of a damaging rumor.
3. Make sure your company has such strong positive relationships with its key publics that the publics would at least doubt a negative rumor, if not totally disbelieve it.
4. Keep employees informed. Employees left in the dark are fertile ground for the growth of rumors commonly spread by "the grapevine."

As reported by Fearn-Banks (2002), McDonald's followed these steps when a rumor circulated that there were worms in its hamburgers. It was a well-known rumor that had plagued Wendy's earlier. McDonald's personnel, on a one-to-one basis with patrons who asked, denied the presence of worms. In addition, the employees recorded the names and phone numbers of those patrons. The strategy was intended to make customers knowledgeable about the company and, therefore, less likely to spread the rumor.

Rumors result when organizations admit only to the least amount of information they can (Garcia 2002). According to Garcia (2002), this is almost always self-defeating because the bad news will almost certainly get out eventually. When companies are parsimonious with the bad news, reports of problems tend to dribble out over an extended period of time. The result is a stream of negative rumor, news reports, and gossip that keeps the company's troubles on people's minds. A quick response and complete disclosure, although it may be damaging in the short run, reduces the risk of rumors, leaks, drawn-out media coverage, and the perception of dishonesty (Burson 1995, Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer 1998).

Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) found that one spokesperson, usually the CEO, helps to ensure consistency of message and reduces the chance of rumors. The CEO, as the organization's final authority, is in most instances the most credible crisis spokesperson. Although the designated spokesperson may have other members of the team respond to technical questions, he or she should retain final authority for the message. The spokesperson should be willing to confront the media when the portrayal of the crisis is unfair or overly sensational (Benson 1988).

According to Allport and Postman (1947), rumor is a considerable problem during wartime. Rumor is created and thrives in the absence of news. Therefore, people must be given the most accurate possible news, promptly, and completely. At the same time, it would not be hard to prove that "rumor also flies thickest when news is most plentiful" (Allport and Postman 1947). There were few rumors about the losses at Pearl Harbor until the newspapers themselves had published an official report on the disaster. Although there were scattered rumors of Hitler's death before the newspapers told of the assassination attempt in the summer of 1944, there were many more immediately afterward. There was also a flood of rumors traveling through the country during the final hours before V-J day. In another example, tales spread of the death of many notable people like General Marshall and Bing Crosby. Rumors became so much of a problem during this time that President Roosevelt felt it necessary to devote part of his fireside chat delivered on Feb. 23, 1942, to a repudiation of the circulating rumors.

DiFonzo and Bordia (2000) surveyed seventy-four experienced public relations professionals serving top global corporations to investigate types of organizational rumors, their prevalence and effects, effectiveness of rumor management strategies, and associated psychological and situational variables. Results showed that harmful rumors are commonplace, especially during organizational change. Three distinct dimensions or rumor effects emerged: external ramifications (bad press), internal attitudes (lowered morale), and internal behaviors (increased absenteeism). The researchers defined rumor as "an unverified bit of information about something of importance to a group. It is like news in every way except that it is not verified. It may or may not be true. It may spread by word-of-mouth, fax, electronic mail, or any other communication channel." The initial sample consisted of 238 persons making up the Arthur W. Page Society, PR professionals invited to the 46th Annual Public Relations Seminar sponsored by the Institute for Public Relations (IPR), and members of the IPR Board of Trustees. Seventy-four completed questionnaires were obtained, yielding a response rate of 33%. DiFonzo and Bordia (2000) offered four implications public relations professionals could derive from the data gained in the study:

1. Public relations professionals can expect to encounter harmful rumors frequently.
2. Public relations professionals can be alert to the possible negative effects of rumors within three broad domains: External consequences and internal attitudes and behaviors.
3. Public relations professionals can formulate a proactive plan to prevent and manage rumors.
4. Public relations professionals can best inhibit rumor activity and its associated effects by reducing and/or placing bounds on uncertainty and by reducing belief in the rumor through effective formal communications.

Ambiguity

The consensus of the crisis communication literature is that the primary objective of crisis management is to provide accurate information as quickly as possible to external publics affected by the crisis (Schuetz 1990, Sellnow and Ulmer 1995). However, this is not always

possible (Sellnow and Ulmer 1995). Since crises confront organizations with surprise, threat, and a short response time, the degree of ambiguity during crisis situations is likely to be intense. Because each of us needs to know his or her circumstances, we begin to theorize on our own when no information on a given subject is forthcoming (Rosnow 1991). The more threatening and nebulous the situation, the more urgent is the need to reduce one's feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, but rumormongers also must be credulous enough to believe stories that may be patently absurd. While some companies rightly avoid telling outright lies, a large number have no qualms about telling half-truths that may be literally correct but that paint a very misleading picture (Garcia 2002). A misleading half-truth, like the lie, is likely to be found out, and companies that are caught face the same kinds of problems as those caught in a lie. The true statements a company tells should be grounded in a clear understanding of the reality of the situation, not on a deceptive foundation. According to Rosnow and Fine (1976), there is a direct tie between rumor development and ambiguity. These researchers point out that rumors develop as people caught in an ambiguous situation attempt to interpret it by pooling what they have heard.

Schachter and Burdick (1955) made the first successful attempt to manipulate ambiguity as a prime factor in determining the intensity of a rumor. Their study took place in a girls' school, and included three manipulated conditions to test the relationship between rumor and ambiguity. The three manipulated conditions were ambiguity condition (referred to as A), rumor condition (R), and combined ambiguity-rumor condition (A-R). In the two ambiguity conditions (A and A-R), the school principal interrupted work in several classes, pointed at one student, and announced: "Miss K, would you get your hat, coat, and books, please, and come with me. You will be gone for the rest of the day." Such an action was intended to arouse a strong sense of ambiguity in the other students' minds. In the two rumor conditions (R and again A-R), a rumor was planted with two girls in each of the classes. The girls were given appointments with their teacher to discuss academic progress and the next year's program. The appointments were routine, but during the interview the teacher asked, "By the way, some examinations have been taken from the office. Do you happen to know anything about this?"

No theft had actually occurred. The rumor was intended to provide a ready explanation for why the principal had mysteriously summoned Miss K out of the class. It was also timed so that the girls returned to their classrooms before the principal entered any of the rooms. In this way Schachter and Burdick could observe the amount of rumor that was subsequently spread in an ambiguous situation where a rumor was planted (condition A-R); when rumor was planted with no accompanying ambiguity (condition R); and when ambiguity was present but no rumor planted (condition A). In the end, there were twice as many exchanges of the rumor in the two ambiguity conditions than in the non-ambiguity condition with the rumor. It was also observed that the condition of ambiguity and rumor (A-R) resulted in the greatest average rate of transmission. Thus the staged incident between the principal and Miss K made the critical difference.

Lukaszewski (1997) writes that in order to alleviate ambiguity that arises during crises, an explanation, no matter how silly, stupid, or embarrassing the problem-causing error was, must be given. The explanation has to promptly and briefly explain why the problem occurred and the known underlying reasons or behaviors that lead to the situation (even if only partial early information is available).

Fishman (1999) conducted a study analyzing how an equivocal apology caused damage to a company in time of crisis. He prepared a case study of the 1996 crisis experienced by

ValueJet when one of the company's planes crashed into the Everglades. The apology employed by ValueJet was filled with ambiguity, which sent the message that the company was trying to protect itself against legal liability. The company did not explain the crash as a "freak accident," which would have lessened ValueJet's blame (Fishman 1999). ValueJet was too implicated in the crash because of its prior service and maintenance policies that it could not speak with an unambiguous or unequivocal voice. The result: instead of containing the story within a short period of time following the crisis, the company permitted the story to grow.

Some researchers believe that ambiguity is appropriate at times (Eisenberg 1984, Sellnow and Ulmer 1995). According to these researchers, ambiguity is an essential part of organizing because it allows for multiple interpretations to exist among people who contend that they are attending to the same message. Ambiguity, then, serves as a means for organizations to craft a message that, due to the complexity of the crisis situation, may simultaneously appeal to distinct audiences. It's suggested that the selection of particular strategies to repair relationships with some audiences often alienates others (Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer 1996, 249). The way to avoid this problem is to address both audience groups simultaneously by interjecting some form of ambiguity into public arguments (Sellnow and Ulmer 1998).

Sellnow and Ulmer (1995) studied the Jack in the Box E. coli crisis to determine the extent to which ambiguity contributes to or detracts from an organization's ability to communicate with its diverse audiences during a crisis situation. The researchers consider ambiguity in its broadest sense, including arguments that appear contradictory, vague, equivocal, or indecisive. They contend that the form of ambiguity shared by the organization is, at least in part, dictated by the situation surrounding the crisis. In the case of Jack in the Box, the company responded to varied audiences by interjecting some form of ambiguity into their public arguments. The company maintained the line of argument that cases of E. coli poisoning had developed during the same period of time in people who had not eaten at their restaurants. By doing so, they remained vague regarding the degree to which they were willing to accept blame for the crisis (Sellnow and Ulmer 1994). The researchers conclude that organizations facing crisis situations may find that they have no choice but to deliver an ambiguous message when framing their public response.

Although Eisenberg (1984) believes ambiguity can be useful, he argues that there are limitations or ethical standards organizations ought to consider as they develop messages containing ambiguity. The use of more or less ambiguity is in itself not good or bad, effective or ineffective; whether a strategy is ethical depends upon the ends to which it is used, and whether it is effective depends upon the goals of the individual communicators. Sellnow (1993), in agreement, says if ambiguity is introduced to the situation by the organization simply to manipulate the public's perception, such skepticism cannot be condoned. Ambiguity, then, provides an amoral means whereby an organization may appeal to multiple audiences during crisis situations.

Allport and Postman (1947) believed rumor travels when news received about events is either lacking or subjectively ambiguous. The ambiguity may arise from the fact that the news is not clearly reported, or from the fact conflicting versions of the news have reached the individual, or from his/her incapacity to comprehend the news s/he receives. Allport and Postman found that ambiguity concerning Pearl Harbor arose out of three conditions operating at the time: 1) Many people were profoundly distrustful of the administration in Washington; 2) in general, people were uncertain of the news policies of the government in wartime; 3) most people's lives had been profoundly upset by the coming of the war: families were disrupted,

plans altered, a dark and uncertain future loomed ahead.

Pious (2001) produced a case study analyzing how John F. Kennedy handled the Cuban Missile Crisis, which explained the role of ambiguity in some presidents' responses to crises. Although in the past half-century presidents have surrounded themselves with a vast national security system, it is not at all clear that presidents have been effective as crisis managers (Pious 2001, 81). Presidents often lack crucial information, use incomplete or misleading analogies to understand crisis situations, find it difficult to micromanage events, and are unable to project force effectively. Even when they are successful, it is often in spite of, rather than because of, the resources of the institutionalized presidency at their disposal.

Time

Surviving a crisis with reputation intact is often determined by how a company responds to a crisis rather than by the event itself (Garcia 2002). If a company is nimble, thoughtful, and quick to take pre-emptive action before a potentially embarrassing, damaging event takes place, it can often prevent the event and the reputational damage altogether. During organizational crises, not only must an organization respond quickly to an event that it could not or did not foresee, it must do so while under the pressure of an imposing loss of profit, legitimacy, or both (Sellnow & Ulmer 1995). Responses are usually critical in reducing, offsetting, and containing harm (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer 1998, 234, Ogrizek & Guillery 1999).

The importance of a quick response during a crisis was a point made throughout the review of current crisis management literature. The longer it takes to react effectively to a crisis, the greater the potential for damage. The delay-related damage caused by lack of planning can easily double or triple the time and costs of damage control. Delay can result in irreparable harm (Bernstein 2002). It's essential to act quickly in communicating news of any adverse incident (Lukaszewski 1997). The first hour or two are critical in getting the word out and setting the record. Ogrizek & Guillery (1999) agree that within the first two hours various parties must be informed of the crisis. These parties include: the media; governmental authorities, local representatives, local residents, business partners, and internally, employees directly affected as well as managers who will be affected later.

The media can broadcast a story across the country within seconds. The news is likely to be more accurate and balanced if the coverage is based on facts the organization has confirmed rather than on speculation by reporters. The first hour of emergency response is critical to establishing the perception of the ability to manage a crisis (Lukaszewski 1997). Lukaszewski (1997) and Ogrizek & Guillery (1999) opine there are priority areas where quick communication during a crisis is needed. The four priority areas for Lukaszewski (1997) are: 1.) Those most directly affected; employees; 2.) those indirectly affected; 3.) the news media; and 4.) other channels of external communication. Lukaszewski notes that communication in this order, from the most directly affected to the media, reduces the media's ability to alter the outcomes of situations because those affected hear directly from the source without the filtration, inaccuracy, or emotionalism reporters and the media bring to high profile situations. According to this view, many of the rumors that arise out of crisis situations could be put to rest before they become the cause of further damage (Lukaszewski 1997).

Several case studies illuminate the critical nature of time in determining the success or failure of efforts to manage the crisis. Sellnow, Ulmer & Snider (1998) noted that quick response time was a factor in Schwan's handling of its 1994 salmonella-contaminated ice cream crisis. Schwan's was quick to react by recalling its ice cream products without being forced to do so by

any state or federal agency, and without knowing the source of the outbreak for another two weeks. By recalling their products before they were forced to, the company had the opportunity to emphasize they valued its customers' well-being above all else.

Exxon ignored the importance of quick response time during the company's 1989 Valdez crisis (Fearn-Banks 2002). Exxon's CEO Lawrence Rawl did not rush to the crisis location, instead, waiting days in his penthouse office in New York City before arriving on site. Rawl declined to go to the site because he said that he felt "technologically obsolete," which angered the media, fishermen, environmentalists, and the public. Further, Exxon waited ten days after the oil spill to release full-page advertisements expressing concern and pledging to clean up the spill, and it wasn't until a month after the spill that Exxon finally had the equipment that was needed for a full-scale clean up. Center and Jackson (1995) note that although the Alaskan food chain has survived, tourism has rebounded strongly, and Exxon's profits are strong, the company's reputation was severely damaged due to its slow reaction. Exxon established a media center, but the information was often slow in coming, and communication lines became jammed with information inquiries from media. It was also hard for management in New York to get information. Further, for legal reasons, it was difficult for Exxon to show remorse or even admit to the environmental ramifications of the crisis. The company was so slow to react that it became the subject of many front-page newspaper stories and unflattering commentary. According to Center and Jackson, had Exxon provided the image of sympathy and remorse, complemented with sincerity, immediately following the crisis, it may have saved the company's reputation.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed from this review of literature.

1. What rumors were present during this timeframe?
2. Did the reactive strategy or strategies used by Malaysian Airlines drive the creation of these rumors?
3. Is there a relationship between level of interest, ambiguity, time and the intensity of the rumors?

Method

Design

Quantitative content analysis is a systematic method of looking at texts post-mortem. Content analysis allows for inexpensive, unobtrusive and easily replicable classification and description of texts as well as for comparison of media content to the real world. In this study we compared Malaysian Airlines' and the Malaysian governments' crisis responses to public perceptions regarding the lost flight. We examined message substance – or the manifest content of each communication - across different media.

Population

In this study we examined social media posts (Twitter, Facebook) surrounding rumors regarding missing Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 in comparison to all pertinent news releases, news conference transcripts and press briefings (n=62) regarding MH370 from the Malaysia Airlines and Malaysian government sites. These provided a timeline of events from the crisis management point of view. To collect data regarding the public's point of view Radian6 was used. We used the following initial search terms: Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, MH370, MAS370. Results were further sorted for *rumors* surrounding the flight by including the following phrases that appeared repeatedly during initial stages of code category creation:

Conspiracy, Tell the truth, Theory, and We're being lied to. Radian6 search results were limited to only social media posts that were unprotected (i.e., contained no privacy controls limiting outside viewing).

Approximately 20% of the total number of rumor communications were coded using a mix of quote and systematic random sampling methods wherein every 20th item of the Radian6 output (Radian6 outputs communications into Excel files) was coded (n=3,861). For example, coders began with item 20 in the Excel file. If the item met study criteria it was coded – that is, the post had to contain an *independent rumor thought* – or direct words from the writer/poster that suggested a rumor. If the post contained only a URL or image it was not considered independent rumor thought and coders were told to proceed to item 21 and so on. Once an item in the 20s was coded, coders moved on to item 40 and repeated the process (60, 80, 100, 120, etc.) until the full Excel file was coded.

Unit of Analysis

We determined two units of analysis for this study. We analyzed each possible news release, news conference transcript and press briefing delivered by Malaysia Airlines and the Malaysian government during the three-month time period. In regard to the rumor messages gathered using Radian6 the unit of analysis was *independent rumor thought*. Independent rumor thoughts were direct words/messages from writers/posters about the missing MH370 flight. This meant the writer had to share his/her own perceptions of what they thought was happening. Likewise, links to images, URLs, etc. were not coded as independent rumor thought. For example, Facebook and Twitter posts such as “hey, look at this” with a link attached were not coded.

Measurement Categories and Scoring Units

The Demand for Information Model suggests we examine time, interest, ambiguity and rumor. The following details how each was observed and scored.

Time. Communications from March 8, 2014 to July 7, 2014 were examined, encompassing the day the flight went missing until 122 days (four months) later. Each social media post and Malaysia Airlines/Malaysian government communication was coded with the date of publication/posting. Prior to data analysis, publication/posting dates were broken into seven phases. Phases consisted of:

1. The first 24-hours of communications about the missing flight (i.e., March 8, 2014),
2. The initial search and rescue (i.e., March 9-March 14, 2014),
3. The “new phase” when other countries joined the search operations (i.e., March 15-March 23, 2014),
4. The flight was officially declared “lost” (i.e., March 24-April 4, 2014),
5. The one month missing announcement (i.e., April 5-April 23, 2014),
6. When victim’s families began attacks on Malaysia Airlines (i.e., April 24-June 3, 2014),
7. When Malaysia announced second “new phase” until 120 days missing mark (i.e., June 4-July 7, 2014).

Interest. Interest in the crisis was determined by using Smith’s (2012) categories of crisis types. We suggest the extent of injury/damage and fault influence public interest in a crisis. Crisis types were ranked 1-10 taking into consideration violence and number of persons affected. The more violent and more damage caused were assumed to increase the importance of a topic, and thus public interest in the topic. This ordinal scale was created for this study, and the MH370

disappearance initially fell into the (#5) nonviolent accident and later into the violent accident (#8) category. Higher numbers indicate greater levels of interest based on topic importance. The rankings for crisis types were operationalized according to definitions provided by Smith (2012) and coded as follows: 1) *Nonviolent mismanagement* (professional judgment with immediate or delayed damage), 2) *Nonviolent ethical/moral failing* (violating ethical/moral standards (though with immediate or delayed damage), 3) *Nonviolent opposition* (external/internal forces with delayed or immediate damage), 4) *Nonviolent disaster* (natural occurrence with delayed damage), 5) *Nonviolent accident* (mishap with immediate damage), 6) *Nonviolent crime* (violating legal standards with delayed damage), 7) *Violent disaster* (natural occurrence with immediate damage), 8) *Violent accident* (mishap with immediate injury or death), 9) *Violent opposition* (external/internal forces with immediate damage), 10) *Violent crime* (violating legal standards causing injury or death).

Ambiguity. An organization's response during a crisis can increase or decrease situational ambiguity. For example, pre-emptive crisis responses (e.g., providing information to the public) can alleviate ambiguity while inaction strategies (e.g., deliberately being silent about crises) can amplify ambiguity. We utilized the seven reactive strategies identified by Smith (2012) as well as non-apology. The reactive strategies range on a continuum between full responsibility and full blame. Each reactive strategy was independently coded as present or not present as they can be used in combination. The categories were operationalized according to definitions provided by Smith (2012) and coded as follows: 1) *Pre-emptive action* (i.e., prebuttal) occurs when an organization acts before the opposition launches its first charge at the organization. Thus, the organization releases bad news about itself before media/public can respond, 2) *Offensive Response* (i.e., attack, embarrassment, shock, threat) occurs when an organization aggressively goes after others, 3) *Defensive Response* (i.e., denial, excuse, justification, reversal) occurs when the organization reacts less aggressively to criticism, 4) *Diversionsary Response* (i.e., concession, ingratiation, disassociation, relabeling) occurs when the organization attempts to shift public gaze to something else, 5) *Vocal Commiseration* (i.e., concern, condolence, regret, apology) occurs when the organization shows empathy and understanding of the misfortunes suffered by publics by expressing grief over loss (i.e., without admitting guilt), 6) *Rectifying Behavior* (i.e., investigation, corrective action, repentance) occurs when the organization does something to repair the damage done to publics, 7) *Deliberate Inaction* (i.e., strategic silence, strategic ambiguity, strategic inaction) occurs when the organization makes no substantive comment, does nothing and lets the problem "blow over" or provides vague and unclear responses, 8) *Non-apology* occurs when the organization provides an insincere or halfhearted apology, expresses sorrow that someone took offense rather than regret for having done something wrong, or expresses grief for the effect, but not the wrongdoing.

Rumor. Cody and McLaughlin (1985) noted that the harsher the criticism, the more a strong offensive response is warranted. Thus, we link the criticisms (seen in the rumors) to the reactive strategies as well as the organization's reactive strategies employed. Rumor categories were taken from the BBC and Mirror's (de Castella, 2014; Hartley-Parkinson, 2014) lists of the top rumors circulating about the MH370 disappearance. It was assumed that posts could contain more than one type of rumor, thus each type of rumor had categories that were coded as present/not present. Rumors fell into the following themes; outside forces (hijacking, shot down, weapons testing, from beyond), mismanagement (aircraft issues), internal ethical/moral (pilot/crew), and miscellaneous. A total of seven rumor categories were coded with different types of speculation within each category: 1) *Hijacking* (Not present, Electronic/Cyber, Jihad

attack, North Korea, Freescale Staff, Diego Garcia/US military, Other), 2) *Aircraft Issues* (Not present, Cockpit or landing gear fire, Cracks in the aircraft (maintenance issues), Other), 3) *Shot Down* (Not present, Shot down during military ops (US), Shot down during military ops (Thailand), Chinese submarine shot down plane, Other), 4) *Pilot/Crew* (Not present, Pilot suicide, Pilot “deliberately turned off oxygen supply” before ditching into sea, Other), 5) *Weapons testing* (Not present, Electronic warfare experiment (cloaking technology), Secret weapon (that can destroy plane whole), Other), 6) *From Beyond* (Not present, Black hole or meteor strike, Alien abduction, Other), 7) *Miscellaneous* (Not present, Pitbull and Shakira predicted loss of plane, MH370 “hid” behind other plane, Life insurance scam, Snowden information, Asian Bermuda Triangle, Other).

Results

Chi Squares were calculated for each ambiguity and rumor category over the seven phases identified. Chi Squares allowed us to examine independence of categorical/nominal variables and told us whether the observed pattern was statistically different from the pattern expected due to chance. When there were fewer than 5 observations per cell the Fisher’s Exact Test was used. When cell assumptions were not violated the Pearson Chi Square value was used.

Ambiguity

Each communication could exhibit more than one reactive strategy. The primary reactive strategy used was rectifying behavior. Overall, this strategy was used in 50% of the communication. Use of this reactive strategy was significant ($X^2=21.05$, $df=6$, $p<.01$). The majority of rectifying strategies (68%) took place during phases 3 and 4 when the search and rescue turned into only a search and the flight was officially declared lost.

Diversionsary responses were used in 37.1% of the communications. Use of this reactive strategy was significant ($X^2=16.04$, $df=6$, $p<.01$). Diversionsary strategies were used from the very beginning of the crisis (phase 1) through the attacks on Malaysia Airlines (phase 6).

Finally, vocal commiseration was used in 35.5% of the communications. Use of this reactive strategy was significant ($X^2=38.45$, $df=6$, $p<.001$). The majority of vocal commiseration (82%) took place in the very beginning of the crisis (phases 1-4) as Malaysia Airlines immediately offered condolences to victim’s families. Vocal commiseration decreased following the one-month announcement of the disappearance. No other reactive strategies were used significantly throughout.

Table 1. Malaysia’s crisis response strategies over the seven phases.

Crisis Response Strategy	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7	Total	%
Preemptive	4	1	1	1	0	0	0	7	11.3
Offensive	1	2	0	1	2	2	0	8	12.9
Defensive	0	5	1	1	1	3	0	11	17.7
Diversionsary	0	9	2	5	2	5	0	23	37.1*
Commiseration	5	3	3	7	2	1	1	22	35.5**
Rectifying	0	0	8	13	4	2	4	31	50.0***
Inaction	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	3	4.8
Nonapology	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	4.8

Note: Crisis response strategies were coded as present/not present. More than one crisis response strategy could be used in each message. N=62

* $X^2(6) = 16.04, p < .01$

** $X^2(6) = 38.45, p < .001$

*** $X^2(6) = 21.05, p < .01$

Rumor

The majority of hijacking rumors took place during phases 3 and 4 (when search and rescue became just search and the flight was officially declared lost). Overall, “other” rumors (still being analyzed) occurred in 6.9% of the social media conversation, electronic/cyber hijacking occurred 3.4% of the time, and rumor that the US military hijacked the flight and took it to Diego Garcia occurred 5.9% of the time. These differences were significant ($X^2=424.62, df=36, p < .001$).

Table 2. Hijacking rumors over the seven phases.

Hijacking Rumor	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7	Total	%
Electronic/Cyber	0	1	23	78	4	0	0	106	3.4
Jihad Attack	0	1	42	11	10	1	0	65	2.1
North Korea	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	3	.1
Freescale Staff	0	2	16	18	1	0	0	37	1.2
Diego Garcia/US Military	0	1	30	91	50	10	2	184	5.9
Other	0	26	117	51	10	3	5	213	6.9

Note: Hijacking rumors were coded as present/not present. Only one hijacking situation could be coded for each message.

The majority of aircraft rumors took place during phases 3 and 4 (when search and rescue became just search and the flight was officially declared lost). Overall, rumors of cockpit or landing gear fire occurred in 16.8% of the social media conversation and “other” (still being analyzed) occurred 2.0% of the time. These differences were significant ($X^2=427.91, df=18, p < .001$).

Table 3. Aircraft rumors over the seven phases.

Aircraft Rumor	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7	Total	%
Cockpit or Landing Gear fire	0	2	364	153	1	0	3	523	16.8
Maintenance Issues	0	1	9	4	1	0	0	15	.5
Other	1	13	18	17	5	1	8	62	2.0

Note: Aircraft rumors were coded as present/not present. Only one aircraft situation could be coded for each message.

The majority of rumors the aircraft was shot down took place during phases 3 and 4 (when search and rescue became just search and the flight was officially declared lost). Overall, the rumor that the US military shot down the aircraft occurred in .8% of the social media

conversation and “other” (still being analyzed) occurred .7% of the time. These differences were significant ($X^2=107.01$, $df=30$, $p<.001$).

Table 4. Shot down rumors over the seven phases.

Shot Down Rumor	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7	Total	%
US	0	2	9	3	8	3	0	25	.8
Thailand	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	.0
Chinese	1	1	5	0	1	0	0	8	.3
Other	0	2	5	10	1	3	2	23	.7

Note: Shot down rumors were coded as present/not present. Only one shot down situation could be coded for each message.

The majority of pilot/crew rumors took place during phases 3 and 4 (when search and rescue became just search and the flight was officially declared lost). Overall, the rumor that the disappearance was a pilot suicide occurred in 1.6% of the social media conversation and “other” (still being analyzed) occurred 2.3% of the time. These differences were significant ($X^2=73.20$, $df=18$, $p<.001$).

Table 5. Pilot/crew rumors over the seven phases.

Pilot/Crew Rumor	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7	Total	%
Pilot suicide	0	0	11	35	4	0	1	51	1.6
Pilot deliberately turned off oxygen supply before crashing plane into sea	0	0	3	1	3	0	0	7	.2
Other	0	5	33	20	8	1	3	70	2.3

Note: Pilot/crew rumors were coded as present/not present. Only one pilot/crew situation could be coded for each message.

The majority of weapons testing rumors took place during phases 3, 4, and 5 (when search and rescue became just search, the flight was officially declared lost, and the one month missing announcement was made). Overall, the rumor that an electronic warfare experiment downed the aircraft occurred in .5% of the social media conversations, the rumor that a secret weapon that could destroy plane occurred .3% and “other” (still being analyzed) occurred .3% of the time. These differences were not significant.

Table 6. Weapons testing rumors over the seven phases.

Weapons Testing Rumor	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7	Total	%
Electronic Warfare Experiment	0	0	7	5	3	0	0	15	.5
Secret Weapon	0	0	3	1	4	0	0	8	.3
Other	0	0	1	5	3	0	0	9	.3

Note: Weapons testing rumors were coded as present/not present. Only one weapons testing situation could be coded for each message.

The majority of rumors that forces from beyond caused the disappearance took place during phases 3 and 4 (when search and rescue became just search and the flight was officially declared lost). This category originally had only two categories (black hole/meteor strike and aliens). However, Illuminati repeatedly emerged during the analysis causing researchers to add this as a category. Overall, the rumor that the Illuminati caused the disappearance occurred in 12.4% of the social media conversation, the rumor that aliens were responsible occurred in 1.4% of the conversations, the rumor that a black hole/meteor strike caused the disappearance occurred in .9% of the conversations and “other” (still being analyzed) was occurred .9% of the time. These differences were significant ($X^2=984.34$, $df=18$, $p<.001$).

Table 7. Beyond rumors over the seven phases.

Beyond Rumor	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7	Total	%
Black Hole/Meteor Strike	0	0	21	6	2	0	0	29	.9
Alien Abduction	0	7	20	9	6	0	1	43	1.4
Illuminati	0	1	0	29	231	85	36	382	12.4
Other	0	9	11	8	1	1	0	30	.9

Note: Beyond rumors were coded as present/not present. Only one beyond situation could be coded for each message.

The majority of identified miscellaneous rumors took place during phase 5 (when the one month missing announcement was made). Overall, the rumor that Pitbull and Shakira predicted the loss of the plane occurred 12.6% of the time. “Other” rumors began immediately in phase 1 and continued through phase 6 (search only through attacks on Malaysia Airlines). “Other” (still being analyzed) occurred 17.5% of the time These differences were significant ($X^2=1,471.63$, $df=30$, $p<.001$).

Table 8. Miscellaneous rumors over the seven phases.

Rumor	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7	Total	%
Pitbull/Shakira Predicted	0	3	2	31	234	85	36	391	12.6
MH370 “hid” behind other plane	0	0	56	5	2	0	2	65	2.1
Snowden Information	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	3	.1
Asian Bermuda Triangle	0	1	3	4	3	0	0	11	.4
Other	0	118	125	263	26	8	3	543	17.5

Note: Miscellaneous rumors were coded as present/not present. Only one miscellaneous situation could be coded for each message.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the reactive strategies used by Malaysian Airlines and the rumors present during the 120 days following MH370's disappearance. A secondary purpose was to examine the relationship between interest, ambiguity, time and rumor intensity. We began by using Smith's (2012) identification of crisis types to determine interest in the disappearance. Initially, when reports suggested survivors (phases 1 and 2), the crisis was ranked as a nonviolent accident, which holds a moderate level of public interest. However, this ranking became a higher level of interest (i.e., violent accident) based on the number of individuals involved (239) and the deaths of these individuals (as noted later by Malaysia Airlines when the search and rescue became a search only). Thus, the level of interest in the disappearance dramatically increased from the beginning of the crisis situation.

This change in crisis type and public interest resulted in crisis response strategy changes from Malaysia Airlines. During phase 1 their response was primarily *pre-emptive* – getting out information about the plane's disappearance, pilots/crew, victims, etc. to the public during the first 24-hours of the nonviolent accident. In addition, *vocal commiseration* is seen in the initial phases (1-4) as Malaysia Airlines spokespersons say they are “deeply saddened,” “deeply regret,” and offer that their “thoughts and prayers are with all passengers, our crew and their family members.” During phase 2 (search and rescue), however, the response strategies become both *offensive* (e.g., “unvalidated reports out in the media,” “we are shocked by these allegations,” “on-going media speculations”) and *defensive* (e.g., “unable to comment,” “our position is not to reveal any information”).

As the crisis type changed to violent accident (Phases 3 and 4 - end of search and rescue, announcement that flight is lost) Malaysia Airlines utilized a *rectifying strategy*, promising to investigate all possible causes for the disappearance. Throughout this time (phases 2-6), however, Malaysia Airlines also practiced *diversionary strategies* by charming publics by paying travel, lodging, etc. to victim's families and trying to keep them from listening to media accounts; turning the spotlight away from accusations and criticisms by suggesting they are being transparent (while withholding information for the “privacy and well-being of the families”); and shifting the public's gaze to “media speculation,” “false and misleading media report[s],” and “fresh rumor[s].” Thus, we suggest public interest in the crisis, driven by the change in crisis type, influenced the crisis response strategies utilized by Malaysia Airlines. In turn, the fluctuation of crisis response strategies created a noteworthy amount of ambiguity.

In phase 1, when search and rescue operations were being conducted and *pre-emptive* and *vocal commiseration* strategies were being used there were far fewer rumors circulating. Malaysia Airlines seemed to be releasing adequate information about the missing plane. However, ambiguity caused in phase 2 (when *diversionary* strategies began being used in addition to *vocal commiseration*) resulted in rumors about hijackings, aircraft issues, and from beyond. In phases 3 and 4 (when *diversionary*, *rectifying*, and *vocal commiseration* strategies were used) rumors about hijackings, aircraft issues, the flight being shot down, pilot/crew sabotage, weapons testing, from beyond, and plane was hidden behind another surfaced. Thus, when three competing strategies were used, the greatest amount of ambiguity was caused thereby resulting in several different rumors as well as the greatest amounts of speculation.

Diversionary responses continued in phases 5 and 6 and the decrease in responsive strategies seemed to subdue ambiguity as rumors focused on US military hijacking the plane to Diego Garcia, Illuminati involvement, and Pitbull/Shakira predicting the flight's disappearance.

In phase 7, which marked almost three months from the flight's disappearance, the response strategies were primarily *rectifying* focusing on the continuing investigation, thereby decreasing ambiguity. Additionally, though no new information surfaced and the level of public interest in this type of crisis was likely still high, it appears as though *time* played the largest role in lack of rumors (though speculation of Illuminati involvement and a focus on Pitbull/Shakira' prediction were still present).

Theoretical Implications

Previous research suggests ambiguity directly influences rumor (Rosnow & Fine, 1976; Schachter & Burdick, 1955) with ambiguous situations increasing rumors. Our findings certainly support that conclusion as the more crisis response strategies used, the more ambiguity increased, and the more rumors circulated. Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer (1996) indicated selection of some strategies would alienate some audiences. While we were not able to see this in our study, we were able to see how ambiguity from multiple crisis responses increased audience speculation and creation of rumors to fill in the narrative regarding the flight's disappearance. In addition, multiple rumors also may have influenced ambiguity. Allport and Postman (1947) suggested conflicting versions of news reaching various publics influences ambiguity. Social media posts containing rumors were spread so quickly and between so many people that clear reports about what had happened to the flight were scarce. Thus, not only might the crisis response strategies have influenced ambiguity, but the rumors may have as well. Future research should examine the influence of rumors on ambiguity.

Allport and Postman (1947) were the first to link importance and interest. Therefore, we created a rank-order measure of interest in this study that suggested different levels of importance depending on violence and damage done during a crisis. This scale indicated importance/interest changed as the crisis changed from nonviolent accident to violent accident (when the victims were no longer assumed alive). Future research can use this scale to examine importance/interest of other types of crisis.

Time from the onset of a crisis has long been an important concept in crisis communication research (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998; Ogrizek & Guillery, 1999). We were able to see a distinct change in crisis response strategies from the first 24 hours of the crisis (pre-emptive, vocal commiseration) to subsequent phases. Initially, it looked as though Malaysia Airlines was doing everything right, with six media statements in the first 24 hours. However, upon asking questions, the media and other publics soon found out this original "outpouring" of information was the least amount of information available about the disappearance (Garcia, 2002), thus beginning the speculation in phases 2-7. Malaysia Airlines media statements soon became obsolete, as they provided no new information to the media or their publics. Thus, these audiences began looking elsewhere for information and found plenty of speculation on social media.

These findings are important as we can clearly see each of our concepts at work throughout this crisis situation. As crisis type changed from nonviolent accident to violent accident public interest in the crisis changed. Changes in crisis response strategy by Malaysia Airlines greatly influenced ambiguity as use of multiple strategies caused uncertainty that was answered by speculation and rumor. Finally, as the amount of time from the beginning of the crisis increased (and response strategies/ambiguity decreased) the amount of speculation/rumor decreased. This suggests that instead of multiplying the situation as proposed in our equation $r = (i \times a) \times t$, that time may be a positive integer at the beginning of a crisis (increasing the interest

and ambiguity), but at the end of a crisis may be a negative integer (i.e., -t). Future research should examine additional crises to see if this hypothesis holds true – if indeed, time multiplies interest and ambiguity up to a certain point in the crisis and then decreases them (i.e., inverted U).

Practical Implications

Irreparable harm can occur if organizations do not react appropriately to crisis situations. In the case of Malaysia Airlines the flight still has not been located, thus extending the crisis length to at least a year. We are able to see in the first 120 days of their response strategies, however, how changes in crisis type affects response strategies and how response strategies affect rumors. Our first suggestion is to immediately release bad news. The media and other publics quickly realized Malaysia Airlines was not providing accurate, complete, prompt information despite their statements of “transparency.” This resulted in negative news reports and rumors that damaged the organization’s reputation. In addition, Malaysia Airlines allowed the Malaysian government to handle much of the communication (in many cases releasing bad news for the airlines), which may have increased perceptions of dishonesty and certainly a lack of transparency. We suggest organizations should handle their own crisis communications.

We also suggest consistently monitoring the public’s opinion regarding crisis type. The importance of the crisis shifted when search and rescue became simply search. Thus, the public sought greater explanation and deeper meaning about the flight’s disappearance. Malaysia Airlines, instead of providing more information during this time, began letting the Malaysian government control all communications. This communication was highly technical and did not take into account emotional publics. This likely led to publics turning elsewhere for information and latching on to any speculation or theory that made sense.

Organizations should understand their perception of the crisis is not necessarily that of the public. While Malaysia Airlines did not directly state the crisis had changed, the public likely understood the shift from search and rescue to just search meant there were no survivors. The change in rumors from highjacking, aircraft issues, and from beyond to shot down, weapons testing, and pilot/crew sabotage indicates the public created a new narrative to try and understand the change in crisis type. Organization must stay on top of audience perceptions of the crisis and what rumors are being circulated to fill in informational holes and reduce rumor and speculation.

As has been discussed earlier, rumors are a type of sense-making for publics and thus run rampant when information is scarce. When the organization at the center of the crisis utilizes multiple response strategies, thereby increasing ambiguity, rumors takeover as well. We therefore suggest limiting response strategies, using 1-2 that work well together and do not compete. For example, Malaysia Airlines utilized diversionary (e.g., being transparent) and defensive (e.g., withholding information) strategies in conjunction. This likely confused publics and caused more ambiguity, which led to increased speculation about what really happened to the flight and rumors that fell into pre-mature fact, intentional, and malicious rumor categories (Fearn-Banks, 2002).

Finally, as time from crisis onset increases it is important for organizations to continue responding to their publics. In the case of Malaysia Airlines, constant rectifying strategies in the form of assurances that the investigation continues have all but alleviated ongoing speculation. Rumors about Illuminati involvement and Pitbull/Shakira predicting the flight’s disappearance fall into the “outrageous” rumor category (Fearn-Banks, 2002). Thus, continued rectifying efforts have removed intentional, pre-mature fact, and malicious rumors. Organizations should take note

of this and think of ways to repent, correct actions, prevent recurrence, and repair the damage done to publics.

Conclusion

Ogrizek and Guillory (1999) labeled rumors as the oldest media in the world. Fitting then, that we should study rumor spread on the newest media -- as social media are the prime place for rumors to start and flourish. While the original definition of rumor suggested rumors usually spread by word of mouth (Allport and Postman, 1947), social media allow for “word of Internet” – a far more dangerous and less personal form of information transfer. Word of mouth at least relies upon evaluation of the speaker’s reputation and credibility, but with social media it is far easier to spread damaging rumors without thought of who said what. In addition, knowing how rumors start or who started them is increasingly difficult. Crisis situations lend themselves readily to rumors as searches for meaning and clarification necessitate information transfer.

At the same time, this makes social media rumors easier to discount. Rumors without reputations attached are easy to dispute. This should take place, however, before the media address the rumors thereby lending credence to the speculations. Malaysia Airlines addressed rumors throughout their communication, but only after the media commented on them. Individuals using social media may have done so in order to get media attention for their rumor, and get Malaysia Airlines to comment on the information. This would have given the rumor importance and fueled other social media user’s desires to promote the rumor as a way to explain or narrate the disappearance. It is important that we understand if rumors dictate responses or if responses influence rumors. This study provides evidence suggesting both. It is thus, very important for future crisis communication research to examine interest, rumor, ambiguity, and time and flush out all the linkages between these concepts.

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When CSR Evolves into Environmental Activism: A Case Study of Patagonia's DamNation Documentary Campaign Through the Lens of Diffusion of Innovation Theory

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Abstract

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and social activism have enjoyed remarkably different trajectories over the past decade. CSR has emerged as a vital business activity for many firms, especially for those whose success is directly contingent upon the health of communities and environments in which they preside or conduct operations. Global mining firms, for example, have an obligation to those jurisdictions they extract minerals from – which may take the form of good-paying jobs for the local citizenry, improved infrastructure, educational and recreational amenities, and long-term environmental commitments. Consumer retailers may similarly integrate the social, economic and environmental welfare of their stakeholders and communities with their business objectives. For public relations practitioners, CSR is an important route to a greater management role for the PR function given its role in elevating a corporation's societal impact (Coombs & Holladay, 2009).

Activism, on the other hand, has often come to be affiliated with action directed toward institutions, including government organizations but also companies. Activism that works *with* institutions is sometimes argued to be co-opted and therefore less effective. The global public's growing concern over social and environmental issues means that *both* CSR and activism are prominent in the public spheres of commerce and communication. What is less likely however is to see the two activities conflated.

This study looks at one case – a prominent U.S. clothing company's campaign to decommission or eradicate the damming of American watersheds – to assess the roles of both CSR and activism. Diffusion of innovation theory – which helps to explain the reception and trajectory of ideas and ideologies in both public relations and social movements, is deployed. An online experiment is used to measure differences between those exposed to such company-sponsored activism and those who are not. Findings from the study shed light on both emerging CSR practices and integration of grassroots activism approaches.

The Case of Patagonia and DamNation

In March of 2014, popular outdoor apparel designer Patagonia premiered its *DamNation* documentary at the South by Southwest festival held in Austin, Texas, winning an audience choice award and putting the environmental spotlight on the damming of rivers and other watersheds in the United States. The film was positioned by Patagonia as an “odyssey across America that explores the sea change in our national attitude from pride in big dams as engineering wonders to the growing awareness that our own future is bound to the life and health of our rivers.” The documentary marks a compelling development in the evolution of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as public relations practice. CSR suffers from competing definitions in both professional and academic circles (Dahlsrud, 2008). Often, it refers to the confluence of social or environmental responsibility *within* business operations or economic models. Patagonia’s *DamNation* campaign, drawing from a mix of commercial acumen and grassroots organizing, is different in that it moved CSR closer to a form of social and environmental activism. Long admired for its social accountability, Patagonia has “in recent years has become more of an outspoken advocate for environmental and corporate responsibility” (Los Angeles Times, 2014).

Founder and owner Yvon Chouinard would not argue with this assessment; his company has long been able to engage activists connected to the company’s causes. For example, it established the Tools for Grassroots Activists Conference in 1994, where seasoned activists train members of environmental groups who are supported by the clothing company. More recently Patagonia has sought to discourage the kind of unbridled consumerism that takes place on the Friday after the U.S. Thanksgiving holiday – the so-called Black Friday – by funding advertisements proclaiming “don’t buy our products” (Fast Company, 2015). *DamNation* is just the latest and perhaps most visible step in Patagonia’s evolution from corporate social responsibility to a direct advocacy or activism.

After its South by Southwest launch, *DamNation* had its U.S. theatrical release in New York City, coupled with a nine-city tour of regional film premieres and 23 free screenings across the U.S. These screenings were often organized with grassroots organizations. For example, in Eugene, Oregon, the film was hosted by the Western Environmental Law Center and the environmental group Save Our Wild Salmon, and the event was sponsored by a salmon-safe certified local business. This rollout was followed in the fall by a tour of the film to Patagonia retail stores. Shortly after, the documentary reached a much wider audience on Netflix and other streaming video platforms. Despite its mobility and early accolades, the film was not universally acclaimed. Taking aim at Patagonia’s subjective approach, the *Hollywood Reporter* argued that the filmmakers “assume viewers already lean toward their side of the argument... they don’t make much effort to pit conflicting values against each other with statistics or a devil’s-advocate argument.” The New York Times chimed in that Patagonia’s documentary “lumps together its grievances and interviews in a way that feels scattered and geared toward those inclined to agree” (New York Times, 2014).

Yet other observers have equated Patagonia’s campaign as proof that business ethics – a driver of CSR – can bear out new business ideas: “High moral values can provide a source for innovation. They can give a clear point of differentiation, a better image and a business advantage” (Innovation Excellence, 2014). Further on-the-ground results show that the *DamNation* documentary has found strongly sympathetic audiences willing to parlay their sentiment into real action on behalf of the cause or the company. For example, university students at Whitman College in Washington State, in a bid to remove four dams along the lower

Snake River, have started a student advocacy group inspired by the documentary called Rethink Dams. In their bid to decommission the dams in the state's southeast corner, the group is reaching out to students on campus, as well as citizens of the city of Walla Walla and its outlying region (The Pioneer, 2015.)

CSR, Advocacy and Activism

Corporate social responsibility is defined as a “commitment by business to contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the community and society at large” (World Business Council for Sustainable Development). The many forms it can take include community engagement and volunteerism, addressing climate change and environmental impacts, philanthropy, and an embrace of workforce diversity. In market specific scenarios, the cultivating of engaged and loyal customers can lead to improved market share, profitability, and other financial incentivizations. Management positions such as that of the chief sustainability officer address the demand for CSR initiatives and solutions within organizations (Fast Company, 2014). Public relations outcomes are as intertwined with CSR as the financial implications – sometimes more so. Clark's (2000) study comparing public relations to corporate social responsibility notes that CSR's rise in the late 1970s and early 1980s coincided with the growing importance of corporate image management and a higher demand from the public for corporate transparency and information. More recently, a necessary embrace of successful CSR by public relations practitioners has been addressed as one route to a greater management role for the PR function within organizations, in great part because CSR addresses a corporation's societal impact (Coombs & Holladay, 2009). In conceptualizing corporate social advocacy, Dodd and Supa (2014) posit that companies who weigh into polarizing socio-political issues or communicate for public policy change – whether intentionally or not – are engaging in a form of advocacy, one that can have an impact on organizational goals such as consumer perception and financial performance. While consumer agreement with a company's stance in the “public sphere” results in greater purchase intention, the opposite is also true – disagreement lessens the same intention (Dodd and Supa, 2014).

Diffusion of Innovation

A lament among some media scholars is that “none of the more popular mass communication theories of the 21st century seem particularly well suited to explain, predict, or even accommodate the remarkable changes that are occurring in our media institutions, message systems and audience” (Bryant & Miron, 2004). That sentiment captures the changing dynamic of today's media environment -- a true coalescing of traditional media institutions with non-traditional communication developments, including Patagonia's unique hybrid of social responsibility and activism. Diffusion theory has been deployed to explain phenomena in disparate fields of study – including strategic communication and social movements. For the former, the spread of ideas, products, or technologies has been an important theme (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). The communicative early adopters of Nisbet and Kotcher's study of climate change influencers (2009) extend their influence through the act of being seen using a product or participating in an activity. This is not to say that diffusion theorists have all agreed on the ultimate importance of individual adopters and opinion leaders. Some scholars have looked to diffusion theory as a panacea for ideas and consumer solutions not because of so-called influentials, but in spite of them. Using a series of computer simulations of interpersonal influence processes, Watts and Dodds (2007) examined what they called “the influential

hypothesis,” tackling the assumptions of so-called “influentials” or opinion leaders within interpersonal relations and networks. Cascades ushering in new ideas succeed not because of a few highly influential individuals, but rather “a critical mass of easily influenced individuals influencing other easy-to-influence people” (Watts and Dodds, 2007).

Untapped Potential in Public Relations Theory

That diffusion research has proven so durable for so long in disciplines that concern themselves with public opinion is not surprising. What does present itself as somewhat perplexing, at least at first blush, is that diffusion research has not been an even more influential approach for the development of public relations theory – a field located at the crossroads of mass communication and the aforementioned themes of ideas dissemination and thought leadership. Certainly, as a model for organizations trying to influence publics, diffusion of innovations at least features as one of the theories used in public relations, and has served as a “staple fare” for decades in public relations textbooks (McKie and Toledano, 2008). However, among the five stages of diffusion -- awareness, interest, evaluation, trial and adoption -- public relations has been especially affiliated with, and interested in, the first two (McKie and Toledano, 2008). Diffusion theory has been used in public relations theory to explain the adoption of new technologies by PR practitioners (Kitchen and Panopoulos, 2010), and the segmentation of publics for PR research (Kim, Ni and Sha, 2008). The theory proved to be a “near-ideal” framework for Larisey *et al’s* 2010 study of the usage of social media by PR practitioners in the health sector -- which not only looked at the early adopters but also the laggards. They note that diffusion scholarship “offers great potential to scholars and practitioners in understanding usage trends” in public relations. Katz (2006) argues for an understanding of diffusion of innovation through the lens of the scholarly tradition of Gabriel Tarde – noting that Rogers’ review of thousands of diffusion studies tips its hat to the Tarde tradition. It was Tarde’s analysis of the components of “public space” – a Parisian coffeehouse being a case in point -- that introduced the idea that the press, then as now, could at least set an agenda for cafe conversation (Katz, 2006) – to then be clarified, crystallized and translated by the conversations between individuals. To this end, Vu and Gehrau (2010) propose a contemporary model of so-called “agenda diffusion” to explain inconsistencies not in diffusion, but in agenda-setting research. The paradox they highlight is that large media effects are often found at the aggregate level, but are less predominant at the individual level (Vu & Gehrau, 2010). In their study of a German village, they discovered a media agenda-setting process that had been diffused at the interpersonal level in a two-step process -- when readers of a local magazine put a key civic issue on the radar of the publication’s non-readers (Vu & Gehrau, 2010).

Diffusion in Activism

Diffusion is invoked with some regularity in social movement theories, often in the context of how a movement either utilizes the media and culture or leverages interpersonal relationships to spread a movement’s ideology. McAdam’s (1982) political process model, for example, which helped explain the success of the U.S. civil rights movement a half-century ago, lays out the applicability of innovation adopters to social insurgencies, which themselves are subject to diffusion or adoption. The existence of diffusion networks, or lack thereof, can be attributed to the success or failure of activist movements:

The interorganizational linkages characteristic of established groups facilitate movement emergence by providing the means of communication by which the

movement, as a new cultural item, can be disseminated through the aggrieved population (McAdam, 1982).

Benford and Snow explain the diffusion process in social movements as leveraging framing in order to enhance the likelihood of the idea or practice resonating with the host or target culture (2000). Similarly, Wickham (2013) highlights the importance of agents and methods of transmission in diffusing ideological frames of the Islamist message during the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Social movements play an important role in diffusing ideas and values (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991.) Echoing this sentiment, Klandermann (2002) posits that social movements, rather than inventing ideas, instead build on “an ideological heritage” in relation to broader values and themes -- thus relating ultimately to larger and longer-standing societal debates. Some of this ideological heritage derives from “critical communities” where such ideas are developed (Rochon, 1998).

Diffusion, then, has helped to explain the success of organizations in both management (and by extension CSR) and social movement contexts – explaining how strategic communication strategies employed in one arena can be successful in the other, and vice-versa. Through this lens of diffusion, this study seeks to assess whether corporate social responsibility that takes on activist or social movement attributes can dispose audiences to be more partial to an organization’s message or point of view. It also examines how such activism – in this case through the medium of documentary filmmaking and dissemination – impacts audience perceptions and attitudes towards the organization itself.

RQ1: Are audiences more likely to be disposed toward an environmental cause through exposure to a company’s activist media production?

RQ2: Are audiences more or less inclined to support an organization as a result of their media activism?

Method

This study conducted an online experiment using a survey to assess differences between those exposed to company-produced documentary film messaging and those who were not.

Participants

This study used the Amazon Mechanical Turk service (MTurk) – a “marketplace for work that requires human intelligence” (Amazon, 2013, par. 1) -- to randomly recruit over 230 American adults to complete the Qualtrics-based survey. According to viability studies, MTurk is approximately representative of the population of U.S. Internet users. Of the participants who completed it 54% of respondents were male, compared to 46% female. Because this study uses human subjects within the experiment, Institutional Review Board approval was obtained.

Design and Procedure

Participants initially visited a website that provided general study information. Informed consent was obtained, with participants clicking an “agree to participate” button at the bottom of the site. Participants were then introduced to an excerpt from the publication *Earth Island Journal* about the issue of damming in the United States. From here, participants were randomly directed to two versions of the study corresponding with two experimental conditions (one with

exposure to a documentary clip, and another without). Participants in the treatment group were directed to a 3-minute trailer/short video from the Patagonia-produced DamNation documentary. This particular clip was chosen for both its summation and reflection of the documentary's nature, as well as its relative brevity compared to the entire production. The second group for control was not exposed to Patagonia's documentary clip.

All participants completed a scaled questionnaire, asking for their opinions about the following: the importance of the cause, the participant's personal views and knowledge about the topic, and his or her willingness to act based on the documentary's message. They were also asked about their affinity for Patagonia and like-minded organizations engaged in environmental activism. All participants also responded to a questionnaire about their demographic background, as well as affiliations with environmental organizations and/or hydroelectric dams.

Pre-test Feedback

Pre-testing was conducted with graduate students to garner feedback on optimal articulation for the questions and ensure maximum reliability and validity of responses. Feedback indicated that language specific to the issue but not known to the general public – so-called “environmental jargon” – should be avoided. It also showed that some more complex questions should be simplified whenever possible, even if this meant creating a larger number of simpler questions. Based on this information, revisions were made to the question set.

Key Measures

Likert scale responses were used to gauge audience reaction to the issue of dams, articulated through a series of statements. To measure salience of the issue, survey participants were asked to respond to the statement that “Government and industry should reduce the damming of watersheds in the United States” on a five-point scale (from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”). A second statement asserted that U.S. citizens should be made better aware of the environmental consequences of dams. Again, participants were asked to respond based on the five-point scale. Respondents were then asked, again using a Likert scale response set, whether they were more likely to: contact a politician or government official about the issue of dams; donate to an environmental organizations as a means to expressing concerns over dams; and sign a petition to express concerns over the issue. Respondents were also asked if “they were troubled by the environmental impacts of damming” and whether they were “concerned about future dams being built in the United States.” To assess company support, respondents were asked if they were more likely to favor the pro-environmental messages of companies like Patagonia; be in support of companies engaging in environmental activism; be more likely to buy Patagonia products as a result of such advocacy; and support Patagonia as organization as a result of their interest in dams. More generally, respondents were asked if they were more or less likely to support the decommissioning of dams; if they would talk to their family or friends about this issue; and if they perceived whether they were more knowledgeable about the topic.

Results

Responding to the statement “government and industry should reduce the damming of watersheds in the United States,” a strong majority of participants – 140 of the 209 completed surveys – indicated agreement or strong agreement. A further 170 of the 209 respondents indicated strong agreement or agreement to the statement that “U.S. citizens should be made better aware of the environmental consequences of dams.” Other statements related to cognition

or support of the topic had similar results. For example, a majority of respondents were troubled by the present environmental impacts of damming (124) and were concerned about future dams being built (130). A further 127 supported decommissioning of dams. Such strong support was not as pronounced, however, when the survey statements turned to personal or political action. For example, only 66 of the 209 respondents were willing to contact a politician to express their concerns over the issue; 87 of the 209 were willing to donate money to an environmental organization based on the issue; while a healthier 124 were prepared to sign a petition.

Whether exposed to the documentary production or not, a majority of participants supported Patagonia's involvement with the issue. 152 respondents supported companies engaging in environmental activism, while 137 agreed with the notion that companies producing pro-environmental messages make for better corporate citizens. Less than half of all respondents (104) indicated they would be more likely to buy Patagonia products as a result of the company's campaign. Again, this degree of support for the company's environmentalism did not translate into a perception of future action.

RQ1: Are audiences more likely to be disposed toward an environmental cause through exposure to a company's activist media production?

Exposure to the anti-damming documentary was not found to be a catalyst for increased affinity for the topic or a greater likelihood to take action. Independent samples t-tests were calculated comparing support for the DamNation campaign between exposure and control groups. P values comparing the means of responses to questions measuring affinity for the cause between the two groups were higher than 0.05 in all instances, thus rendering any differences as non-significant.

RQ2: Are audiences more or less inclined to support an organization as a result of their media activism?

Individuals who viewed Patagonia's documentary were not more likely to hold the company in a higher (or lesser) regard as a result of its activism. Again, independent samples t-tests were calculated comparing affinity for Patagonia as a company between exposure and control groups. In comparing the means of responses to questions measuring company affinity between the two groups, P values were higher than 0.05 in all instances, rendering results as non-significant.

Discussion

Where does one company's corporate social responsibility stop and social activism start? Patagonia's DamNation campaign represents one case where the demarcation may be more apparent than others. The company has openly publicized its "activist" activities, some of which are less central to its business model as a designer of outdoor clothing and gear than others. As media activism, the DamNation documentary and Patagonia's producing role had many of the characteristics that define social movements. The company diffused an environmental idea by leveraging its considerable economic resources and a network of loyal consumers and retailers. Such an approach to an economic and environmental issue – one with implications for governments and citizens across the United States – is not without risk. Dodd and Supa (2014) note that corporate social advocacy, the act of firms taking a public stance on socio-political issues, can be controversial – serving to attract like-minded activists while potentially alienating stakeholder groups. Patagonia certainly went beyond a high-profile position on a contentious

issue. It actually financed, distributed and widely promoted an activist documentary. Notable is that the production celebrated certain forms of civil disobedience, such as trespassing onto government properties and acts of vandalism at dam sites. Patagonia's CEO Rose Marcario noted herself in an interview with *Fast Company* magazine that such alienation was a risk the company was aware of and willing to take, regardless of the financial fallout:

This documentary took on an issue we didn't feel that anyone else could take on in the way that we could. Any fight worth fighting is the sort of attitude that we take...we don't sit back and go, "Well, what kind of an ROI could we get on a film? (Fast Company, 2015)

At the same time, Patagonia has continued a long tradition of environmental activists strategically making their voices heard in the public sphere. Over four decades ago, a long-simmering controversy over the expansion of the Ross Dam on the Skagit River in the U.S. Pacific Northwest underscored the crucial role of public opinion in mitigating the growth of such infrastructure. In his 1974 thesis devoted to the Ross Dam controversy, Terry Simmons – himself one of the original members of Vancouver, BC-founded Greenpeace – argued prophetically that there could only be such public debate around the issue of damming when there also existed a public forum:

There would be no controversy without active support from members of the media. Opponents of the dam have received good press on the whole. Media coverage generally has been carefully orchestrated in order to achieve maximum impact for the mutual advantage of the media and the conservationists.... A public controversy is in large part a media campaign (Simmons, 1974).

To this end, Patagonia willingly accepted such contention as part of its own strategic communication campaign. Given that its chief stakeholders – its customers – are ostensibly enthusiasts of the wilderness, Patagonia was acting from a foundation of corporate social responsibility. The documentary's diffusion of the company's environmental ideology, however, transformed this CSR into a real activism that was taken up by students, activists and community organizers alike.

While this study did not demonstrate a significant rise in public support for the cause against dams *after* the viewing of documentary highlights, it did show overall support for the issue and Patagonia's actions on the whole. This indicates that Patagonia had launched its documentary from an initial position of strength – one that would have been assessed based on thousands of customer interactions and public support for its CEO's statements. Such support for Patagonia's overall campaign – the documentary notwithstanding – was likely bolstered by a customer base that would stand to ultimately benefit from the removal of dams, given the barrier such infrastructure represents to enthusiasts of sports such as fly-fishing, kayaking, and white water rafting. Future research should take into account the multiple stakeholder groups within company ecosystems who are in a position to support the diffusion of corporate activism efforts based on group- and individual-level traits. To this end, what Patagonia created was not a social movement in the classic sense, but a CSR-as-activism campaign that leveraged the loyalty of its stakeholders and the beliefs of its leadership into a genuine opportunity to shift public policy and enact important environmental change.

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**Apology, Sympathy, and Empathy: The Legal Ramifications of Admitting Fault in U.S.
Public Relations Practice**

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Abstract

This paper explores the legal ramifications of using apology during a public relations crisis. Federal and state evidence laws are examined and practical solutions for PR practitioners facing a crisis are discussed.

Introduction

Apology is something that is pervasive within American society. At its core apology is part of having good manners because it is viewed as taking responsibility for oneself. Frequently children are admonished for not “saying they’re sorry” or for giving an apology and “mean it.” This culture of apology goes beyond childhood and influences adult behaviors as well. In fact, apology has become a type of “ritual” within our society in which aggrieved people are made right by the issuance of an apology (Bolivar and Vanfraechem, 2013, p. 124). Because of this apology has become a large part of communication practice, particularly in public relations. Crisis communication case studies and theories analyze variations of apology arguing that organizations must use these response strategies to maintain relationships with publics (Coombs, 1995; Coombs 2013; Lee and Chung 2012).

All of this comes at a price. Apology is not a cure-all for PR crises because there are legal implications that resonate well after the crisis has passed. Public relations literature suggests that organizations need to own their transgressions and seek transparency to build relationships with key publics. However, in many crises PR practitioners are faced with legal limitations on what, if anything, they can say about the organization’s level of fault. This frequently creates tension between public relations and legal departments who struggle between PR acknowledging organizational fault and legal denying all responsibility.

The admission of guilt by a person or organization has a longstanding history in U.S. criminal and civil laws. Currently the Federal Rules of Evidence (Fed. R. Evid.) specifically recognizes admissions of guilt as exceptions to hearsay rules. Fed. R. Evid. 801 (d)(2) allows for statements made by a party-opponent (i.e. person being sued) to be admitted at trial regardless if the person who made the statement testifies. Similarly Fed. R. Evid. 804 (b)(3) allows a person’s prior statements against interest (i.e. statements that demonstrate guilt) into evidence regardless if the speaker testifies. These admissions and statements can take many forms including verbal and written statements such as press conferences, press releases, official statements, and social media comments. Because most states craft their evidence rules to mirror the Fed. R. Evid., all organizations facing litigation in state or federal courts can have their prior statements admitted into court as evidence of their legal fault.

Studies show that apology, empathy, and sympathy are essential to catharsis and decreasing public anger over intentional and unintentional organizational transgressions (Helmreich, 2012; Taft, 2000; Cohen 2002). Most importantly, a study of apology even showed that sympathetic statements reduce the amount of lawsuits because plaintiffs frequently file suits to secure an apology rather than a monetary reward (Robbennolt, 2003). Recognizing the role apology plays in post-crisis empathy states began to craft “I’m sorry” laws that specifically exempted certain types of apologetic statements from being used as evidence of guilt at trial. Currently 37 state jurisdictions in the United States have some form of “I’m sorry” law. The approach to these laws varies state-by-state with some jurisdictions exempting apology only in certain situations where other states exempt apology from evidence altogether. Some states even have specific language requirements that exclude statements of empathy from being admissible while allowing statements of fault to be admissible as evidence without exception (“I’m Sorry Laws,” 2007; Saitta, and Hodge, 2012).

These laws present a unique issue for the public relations practitioner facing a crisis situation. Knowing the contours of the Fed. R. Evid. as well as the parameters of the current 37 “I’m sorry” laws gives practitioners the ability to craft effective public relations messages that also protects organizations from legal fault. This study examines current federal rules concerning

admissions as well as the 37 “I’m sorry” laws and concludes with practical suggestions for PR practitioners for crafting effective messages during crisis communication.

Apology Use in Public Relations Practice: A Pervasive Strategy

Apology has been a long studied type of communication practice dating back as early as Plato’s *Apology* (Vassello, 2005). Within public relations apology is frequently analyzed within the context of crisis communication. The main debate within apology is whether apology is an effective communication tactic. Early studies argued that apology was an effective tool in communication management. However, recently new studies suggest apology, while frequently used, is often over-used as a strategy.

Apology as a communication tactic has been a well-researched area in communication scholarship since the 1970s with Ware and Linkgel’s (1973) analysis of apologia, which used social psychology and rhetorical traditions to fashion a understanding of the motivations and implications of apology in Western civilization. By the 1980s and 1990s other scholars emerged that refined research on crisis response strategies and apology (Tedeschi & Riordan, 1981; Sturgis, 1994; Hearit, 1994; Benoit, 1995). Benoit (1995) had a particularly important impact on the study of apology because he focused on image repair and how apology had multiple functions specifically self-protection. However, scholars in the 1990s began examining apology and crisis communication within a public relations context. Their work took a different approach to crisis arguing that apology had usefulness in limited scenarios.

The public relations implications of crisis strategy are huge for organizations because proper crisis response influences the attitudes toward a corporate image. In Coombs and Holladay’s (2008) review of crisis communication scholarship since the 1990s, they found that apology has been accepted by many academics as a universally accepted practice for organizations despite the fact that apologies can have expensive collateral consequences. Coombs and Holladay (2008) argue that apology within public relations contains both “accepting responsibility for the crisis and asking for forgiveness” (p. 253).

Most of the early research on apology focuses on the authenticity of the organization’s apology and whether an organization owned its transgressions (Lee and Chung, 2012; Benoit & Drew, 1997). Theories that directly affect the level of apology and crisis strategy emerged in the 1990s and 2000s. One major crisis communication theory was Coombs (1995) crisis matrix that detailed how crisis response warrants a complex set of responses because each organizational crisis has a multitude of factors that directly inform appropriate response. Coombs’ (1995) work on Situational Crisis Communication Tactics (SCCT) was a major development in public relations research and has been applied to a multitude of crisis scenarios. Coombs (1995) and Coombs and Holladay (1996) crisis matrix was based on the four types of crises that emerge: faux pas, terrorism, transgression, and accident. These types of crisis are informed by the intentionality of the crisis and the source of the crisis. Each type of crisis warrants different response strategies depending upon the organization’s history, the level of injury, and the organization’s level of fault. Coombs (1995) crisis communication matrix does not mention apology directly as a category of response but his mortification strategy, such as remediation, repentance, and rectification, do contain a level of admission of fault or apology.

Despite these studies on apology and Coombs’ (1995) inclusion of mortification in his crisis response categories, scholars continue argue that apology should be used only in specific circumstances. Coombs and Holladay (2008) advocate that apology is not always a best practice for PR practitioners because rectifying organizational crisis can be achieved by “sympathy” or

“compassion” (p. 255). He also argues that apology does not necessarily have to be full-blown. Using a partial apology sometimes achieves the same effect as a complete apology. This does not mean studies do not think apology is valuable. McDonald et al, (2010) argues that in certain crisis scenarios where public anger is high admission of fault and “confession” should be used in certain crises even though there may be legal ramifications (p. 269). Coombs (2013) also argues apologies can reduce anger at organizations and mitigate ill will toward an organization. The use of an apology within society is part of reason why organizations may feel they need to apologize. Coombs (2013) states that apology in some circumstances becomes an expectation and when organizations fail to meet that expectations publics become angry. In fact, Coombs (2013) argues that this expectation of apology is so powerful that an organization may have to apologize because if it does not the crisis reaction will worsen.

Outside communications legal research on apology shows that apology serves to reduce litigation, particularly where there has been injury or death (Saitta and Hodge, 2012; Helmreich, 2012; Pearlmutter, 2011). Studies show that lawsuits are frequently filed because litigants feel as if they have been wronged and deserve an apology from the transgressor (Miller, 1986; Vincent et al., 1994; Robbenholt, 2003). Boothman et al. (2009) showed that in Michigan the duration of lawsuits declined when mandatory apology laws were implemented that required doctors to apologize to patients who were the victim of malpractice. They found that patients expected apologies from doctors and when they received them were more likely to feel goodwill and have less anger toward the physician and healthcare provider.

However, as Coombs and Holladay (2008) note, apology is not without risks. Apologies can become evidence at trial of admission of wrongdoing. Legal departments correctly advise PR practitioners and corporate spokespersons that apology can trigger fodder for litigation and ultimately cost an organization thousands in legal fees and judgments. Because of this reality apology as a PR tactic is in a quandary. While research shows apology should be sparingly used, it does have utility as a PR communications technique during a crisis. There is a cultural expectation of apology for organizational transgressions. The lack of apology leads to anger while apology can reduce potential litigation. However, against this backdrop apology is risky because it can be used against an organization. For practitioners to be able to use apology effectively they must know the legal rules that affect its usage and state laws that remove apology from evidence in court.

Apology as “Admission by Party Opponent”: The Federal Rules of Evidence

To understand the implications of apology within litigation it is important to understand how evidence works in American trials. The Fed. R. Evid. were created in 1975 to create a universal method of admitting evidence in federal courts. Based on common law rules of evidence, the Fed. R. Evid. provides 11 Articles, or classifications of rules, and 67 specific rules that range from rules governing hearsay to when an interpreter can be used at trial. Many states conform their state rules of evidence to mirror those federal rules. As of 2015 38 states follow some part of the Uniform Rules of Evidence, which is largely based on the Fed. R. Evid. Those 12 states that do not follow the Uniform Rules of Evidence base their evidence rules on old common law. However, because common law informed the initial creation of the Fed. R. Evid. it is common to find overlap between the Fed. R. Evid. and state jurisdictions that follow common law evidence rules.

At the core of the Fed. R. Evid. is the rules concerning admissibility of evidence. Rule 401 governs what is considered “Relevant Evidence.” It states:

“Relevant evidence” means evidence having any tendency to make the existence of any fact that is of consequence to the determination of the action more probably or less probable than it would be without the evidence (Fed. R. Evid. 401).

Rule 402 further clarifies the importance of “relevant evidence” stating that when an issue is in question at trial information that directly proves or disproves that fact at trial is generally admissible. However, there are some limitations on the admission of this evidence. Rule 403 entitled “Exclusion of Relevant Evidence on Grounds of Prejudice, Confusion or Waste of Time” states some “relevant evidence” may be inadmissible in certain situations. The rule states:

Although relevant, evidence may be excluded if its probative value is substantially outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice, confusion of the issues, or misleading the jury, or by considerations of undue delay, waste of time, or needless presentation of cumulative evidence (Fed. R. Evid. 403).

This means that even if evidence is relevant that sometimes it will still be excluded if it is prejudicial to the party. For example, if a company were sued for manufacturing a defective product, memos showing executives knew about the defects before they were sold would be relevant evidence under Rule 401. However, if those same memos also showed the company failed to pay taxes those same memos arguably could be excluded under Rule 403 because jurors could be prejudiced against the company based on the unrelated issue of tax evasion. Rule 401 and Rule 403 are balanced against each other to determine admissibility. At issue is how important the evidence is to the underlying claim made at trial and the level of prejudice the party may receive from the evidence. This determination is made by the trial judge and is solely made within his or her judicial discretion. Appealing these issues of balancing Rules 401 and 403 are frequently difficult because appellate courts give great deference to trial judges in admission of evidence.

Hearsay is a further limitation on relevant evidence. Rule 801 defines hearsay as “a statement, other than one made by the declarant while testifying at the trial or hearing, offered in evidence to provide the truth of the matter asserted.” Rule 802 states hearsay is not generally admitted unless it falls into one of the exceptions provided in the Fed. R. Evid.. For example, in trial where a company manufactured defective products an employee who saw the defects first-hand during the manufacturing process could testify at court about what he saw. However, if that employee then told his wife about what he saw, the wife could not testify as to what her husband/employee told her because those statements would be hearsay under Rule 801.

Rule 801 also specifically excludes certain out of court statements from being categorized as hearsay. Rule 801(d)(2) states that statements made by a party outside of court are admissible. Rule 801 says that statements that meet the following standards are admissible and not hearsay:

An Opposing Party’s Statement. The statement is offered against an opposing party and:

- (a) was made by the party in an individual or representative capacity;
- (b) is one the party manifested that it adopted or believed to be true;
- (c) was made by a person whom the party authorized to make a statement on the subject;
- (d) was made by the party’s agent or employee on a matter within the scope of that relationship and while it existed; or
- (e) was made by the party’s conspirator during and in furtherance of the conspiracy (Fed. R. Evid. 801(d)(2)).

This rule is important because it means that statements made by an individual party or statements made by other people in which the party acts as if he or she agrees with are admissible in court. Rule 801(d)(2) does not mean the party has to testify. These out of court

statements can be admitted through the testimony of a witness who heard the party make or agree with the out of court statements. This should not be confused with privileges under the Fifth Amendment of the United States Constitution that allows witnesses not to incriminate themselves during testimony. Rather, the power of Rule 801(d)(2) is that legal parties, in both civil and criminal cases, can have their out of court statements admitted into evidence through the testimony of witnesses who heard what they said.

This has particularly harsh consequences for apologies, which are frequently characterized as admissions of guilt. For instance, if a company issued an apology for wrongdoing that apology could be admitted in court because under Rule 801(d)(2) it constitutes an admission. Perhaps even more importantly the Fed. R. Evid. does not distinguish between the manner and forum in which the admissions are made. If an apology was given in a press release or privately in a conversation both communications would be admissible at trial. This is part of the reason why public relations crisis communications are carefully screened by legal departments. Because these statements made by the company are not hearsay and can be re-told in court by anyone who heard the statement, organizations can potentially cause greater problems for themselves by their own attempts to manage a crisis. For instance, the Court of Appeals for Ohio found that in a criminal prosecution of vehicular assault the defendant's apology card given to the injured driver of another vehicle was admissible as an admission (*Ohio v. Butcher*, 2005).⁵ Similarly the Court of Appeal of California, Third Circuit held that a doctor's statement in which he said "Boy, I sure made a mess out of things today, didn't I" constituted an admission in a medical malpractice case (*Wickoff et al. v. James et al.*, 1958). These cases illustrate that acts of remorse and apology, whether spontaneous or deliberate, can be admitted as admissions at trial. Because of this organizations' attorneys warn against an overly sympathetic response to crisis, which may lead to what Coombs (2013) described as an increased anger by crisis victims when an apology is withheld. It is against this backdrop that states began creating apology exemptions from evidentiary rules. These laws were crafted to protect potential defendants from being sued, and allowing victims to receive the apology they may expect from a wrongdoer.

"I'm Sorry" Laws in U.S. States Rules of Evidence

State apology exemptions, commonly referred to as "I'm Sorry" laws, take multiple forms depending on the jurisdiction. Currently 36 states and the District of Columbia have "I'm Sorry" laws. As Table 1 shows 26 percent of states have no "I'm Sorry" laws and follow the hearsay exceptions for all admissions. These states without an "I'm Sorry" statute include a cross-section of jurisdictions in the United States and include: Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Kentucky, Kansas, Michigan, New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, Nebraska, and Minnesota. Jurisdictions that do have "I'm Sorry" laws are not monolithic in their approach. The first major difference between states' "I'm Sorry" laws is whether the laws apply to all potential defendants or only to defendants in medical malpractice claims.

Table 1. U.S. States' approaches to "I'm Sorry" laws⁶.

⁵ Ohio is a state that follows the Uniform Rules of Evidence, which is modeled after the Federal Rules of Evidence.

⁶ The following states have some form of an "I'm Sorry" law: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia,

Stance	Percentage of States
States with “I’m Sorry” Laws that Only Apply to Healthcare Providers	54%
States with General “I’m Sorry” Laws that Applies to All Situations	20%
States with No “I’m Sorry” Laws	26%

N=50

Fifty-four percent of states have “I’m Sorry” laws that only apply to medical healthcare providers. This includes providers, such as doctors, nurses, hospital administration, and insurance companies, who express sympathy or regret over a loss or injury resulting from potential malpractice. One potential reason this exception exists is “I’m Sorry” laws are frequently the result of tort reform measures taken by the medical community. These laws allow for limited expressions of sympathy by healthcare providers in medical malpractice cases. Only 20 percent of states have “I’m Sorry” laws that exempt apologies or sympathetic actions for all potential lawsuits. In all of these jurisdictions, “I’m Sorry” exceptions could protect both a legal wrongdoer and their representatives, including public relations counsel. However, in all jurisdictions there is a limitation on what type of message constitutes an apology.

In those jurisdictions with “I’m Sorry” laws both statements and actions that convey remorse are excluded from evidence. California’s law is typical in this regard. In California Evidence Code §1160 it states “statements, writing, or benevolent gestures expressing sympathy or a general sense of benevolence...shall be inadmissible as evidence.” Other states, such as Illinois and North Carolina, even exclude offerings of monetary compensation as evidence of legal admission (745 Ill. Comp. Stat. . §5/8-1901; NC Gen. Stat. §8C-1, Rule 413). Vermont even allows for statements and actions expressing apology or sympathy made in the first 30 days after injury to be inadmissible (Vt. Stat. Ann tit. 12 §1912). Benevolent actions are mentioned in nearly all of these statutes regardless if they apply only to medical malpractice or the general wrongdoing. Cal. Evid. Code §1160, Mo. Rev. Stat. §538.229, and Fla. Stat. §90.4026 define “benevolent gestures” as “actions which convey a sense of compassion or commiseration emanating from humane impulses.” Louisiana’s “I’m Sorry” law states that “any communication, including but not limited to an oral or written statement, gesture, or conduct...expressing or conveying apology, regret, grief, sympathy, commiseration, condolence, compassion, or a general sense of benevolence” is excluded from evidence (La. Rev. Stat. Ann. §13:3715.5). This broad language describing apologetic, sympathetic, and benevolent communications highlights the purpose of these laws, which is to foster environments in which wrongdoers can engage in socially appropriate responses to crisis.

Despite the expansive nature of many of these laws, the older evidentiary conventions of admission by party opponents still exist. As Table 2 shows of the 37 jurisdictions that have “I’m Sorry” laws 49 percent have laws that include statutory language within the “I’m Sorry” law that explicitly states admissions of fault within an apology are admissible. These statutes tend to differentiate between an apology for someone’s circumstance and an apology that reflects an

Wyoming, and the District of Columbia.

admission of wrongdoing. These laws do not provide a litmus test for what constitutes a fault-free apology, but interpreting the statutes it seems that apology is viewed as a statement that reflects sympathy for the wronged party's circumstances. Maryland is typical of this type of law. In the Maryland "I'm Sorry" law only "apologies or expressions of regret" that do not contain admissions of fault are excluded from evidence (Md. Code Ann. Cts. & Jus. Proc. § 10-920). There is not operationalization of what "apologies or expressions of regret" are in the Maryland statute; however, the language suggests that purpose of the law is to protect statements of sympathy from being wrongly labeled as remorse turned admission.

Table 2. Breakdown of content in U.S. states' "I'm Sorry" laws

Stance	Percentage of Laws
"I'm Sorry" Laws that exempt both Apology Statements and Apologetic Actions/Conduct from Evidence	49%
"I'm Sorry" Laws that Allow some Apology Statements that Suggest Fault into Evidence	51%

N=37 For this Table the percentage is rounded up from .5 or above.

Florida's "I'm Sorry" law is representative of this approach that reserves the right to use fault-based apologies as admissions. It reads:

The portion of statements, writings, or benevolent gestures expressing sympathy or a general sense of benevolence relating to the pain, suffering, or death of a person involved in an accident and made to that person or to that person or to the family of that person shall be inadmissible as evidence in a civil action. A statement of fault, however, which if part of, or in addition to, any of the above shall be admissible pursuant to this section (Fla. Stat. § 90.4026).

The construction of this statute suggests that apologies or sympathetic gestures must be parsed to remove any essence of admission of guilt. Hawaii's statute also permits the inclusion of fault-based apologies stating "This rule does not require the exclusion of an apology or other statement that acknowledges or implies fault even though contained in, or part of, any statement or gesture excludable under this rule (Haw. Rev. Stat. §626-1, Rule 409.5). What this means for those crafting apologies is that unintended interpretations of apologies can be construed as admissions. Crafting these statements requires a careful evaluation of content and an objective assessment of the multiple ways a statement may be interpreted. Even then, the apologizer still runs the risk of having the statement interpreted as an admission of fault.

One last nuance of the "I'm Sorry" laws is they protect statements that are given to a specific audience. All of the 37 jurisdictions with "I'm Sorry" laws state that these laws protect statements that are given to the victim or families of victims. This means that public statements of apology, unless directed at victims and their families, would be excluded from exemption. This creates a problem for public relations practitioners who may hope to use the statements to maintain an organization's image during a crisis. However, this does not mean a public statement

can never be protected under these laws. Public statements directed toward victims and their families conceivably can be protected even if these statements serve the additional function of image management. To ensure protection under these “I’m Sorry” laws practitioners need to be cognizant of how they are crafting these messages. In cases where there are multiple victims or even a community of victims there is even a stronger case that “I’m Sorry” laws would apply to communications made in a public forum such as a press conference, town hall, or press release.

Implications of U.S. Federal and State Evidence Laws in Public Relations Practice

The prevailing view that apology causes many negative collateral consequences is correct. However as research demonstrates apology does have a power within communications practice. Additionally, apology during a crisis event may be expected (Coombs, 2013). Because of this it is important for practitioners to know how to craft a legally defensible yet believable apology. Examining the current evidentiary laws at the state and federal level there are five things public relations practitioners need to ensure that they do before they use any mortification strategy in a crisis situation.

First, practitioners need to ask whether their potential legal liability in the United States will be in a federal or state jurisdiction. This may seem like an issue that would be best left for lawyers to determine. However, determining legal jurisdiction on a crisis has a direct impact on strategy of apology or benevolence. Federal jurisdiction arises when the issue at hand involves federal laws, such as statutes, Constitutional issues, or federal agency regulations (28 U.S.C. § 1331). Because public relations is arguably a field subject to commercial speech regulations, federal jurisdiction may frequently be triggered. Equally possible are scenarios where public relations firms are representing clients whose crisis involves some type of federal regulatory agency, such as the Environmental Protection Agency or Federal Trade Commission. Another way federal jurisdiction is triggered is if the plaintiff and defendant in a lawsuit have legal residency in two different states and have a case where the damages exceed \$75,000 (28 U.S.C. §1332). Federal jurisdiction is important for PR strategy because the Fed. R. Evid. do not recognize exceptions for mortification strategies. Practitioners who have clients facing federal litigation may be forced to not use mortification because those statements and acts can be used as evidence showing admission.

In state jurisdictions practitioners need to know the relevant state evidence laws pertaining to apology. State jurisdiction varies state-to-state, but generally if a case involves a state law or a plaintiff and defendants from the same state, state jurisdiction will apply. Currently 74 percent of states have “I’m Sorry” laws that protect apology and sympathetic acts from entering evidence. However, state laws are nuanced and have caveats that carve out exceptions, such as the 49 percent of states who have “I’m Sorry” laws who still allow fault based apologies into evidence. Healthcare provider limitations on “I’m Sorry” laws do not mean PR practitioners are not covered in those states. With the growing field of health communication, practitioners frequently find themselves representing medical organizations, including hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, or insurance providers. These groups perhaps have the greatest risk of crisis given that they regularly deal with issues involving life and death. Practitioners representing those clients can take advantage of these “I’m Sorry” laws to craft mortification messages that protect and maintain the client’s image while providing the expected apology to victims.

Second, practitioners in state jurisdictions with “I’m Sorry” laws need to evaluate who their audience is. All states who have “I’m Sorry” laws specifically state the apologetic statement

or act is protected from becoming evidence of fault if the communication is directed to the family of victims or victims themselves. A surface reading of these statutes means that interpersonal communications between wrongdoers and victims is exempt from evidence. However, a closer reading of the statutes indicates that public statements may also be protected under existing “I’m Sorry” laws if those statements or acts are directed at the families of victims. This means that practitioners who use direct and mass communication techniques can be protected from potential admissions so long as the messages are crafted to directly address victims and their families. For instance, a press conference given by a practitioner may contain direct communications to victims or families even though it is held in a public forum. In fact, large crises frequently have multiple victims and widespread community impact, e.g. Deepwater Horizon oil spill, so these conventional public relations communications could be protected under “I’m Sorry” laws so long as the jurisdictions were not federal or in a state without these evidentiary exceptions.

Third, practitioners in “I’m Sorry” jurisdictions need to parse language to emphasize sympathy and empathy while minimizing fault. As Table 2 shows currently 51 percent of “I’m Sorry” laws state that admissions of fault within an apology or sympathetic act are admissible. That means that practitioners must be careful when crafting these statements or doing benevolent acts. All 37 jurisdictions that have “I’m Sorry” laws do not provide specific operationalization of what apology, sympathy, benevolence, or empathy is. Because of that it is likely that all actions and statements that potentially can be interpreted as admission will be evaluated by a judge to determine if they are excluded or admitted into evidence. This is a highly subjective process in which trial judges have almost unencumbered discretion. Appellate courts typically do not reverse trial courts on evidentiary decisions absent an abuse of discretion by the trial court judge. This means that it is important for practitioners to craft messages early and potentially with attorneys to ensure protection. Even those “I’m sorry” jurisdictions who do not have fault exemptions still have evidence laws that are subject to interpretation. It is conceivable that a practitioner’s well-crafted apology will still be challenged by a plaintiff’s lawyer on the grounds that the statement is not an apology, but an admission.

Fourth, practitioners need to evaluate whether the organization is making non-verbal apologies through its actions. The old adage that “actions speak louder than words” is central to evidentiary laws concerning admissions. Knowing all of the tactics, verbal and non-verbal, an organization uses in a crisis may help the practitioner to make an informed decision on strategy. Both federal and state evidence laws allow evidence at trial of a party’s actions. These actions are not statements and therefore not subject to hearsay rules. For instance, if an organization were accused of making illegal payoffs, those checks and bank accounts where the payoffs were processed are admissible evidence. No hearsay rule could prevent this from entering into evidence because it is not an out of court statement. Rather it is an out of court actions that relevant to the case under Fed. R. Evid. 401.

Admissions are not always direct statements. Under Fed. R. Evid. 801(d)(2) a party can give an admission not only be directly expressing guilt, but also statements made by the party that “manifested it [the party] adopted or believed it could be true.” This means that if a party agrees with statements that insinuate fault those statements are admissible. It is also important to note that among the “I’m Sorry” jurisdictions actions that are meant to convey apology can sometimes be interpreted as admission. This includes paying for medical bills, providing shelter, or pre-paying damages to victims. While some state jurisdictions specifically exclude paying bills and benevolent acts from evidence, many do not. This means that benevolent actions may or

may not be excluded from evidence as admissions. This means well-crafted apologies that do not admit fault may be undermined by an organization's actions that suggest culpability. Because of this it is important for practitioner to know all crisis strategies used by an organization. PR communication does not occur in a vacuum and context matters. An organization's crisis strategy should include verbal and non-verbal communications and it is important for the practitioner to manage, and at the least be aware, of these responses.

Fifth, practitioners need to recognize mortification strategies are not always off-limits because of potential litigation. Reading federal and state evidence statutes, practitioners may get the false impression that mortification strategies are too risky because of potential litigation. While it is true that apology, sympathy, and empathy is a complex form of PR communication that can have unintended legal consequences, it is important to not that admission of fault is not dispositive of guilt. That means that even if an apology were admitted into evidence as an admission of fault, that piece of evidence alone does not necessarily mean a party will be found legally responsible by a jury or judge. Admissions are pieces of evidence. Trials have large amounts of evidence proffered by both plaintiffs and defendants. Admissions are only one part of that total body of evidence. While admissions are certainly damaging to a defendant, they may not suggest liability if other evidence to the contrary is produced. However, this does not mean that admissions of fault are to be taken lightly. Juries can consider all of the evidence or none of it in their deliberations. That means the weight of admission depends upon the fact-finders.

Conclusion

The debate over the efficacy of apology in crisis communications is important for public relations practice. As scholars have shown mortification strategies do work but come with a price. However, practitioners should know the legal contours that govern PR communications. While federal and state evidence laws affect the approach a practitioner takes in a crisis scenario, knowing these laws provides new opportunities for practitioners.

PR and legal departments frequently disagree over communication strategy. Perhaps this can be best explained by viewing PR as a profession focused on communication while law is a profession focused on risk-aversion. However, PR and law share common goals of maintaining the integrity of an organization's image, mitigating collateral damage, and maintaining the relationships with publics that make an organization successful. Being about to work within the boundaries of evidentiary rules allows practitioners craft even more salient messages. Implementing this into PR practice provides practitioners the opportunity to build internal relations with legal departments and contribute in a new way to managerial decisions. While evidence rules may limit what can be said in a crisis, they provide practitioners the opportunity to craft even more sophisticated messages that help build relationships with publics and clients alike.

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**Getting To Compliance—A Fairy Tale of Hope, Fantasy, Disillusionment, Despair, and
Ultimately Redemption in the Search for the Holy Grail of Standardized, Meaningful
Measurement**

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Abstract

This paper examines several implementations of Barcelona-compliant measurement programs, showing successes and failures, including how we implemented standard coding, metrics and conducted an RFP process based on the Transparency Table. It also draws conclusions that others in the industry can use to improve the path to compliance.

It's one thing to have written and released standards for measuring public relations and social media. It's quite another to actually get them implemented within an organization. This paper takes a detailed, behind-the-scenes look at several organizations that have tried with varying degrees of success to move from AVEs and counting "likes" to measuring outcomes. In the following pages we examine the successes and failures of their efforts and draw conclusions so that others in the industry can use it to ease the path to compliance. The statements are fact-based, but for client confidentiality we have disguised the names of the organizations involved.

Hope -- the Planning Process

Most companies that hear about The Barcelona Principles and/or the new standards from The Coalition and Conclave see them as a way out of the endless confusion that multiple vendors and systems are causing them. Upon taking over responsibility for measurement, one client laid out 30 separate measurement reports that she discovered she'd been paying for. None of them used the same metrics, definitions, or criteria. Plus, none were being used to make decisions.

Clients envision a simple, easy-to-use platform that provides consistent metrics at the click of a mouse. But sadly such systems, like unicorns, only occur in fairy tales. The ugly reality is that, also in fairy tales, the world is full of dragons and beasts in the form of vendors, entrenched structures, and old habits and beliefs. And it takes a lot of white knights on horseback or women with magic wands wielding research and standards documents to banish those bandits.

Let's start with the core of The Barcelona Principles—tying efforts to outcomes. Few organizations find it hard to argue with the idea of tying their communications efforts to corporate goals. But fewer still are able to get the face time with senior management to hammer out a consensus about what success looks like in real life. The larger the organization, the bigger the challenge that becomes.

Let's Look at a Few Examples:

In one very large destination marketing organization we met with the CMO, a very research-minded manager. This manager had ROI statistics on everything in his organization except PR and social media. After he vented his frustrations about the bogus numbers PR had been providing, I asked him what he thought PR's role was in the visitor's path to purchase a ticket to visit. "It's the spark...The thing that gets them to consider coming." In short order we used existing research to identify what specific elements had to be included in a story to light that spark – those elements had to:

- Leave a reader more likely to consider visiting
- Contain a desirable visual
- Offer a recommendation
- Dispel a myth

So the first definition of success would be the percentage of coverage in earned media containing those elements. We then developed an "optimal content score," that the organization could use in its marketing mix model to determine earned media's contribution to the departmental ROI. Sadly, the CMO left, new metrics are in limbo and their RFP to vendors included AVEs.

For another travel destination, with a communications staff of less than 10, the process was relatively simple. We were able to get the executive director in the same room with the staff and a few of the agencies. We had a productive discussion that resulted in an agreement that getting traffic to the "Visitor Guide" page on the website was an acceptable proxy for intent to

visit. They used quarterly survey research to measure actual intent, awareness, and preference. We inserted a question in the survey to identify people who had heard news via earned media and were then able to track the extent to which people who had seen destination-related news in key markets were influenced to perceive the city as a fun place to go with friends – a key driver of actual visits.

For a nonprofit organization, it just took a few meetings to agree that unique page views of the “Thank You” page seen by donors (after giving) was proof of outcome.

At a major high-end retailer, the meeting to define the metrics was contentious and took a full day. In the end, the only outcome metrics they could agree on were media –related. They defined success as the percentage of items that contained a desirable visual, key message, and call to action.

In a major health care company, the metrics started with the strategic plan that outlined 10 imperatives for the year. The new head of communications operations decided that his department could measurably contribute to 4 of those imperatives:

1. Increase brand awareness & familiarity -- Measured by: Increase in desirable share of voice in both traditional & social media and increase in new visits to the company website
2. Increase in awareness & brand reputation index among key stakeholders (from global brand study)
3. Protect the brand -- Measured by: Decrease in undesirable share of voice in traditional & social media and expansion of the marketable universe via desirable social media engagement
4. Promote the culture -- Measured by: Increase knowledge of corporate strategy & culture demonstrated from employee quizzes

Therefore the final metrics used on the dashboard were:

- % decrease in those who are unaware of the brand among key stakeholders
- % increase in awareness of brand positioning among key stakeholders
- % increase in non-employee engagement with online brand properties & networks
- % reduction in share of undesirable voice
- % increase in share of desirable voice

Fantasy

The next phase of implementation is to ascertain where the data for these metrics will come from. In most organizations everyone knows data is available, but no one knows who exactly has it. As a result, many of the metrics found on most dashboards are a sort of group fantasy. Everyone knows the data is there somewhere, they just don't know where.

What was unexpected is the degree to which people guard their data the way dragons guard gold. It almost always requires the power of the CMO to get people to hand over data. But in some government institutions or highly-regulated national organizations, it is very likely you will hit an institutional brick wall. In many organizations there is an assumption that data exists when in fact it has never been collected. In several organizations we encountered vendor contracts that hadn't been signed (hence the data wouldn't be available for months) or data sources that were once available had been eliminated for budget reasons. That frequently sent us back to the drawing board to change, replace, or eliminate specific metrics.

Disillusionment & Despair

Without a doubt the hardest, most frustrating, and frankly depressing phase of

implementing a standards-compliant program is getting good-quality data that's also valid.

In the health care organization, the problems were discovered early in the process after we conducted an audit of existing measurement systems. The results of that audit necessitated a search for a new vendor. As part of the evaluation process we used [The Conclave's Standard Transparency Table](#) (also called "The Transparency Reporting Template") as a base, and adapted its list of vendor questions to meet the organization's specific needs.

After an initial round, a number of vendors were eliminated because they couldn't meet the basic requirements. We then created a set of criteria weighted according to the requirements of the dashboard.

The weighting was assigned as follows:

1. Accuracy: 5 points
2. Completeness of data: 5 points
3. Timeliness: 4 points
4. Ease of use: 3 points
5. Cost: 2 points (Cost was weighted relatively low in this instance because the organization was saving money by eliminating at least 3 duplicative reporting systems.)
6. Capability, credibility, stability, culture of the supplier: 1 point

The first test we undertook examined how the top 4 vendors coded articles during a one month period. The results were shockingly different. (Figure 1.) The incumbent vendors, Beyond and SDL, used human coding while UberVu and NetBase used automated coding. Not surprisingly, the automated coding found far more neutral items, while Beyond reported very high positives, and SDL reported the highest negatives. Since Beyond would not provide the raw coded data to help us determine the cause of the variance, they were eliminated from further tests.

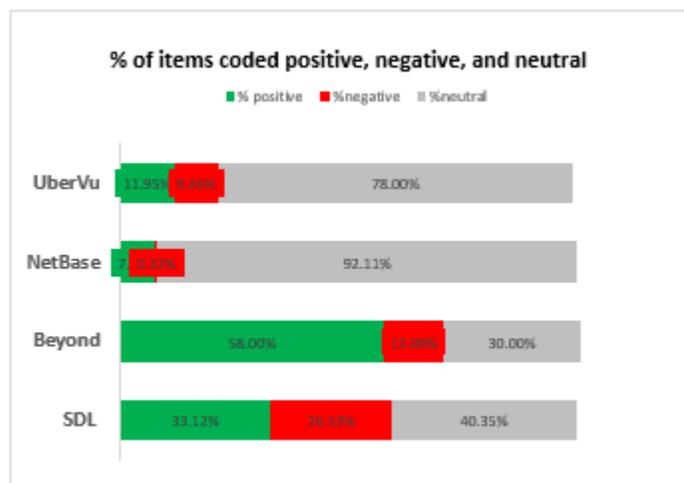


Figure 1

Figure 1. Percentage of items coded positive, negative, and neutral

To reconcile the differences, we set up an intercoder reliability test using [the Standard Coding guidelines](#) established by the research of Eisenmann, Geddes, and O'Neil. We employed a team of highly-trained human coders with a minimum of 5 years of complex content analysis experience. The human coders were presented with raw data from a one month period and asked to code for positive, neutral, and negative sentiment based on an agreed upon standards coding

document.

Once the human coding was complete, the team compared the human coding with the coding provided by the 3 leading vendors. NetBase clearly surpassed the other vendors on the accuracy test with an 89% level of consistency with human coders. (Figure 2.)

The next test was for completeness of data. The company had in place a comprehensive (but very expensive) monitoring system that was used as the benchmark. If a vendor could find everything the incumbent system was finding, it would be an acceptable alternative. Unfortunately initial results showed that while NetBase excelled in accuracy, it failed on the completeness of the data test. (Figure 3.)

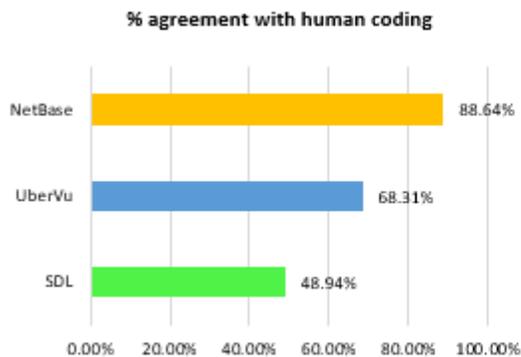


Figure 2¹

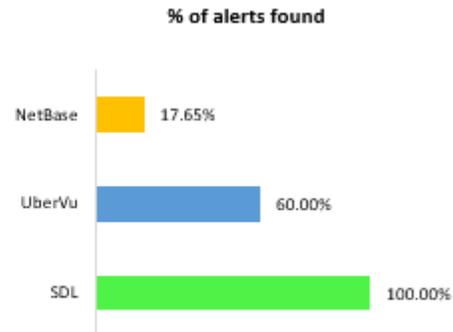


Figure 3¹

Figure 2. Percentage of agreement with human coding

Figure 3. Percentage of alerts found

As it turned out, for the purposes of the test, NetBase had only provided a sampling of its full feed. Once it provided the full feed, it was found to get 99.9% of the alerts provided by the incumbent.

However, for the tourism client, the opposite scenario unfolded. As part of its move towards standardization, the client had selected a vendor based on its ability to deliver a very broad and complete selection of clips. But, during the reporting process, errors in coding were found. Once again we conducted an intercoder reliability test to determine the accuracy of the vendor's coding. The following charts (Figures 4 & 5) illustrate the discrepancies between the coding of trained humans using the Eisenmann, Geddes, and O'Neil guidelines and the relatively untrained coders of the incumbent vendor. "Yes" indicates that the trained coder agreed with the way the incumbent vendor had coded. The red means they disagreed. Clearly better training was in order...In fact, the client elected to switch to a different vendor.

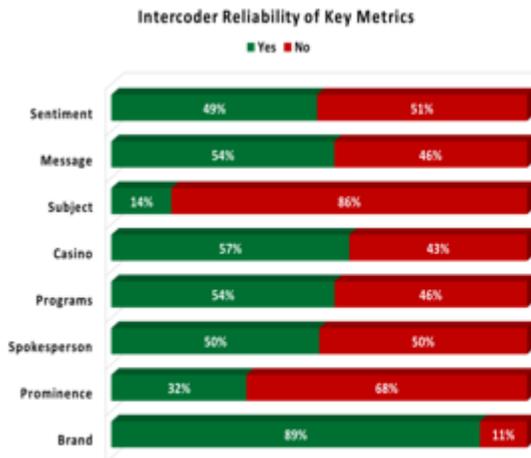
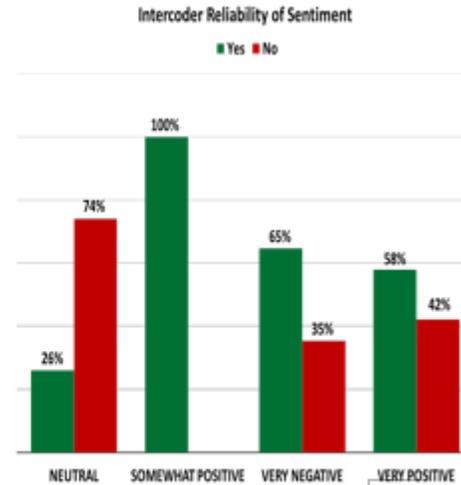
Figure 4¹Figure 5¹

Figure 4. Intercoder reliability of key metrics

Figure 5. Intercoder reliability of sentiment

Redemption

After months of meetings, frustration, and repetitive efforts, one might worry that these organizations would just give up on the entire process, but the good news is that organizations that have chosen to implement the “holy grail” of outcome metrics, are willing to invest a lot of time and effort into the process. Better yet -- because they’ve committed to the process, they really use the data to make better decisions.

For the travel destination, during a summer of overwhelmingly bad news, they used the data almost weekly to make decisions about how to allocate resources to mitigate the damage most efficiently.

At the health care organization, there were several senior management changes during the roll out and a period of unusually heavy media attention, mostly unwanted. As leadership shifted, different priorities emerged and metrics were adjusted in the process. However, the consistency of the data and standard reporting styles proved to be an enormous asset in not just the extent of the coverage, but also in what themes and messages helped mitigate the undesirable messages.

For the high-end retailer, after the initial contentious discussion, it wasn’t surprising there was some push-back on the metrics. Ultimately it took a year to fully implement the new standardized dashboard, but it is now an integral part of their strategic planning process.

For the nonprofit organization, they used their data to make resource allocation decisions. Now, they have become better stewards of their donor’s contributions.

The common theme of these organizations is that once senior leadership bought into the metrics and the process, the metrics became part of the internal culture, and behaviors changed.

What We Learned

1. *Expect the Unexpected.*

Throughout all these processes, the most frequent comment my clients and I would share was “Who knew...?”

- Who knew how complex some of these platforms would be to implement?

- Who knew what kind of push-back we would get from people who had a large personal stake in the “old reports” – full of activity metrics and zero insight? We had people advocating for old reports even though they admitted they were bogus, just because change was harder to swallow than bad data!
 - Who knew how hard it would be to create an “apples to apples” comparison between vendors? The media analysis vendors were bad, but the social analytics vendors were worse.
 - Who knew how hard it would be to get any of these systems to work together?
2. *Forewarned is Forearmed When It Comes to Vendors.*
- Don't start a vendor search until you have defined and agreed upon criteria for success.
 - Don't believe any technology will do what it promises until you've gotten it to do what you want it to do.
 - Don't assume anything is accurate or consistent unless you have tested it.
3. *Keep It Simple.*
- Make sure you can explain EVERYTHING, even to the dumbest person in the room.
 - Don't finalize any standards or metrics until you've done the math and tested your theories.
 - Know when to push and when to give in.
4. *Be Patient.*
- Change takes time, and measurement will always be at the bottom of a busy executive's to-do list.
5. *Put on Your Therapist Hat.*
- All organizations are made up of human beings. Most humans fear change; therefore, they feel threatened by measurement, get defensive when presented with data that changes their beliefs, and may fear for their jobs. Measurement needs to be seen as a healing balm, not a malevolent force.
 - Many people think they know measurement and measurement vendors, (especially Digital Media teams) and love to show off their knowledge. Let them, then educate them on the challenges of attribution and good research.
 - Speed is of the essence. Once an organization gets accustomed to good metrics and knows they are available, they want them RIGHT NOW! Set expectations for what is realistic and what can accurately delivered in the 3 hours they've given you.

Finally, just like the real quest for the Holy Grail, striving for good metrics based on goals and outcomes is a worthy endeavor --regardless of how many dragons you need to slay, AVEs you have to vanquish, or Klout scores you must kill. Ultimately, you'll leave the PR world in a better place than you found it.

Taming Contingency Theory: Creating a Quantitative Decision Tool Using Decision Theory and Game Theory in Conflict Management

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Abstract

The Contingency Theory of Accommodation provides a broad spectrum of factors that can be used to analyze crisis situations and propose stances that each organization can employ. The purpose of this study is to utilize these variables to create a usable tool that can quantify these variables as a decision tool for management teams facing a crisis situation. This tool is intended to be dynamic and can be used at various stages of a crisis and will reflect the “It Depends” spirit of the Contingency Theory.

Past research has recognized the demand for more applied research in the field of conflict management and specifically utilizing expert systems as a solution to overcoming time, money and complexity constraints (Cameron & Curtin, 1992). Over the last decade, the academic community in conflict management and the general public have witnessed multiple instances of public relations gone wrong, from the handling of the BP Gulf Coast oil spill (Shogren, 2011), Merck's decision not to recall its questionable drug Vioxx, Bridgestone-Firestone's tire failures and many more that have cost small businesses all the way to Fortune 500 companies money and reputation.

In order to address this recognized gap between theory and practice, the purpose of this study is to offer an effort toward developing a tool that bridges that gap by building a structural framework based on the Contingency Theory of Accommodation (Cancel et al., 1997) and applying the principles and mechanics of decision and game theory to analyze multi-faceted problems faced by public relations professionals.

This tool embraces complexity and dynamism much in the same spirit contingency theory does. The tool aims to aid public relations practitioners and the organizations they serve by offering a straightforward pathway for applying contingency theory to industry problems and arriving at optimal decisions.

What follows is a literature review of contingency, game and decision theories from which the premise of this research arises. The methodology section lays out how these theories inform one another to create a framework for a tool relevant and useful to public relations practitioners. The tool itself is then explained and applied to a sample conflict scenario, the 2005 product failure of Pork Chop Pet Foods (name and date changed for confidentiality purposes). Limitations of the current model and intended next steps for this research, which include proof of concept follow.

Literature Review and Research Questions

Contingency Theory

Before discussing other attempts at making contingency theory relevant to practitioners, contingency theory's defining factors and strengths are discussed. Contingency theory (Cancel et al., 1997) offers an alternative to Grunig and Grunig's (1992) excellence theory, which conveys a two-way symmetrical model of conflict resolution. The continuum posited by the contingency theory evaluates each crisis through 87 different variables and offers a recommended stance an organization should take towards each public. Conflicts can arise from actions outside parties (such as activist groups) or from within an organization (such as fraudulent activity).

The continuum developed by Cancel et al. (1997) represents a wide range of possible stances an organization can take in a crisis. The continuum offers a practical view that deviates from the normative theory that all actors in the crisis seek to resolve the conflict in a most efficient and amicable manner. The "It Depends" ideology presents a systematic manner in which factors in a crisis can be evaluated at different points in dynamically changing situations. Because of its robustness, it lays an excellent foundation to evaluate conflict management within the realm of public relations.

Life Cycle of Crisis Communication

Crisis communication can be defined as defending or protecting an organization's position or actions relative to a crisis. According to Coombs (2007), crises create threats to the reputation of the organization. "Reputations are widely recognized as a valuable, intangible

asset. Reputational assets can attract customers, generate investment interest, improve financial performance” (Coombs, 2007; Carmeli and Tishler, 2005; Davies et al., 2003; Fombrun and Gardberg, 2000; Fombrun and van Riel, 2004). The importance in crisis resolution and effective communication is therefore paramount to ensure the erosion of the value embedded within the brand of the organization does not reach catastrophic levels and is managed properly.

In many modern organizations, public relations departments have been tasked to strategically communicate the organization’s stance in fair and foul weather on paper. In practice that has been not always the case. Lauzen (1991) introduced the idea of encroachment in the field of public relations where non-public relations personnel are given the responsibilities. This can be often seen in times of crises. The blurring of the lines of responsibilities during crisis communications have seen senior management finding the most appropriate problem solvers instead of relying on the public relations team. Legal departments are known for colliding with public relations departments (Reber, Cropp & Cameron, 2003), and in recent years, corporate crises have seen a larger role taken by teams such as the legal department due to the strong fear of litigation while internal corporate communications have been taken over by the communications team.

Public relations has been relegated to serving up press releases and external communication and is often not actively called upon to quell the crisis due to the perceived lack of expertise and knowledge; marketing, legal and human resource departments fill in or take over. This phenomena is encroachment theory in play. One of the reasons for this is that public relations are often perceived as the “forgotten man” during times of crisis as their roles are largely different during a non-crisis period. It is the authors’ belief that public relations researchers have a responsibility to spearhead efforts toward a quantitative tool. If the field of public relations does not make strides toward such a tool, other disciplines might, but with less understanding of developed conflict management theory.

According to Reber & Berger (2006), the role of influence plays a large part in determining how responsibilities are assigned and decisions are made. Influence can be earned through merit and credibility and success in problem solving. The “expertise” factor during a crisis for public relations personnel is often limited to what senior management observe during day to day (non-crisis) functions and often seem less useful when compared to the legal team for instance as litigation could cost or save the company a lot of money.

Reber & Berger’s (2006) research showed that influence can be increased through “rationality.” In practice, public relations personnel offer opinions that are usually often theoretical and hard to substantiate. This makes it difficult to be rational or convincing if faced with an opposing viewpoint until one party backs down. The decision making process during a crisis is one that is multi-layered and often unorganized. The introduction of this proposed tool could potentially alleviate this problem. Foremost, the potential is that it creates a platform whereby this process becomes a systematic, quantifiable method of problem solving instead of an opinion fest.

Second, by being an “expert” in this platform and understanding how this tool can be utilized to help evaluate and resolve a crisis, it would enable better collaboration between all teams in communicating clearly to the most important issues at hand and to focus on the solutions. Third, this would lead to an increase in credibility of the public relations department and to recapture their niche in this role and hence reducing the encroachment by other departments. This would address the issue of rationality where teams can debate on salient points outside of just opinions.

Such decisions that are undertaken happen at various instances of a crisis. Coombs (2007) breaks down a crisis into three stages, pre-crisis, crisis and post crisis. During a crisis, reputational capital is spent and the goal is to ensure that reputational capital is managed properly. Each stage of the crisis needs to be articulately managed in order to reduce reputational damage. While each stage is often ubiquitous and hard to draw a line in the sand to differentiate the transition, tactics need to be dynamically shifted to appropriately deal with the crisis at hand. Another benefit of the systematic nature of this tool is to ensure that it can be utilized during different stages of a crisis to measure the pulse of the public and the weight of various factors that have changed over time. This can be effective to uncover if the transition has shifted or if the next phase of the crisis has taken hold. This tool can appropriately advise which stance an organization should undertake to minimize reputation damage.

During the post-crisis phase, restoration of a reputation becomes a priority. Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory describes the five different strategies organizations can undertake to mend a damaged reputation. The five options of denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification shows the spectrum of approaches that an organization can take. Pang (2006), shows how the continuum from the Contingency Theory of Accommodation would create an appropriate fit for the options within Image Repair Theory. Essentially, a change in stance would affect a change in strategy. Likewise, this decision making tool that is developed would be able to adopt a similar outlook when used to process the necessary strategies needed in a post-crisis mode.

While foundationally based on the Contingency Theory, the factors within this decision-making tool are developed to be easily understood and robust. In this paper the ten sample factors selected are clearly based on the Contingency Theory of Accommodation, yet it is fleshed out appropriately with other public relations theories in mind to ensure that this tool in development would both be relevant and easy to operate. This tool is developed to fill the vacuum of a lack of a reliable and consistent tool used within public relations practice today. It is intended to be used from the onset of a crisis to the end of it. Ideally, it would help return a sense of credibility to public relations practitioners and elevate their role and influence during crisis communications. Our hope that it can be streamlined and ultimately adopted by public relations practitioners for organizational use throughout the world.

Decision Theory

Decision and game theories have been applied to social science research in the past. Rationality and logic are the underpinning of decision and game theories, and practitioners tend to describe their advice to clients as rational (Ormerod, 2010). Decision and game theories have been widely applied to a variety of fields ranging from anthropology, sociology and philosophy to military strategies and tactics, economics, political science, behavioral psychology, computer science and engineering (Kaplan, 1996; Ormerod, 2010; Parmigiani & Inoue, 2009). From a high level, decision theory works toward making the best decision possible from multiple options, while game theory works toward selecting the best option when outside parties such as adversaries, competitors and collaborators are involved (Ormerod, 2010).

Decision theory is known for being well suited to choices involving complexity, a time element between choices and competing decision makers, and its ideal strong suit is dealing with decisions during uncertainty (Kaplan, 1996). Given the constant uncertainty of public relations, for example, how a given public will react to news or whether government will pursue regulations following corporate action or market reaction, this makes decision theory a natural fit

for conflict management. Levels of uncertainty range from complete certainty (deterministic knowledge) to risk (complete probabilistic knowledge), uncertainty (partial probabilistic knowledge) and ignorance (no probabilistic knowledge). Because managing conflict is a dynamic, complex process, to create a model based on certainty would be nonsensical. Decision makers might have a complete probabilistic knowledge of several elements of but not all 87 factors, for example, and it would also be faulty to assume no probabilistic knowledge of the situation whatsoever. Decisions about strategic conflict management will most often fall under decision making under uncertainty (Hansson, 1990). By identifying the values, uncertainties and other issues relevant in a given decision, one can make strides toward a rational decision that can be quantified (Kaplan, 1996). Contingency theory offers the full line-up of uncertainties and other issues relevant in a given decision. With knowledge of the given conflict scenario and the given public, practitioners can identify values associated with these uncertainties. Game theory is next discussed because decisions on how to handle conflict are not made in a vacuum, and the response of an organization must take into account the actions of other actors such as competitors when deciding upon the most advantageous course of action.

Game Theory

According to Rapoport (1974), game theory can be defined “as a theory of rational decision in conflict situations” (p. 1) and such models consist of players, strategies, outcomes and payoffs. In a crisis, a practitioner and their contending publics will hence be players developing strategies based on what they believe the other party will execute in order to maximize their utility and get their desired outcome.

One of the popularized versions of Game Theory is Prisoner’s Dilemma. Prisoner’s Dilemma is a 2 x 2 matrix that displays the payoff of each outcome. The outcome is determined by each player’s strategy. A player has two choices, which are to choose to cooperate with the other party or not to. Based on each player’s choice in strategy, the outcome will be determined, and each player will receive an appropriate payoff based on the matrix. The ideal outcome with the optimal payoff is when both parties choose to cooperate with each other. However, this is not commonly done due to the inherent risk of the opposing party not choosing to cooperate, which results in the worst possible payoff. As such, these decisions need to be taken into account when plotting strategy.

Another aspect of Game Theory is Simultaneous and Sequential games. According to Dixit and Skeath (1999), simultaneous games occur when each player reveals their strategy at the same time, whereas sequential games allow each player to make their move based on what the other has done. Sequential games may be more consistent with public relations crises as there are several reactionary phases during a crisis. Coombs (2007) defines them as crisis recognition, crisis containment and business resumption. During these stages, decisions are made often in reaction to the other player, and this model may be paint a more realistic picture.

As such, decisions are often made through backward induction (Binmore, 1996) where decisions are made based on the last action taken in order to achieve an optimal action. This is consistent with how practitioners deal with crisis. And the proposed framework in this paper would account for how the changing factors will affect the proposed stance of the practitioner's organization.

Group Decision-making Research

For the purposes of this tool, group decision making research is addressed because one of the advantages of the tool is it can help facilitate discussion amongst practitioners and the dominant coalition, so understanding this decision making dynamic is relevant. In many corporate situations, decisions are made on a “judge-advisor system,” where in pursuit of the best decision possible, multiple people provide advice to a decision maker or judge. Ultimately, however, the decision lies in the hands of one individual. While advisors indeed influence judges, judges tend to give more weight to their own opinion and to advisors who share opinions with them. Judges, or decision makers, are sensitive to advice-givers’ good or bad histories of correctness and levels of information at their disposal. Notably, research shows the best predictor of an advisor’s influence is his or her level of confidence (Kerr & Tindale, 2004).

Group decision research further suggests that individuals have difficulty optimally combining individual preferences. Often, judges come to better decisions when using simple, linear models such as averages, rather than relying on personal or intuitive weighting schemes. Kerr & Tindale (2004) explain:

Ariely et al. (2000) showed that, assuming pairwise conditional independence and random individual error distributions, the average of J probability estimates (J = the number of estimators) will always be better than any of the component individual estimates and that as J increases, the average will tend toward perfect calibration diagnosticity (accurate representation of the true state of affairs), even when information provided to the various estimators is less than optimal. In addition, Johnson et al. (2001) empirically showed the accuracy of the average probability estimate to be robust over a number of conditions, even when individual estimates were not independent. Thus, decision makers’ tendency to weight their own opinions heavier than those of their advisors may often be a suboptimal strategy. (p. 635-636).

This suggests that a proposed tool might be used best by individuals first, then their totals averaged prior to a group discussion by the dominant coalition. Given unequal amounts of knowledge in different areas, however, the authors see the benefit of fuller information in all 87 areas as necessary to the process, so the tool’s use is suggested as a facilitator of discussion to commonly agree upon values. Existing research that supports group decisions, not just individuals as information processors includes the work of Hinsz, Tindale & Vollrath, and takes into account variability of uniqueness-commonality of information, diversity-convergence of ideas, attenuation-accentuation of the cognitive process and distinctiveness-belongingness of members (Kerr & Tindale, 2004).

From this literature review, several research questions arise. First, (RQ1) How can decision and game theories activate contingency theory’s internal and external factors into a usable tool? (RQ2) How can we best measure external and internal factors in a crisis of the contingency theory given the complex and dynamic factors involved (probability, different actors and group decision)? And (RQ3) How do we operationalize such a methodology for industry use? These aforementioned theories are combined and further explored in the following section.

Development & Methodology

As previously mentioned, contingency theory embraces the complexity found in strategic conflict management, as seen in the 87 factors uncovered by Cancel et al. (1997). In this tool’s early stages the creators have first selected a more manageable 10 factors to work with. External factors are chosen because in the sample instance of an organization’s product failure, external

publics will be key, and more information on external factors is available to researchers. Also, external factors are more easily evident in their roles in portraying causality and consequence. The contingency theory factors examined for a preliminary model include:

1. Litigation
2. Government regulation
3. Damaging publicity of organization
4. Reputation of organization – business community
5. Reputation of organization – public
6. Competition within industry
7. Affected public's perception of organization
8. History of affected public
9. Affected public's willingness to negotiation
10. Media coverage

These ten variables are pulled directly from the external factors from the Contingency Theory of Accommodation and represent one-sided statements that lean towards various degrees of accommodation. The premise behind each variable is the degree in which accommodation becomes a necessity based on the values of importance and probability of each of the factor involved.

Contingency theory is operationalized in this model by evaluating each of the 87 factors of accommodation during a crisis. Game theory accounts for the theoretical actions of more than a single actor in the decision making process in contingency theory because organizations need to take into account what the actions and strategies of other players would be. Additionally, sequential games is evident in the decision making process in the life of the crisis.

Each factor is measured on two levels: the importance of the threat to the current crisis as well as the probability or likelihood of that factor affecting the organization negatively. A two-dimensional scale is based on a similar but more complex series of measurements for each factor developed by Cameron, Pang & Jin (2008). As it stands in this early stage, the tool appears to have face validity, but testing will be necessary for actual validity and reliability measures. The evaluation of each factor can be represented by a two-dimensional scale to reflect their relative impact within the crisis (Figure 1). This scale is based on Jin and Cameron's (2003) emotional appraisal model that showcases how emotional tone, weight and temperature can put on a two dimensional scale with a slider to denote emotional temperature changes.

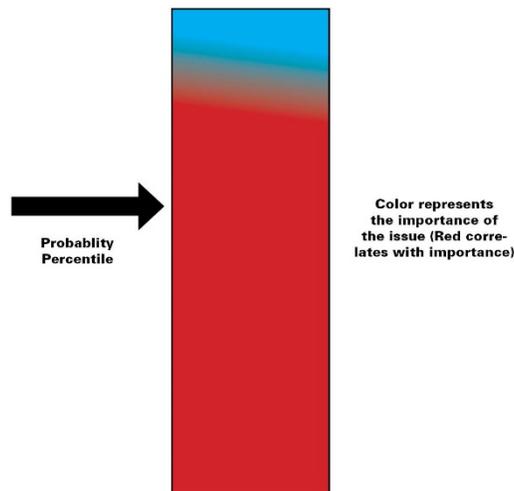


Figure 1.

Decision makers involved in a crisis would then evaluate each factor along both dimensions on a scale of one to 10 for importance and 0 to 100% for probability. For importance, 10 is classified as highest importance and 1 is the lowest. This importance is multiplied by the probability factor where a score of 1.0 represents 100% and a score of 0 represents 0%. This reflects the probability of the factor coming into play during a crisis. For example a factor such as litigation with a probability of 80% and an importance of 5 will get a score of 4.0. These scores of all weighted factors will eventually be summed and measured on the continuum to evaluate possible stances.

Each variable will be computed using this tool, made accessible to practitioners via an online website and/or mobile app. Their input will be based on the particular situation at hand. One of the advantages of this model is that it recognizes different people involved in the public relations process will likely view the importance of given factors differently. By laying out these factors in a format where priorities of importance must be decided upon, the floor is opened up for discussion and various parties can discuss and negotiate what should be considered the most important factors and why. This in itself is of importance. For example, the dominant coalition's top decision makers might be open to hearing a basic pros and con description or debate between public relations and legal departments for handling on a particular factor such as litigation. Laying out the pieces of the puzzle in a systematized way opens up the floor for a systematized and more efficient discussion.

Factors receiving the highest scores (product of importance and probability) will be prioritized at the top of the list for further evaluation. By having a two-dimensional array of factors presented, companies can make a more informed decision on their organization's stance.

The utility of this tool is best demonstrated through its application in a sample scenario, so what follows is a crisis scenario and further explanation of how the tool works.

Sample Application

Pork chop pet food crisis. By looking at a past product failure crisis, the Pork Chop Pet Food poisoning in 2010 (the name and date have been changed to maintain anonymity), the authors use the proposed tool to evaluate how the crisis may or should have been handled based on interpretation of the factors of the Contingency Theory. One of the authors has first-hand knowledge of incident's handling. By revisiting a crisis in the past, we will be able to evaluate the event with a 20/20 hindsight given the actions of Pork Chop Pet Foods Pet Foods that some may have deemed as unsuccessful. Pork Chop Pet Foods Pet Foods as of present has not released new pet foods under their company brand and their current bestseller, released two years after this crisis, is in fact distanced from the Pork Chop Pet Foods Brand.

In 2010, Pork Chop Pet Foods had a pet recall when it was discovered that a fungus had infected their primary granary where the pet food was manufactured. This led to a massive pet food recall due to infected pets becoming sick and some dying as a result of the consumption. While Pork Chop Pet Food executives offered their sympathies to the owner of the pets, they were unwilling to engage in any form of compensation.

At this stage, the tool is best applied with one specific public in mind, in this case, current and potential Pork Chop Pet Food consumers. Because the entire 87 contingency theory factors would be a lot to handle in early stages of this model's development, the authors have chosen 10 preliminary variables to work with, which happen to be mostly external threat factors. The variables were chosen because the researchers expect that predisposing factors (Cancel, et al., 1999), while important, would return less variance in terms of calculated accommodation or advocacy than the internal threat factors. In the early development stages of this tool, more variance is valuable in that it allows the researchers to account for greater swings in numbers leading to an accommodation or advocacy stance. Below is a table that shows the factors used in this sample case, as well as assigned importance and probability scores and a calculated weighted score, which are all explained below:

Table 1

Factor (One-sided toward accommodation)	Importance Score	Probability Score	Weighted Score
Litigation	5	0.8	4
Government regulations	3	0.6	1.8
Damaging publicity of organization	8	0.9	7.2
Reputation of organization – business community	8	0.8	6.4
Reputation of organization – public	7	0.7	4.9
Competition within industry	6	0.7	4.2

Affected public's perception of organization	8	0.8	6.4
History of affected public	3	0.3	0.9
Affected public's willingness to negotiate	7	0.8	5.6
Media coverage	7	0.7	4.9
COMPOSITE SUM			46.3

The importance score in the above table indicates the significance of the given factor in the grand scheme of the scenario to the given public. The scale is set 0 to 10, 10 being the most important. For ease of use, only whole numbers are used, and a maximum score of 10 is chosen for importance for simplicity's sake. Multiple factors may have the same importance score. In the current, preliminary version of this tool, it might be possible to rank order all 10 factors, but an all-encompassing version of this tool would mean rank-ordering 87 factors would be too tedious to be of value, given one of the purposes of this tool is efficiency for decision makers. The importance score is determined by practitioners in a given scenario and for the given public under examination. If done in a group setting, one value of this tool is it can facilitate discussion and agreement on the importance of given factors.

The probability score in the above scale is not a calculated score in the mathematical sense, and might best be thought of as a score of likelihood. Probability is used because, as described in the literature review, decision theory logic allows for the probability of a factor times a given score (in this case importance score) to become a factor's weighted score, and weighted scores can be added together to create a total score, or in the chart above, a composite score for all factors combined. The probability score can be thought of and discussed as a whole number from 0 to 10 for ease of discussion and to not get bogged down in details, in the chart above, notice these whole numbers have been converted to a percent in the form of a decimal for easy multiplication. For example, a high probability score of 8 would translate to 0.8 in the chart. As this is not a ranking, multiple factors might have an 80% probability or likelihood of happening. Again, probability score is determined by practitioners in a given scenario and for the given public under examination. This tool again offers value in that it can facilitate discussion and agreement on the probability or likelihood of given factors.

The weighted score is calculated by multiplying the importance score by the probability score, so each factor has a weighted score. The composite score is a sum of all factors' weighted scores. The composite sum of the weighted scores, in this case 46.3, represents the total, weighted probability of the entire scenario for the one person who analyzed the scenario. Using the suggestions of group decision theory literature as previously discussed, multiple people would use the tool to arrive at a composite score, and the composite sum averaged for an average composite sum. This average composite sum then falls on a scale that's been developed for the advocacy-accommodation continuum. The absolute minimum for the scale, 0, is determined by multiplying the lowest importance, 0, by the lowest probability, 0, by the number of factors under consideration, 10 (multiplying the weighted score by the number of factors works because

operational level what does that mean? What might the conflict manager's response actually look like for a score of 46.3? The next step in making this scale meaningful is to have practitioners suggest operationalized responses that correspond with the five sections of the continuum/scale. Five sections are chosen to aid the operationalizing process, which is similar in form to the five categories of responses used successfully in Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory.

Alternatively, the Situational Crisis Communications Theory (SCCT) model could be applied in the use of this tool. The reputational threat that SCCT considers is broken down into three parts, initial crisis responsibility, crisis history and prior relational reputation (Coombs 2007). Additionally, by using one of the cluster types (victim, preventable or accidental) to identify the crisis, additional considerations can be given as to how the stance may be appropriate. Finally, SCCT also provides crisis response strategies in the form of denial, diminish and rebuild (Coombs 2007; Coombs 2006), which can also be used on the continuum of the contingency theory.

We believe this initial model would answer the research questions in determining how to successfully integrate the basics of the Contingency Theory into a quantifiable tool for use in the industry. Additional work lies ahead in ensuring its viability and relevance.

The model as laid out above has limitations in that it does not yet comprehensively address all 87 factors, so this is a natural and necessary next step for this research to accomplish the declared goal of bridging the gap between theory and practice in strategic conflict management. Next the model needs to be field tested by practitioners for proof of concept. A purposeful, national sample of public relations practitioners will offer generalizable and reliable data. Surveying multiple practitioners on the same scenario will be similar to multiple people within an organization using the tool, which is the final intent and use of this tool.

Because dealing with 87 factors is admittedly bulky and complex, Q methodology should be considered in helping sort the variables by importance. Q Assessor would offer technological services to help in this endeavor (Reber & Kaufman, 2011). Bringing the most important factors to the surface in a more scientific way than the sample above increases the validity of this tool. Q-Assessor, an online Q-sort system, enables a practical, visual way to implement Q methodology among far-flung executives or managers. The dataset includes presenting a series of contingency variables that subjects rank along axes of consideration chosen by the investigators. Additionally, Q-Sort can also be used to determine the most salient factors from the list of contingency variables and the most popular factors can be applied through the proposed tool. Q methodology thus functions much like a quantitative focus group. (<http://q-assessor.com/>). Then, the same decision theory logic outlined above would be applied, results of multiple people averaged and the average composite score lined up along the advocacy-accommodation continuum of contingency theory for a comparative indication of best decision.

The three dimensions of emotional tone (Jin & Cameron, 2004) can also be utilized in the further elaboration of this matrix of contingency factors. Emotional intensity, valence and size for the public can be evaluated in tandem for deeper analysis. By understanding public emotion towards the organization, it would create multiple avenues whereby this tool could better explain the stance an organization should take.

Limitations of this model include at this time is it is purposely limited to addressing one public at a time. If an organization is addressing multiple publics such as activists as one public and investors as another public, each have to be considered separately with this model and then compared against one another to ensure they are harmonious. Further, this quantitative tool does not directly address the ethical or cost considerations of a stance. Given that ethics vary from one

person to the next and one corporate culture to the next and that cost tolerance varies from company to company and year to year, these important considerations are best part of the discussion of how to implement a given stance that the tool recommends.

The next step in this program of research is to create a scenario and test it with members of the public relations community through the use of an online sorting tool. The vision is that expanding the number of factors as listed within the contingency theory, the tool can be better operationalized for use. Ultimately, this tool is about bringing knowledge of a given situation to an expert system, which to provide a straightforward command. We believe that the tactical edge that this tool can provide for practitioners in the industry can help enhance the craft and skill of public relation practitioners and recapture the edge as crisis communicators.

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**The Art of Content:
How Businesses and Agencies Value Digital Content Marketing**

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Abstract

Digital content marketing—the coordinated, organizational use of blogs, social media, podcasts etc. to drive business goals—is an increasingly popular organizational practice that is collapsing boundaries between traditional communications disciplines. Using theories of relationship marketing and relationship management, this study investigates how content marketing is being valued by top in-house and agency leaders. The researcher conducted 21 in-depth interviews with leaders in large English-speaking markets (Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom) and found that few practitioners can link content marketing efforts to an uplift in sales. Instead, content marketing is most often valued as a challenging, long-term brand building effort that requires both creativity and technology. The research highlights best practices for businesses, especially the need for collaboration and a defined brand across organizations. Public relations professionals in particular can play a key role in marketing strategy and developing content that builds mutually beneficial relationships over time.

Introduction

“Content marketing” is a buzzword that deserves deeper examination. Its roots are in a century-old marketing approach but its recent popularity tells us much about the direction of communications in 2015. The rise of content marketing shows how customers are demanding more authentic and relational communication with businesses. This trend is now forcing businesses to adapt and accommodate this need—specifically dissolving traditional boundaries between communications disciplines, including marketing and public relations.

This paper investigates this key question “How effective is content marketing?” by studying how English-speaking companies are valuating their digital content marketing success. The goal is to learn how—if at all—this new, hybrid model of advertising and journalism is in fact serving organizations’ business goals. This research will focus on the most popular part of the trend—digital content marketing—and will use the widely accepted definition from the Content Marketing Institute, which conducts industry research and runs the international Content Marketing World conference: “Content marketing is a marketing technique of creating and distributing valuable, relevant and consistent content to attract and acquire a clearly defined audience—with the objective of driving profitable customer action” (Content Marketing Institute, 2014). Some recent examples of digital content marketing are French Connection’s YouTique YouTube series, which featured mini fashion videos for women, and The Ford Story Online Community, where users shared their experiences as Ford car owners (Content Marketing Institute, 2013). In both examples, companies used quality digital content over time to build trust with customers and ultimately drive profitable action.

It is notable that beyond surveys of practitioners, there is currently little in-depth research on digital content marketing. The researcher aims to uncover more nuanced reflections, first revealing how or if marketing, communications, and public relations are operationally integrated around digital content marketing. Second, this study will uncover current expectations around the discipline. Finally, the research will examine how content marketing is being measured. The overall goal of the research is to uncover useful findings and best practices that will be valuable in raising professional standards for all content marketers.

Research Problem

Increasingly, organizations are turning to content marketing—and particularly digital content marketing—as a way of attracting and retaining customers in a busy media landscape. Although certain brands like Purina and LEGO are finding success (Lazauskas, 2014), others are facing the challenge of how to produce content that wins readers’ attention and connect their efforts to business goals. The theory of relationship marketing has influenced the development of content marketing. Morgan and Hunt (1994) define relationship marketing as “all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (p. 22). Certainly some aspects of relationship marketing theory can be useful for organizations that are producing content. For example, reminding businesses of the multiple stakeholders to consider in marketing efforts, and keeping the values of trust and commitment central in driving exchange relationships.

Yet the field of public relations, although relatively new to the content marketing discussion, offers a broader, more ambitious vision of the value that content marketing can bring to publics. Whereas relationship marketing focuses on adding value to the finance-focused transactions between parties, relationship management aims to cultivate long-term, mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and publics. Ledingham (2003) offers a seminal

definition of the term: “The relationship management perspective holds that public relations balances the interests of organizations and publics through management of organizational public relationships” (p.181) Hon and Grunig (1999) name the goal of relationship management as “communal relationships” and describe it thus: “both parties provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other even when they get nothing in return” (p. 3). With this ambitious goal of “communal relationships,” relationship management stretches the boundaries of relationship marketing. It moves the focus off of financial transactions towards the long-term development of relationships.

This study will explore whether the longer-term communal goals of relationship management are a more fruitful way for organizations to approach content marketing. The researcher will investigate how businesses are creating value for their publics by exploring how they are managing and evaluating digital content marketing efforts. By understanding more about how this relatively new discipline is working within organizations, the researcher hopes to distill a set of best practices for how all communicators, including marketers and public relations professionals, can best manage their content production to advance business goals.

Research Questions

RQ1: How is digital content marketing integrated operationally into businesses?

RQ2: What do businesses expect from their digital content marketing initiatives?

RQ3: How do businesses measure the effectiveness of digital content marketing initiatives?

Literature Review

Background: Content Marketing

Definition and History

Content marketing is a relatively new and popular discipline that has its roots in a century-old relational marketing approach. In a report generated through Google Trends (see Figure 1), it is clear that “content marketing” appeared in news headlines as early as 2004, though in 2011 its usage began to increase and this momentum has continued to the present day. Using the aforementioned industry definition from the Content Marketing Institute, the researcher will focus specifically on digital content marketing: the production and distribution of this “valuable, relevant, and consistent” content on digital platforms, including websites, email, video, and social media.

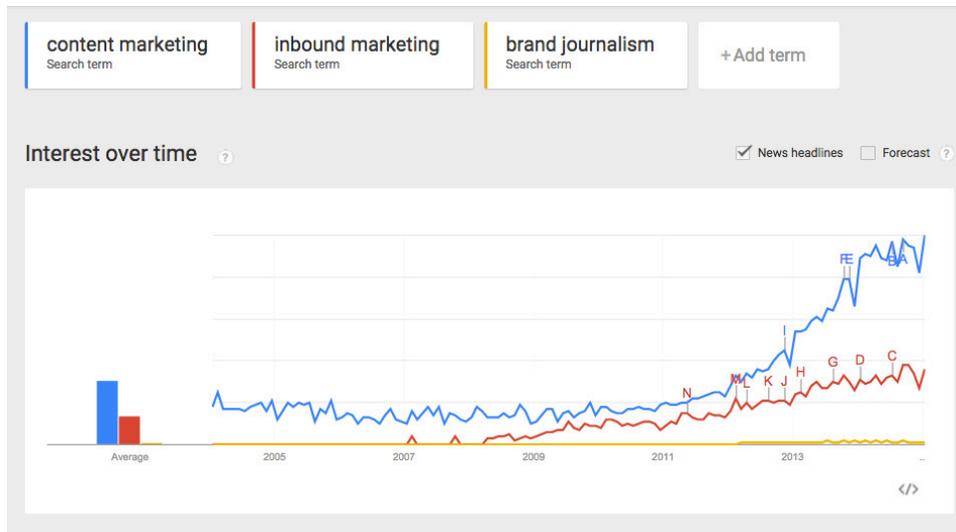


Figure 1. Content marketing and related terms in news headlines (Generated from Google Trends, 2014).

Though “content marketing” has recently become a popular marketing trend, many in the field trace its origins back more than 100 years. John Deere’s magazine *The Furrow* (founded 1895) is often cited as an early example of how a company built credibility with an audience through material that supported their interests—in this case farming—over and above John Deere’s own promotions (Gardiner, 2013). *The Furrow* remains a key marketing tactic for John Deere and continues today as a quarterly agricultural news magazine, published in 12 languages and available in a tablet version (John Deere and Company, 2014). Other examples of early content marketing include JELL-O, which distributed free recipe books to customers in the 1900s and Sears, which launched the World’s Largest Store radio show to court farming communities in the 1920s (Pulizzi, 2012). In all these examples, companies focused on long-term relationship-building with consumers in order to ultimately drive sales.

This more relational strategy has been a driving force for some brands over many decades, and the field of “custom publishing” claims a long history of providing in-depth, journalistic material to interested consumers, particularly in the United Kingdom (Haeusermann, 2013). However, the dominant marketing approach for most brands has largely been “interruptive,” as Seth Godin identified in his influential book *Permission Marketing* (1999). Businesses have long “piggybacked” on content that consumers valued—whether television shows or magazine articles—and presented ads that aimed to divert attention to their products (Contently, 2014). This strategy emerged with print advertising in 19th century magazines, and then spread over new media—television, telephone telemarketing, and even email—as they gained popular acceptance (Eridon, 2012).

Yet consumers had a limited tolerance for the unfettered growth of advertising through all these new channels. In the digital age, as they experienced search, social media, and the influence of blogging, consumers began to feel empowered in the new media landscape and pushed back against interruptive advertising (Eridon, 2012). In the U.S., the Do Not Call List and key anti-spam legislation marked a change in marketing tactics (Eridon, 2012). Brands worked to attract attention through social media, often with the initial strategy of spreading their messages on all new platforms as they cropped up—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. (Contently, 2014). Companies soon realized that in a sharing economy, content needed to be seen as high quality

before it was passed on (Contently, 2014). Storytelling emerged as a more effective strategy: developing content that people wanted to read and share, or, in some cases, even pay for.

As more brands recognized quality storytelling as a key strategy, several new—and often overlapping—terms emerged in this field. “Sponsored content” was one way to do attract attention, where brands paid to have their material run on unowned media sites. This tactic is also known as “native advertising,” where the advertising is high quality and matches the tone and quality of content that it is placed next to (Contently, 2014). It could include promoted tweets, sponsored Facebook stories, or featured YouTube videos. “Brand journalism” also emerged as an organizational strategy, though it was the most controversial term. Some marketers have embraced the term, seeing it as the use of journalistic skills to interpret an evolving brand story over many platforms (Light, 2014). However, some journalists, including those who founded Contently, argue that “brand journalism” is impossible, as journalism must always be independent and not sponsored by a company (Contently, 2014). Contently and other groups prefer the term “brand publishing,” though they note that this activity must still be produced according to high ethical standards (Contently, 2014). Another related term is “inbound marketing,” often associated with Hubspot, a prominent internet marketing company, which focuses on attracting relevant leads online (Hubspot, 2015). Here too, there is dispute, as leading content marketers, including Joe Pulizzi, see this lead generation as just one step in the longer journey of content marketing (Pulizzi, 2011).

Although all these terms and strategies are still present in the marketplace, the concept of “content marketing” has become an especially influential, overarching strategy as marketers search for new ways to attract attention in a world filled with interruptive advertising. Google Trends shows the dominance of content marketing over these other aforementioned related terms in headlines since 2004 (see Figure 1). Marketing leader Seth Godin has lent credence to the discipline when he was quoted as saying “content marketing is the only marketing that is left” (Pulizzi, 2008).

Content Marketing in 2015: State of the Industry

Industry surveys confirm that content marketing is a growing business. The Content Council, a prominent American content marketing association (founded 2009 as the Custom Publishing Council) reported that in 2013, the industry had risen to be worth nearly \$44 billion and on average, 39% of marketing, advertising and communications budgets were spent on content production (Qu, 2013). In a 2013 survey of 130 marketing leaders in the United Kingdom, the Content Marketing Association, which is composed of members from that same industry, found that more than 70% of marketers were using content marketing and that they spend 20% of their budgets on it—more than any other channel, including television (15%) and online advertising (11%) (Content Marketing Association/TNS, 2013). Companies found that it was best suited for long-term customer engagement and building the brand, and 51% were planning to increase their content marketing budgets in upcoming years (Content Marketing Association/TNS, 2013). The 2014 Effies survey of North American marketing executives revealed that content marketing was expected to be the third largest area of growth for brands, behind mobile and social (Rooney, 2014). “Marketers are officially hooked on content,” reported *Forbes* (Rooney, 2014).

Digital content marketing in particular is a growing area. The Content Marketing Institute found that 92% of marketers were using online content marketing and 58% of B2B businesses and 60% of B2C businesses were planning to increase their online content marketing budgets

(Abaza, 2014). The 2013 Content Council study found that social content was the most frequently used form of content marketing (Qu, 2013).

Certainly for some major brands, digital content marketing appears to be driving results. Kraft Foods has claimed that content marketing is four times more effective than traditional advertising (Neff, 2014). Their examples are primarily digital: Kraft tracks the attributes of more than 100 million unique visitors per year, then send highly targeted advertising to them (Neff, 2014). The American fast food chain Chipotle has also seen great success through customized online videos. “The Scarecrow,” a video story about a forlorn scarecrow in a processed-foods dystopia, has earned it as much attention—if not more—than traditional advertising (Meyer, 2014). The video earned more than 13 million views on YouTube and became a viral sensation (Meyer, 2014).

However, while content marketing is clearly effective for some brands, other brands have had a harder time quantifying success. The most prominent example is Coca-Cola. In 2011, the global brand stepped out as a content marketing leader with its ambitious “Content 2020” videos that proclaimed a new era of “liquid and linked” content as a way of engaging customers and driving sales (The Cognitive Media, 2011). Coca-Cola also reportedly spends more on content marketing than traditional marketing (Meyer, 2014). However, their external engagement numbers (social shares, etc.) have been low and when asked about the return on investment, Coca-Cola staff have been evasive, leading some commentators to speculate about its real success: “Should Coca-Cola quit its content marketing journey?” read one recent headline (Higginson, 2014).

Apart from the success of specific brands, another challenge to content marketing is what some industry observers are calling “content shock,” where consumers rebel against an excess of mediocre online content (Schaefer, 2014). According to Schaefer (2014), the supply of content far outweighs demand, making most content strategy models unsustainable. On August 1, 2014, *Forbes* published an article acknowledging this issue. Their headline asked this pointed question: “How effective is content marketing?” (Matthews, 2014). The article reported on a study by British content agency The Big Shot, which found that of people who interacted with branded content, 42% of those people found it “irrelevant” and another 13% called it “rubbish” (The Big Shot, 2014). The key question in content marketing today then lies in its quality and value. How can brands develop truly valuable content that not only wins sales but also cultivates long-term relationships?

Content Marketing and Journalism

To answer this question of value it is useful to consider how the growth of content marketing has affected two closely related disciplines: journalism and public relations. The impact on journalism has been acute. The same digital tools that have empowered brands to expand their publishing power have only weakened the revenue models of traditional journalism. For example, the rise of social media and internet search functions has enabled brands to connect directly to customers without relying on media coverage or media advertisements. With this greater power, brands can court not only readers with excellent content but also journalists with the promise of better salaries. Brands including General Electric, Qualcomm, IBM, and LinkedIn have all hired former journalists from top news outlets (Lyons, 2013).

Some companies take the position that journalists are a welcome asset in content marketing. Contently has celebrated the opportunities that content marketing opens up for journalists, and they work to pair freelancers with brands. Edelman, the largest public relations

agency in the world, has hired journalists to help provide a Creative Newsroom offering for companies (Edelman, 2013). The brand content here is specifically crafted to fit into the news cycle. The goal is to “help clients monitor and respond, in real time with planned brand-relevant stories and creative assets to the conversations and reporting taking place among consumers and the media” (Edelman, 2013). Edelman may position the brand news as journalism, but the qualification of “brand-relevant” means that they, like other content marketers, are working to serve their company’s business goals first and foremost.

Many journalists remain skeptical about the relationship between content marketing and journalism. The November-December 2014 cover story on the *Columbia Journalism Review* was “Should Journalism Worry About Content Marketing?” accompanied by an illustration of a sheep inside a wolf (Meyer, 2014). The findings were inconclusive. Meyer (2014) recognized that in some cases the rise of content marketing was doing a disservice to readers who might not know the difference between it and independent journalism. However, Meyer (2014) did not dismiss content marketing entirely. He acknowledged that in other cases brands seemed genuinely interested in adapting to the information needs of consumers, for example setting up ombudsman programs that represent consumer interests. “Brands are really good at finding new ways to adopt the aspects of journalism that most appeal to the public,” he concluded (Meyer, 2014, p. 29).

As the worlds of content marketing and journalism blend together, media scholars have started to research how producers and readers discern value. Haeusermann (2013) has examined these new relationships from the perspective of producers and has used the theories of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to explain the inherent power imbalances that journalists face when writing for branded media. Van Reijmersdal, Neijens, and Smit (2010) as well as Cole and Greer (2013) have examined the question from the perspective of readers and found that increased commerciality in publications reduces their credibility, and therefore, their overall value to the reader.

Content Marketing and Public Relations

Of greater relevance to this research, however, is the relationship between content marketing and public relations. There is natural overlap between the concerns of both disciplines, in that they both aim for the long-term cultivation of relationships with publics. Here the researcher uses the definition of public relations from the Canadian Public Relations Society (2008): “Public relations is the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals, and serve the public interest” (Flynn, Gregory, and Valin, 2008).

Not surprisingly, the term “content marketing,” has primarily been associated with marketing, and public relations professionals have been slower to join the conversation. An example of this lag is a series of November 2014 articles in *Communications World*, the International Association of Business Communication magazine, on brand publishing. One article offered a basic overview on how to set up a brand newsroom and provided a definition of content marketing as if the term was relatively new to readers (Miller, 2014). The article held up the ideal of an integration across traditional roles—marketing, public relations, graphic design—for the sake of creating high-quality, audience-focused content (Miller, 2014).

The vision of integration may be appealing to public relations professionals, but it touches on another challenge: the historic tensions between the fields of public relations and marketing. Hutton (2010) is one of many academics who has written on the subject. He traces

this dynamic to the emergence of “integrated marketing communications” in the 1980s and 1990s, which sought in some cases to blend the two areas. Hutton (2010) observes that while the two disciplines are externally focused, concentrate on the media, and manage relationships, there are distinct differences. Marketing is more focused on products and customers, while public relations is concerned with a wider variety of relationships, including those with the government and with the community (Hutton, 2010).

If this distinction is true, then public relations professionals may be able to offer complementary skills that extend and enhance marketers’ relationship building through content marketing. Certainly some content marketers have identified that media relations in particular is an area in which public relations can add value. A 2014 study by Nielsen and content promotion agency Inpowered revealed that expert third party content (earned media) was more effective than content marketing in influencing a consumer’s decision-making process at every stage, including purchase consideration, where it was 38% more effective than branded content and 83% more effective than user reviews (Nielsen and Inbound, 2014). Even content marketing agencies are recognizing the added value of earned media. Spencer (2014) of content marketing platform Kapost wrote an article for the Content Marketing Institute explaining why her organization made its first public relations hire. She admits she once saw public relations as a “traditional” role that fell into old marketing categories but she became convinced of its value—particularly in the area of media relations (Spencer, 2014). She noted that public relations professionals can enhance content marketing efforts by extending content distribution to earned, not owned, platform and that news placement strengthens a brand’s credibility (Spencer, 2014).

Tetsuya Honda (2013), CEO of digital communications agency Bluecurrent Japan, agrees that having media perspectives on content can add credibility to marketing messages. He writes, “In this area, PR has the advantage of being able to deliver objective information and dialogue, whereas advertising messages are more likely to come heavily branded” (Honda, 2013, para. 10). Honda (2013) uses the example of Panasonic attempting to encourage Japanese consumers to buy dishwashers. Marketing campaigns proved ineffective but a breakthrough came through a creative public relations strategy. First, the public relations agency helped publish a survey on the household habits of young Japanese couples and revealed that dishwashing was the chore most likely to cause contention. Second, the agency worked with a prominent beer blogger who celebrated the enhanced taste from dishwasher-cleaned glasses (Honda, 2013).

Honda’s (2013) example is an extension of traditional media relations, however it is notable that the public relations strategy included building relationships online. Hutton (2010) sees this an area of growth for public relations professionals who want to have a greater voice in marketing. He advocates for increasing integration between marketing and public relations, but notes that if public relations professionals are concerned with being subsumed by marketing, then they should sharpen their business acumen and also work to improve relationship-building in digital spheres (Hutton, 2010). An unattributed article in the marketing communications magazine *Campaign Asia-Pacific* (2013) echoed this sentiment, noting that public relations professionals are already adept at creating and distributing content for clients, so should extend these skills online.

However, beyond media relationships and digital relationship building, some communicators see a more strategic role for public relations professionals. Nichola Gilchrist, a Corporate and Government Affairs Director, at Mondelēz International, offers an example of this insight (Varadarjan, 2014). For Gilchrist, public relations helps content marketers discern the context in which they are operating. She explains, “The PR function ensures that those who

oversee content marketing are properly briefed on the differing social, economic and political environments across the various markets we operate in” (Varadarjan, 2014, para. 7). Gilchrist cites the example of how Cadbury positioned itself at the London 2012 Olympics; here public relations professionals were helpful in discerning cultural sensitivities and they helped frame the brand in a way that supported the iconic event.

Relationship Marketing

To better understand how content marketing can create value for both organizations and publics, it is helpful to consider its roots in the theory of relationship marketing, as well as an overlapping theory that emerged in public relations: relationship management. On the marketing side, Morgan and Hunt (1994) offer a helpful definition of relationship marketing as “all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 22). Exchange is a key concept here, and relationship marketers draw on the work of Scottish-American legal scholar Ian Macneil (1980), who wrote about the multi-layered natures of human contracts. Macneil (1980) argued that “the notion of instantaneous exchange between anonymous partners who will never interact in the future is an abstracted model that does not exist in the real world” (p. 60). Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987) convert Macneil’s (1980) work into the world of communications and explain the difference between discrete and relational exchanges in marketing. Discrete exchanges are limited to the one moment of transaction, for example a one-time cash purchase of unbranded gas at an independent station (Dwyer et al., 1987). In contrast, a relational exchange transpires over time, and “each transaction must be viewed in terms of its history and its anticipated future” (Dwyer et al., 1987, p. 12).

The term “Relationship marketing” reached wide popularity in the 1990s but was first introduced in the 1960s (Gummesson, 2002). With the growth of post-war affluence and the rise of mass advertising, companies had greater incentive and opportunity to not only capture but retain customers. Christopher et al., (2013) note that relationship marketing grew out of industrial and service environments, where value needed to be maintained after the sale. However, historians including Tadjewski (2008) trace these principles back further, noting that retail pioneer John Wanamaker was an early practitioner of relationship marketing at the turn of the 20th century.

Relationship marketing is measured financially and aims to save companies costs by developing longer-term relationships. Retention is a key concept here; it costs an estimated five times more to acquire a customer than retain an existing one (Levine, 1993). Some examples of successful relationship marketing in the 1990s included General Motors’ large gatherings specifically for Saturn owners and New York luxury hotels that researched customers and greeted them by name (Levine, 1993). Both strategies were considered successful in financial terms in that they retained customers and drove profit.

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, various marketing researchers refined the concept of relationship marketing to better improve the industry practice. Two works in particular have clear connections to the question of value in content marketing. Morgan and Hunt (1994) observed that relationship commitment and trust were key variables in successful relationship marketing. They also suggested specific ways that these values could be upheld by companies, for example, by “providing resources, opportunities, and benefits that are superior to the offerings of alternative partners,” and “maintaining high standards of corporate values and allying oneself with exchange partners having similar values” (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 34).

Certainly these baseline values of commitment and trust remain undergirding concepts for much content marketing work today.

Another key work applicable to content marketing comes from Payne, Ballantyne, and Christopher (2004), who applied R. Edward Freeman's stakeholder theory, first articulated in the 1980s, to relationship marketing. According to Freeman (2010), organizations succeed insofar as they satisfy their stakeholders—key people and groups that are affected by their operations in some way. Payne et al. (2004) showed how stakeholder theory could be further used to identify other stakeholders who were key to the relationship marketing cycle. They identified six groups that have an impact on marketing effectiveness: internal markets (employees), referral markets (potential shares from employees and suppliers), influencer markets (those who influence customer choice, including financial analysts and consumer groups), recruitment (potential employees), supplier/alliances, and customers (at the centre) (Payne et al., 2004). Certainly there are limitations to the marketing potential of stakeholder communities: Nevin (1995) has noted that a competitive environment limits the development of authentic connections with stakeholders, for example suppliers. However, this “six market” approach is useful to content marketers in that it reflects the breadth of people that they could be considering in their marketing activities.

Relationship Management

At the same time that relationships were arising as a key concept in the world of marketing, a similar shift was happening in public relations through relationship management theory. There is obvious overlap with relationship marketing, including the interest in “exchange” relationships and an interest in the key dimensions of relationships, including commitment and trust (Heath & Coombs, 2006). Scanzoni's (1979) early work on relationship management described an organization-public relationship as a five-step cycle that had a natural end: awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment, and dissolution. This dissolution phase was challenged by later theorists, who argued that public relations could play a role in maintaining relationships for ongoing, mutual benefit between organizations and publics. Here Grunig's (1992) model of two-way symmetrical communications emerged as an influential ideal. In a later work, Grunig (2000) defined this model as the vision that “public relations should go beyond the advocacy of self-interest without concern for the impact of an organization's behaviour on others to a balance between self-interest and concern for the interests of others” (p. 28).

Ledingham (2003) saw this symmetry as more than a value; he argued that it should become the general and unifying theory of public relations. He argued that a major shift was needed in public relations: from using communications as a tool to manipulate public behaviours to using communications as a tool to achieve the key public relations objective: relationships (Ledingham, 2003). If relationships were the goal of public relations, then other activities could influence progress towards this goal, including events and other public affairs activities (Ledingham, 2003). This new positioning would also require public relations professionals to recognize their role as not just tacticians but managers. This was something that Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1994) had advocated for in this widely cited definition of the profession: “Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (p. 2). Ledingham (2003) argued that if relationship management became the normative theory for the field, then its work could be more easily quantified: public relations professionals could

be trained to move publics between different relational phases.

Hon and Grunig (1999) agreed that relationship management was central to public relations but their contribution was to raise the bar for the relationship outcome, from exchange relationships to communal relationships. Hon and Grunig (1999) define communal relationships as times when “both parties provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other even when they get nothing in return” (p. 3). They note that this kind of relationship often needs to be in place with a public before an exchange can happen (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Interestingly, they note that the goal of a communal relationship is what distinguishes public relations from marketing:

All in all, however, it is the expertise needed to build communal relationships with publics that distinguishes public relations from similar professions such as marketing. And a measure of the degree to which a public perceives that it has a communal relationship with an organization is perhaps the purest indicator of the success of the public relations management function. (Hon and Grunig, 1999, p. 22)

The vision of communal relationships is an attractive ideal, and one that could be helpful goal for organizations who are working to produce valuable content marketing for their audiences. However, unlike relationship marketing, where sales figures are an obvious measure of success, examples of successful relationship management are harder to find and measure. Although Ledingham (2003) notes that relationship management is useful in a variety of spheres, from issues management to government relations, specific examples are lacking. Hon and Grunig (1999) offer several hypothetical examples, including developing trust between a housing association and residents through focus groups so they can welcome low-income residents. A more recent application comes from Galliano (2013), who researched how public relations agencies can use relationship management in retaining millennial employees, specifically by communicating that they are being “groomed” for success at the company. If the ideal of communal relationships are to be held up as an example for content marketers, further research may be needed to show value in more specific, even financial terms.

Hon and Grunig (1999) approach this question of measurement in qualitative terms similar to Morgan and Hunt (1994), who focused on trust and commitment in exchange relationships. Hon and Grunig (1999) list six indicators in relationship measurement: trust, control mutuality, satisfaction, commitment, and communal and exchange relationships. They acknowledge that measuring relationships is complex: it includes measuring perceptions that parties have of each other and predictions of each other’s behaviour (Hon and Grunig, 1999). They propose a questionnaire model with the six indicators that has been widely accepted in the public relations community (Hon & Grunig, 1999). This work is useful to organizations seeking to drive value through content marketing: it points to not only a richer communal ideal of an organization-public relationship, but the potential to measure it more holistically.

Organizations Studied

The 21 participants in the study were chosen because they were recognized by an industry third party (i.e. the Canadian Marketing Association) as leaders in content marketing. Participants were drawn from the major English-speaking centres of content marketing production: Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The first group, of eight senior content marketing leaders within businesses, came from a range of professional backgrounds and represented a range of products and services. The second group, of 13 content marketing agencies and consultants, worked with a range of clients across the business to business (B2B)

and business to consumer (B2C) sectors. The researcher gathered this sample of diverse and respected practitioners to investigate in-depth how content marketing value is perceived across a range of industries.

Methods

Between November 2014 and February 2015, the researcher performed 21 in-depth interviews with these recognized senior content marketing leaders in businesses and agencies. This was a purposive sample, with leaders chosen because they had been recognized by a third party as a content marketing leader, often by presenting at an industry conference. The qualitative interview method was chosen to investigate the value of content marketing because “in-depth interviews are best used when answering questions of definition, value, and policy” (Stacks, 2011, p. 173). In-depth interviews also allow for “introspection on the part of the interviewee and can still provide interviewer control over the type of questions asked” (Stacks, 2011, p. 174). As little research currently exists on content marketing, this was a unique opportunity for leaders to reflect on their practice.

Two groups were chosen for interviews—business leaders and agency/consultant leaders—to capture a greater picture of content marketing practice, which at times is done in-house and other times outsourced. These interviews with external content marketing experts served as a “foil” to the first group of interviews. While the first batch of interviews presented internal perspectives on specific content marketing contexts, the second interviews provided a broader scope. Based on their work with past clients (not necessarily those in the first group), these experts reflected on cross-sector trends of operational integration, expectations, and valuation of content marketing initiatives.

Interviews were primarily conducted over the phone, with the exception of one in-person interview and one done by email. The phone and in-person interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to one hour, depending on the participants’ available time. All interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality. In addition to the interviewees, the researcher did a survey of existing industry research, previously summarized in the literature review. See Appendix A and Appendix B for full lists of interview questions. Appendix C presents the relevant coding table templates.

Participant demographics

Of the 21 interviewees, eight led content marketing initiatives within organizations, and 13 provided external agency services on content marketing. Three of the organizational leaders worked for Fortune 500 companies. See Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1. Organization participants

Level	Industry	Location	Market Cap (CAD), Rounded
Senior Manager	Airline	Canada	\$4 B
Senior Manager	Banking	Canada	\$120 B
Senior Manager	IT	USA	Private
Senior Manager	IT	USA	\$180 B
Director	Food and Beverage	USA	\$220 B
Director	Real Estate	Canada	\$3 B
Vice President	Retail	USA	\$2 B

Senior Vice President	Retail	Canada	\$10 B
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Table 2. Agency participants

Level	Business	Location
Managing Director	Digital Marketing Agency	UK
Vice President	Marketing Agency	Canada
Senior Vice President	Content Marketing Agency	Canada
Senior Vice President	Marketing Agency	Canada
Executive Vice President	Digital Marketing Agency	USA
President	PR Agency	Canada
President	Marketing Agency	Canada
Co-CEO	Marketing Agency	USA
CEO	Marketing Agency	USA
CEO	PR Agency	USA
Co-Founder/CEO	Digital Marketing Agency	USA
Founder and CEO	Marketing Agency	Canada
Founder	Content Marketing Agency	USA

Results

A) Operational Integration

The first research question focused on how content marketing is integrated operationally into organizations. The research questions were designed to uncover how organizations managed content marketing with internal teams and external agency partners. It must be noted that the theme of public relations emerged as a key variable in this question so the researcher added a few questions that addressed this topic.

Organization Response

There was a wide variety of responses to the questions around participants' roles as they related to content marketing and their content marketing teams. Although all participants had been identified by external agencies as content marketing leaders, and all played a role in strategy, they represented a range of levels within organizations, from senior manager to vice president. Interestingly, only two participants said that their teams worked with an external agency to develop content marketing projects. Another participant said his organization chose not to work with an agency in order to have more creative control internally. The other participants did not mention work with agencies. Three participants oversaw content marketing as part of a larger marketing and communications portfolio. Three oversaw internal teams that focused on content marketing and two played more specialized roles in a branch of content marketing. The internal teams ranged in size from a defined team of 17 who worked exclusively on content marketing to a dispersed team of 38 or more across the organization that contributed to content marketing in some way.

Cross-departmental collaboration was a major theme across all interview questions in this area. Seven participants noted that content marketing required working with other departments. These participants said that in order to do content marketing well they had to collaborate with a number of other teams, including communications and public relations, social media, sales, research, and subject matter experts. Several participants seemed unsure of how to draw the

boundaries around their team, because they were drawing from the expertise of so many colleagues. “I don’t really know how you would count them...It’s like, where do you draw the circle?” said one participant. Four participants could not immediately define the size of their team because the term “content” was used broadly in the organization. Here was one participant’s reflection:

We may have new definitions of what can constitute marketing content, and maybe that’s changed a little bit, where it’s not just in a box and it’s just a 30-second television spot. But now it can be a blog post, it can be an update on Twitter, it could be an infographic, it could be survey results published by the PR team—all those are different pieces of content.

Seven participants said public relations should play a role in content marketing. Two presented a traditional conception of public relations and said that it brought value in cultivating earned media. One used the marketing term “cost per impression,” to evaluate the media coverage that his external public relations agency brought. The five other participants suggested that public relations could play a role beyond traditional media relations. Their responses were varied. One participant said that public relations and communications teams were needed in content marketing because they better understood the qualitative outputs that came from content marketing. “I think PR and communications people have a much better understanding of looking at...the quality of the story and changing people’s opinion about it,” said one participant. He noted that sometimes the marketing team’s concern with numbers meant that more important measurements were missed. Another participant noted that public relations could play a role in helping organizations understand their strategic landscape. “PR is a good kind of pulse check,” he said, “in terms of, are we going in the right direction? Are we being consistent with our brand message?” One other participant mentioned the role that public relations could play in shaping editorial content, since many of these team members had experience working in media.

In response to the question of how content marketing developed within organizations, three participants described it as a natural evolution of the company’s marketing efforts. Two noted that the development of digital and social media since the late 1990s and early 2000s was a catalyst for this new shift, which one described as “customer focused,” because of the new dependency on search and sharing to spread the message. “Digital has created this massive convergence across different disciplines,” said one participant. “So yes, it’s just, it’s a messy space to play in.” Three said that it was only within the past 1 to 2 years that companies have become more strategic about content marketing and sought to tie it to business goals. One participant described it this way:

That is really where content gets strategic—are you creating content around strategic objectives and to further your brand, not just something cool because you want to get a lot of views? It has to further some sort of strategic objective for the organization.

Another major theme across responses was organizations’ intention for content marketing to create a consistent and compelling brand experience for their customers and other audiences. When asked about their roles within organizations, five participants described this as a key area of focus. One participant noted that his company decided to go into content marketing so they could connect with customers emotionally and therefore have more power as a brand. They wanted to be more than just a company that developed products. Another participant said that content marketing can help “build brand equity” and also “humanize” the brand for audiences. Organizations’ desire to create a comprehensive brand experience is often a reason why they decide to work across traditional departments. One participant described it this way:

When you're creating a brand identity and a brand image through a lot of the content we are producing, how do our TV spots start to look like our content and also carry the message of retail so we have a really consistent brand image in the marketplace?

Agency Response

The external agencies interviewed offered a range of services to a range of clients. Only three offered content marketing services exclusively and seven worked at larger agencies that offered more general marketing services. Another three linked their client offerings to a specific technology product, whether it was software or a specialized tracking service that helps clients analyze their success. Of this larger group, three specialized in business-to-business (B2B) relationships, focusing on how content can help customers make decisions in a complex sales process.

When asked about their interaction with public relations in the consulting process, ten respondents said that public relations could play an important role in content marketing. Two did not address the subject and one offered a strong negative response: "I think they should stay the hell away." However, only three participants said that they are seeing clients bring public relations professionals to the table as part of an integrated content marketing team. All three of these respondents indicated that this was a forward-thinking and in some cases "sophisticated" approach to content marketing. Participants offered mixed responses to how public relations could enhance organizational success in content marketing. Two noted that public relations can complement content marketing by offering traditional skills in media relations, as "message spreaders" in "late engagement" for content marketing efforts, through press releases or social. "If PR and marketing can work hand in hand it creates a powerful partnership within the organization," said one participant, "because you've got PR that understands storytelling, and you've got marketers that understand what the marketing goals are and how they can work with each other." Two participants stated that public relations has been redefined by some to be a more holistic relationship-focused discipline. Eight participants named specific strategic skills that public relations brought to the table, including nuanced understandings of relationships with audiences and skills in storytelling and building relationships (named by two participants each). However, other participants named specific areas where public relations was weak in its engagement with content marketing. One respondent said that measurement and creativity were weak points for public relations professionals. "To be quite honest," said one participant, "...a bit of a challenge in the market overall is that the communications objectives often don't really map back to a specific business objective."

Table 3. Summary of Responses to RQ1: How is CM integrated operationally into businesses?

	Organizations (of 8)	Agencies (of 13)	Total (of 21)
Public relations has a role to play in content marketing (beyond media relations)	5	8	13
Cross-departmental collaboration is important	7	4	11
Consistent brand is important	5	1	6
Public relations has a	2	2	4

role to play in content marketing (traditional media relations)			
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B) Expectations of Content Marketing

The interview questions here focused on past, present, and future expectations of content marketing. Participants were asked to reflect on clients' current expectations and how these had changed over the past few years. Finally, participants were asked to anticipate what they were expecting to change in the world of content marketing.

Organization Responses

When reflecting on past, present, and future expectations of content marketing, organizational leaders had the least to say about past expectations. Most spoke about the process of getting organizational buy-in for content marketing efforts and how they ran up against challenges of corporate culture, especially a reluctance to take risks. In terms of current expectations, three participants who directly addressed this question mentioned content marketing's value in building the company's brand. Interestingly, only one participant directly mentioned content marketing's connection to sales. "At the end of the day we're looking to sell product," he said. Another participant mentioned in passing that his organization could do brand building work because they had worked to prove the ROI of content marketing and build credibility with corporations. However, he did not state that his current or future content marketing work would have a direct impact on sales.

When describing how content marketing can help build a brand, all participants defined this in terms of building relationships with customers. "The role that content marketing can play in that is helping to foster ongoing relationship with the consumers," said one participant. "It allows you to build an audience around a brand, and again fostering that brand connection with them." Other participants referenced relationship building indirectly through "conversation." One participant said her current work was a result of "want[ing] to deepen our conversations with customers," and another said he was looking for "unique opportunities for us to extend our brand message, extend the conversation." Another participant said that his brand aimed to inspire customers with their core brand message that would ultimately improve their lives.

In terms of future predictions, five participants said they anticipated that their company would be developing personalized content that would meet customers' needs at various points during the sales process. Two participants mentioned that they wanted their company to shift from being a content creator to a content distributor. The ultimate goal for at least three of these participants (mentioned here and in response to other questions), was for the brand to become not just a content creator but a channel in itself, with enough credibility and engaging storytelling that people would tune in of their own volition. Participants recognized that this was a long-term goal, but two had already made significant progress in building this credibility. One was planning to leverage this credibility into embedding more brand messages, and the other was planning to grow the distribution network further and keep branding secondary. Interestingly, no participants mentioned that they expected an increase in revenue through content marketing.

Agency Responses

Agency participants reported that clients are keen to tie content marketing efforts to business goals and that expectations are growing in general. Clients' expectations—past, present, and future—depend greatly on their past experimentation with content, and what kind of

business they are in. Five participants noted explicitly that content marketing needs to be tied to sales. Three participants noted that B2B businesses have a long history of using content to help customers through complex sales processes. Often these businesses with a defined, though sometimes complicated sales process, are the ones who are most advanced in their content marketing work and have high expectations for the disciplines' improvement. For many other businesses, they may be interested in content marketing initially because it is so popular, but they need to be walked through an intensive consultation process where they define what kinds of content will best support their business. Overall, businesses want to be able to link their content to economic value, especially if they are in a sales process. According to one participant, "The expectation now is [content marketers] have to figure out how to get people to do something and essentially get into a sales conversation [and] take next steps because they're being challenged to quantify their spend."

The interviews revealed that content marketing is far from a "one size fits all" approach, and agencies need to help clients find out how content marketing is applied to their specific contexts. Five participants noted that the term "content" needs to be defined with the client, since this term can mean many things. "I think the biggest problem for all of us is confused clients," said one participant. This process is not always smooth. One participant noted that many organizations feel behind in adopting content marketing. There are often organizational barriers to the clear execution of content marketing. One participant said that many businesses have a fear of venturing into this new space. Two participants noted that departmental "silos" were a major issue and especially a challenge as organizations worked to define a corporate voice, necessary to content marketing. Another participant said that even once organizations are doing content marketing, they are concerned that they have not optimized it enough.

Table 4. Summary of Responses to RQ2: What are organizations' expectations of content marketing?

	Organizations (of 8)	Agencies (of 13)	Total (of 21)
Struggle to define content	1	5	6
Face barriers of corporate culture	2	4	6
Seek a direct channel to customers	3	3	6
Seek to build sales	1	5	6
Seek to build brand	3	2	5
Seek to build relationships	2	3	5
Feel behind in content marketing efforts	0	1	1

C) Measuring Success

The interview questions on this topic were direct and indirect in asking participants to reflect on the value of digital content marketing. Participants were asked to share stories of success and failure (from their organizations and beyond). They were also asked to reflect directly on how content marketing helped their company achieve its business goals and how their company measured these efforts.

Organization Responses

The greatest number of interview questions (8) were devoted to this question. All participants agreed that content marketing brought value to their organizations but they each defined it differently according to their unique business contexts. Interestingly, no organization could say that their content marketing efforts were directly influencing sales. Two said that they could sometimes trace a connection between content and revenue but it was not an absolute connection. “There is no way to know,” said one participant. “Overall for us, sales are up. But there is no way to attribute.... That has always been the struggle.” When asked to define the link between content marketing and business goals, three participants talked about brand positioning as a business goal. One participant said that content marketing provided three outcomes: it helped position their organization as a thought leader, it drove leads, and provided value for existing clients.

On the subject of measurement, all participants acknowledged that this was very important and several indicated that they were constantly evaluating the best ways to measure, especially as there were always new digital methods that provided better methods of tracking the true impact of their content. Two participants acknowledged that the ability to track digital advertising meant that older media, including television advertising, were becoming less attractive for organizations. Although the proliferation of digital tracking tools is on one hand desirable, two participants described how they had to adapt to the changing organization of social media platforms, where some of their material was hosted and attracting engagement.

When describing their measurement approach, six participants could identify key performance indicators (KPIs) that best fit with their content. These KPIs included YouTube video views for one-off attention-getting videos, cost per impression (CPM) to measure across digital and earned media, or number of quality leads generated—a common metric in the B2B context. Two mentioned that they focused on digital metrics that showed numbers of shares or “stickiness,” i.e. how long someone stayed with their content. However, six participants noted that content marketing required qualitative evaluation. One participant described it this way:

Here the challenge is: I can tell you exactly how many visitors we brought in from every single content piece we created. I can tell you how many leads we generated. And I can tell you which search words performed better than others. And I can get quite granular on that which is all great. Where it’s very challenging for us as an organization is, is I have no real way of telling you what the quality of leads of one content piece vs. another piece is. It’s very challenging for me to give you a quality dollar value.

Another participant noted that he prefers to use qualitative measures when reporting to senior management. This allows him to capture the influence of certain shares as well as a better understanding of the sentiment of comments, etc. He described it thus:

I’m a big believer in trying to get people to talk about qualitative measures, versus how many views did a video get. That’s important too, but I think that if you get a positive tweet from the journalist at the *New York Times* or even somebody at one of the trade magazines...if you get a positive tweet or Facebook post or blog post that references one of our videos that’s a huge win.

When asked whether they measure content marketing success in financial terms, no participants said yes and three answered with a definitive “no.” One participant expressed exasperation:

The ROI question makes me totally completely insane. If I did not have the CMO that I have I would go batty and somebody would put me in a room because if there is anything

harder to do, it's to explain to somebody why something is, so high in the funnel, at the top of the funnel in that awareness and reputation and form space, how that should somehow connect, skipping over the entire middle of the funnel all the way over to the bottom of the funnel.

When asked about their successes and failures in content marketing, several interesting themes emerged. Successes appeared to be defined not only by the amount of attention the piece garnered (numbers of shares or views, etc.) but the credibility that it garnered with a key public. This could be understood as falling within the category of "thought leadership." For example, a video featuring a key influencer encouraged other key influencers to partner with the organization. Or a popular blog post on a trending business topic positioned a staff member—and the organization—as reliable experts on the niche. Answers about failures were also revealing: they demonstrated that successful content required both quality stories that was both engaging and true to the brand as well as good distribution, what one participant described as the "kindling" that needed to be lit, either through adequate PR distribution or savvy digital marketing. Five respondents linked failures to low-quality content. Interestingly, one participant focused on how being "boring" was a brand's greatest failure, as it means that the content never rises above the clutter of the internet.

Agency Responses

As with organizational interviews, the greatest number of individual questions (5) were devoted to this important topic. When asked about whether content marketing helps organizations achieve their business goals, four participants answered with a firm "yes." Another five participants responded positively, but with qualification, noting that content marketing is hard to do well. Three noted that there was a lot of bad content out there, and that content marketing would only be successful for a company if it were excellent. Interestingly, several respondents pointed out that content marketing is not new—that all marketing is content in some way. Two participants independently used the phrase "back to the future" to describe how this focus on content marketing is really a return to the basics for brands, to recover the question of what is actually of value for potential customers. Two participants noted that building relationships with customers was at the core of what content marketing was trying to do. As one participant noted, "We've got to go back to the future...and start telling stories again and creating relationships through compelling storytelling."

When asked to describe content marketing successes and failures, five participants described successes that resulted from excellent technical execution, including the optimization of user experience in an app or the restructuring of content on a website. Four other participants named a content marketing initiative that was creative and resonated with an audience in a particular way. One participant described his favourite business content marketing as "authentic" and explained his experience this way: "I'm on their email marketing list but I don't even think of it as marketing—it like getting an email from [the founder] himself." Four participants (some included in the earlier groups) explicitly linked their success stories to an uptick in sales. When asked to describe content marketing failures, it was interesting that none of the participants mentioned a failure that related to technology. Four participants described failures that fell into this "authentic, creative," category that was linked with successes. They described brand messages, particularly on social, that were misplaced or mistimed.

Participants were also asked more detailed questions about measurement, including how they should do it, and whether it should be tied to a financial ROI. In response to the "how"

question, three acknowledged that it was a difficult thing to do. In contrast, two respondents said that the core of measurement could be distilled down to one metric that their organization valued above all and recommended to others. In terms of measurement trends, it appeared that several participants were defining their approach in contrast to the popular attention paid to engagement. Three participants also acknowledged that “funnel” metrics were popular and often useful. These funnel metrics are attached to particular points in the traditional marketing funnel, often simplified to awareness, engagement and conversion (See Figure 2). Two participants noted that measurement should always be tied into the achievement of business goals, and one participant argued that this could only come if marketing was more closely connected with sales.



Figure 2. The traditional marketing funnel, from <http://thenext-us.com/2014/11/future-of-consulting/>.

When asked whether content marketing should be linked to a financial ROI, five participants responded with a definite “yes.” Two of these participants tempered expectations by noting that this connection often takes time to analyze. One participant said “If you don’t [measure ROI in financial terms], then you’re a PR agency, which people would say is important and nice but no one can quantify.” Another participant answered “maybe,” saying that the connection was possible, but it depended on what business goals were being used. Interestingly, one participant, who develops software to better optimize content marketing answered “no.” He said “If you’re always chasing ROI that will definitely get in the way of innovation.” Three participants, including the one who said “no,” said that completely accurate measurement of content marketing effectiveness was impossible. One of the participants offered this response in reply to another question. Two participants said the challenge of measuring content marketing was not a new topic for this field. One participant explained it this way:

[I]t’s so funny when you hear people say it’s a struggle to measure content marketing. Yes, it is! It’s a struggle to measure any marketing. It doesn’t matter. It’s a struggle to measure social media. It’s a struggle to measure email marketing. It’s a

struggle to measure direct today. It's harder than it was just because people aren't responding as much as they used to.

Table 5. Summary of responses to RQ3: How are organizations measuring content marketing?

	Organizations (of 8)	Agencies (of 13)	Total (of 21)
Does it bring value?	8	13	21
Should you measure it?	8	13	21
Using qualitative measure	6	5	11
Hard to do well	5	6	11
Using digital KPIs (funnel metrics)	6	4	10
Using financial measures	0	5	5
Technical execution plays a role	0	5	5

Conclusions

Content Marketing: A Century-old Practice is Redefined

In 2015, organizations are still adapting to the new—and constantly changing—realities of digital communications. As digital media empower more communicators within and without the organization, traditional marketing and public relations work is being forced to overlap and at times collaborate. The challenge of categories must be acknowledged in this research: traditional disciplines of “marketing” and “public relations” are not distinct, mutually exclusive categories. Furthermore, the term “content marketing,” as a relatively new discipline, is used differently by different people. This research has sought to define these terms, but research participants often challenged and questioned the boundaries of these professions as well as the term “content marketing” itself.

This research revealed that while organizations and agencies may use the trending term “content marketing” and seek to refine current practice, many recognize that the idea is not new—in fact it has been in organizations’ toolkits for more than a century, most successfully in the area of B2B. However, beyond B2B, the underlying concept of content marketing, that organizations want to produce valuable content to foster ongoing, productive relationships with customers, is as two participants put it, a “back to the future” concept. This can be viewed as a positive recovery of a key motivator for organizations. For many businesses, content marketing is forcing them to focus on quality, authenticity, and customers’ interests—perhaps in a way that was forgotten in an earlier era of interruptive advertising.

Content Marketers Care about Communal Relationships

As the researcher had anticipated, the theme of relationship building emerged as a strong theme and important priority for interview participants. The theories of relationship marketing and relationship management theories proved to be a helpful framework in understanding how businesses valued content marketing. On one hand, relationship marketing upheld the ideal of the exchange relationship, defined by Hon and Grunig (1999) as when “one party gives benefits to the other only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future” (p. 3). On the other hand are communal relationships, a concept connected to the public

relations theory of relationship management. Hon and Grunig (1999) define communal relationships as when “both parties provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other—even when they get nothing in return” (p. 3). In the following tables, the researcher distilled basic differences between exchange and communal relationships, contrasting the financial transaction focus with a longer-term relationship focus.

Table 6. Evidence of organizations practicing exchange and communal relationships.

	Exchange		Communal	
	Goal: Sales	Evaluation: Financial	Goal: Relationships	Evaluation: Qualitative
Org 1				
Org 2				
Org 3				
Org 4				
Org 5				
Org 6				
Org 7				
Org 8				
Results	12% (n=1) demonstrate exchange approach		75% (n=6) demonstrate communal approach	

Table 7. Evidence of agencies practicing exchange and communal relationships.

	Exchange		Communal	
	Goal: Sales	Evaluation: Financial	Goal: Relationships	Evaluation: Qualitative
Agency 1				
Agency 2				
Agency 3				
Agency 4				
Agency 5				
Agency 6				
Agency 7				
Agency 8				
Agency 9				
Agency 10				
Agency 11				
Agency 12				
Agency 13				
Results	54% (n=7) demonstrate exchange approach		54% (n=7) demonstrate communal approach	

The researcher had expected that communal relationships would be a helpful ideal for content marketing practitioners to strive for, and indeed, Tables 6 and 7 demonstrates that overall, more content marketing practitioners are upholding communal ideals than exchange ideals. Within organizations, a communal approach dominates. It is interesting to note in these tables that some organizational and agency leaders demonstrated characteristics of both

exchange and communal relationships. This reveals the inherent tension between altruism and profit that exists for content marketing leaders. However much they may aim to serve the customer and the public interest, they are ultimately accountable to the rest of the business, which likely evaluates success in financial terms. This opens up room for public relations to play a role in content marketing, a topic that will be addressed later in this section.

There are a few limitations to this table. First, not all participants answered questions about goals and measurement directly in the interviews so therefore their opinions are not counted here. Second, in order to truly measure relationships according to Hon and Grunig's (1999) criteria, the opinion of external publics must be included. This method of considering the input of both sides would allow the researcher to better trace the presence of Grunig's (1992) symmetrical communications model and evaluate whether dialogic communication was in fact happening through content marketing. This would be a rich area for future research: to evaluate how both businesses and their publics evaluate relationships and content marketing effectiveness.

Brand Building Trumps Sales

While a communal relationship approach was more prevalent in the interviews overall, half of the agency participants demonstrated an exchange relationship approach and said they were seeking financial success. Five agency participants stated that content marketing should be tied to sales. They could share examples of how content marketing helped increase revenue, but this was not true across the board. Like other marketing efforts of the past, content marketing is useful as a “top-of-funnel” effort to build brand. Four participants (three in-house practitioners and one agency leader) defended this strongly, arguing that there should not be a financial ROI attached to content marketing. They cited a few reasons for this: it stifles innovation, hampers creativity or it is impossible to do.

Content Marketing is Both Art and Science

For many organizations seeking to navigate a new, busy digital landscape, content marketing seems like the only choice—and not an easy one at that. Two research participants separately cited Seth Godin's aforementioned proclamation that “content marketing is the only marketing that is left.” Eleven of twenty-one participants (five organizational and six agency) acknowledged that content marketing is hard to do well. In many ways it could be considered both an art and a science. On the “science” side, there are new software and marketing automation platforms that promise to simplify content marketing execution and measurement. Agency leaders were the most interested in discussing the success of these, and this group revealed five stories of content marketing successes that were linked to technology. No stories of failure were linked to technology.

The research revealed that the harder part of content marketing is the “art” side—producing compelling, creative content that attracts and builds relationships with the right audience and can then be linked to business goals. This research revealed two related ways that help organizations improve the art of content marketing. One is focusing on building a cohesive brand across all channels. “Brand building” was by far the most commonly cited value of content marketing for both practitioners and agency leaders. If this is the goal of content marketing, then all communicators—including public relations—can play a role in defining what this brand is, monitoring its dissemination, and ensuring consistency across channels. The role of user-generated content, engagement, and interaction must not be forgotten as important in brand building.

In order to achieve this cohesive brand through content marketing, organizations must break down traditional silos. The term “silo” was often mentioned by participants as the most common corporate culture challenge they face as content marketers. The majority of participants in this research were marketers and it was informative to hear them describe which areas of their businesses could play a role in content marketing. In terms of content generation, several participants noted that excellent content should be drawn from around the organization. “Thought leadership” is a key concept here, although it was not mentioned directly by participants. When staff members are elevated as experts in certain areas this was good for both the individual and the organization, because it achieved influence with key publics. For example, one leader shared a story of when a staff member created a piece of content that went viral among a niche group of buyers. This meant that this staff member was asked to provide expert opinion on this subject in the future. In another example, a celebrity collaborated with a brand for a content piece that was considered by key publics to be excellent, useful material. This successful collaboration made it easier for the brand to approach other celebrities for similar work together.

Organizational “Silos” Need to Be Broken Down—Especially with Public Relations

Apart from content generation, marketers described the need to break down silos with both the sales division and public relations. It became clear in the research that a lot of marketing has been hard to measure over the years, and many marketers seek to improve their relationships with salespeople in order to better understand the value of their efforts. This relationship was something that several agency leaders said they had focused on with their clients. Certainly the improvement of these organizational connections could improve the “science” of content marketing so marketers could have the opportunity to link their efforts to revenue.

On the “art,” side of digital content marketing, participants also stated strongly that public relations could play a greater role in the practice. There was a difference here between the traditional and more modern conceptions of public relations. Watson (2012) in his survey of public relations measurement, explains this distinction: public relations was once solely identified with publicity, events, and media relations, but beginning in the 1980s, the profession began to be respected as playing a more strategic management role in organizations.

Thirteen participants envisioned creative roles for public relations professionals beyond this traditional media relations role of gaining earned media for content. Similar to the “thought leadership” role mentioned earlier, participants said public relations professionals could play a role in generating editorial content. Several participants noted that public relations brought particular skills in this area because of their experience either working within or pitching to media. This was often described as a “storytelling” skill that could be harnessed. Not surprisingly, relationship-building was also something that participants felt public relations could bring to the table. Often this was described as a strategic skill set, in understanding the complex interplay of relationships between an organization and its publics, then helping chart out a course for future content to improve on this. Another theme that emerged was the potential for public relations to assist in helping content marketers develop better qualitative approaches to measuring relationship-building. In all of these potential roles, it is clear that public relations professionals can help organizations develop more communal relationships with publics, in line with Hon and Grunig’s description (1999). Often public relations professionals are better able to establish more effective relationships because they are externally oriented, have a breadth of relationships with publics (beyond just consumers), and in the best cases can offer a cooperative

approach that focuses on mutual benefit. (In Appendix D the researcher has outlined a checklist that distills the best content marketing practices listed here and offers a way forward for all practitioners, regardless of professional background.)

Although it may seem like a natural progression for public relations professionals to help improve content marketing in this digital era the research showed they must earn their seats at the table. As described before, marketers are naturally motivated to gain influence with the sales team, so to contribute to this process, and help improve the “art,” public relations professionals must be conversant in the “science,” as well. A theme in this research is that public relations has changed in the digital era, but they have been slower to adapt than marketing because they lack the business acumen. As a result, communications leadership has shifted away from this profession. The researcher notes that this is a tension: public relations professionals must demonstrate their interest in the financial exchange in order to orient the company towards the ideal of “communal” relationships. Can a profit-seeking company really seek mutually beneficial relationships with its customers? Though it’s a difficult task, the answer to that question must be a “yes.” It is the role of public relations professionals to help companies walk this line between profit and the public good. This is really the “sweet spot” that all content marketing seeks after: to share stories that both advance the brand and meet the real needs of real people.

Future Research

This research opens up the potential to further investigate content marketing excellence and the role that public relations can play. Further studies could be done on how theories of relationship management can be fruitfully applied to content marketing within organizations. It would also be beneficial to examine exactly how public relations could help content marketers measure relationships through qualitative methods proven in public relations work. Existing public relations models such as Edelman’s Creative Newsroom could be revisited and the researcher could explore how such models serve the public interest. One potential measurement process might be drawn from the relationship management scale developed by Hon and Grunig (1999).

Limitations

The researcher worked to reduce bias and ensure accuracy in this work. However, this research was limited by a number of factors. First, it featured interviews from a limited sample of content marketing agencies and practitioners. A broader study, with more participants across a wider geographic area and a greater range of industries, would yield richer results. In a similar study that examines both agencies and in-house content marketing practitioners, it would also be of value to interview both parties who were involved in the same project to further cross-reference the material, i.e. an agency and an organization who were both working on the same campaign.

The researcher also acknowledges her bias as a student in a Masters of Communications Management program. Although she worked to ensure accuracy and added a quantitative element to tallying her results, she acknowledges that she has a bias towards finding results that advance the public relations profession.

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Transparency Self-Evaluation for Hybrid PR

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Abstract

The rise of sponsored content and native advertising has questioned transparency of communication activities. The Federal Trade Commission recently expressed in its regulation that content from PR firms is indistinguishable from ad agencies, an urgent call has to be made for transparency and its measurement. The measurement of transparency, however, is still debated. What matters most for measuring transparency is to enable organizational as well as individual reasoning abilities to sustain the legitimacy of the communication activity.

This paper suggests that for public relations to thrive in this new era of commercial hybrid content, transparency is central and provides lessons learned from measuring transparency in the case of commercial hybrid PR, and reports findings of two relevant industry magazines from the US. In conclusion, the paper presents a framework for transparency self-evaluation and proposes that for organizations to become transparent, it needs to occur on several levels: on the level of content (quality requirements), on the level of ethical responsibility (appreciation), on the level of identifiability (disclosures and differentiation) and on the level of consumer engagement (empowerment and discoverability).

Introduction

As the media landscape continues to evolve and traditional media advertising formats are increasingly complemented by new commercial hybrid forms (Balasubramanian 1994) like native advertising and sponsored content, the convergence of PR and advertising is becoming an issue for public relations. Interactive Advertising Bureau (2013) states native ads as “paid ads that are so cohesive with the page content, assimilated into the design, and consistent with the platform behavior that the viewer simply feels that they belong”. While the phenomenon is old, one of the first native ads literally caused a serious media hassle where the Atlantic published a paid news article about the Scientology church. After this multiple media companies have implemented native advertising (see e.g. New York Times, the Guardian).

The rise of the new advertising formats has raised an ethical challenge, which needs to be addressed (Bowen, 2013; Howe & Teufel, 2014). Self-regulation in communication industry has been a traditional way to secure the ethics of organization’s actions. When new trends and tactics are implemented those should be proactively considered in ethical manner (Snyder, 2011). By becoming aware about the different ethical aspects about the certain activity, the practitioner ethics can become more consistent and this way secure the legitimacy of the activity in general (Fullerton, Kendrick & McKinnon, 2013). Hence, setting of new norms and standards for the activities should be rationalized and proactively judged with a close collaboration between practitioners and academics (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009), as well as the recipients of those actions (Rawlins, 2009; Baker, 2008).

In the field of public relations or advertising the ethics focus on the persuasive nature of communication (Roberts, 2012). This persuasion-orientation in ethical reasoning is based on the fact that organization may use communication self-servingly (Baker & Martinson, 2001). For communication practitioners as well as the organizations in general the ethical consideration may help them to sustain their legitimacy (Bowen, 2013).

Pursue of transparency has become prevalent in the field of communication (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009; Karlsson et al., 2014; Taiminen et al., forthcoming) and its importance have recently been acknowledged by both academics and practitioners (Melbourne Mandate, 2012; Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2011). It is a key for credible organizational activities and lasting public relationships and reputation. Transparency can be seen also as a way to gain acceptance from the publics (Burkant, 2008, 157). However, there is a concern that practitioners see transparency too narrowly, like simply as openness or being truthful (Taiminen et al., forthcoming). Hence, building a transparent communicative organization is an important objective for all communication functions in the organization (Taiminen et al, forthcoming) and there is a need to find new ways to support transparency (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2011). Related to the new commercial hybrid content tactics, consideration should be made in terms of how transparent communication helps the public to become sufficiently aware and understand the new commercial hybrid forms.

Transparency in Commercial Hybrid Content

Transparency concept is an important element of organization’s ethical responsibility (Miller & Sinclair 2009) and can be seen as a requirement for ethical communication activities. Rawlins (2009, p. 75) defines transparency in organizations as “the deliberate attempt to make available all legally releasable information — whether positive or negative in nature — in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal, for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of publics and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies, and

practices”. While transparency has certain universal elements, it must be scrutinized in its specific context to secure the legitimate organizational activities (Taiminen et al., forthcoming; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2014).

Plaisance (2007, p.187) states that transparency should not be considered only in terms of “what we say, but regarding why we say it and even how we talk”. Carroll and Einwiller (2014, p.251) state transparent communication as “open and observable communication designed to match, associate, or demonstrate congruence between an organization’s behavior and its motives”. The opposite actions for transparency are suggested to include for example inauthenticity and hypocrisy (Carroll & Einwiller, 2014), secrecy (Rawlins, 2009) or media opacity or non-transparency (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2011).

In transparent communication to succeed, it is important to understand the public information needs and taking them into account. Thus, to achieve real transparency the public must be involved in the process to define their own needs (Carroll & Einwiller, 2014; Taiminen et al., forthcoming; Karlsson, 2010; Rawlins, 2009). Without this understanding transparent communication may fail to provide the relevant information for publics to enhance their understanding (Baker, 2008; Rawlins, 2009; Albu & Wehmeier, 2014). In practice this emerges through enhancing public autonomy by inviting them to scrutinize the organization’s actions (Carroll & Einwiller, 2014, p.250) and inviting them to form their opinions based on accessible information (Rawlins 2009). This way transparent communication also strengthens organization’s accountability (Rawlins, 2009).

While the new consumer value orientation of commercial hybrid content is to offer valuable and relevant content for publics, it is unnecessary to consider the covert advertising as the effectiveness comes from authentic and transparent communication (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005). Hence, Taiminen et al. (forthcoming) suggest that transparent communication should be based on authentic organizational character, as this way the transparency should be built on ethical principles of being genuine, truthful and consistent (Shen & Kim, 2012) as well as having the ability and expertise (Gilpin et al. 2010) to contribution to the content.

The thing that makes the commercial hybrid content different from the original editorial content, is its persuasive nature (Baker & Martinson, 2001). Consumers form their perceptions from the content based on recognition of advertising, understanding of the persuasiveness intent, ad skepticism (Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012), based on consumer’s own topical knowledge and aims, and possibilities to manage the persuasion attempt (Miller & Sinclair 2009). In addition, the expertise and trustworthiness of the source matters (Cole and Greer 2013). These are also themes that the discussion of transparent communication should address.

Taiminen et al. (forthcoming), suggest that transparency of commercial hybrid content should be analyzed based on content, its presentation as well as based on the content creation process. Organizations must shape their disclosures and procedures to strengthen the public’s sense-making abilities (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014). Schnackenberg & Tomlinson (2014, p.5) explain this more deeply and suggest transparency being “the perceived quality of intentionally shared information from a sender”. They note that if the disclosed information is perceived as relevant and timely, when the message is perceived understandable or clarified, and when information is perceived more reliable or accurate, also increases the perceived transparency. Same way in general to increase transparency in communication the quantity of relevant information must increase or the quantity of unnecessary information (Rawlins 2009; Baker 2008) and misinformation (Plaisance, 2007) must decrease.

Hence, disclosure of information is a one building block of transparency (Rawlins, 2009).

In the communication field there are numerous guidelines and standards for the ethical communication actions. For example International Chamber of Commerce's 2011 ethical code includes digital media part, issuing the identification of commercial message and identification of the message sender (Ginosar, 2014). Some suggestions have been found from multiple studies. For example Nelson et al. (2009) note the transparency of content increasing when the content producer is made visible and the message content is clearly explained and Miller & Sinclair (2009) note the source identity as an important disclosure affecting the public evaluation of the message. In addition, Taiminen et al. (forthcoming) suggested that disclosing the content provider, payer, and original author of the content should be considered.

Also labelling has been an important aspect when reducing the possibilities to mislead the consumers. Identifiability of the disclaimers and labelling should be guaranteed (Taiminen et al., forthcoming). Hoy and Lwin (2007) noted from the bottom of Federal Trade Commission's labelling instructions, several important aspects: text should be big enough, contrast between labels and background should be high enough, font types and disclosure repetition should be considered, and all distracting factors should be removed.

As native advertising and sponsored content are combining editorial content style into advertising and public relations purposes, in the procedure level transparency in journalism should be taken into account. In journalism transparency is pursued for example through disclosing how the news is produced, selected, corrected (Karlsson et al, 2014; Karlsson, 2010). In the study made by Taiminen et al. (forthcoming) industry practitioners also stresses the importance of disclosing the roles of media and brand in the production of the commercial hybrid content. In addition, the interviewees stated that the guidelines for commercial hybrid content may be put into public scrutiny. Moreover, offering participation points for the consumer in terms of any interactive features like commenting (Karlsson, 2010) or feedback possibilities (Shen & Kim 2012) create possibilities for even more transparent communication.

In total, it is the quality of information that eventually defines the transparency (Rawlins 2009; Schnackenberg and Tomlinson, 2014). This is why Carroll and Einwiller (2014) use the term transparency signaling when referring to organizational actions demonstrating their transparency. Therefore, in content level, several aspects must be considered. Rawlins (2009) acknowledges multiple other dimensions of transparency based on different guidelines, but suggests relevance, accuracy timeliness, reliability, and clarity as the key elements of the transparent message. However, Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2014) suggest accuracy and clarity as the most important ones based on the previous literature. Phillips (2010) on the other hand notes that in journalism including the necessary information about the news origin is a must (Phillips 2010). This relates to the authority of the content, as it builds the credibility to it by creating confidence in the content quality (Schnackenberg and Tomlinson, 2014). Same way, Taiminen et al. (forthcoming) state from the bottom of study by Gilpin et al. (2010) to pay attention to the expertise of the source towards the content topic, as it basically supports the current value-orientation of the commercial hybrid content activities. Another way around, unethical content may include vague, ambiguous, or highly subjective opinions, without existing facts or too much promotion (Baker & Martinson, 2001).

Methodology

This study explores the nature of transparency of new commercial hybrid content activities through systematic content analysis of the articles in two major global advertising industry magazines, namely Advertising Age and Ad Week. The analysis focused on various

point of views relating to native advertising process, and its ethics. The aim of the study was to identify as many transparency aspects as possible to create understanding to the ethical considerations of implementing commercial hybrid content activities.

In the magazines native advertising has been discussed increasingly and many times the articles relate to the native advertising phenomenon per se, to the implementation of such activities by newspapers or to the ethics of native advertising. The data was collected in the spring 2014 and it included a total of 158 Advertising Age articles and 176 Ad Week articles and after excluding the irrelevant articles, a total of 50 articles from Ad Age and 81 articles from Ad Week provided relevant aspects into the study.

During the content analysis the different aspects related to the transparency of native advertising activities were analyzed by collecting and coding the aspects into different themes. As the idea was to gather relevant themes, “who said what” was considered irrelevant and the article focused on “what has been said” and “how often they emerge”. A single article was used as unit of analysis. The relevant articles were found by using the search term ‘native advertising’ or ‘native ad’. Investigator triangulation was used to make the data gathering more reliable and this way the collected themes were verified by another researcher. After the first phase, the coded data was grouped into broader categories. To enhance understanding of the most common perceptions of transparency the categories were also examined in terms of frequency of occurrence. Finally, the findings were reflected according to theory.

Findings

The transparency-related themes varied from direct suggestions how the transparency should be guaranteed in the implementation of native ads to the media houses explaining their native ad processes. During the data analysis various subthemes were found, which basically formed ten main categories (see Table 1). These themes are discussed next.

The theme emerging most in the articles was labelling, where over half of the articles at least mentioned it. This category consisted from general subtheme about labelling to make the advertisement identifiable. Also more accurate subthemes were found as adding the brand logo next to the content to specify the advertiser, avoiding of using paraphrases were often present. In the data there was also two times mentioned that the “advertising” disclaimer should be remarkable enough to be spotted with one eye glance.

The second theme included all the suggestions that the native ads should be clearly differentiated from editorial content for consumers to able to make the difference. Some of these articles suggested more precise statements about how the difference should be made, while in other articles this statement was the only mentioning. However, those more specific suggestions are included in other categories.

The third frequent category related to the statements of separating the editorial staff and advertisers in producing the native advertising content. The subthemes within this group included thoughts of whether editorial staff should produce content for brands or not and whether journalists’ articles are acceptable to use in advertising/sponsor purposes, and whether there can be an advertising unit inside the media house which creates content for brands. Related to last one, it was also few times discussed about the strict separation of advertising unit and editorial staff inside the media house, or related to whether for freelancers it is acceptable to create both branded and editorial content at the same time. It was also one time suggested that it is important that brands do not pay anything to a single journalist as it endangers journalistic integrity.

The fourth category was the disclosure of the division of labour. Here the most frequent

notions were the disclosures of the payer, producer, or the writer of the content.

The fifth category related to industry standards and guidelines. Within this category most often it was only stated that there is a need of clear editorial guidelines for native advertising. However, also unification of the industry standards was repeatedly suggested. In addition the use of self-regulation in native advertising was mentioned and one suggestion emphasized the readers as the primary party to set the needed guidelines.

Table 1. Collection of point of views about the transparency of native advertising.

Category (% of articles)	Subthemes	Frequency
labelling (55%)	labelling to enable consumers to identify the ad as an ad	72
	adding the brand logo next to the content to specify the advertiser	11
	avoiding to use paraphrases	10
	disclaimer should be spotted with one eye glance	2
clearly differentiated from editorial content (49%)		
separation of editorial staff and advertiser unit (24%)	editorial staff producing content for brands or editorial article usage in advertising	13
	media house advertising unit as content producer for brands	9
	advertising unit and editorial staff separation inside media house	7
	freelancers making both branded and editorial content at the same time	4
	advertisers paying to a single journalist	1
disclosing the division of labour (24%)	payer of the content should be disclosed	15
	producer of the content should be disclosed	8
	writer of the content should be disclosed	1
industry standards and guidelines (16%)	the general need of clear editorial guidelines	17
	unification of the industry standards	8
	usage of self-regulation in native advertising	2
	readers as the primary party to set the needed guidelines	1
differentiation via visual and section separation (15%)	different background color or shading	8
	section separation	5
	general notions of making a visual separation between editorial and advertising content	4
	different fonts	4
	different visual features in search results	4
	different graphics	3
	different borders	2
media control in native advertising processes (13%)	advertiser's involvement in the production of media produced native ads	6
	complete autonomy of editorial staff in the native ad content and its publication	5
	editorial review process for native ads	4
	content affecting to objective newswriting about the advertiser	3
	brands having a direct access to publish on the site	1
	advertiser possibilities to remove or reframe the content	1
enabling reader comments (7%)		

	consumers' commenting possibilities in native ads	4
	advertisers filtering the comments	5
searchability of native ad (4%)	should native ads be as discoverable in search results as the editorial content	5
	should native ads be discoverable after the campaign ends	1
others	content quality in general (no specification collected)	18
	brand promotion in the advertisement	5
	identification of native ad after sharing it in social media	4
	offering full explanation of the native advertising meanings	3
	disclosing the link meanings	2

The sixth group included all the suggestions about visual and section separation for differentiating the native advertising from editorial content. Visual separation included a few more general notions of making a visual separation between editorial and advertising content, but mainly more specified statements like different background color or shading, different fonts, different graphics, different borders, and different visual features in search results. Moreover, section separation was pondered in five articles as a way to differentiate the advertising content from editorial content.

The seventh group editorial control relates to the power and authority of the media in the native advertising processes. Within this category, it was discussed whether the editorial staff has the complete autonomy over advertisers about the content of the native ad and its publication, whether the native ad content should go through an editorial review process, how the content should not have any effect on objective newswriting about the advertiser. Furthermore, it was considered if the advertisers should not be involved in the production of media produced native ads. There was also a suggestion that brands should not have a direct access to publish on any site, and that the advertiser should not have possibilities to reframe the content, but only have a possibility to reject it as a whole.

The eighth category relates to enabling reader commenting. In the articles it was discussed whether the consumers should have a possibility for commenting on native advertising content, and notions that those comments should be presented unfiltered.

The ninth category includes suggestions about the searchability of native ad. More specifically it was discussed whether native ads should or should not be as discoverable in search results as the editorial content. In addition there was a suggestion that native advertising content should be discoverable after the campaign ends.

Other smaller groups related to the content quality in general, promoting the brand within native advertisements, responsibilities of offering full explanation of the native advertising processes somewhere within the media, the persistence of advertising labelling or other identification after the content is shared in social media, and disclosing the meanings of links within the native ads.

Conclusion and discussion

In recent development and turmoil of media industry, new commercial hybrid content activities as native advertising have emerged and in need of ethical consideration. Transparency must be understood in its specific context (Taiminen et al., forthcoming). Based on existing literature and empirical study made, this study identifies various aspects of transparency efforts which can be used in ethical considerations related to the commercial hybrid content activities. The next discussion is based on Taiminen et al. (forthcoming), suggestion that transparency of

commercial hybrid content should be assessed in content level, disclosure level and procedure level.

Transparency in the Procedure Level

Self-regulation in communication industry has been a traditional way to secure the ethics of organization's actions. However, in this study native advertising related self-regulation was many times suggested as inadequate and that there is a need for ethical standards and media guidelines for sustaining the ethics in native advertising. This should be taken into account also when evaluating transparency efforts in terms of

'whether the industry standards and ethical guidelines followed or not?'

In ethical behavior, one must evaluate in which means the actions are moral (Bowen, 2004). These evaluations must be made in relations to the context. Related to transparency, the procedures must be accountable and in respect to the original context. Hence, as found from the study, it is arguable to consider separating the editorial staff and advertisers in producing the native advertising content as this way the journalistic work does not endanger. Thus, editorial integrity should be thought over and transparent communication include consider:

'whether the editorial staff have been involved in the content production?'

'whether freelancers can create paid and editorial content at the same time?'

However, also the relative power relationship between the advertiser and media should be rationalized. This category relates to media autonomy:

'Whether the editorial staff has the complete autonomy over advertisers about the content of the native ad and its publication?'

'Whether the advertiser has possibilities to reframe the media produced content?'

The basis of ethics relates to taking others into account (Bowen, 2004) and hence, participating receivers into processes of evaluating commercial hybrid content is important (Rawlins, 2009; Albu & Wehmeier, 2014). However, in the study, there was only once emphasized that the readers should be the primary party to set the needed guidelines. Hence, the dialogic approach to understand the stakeholder's needs and values needs to be emphasized. Thus we propose considering,

'whether transparency efforts are based on consumer needs?'

Consumer engagement to the content processes may also support transparency. In this study enabling possibilities for consumers to give feedback (Taiminen et al., forthcoming; Shen & Kim, 2012) and comment the content (Karlsson, 2010; Taiminen et al., forthcoming) has been confirmed as a potential area of consideration, with notion that those comments should be presented unfiltered. Hence enabling reader engagement should be considered in terms of:

'whether the consumer have possibility to give feedback from the content?'

'whether the consumer is allowed to give comments?'

'whether the comments are being moderated?'

In addition, it was found that there is a disagreement about the searchability of native ad and whether this content should be discoverable through search results, and whether the advertisement should be discoverable also even the "campaign" has already ended. Hence, the considerations might be done based on:

'Is the ad discoverable form search results same way as original content?' and *'Is the still discoverable even if the "campaign" has ended?'*

Transparency in the Level of Disclosure

Related to content presentation, identifiable labelling seems to be the most prominent way of supporting transparent communication. The theme was present also in over half of the articles examined, which might result already from regulations relating to minimum requirements of making advertising identifiable. Related to commercial identifiability of the content following aspects should be considered:

'Is the content clearly labelled as paid content or does it involve unclear paraphrases?'

'Is the labelling spotted with one eye glance?'

'Is the commercial nature of the content identifiable after sharing it via social media?'

Furthermore, revealing the content provider is important to ensure transparency (Nelson et al., 2009; Miller & Sinclair, 2009). Identification of processes and source was also the most frequently suggested action to ensure transparency in study made by Taiminen et al.

(forthcoming). Their interviewees suggested that disclosing the content producer, but also payer and writer may be needed. Same suggestions were thought also in this study. In addition, a question whether brand logo should be added next to the content to make the advertiser more identifiable arose. Furthermore, as found from this study, there may be a need to disclosure of the division of labour between advertiser and media. At least five consideration should be made related to the division of labour:

'Are the content production process roles between the brand and the media explained?'

'Is the producer of the content disclosed?'

'Is the payer of the content disclosed?'

'Is the writer of the content disclosed?'

'Is brand logo added next to the content to reveal the advertiser?'

Clear visual differentiation as well as section separation of native ad content from editorial was many times suggested in the study. More specifically, visual separation included notions like different background color or shading, different fonts, different graphics, different borders, and different visual features in search results. Moreover, section separation was pondered in five articles as a way to differentiate the advertising content from editorial content. Hence, next questions related to graphical differentiation and section separation should be considered:

'Does there exist a clear out-text graphical differentiation from editorial content (e.g. background color, borders)?'

'Does there exist a clear in-text graphical differentiation from editorial content (e.g. fonts)?'

'Does the search results involve graphical separation between ad and editorial content?'

'Is the content being separated into own section in the newspaper?'

Explaining the content production methods to increase reader understanding and thus these should be considered in terms of explaining how the news is produced, selected, corrected (Karlsson et al., 2014; Karlsson, 2010), explaining the news origin (Phillips, 2010) and disclosing the roles of media and brand in the production (Taiminen et al., forthcoming). These can be added for example in the form of media guidelines for commercial hybrid content, which are put into public scrutiny. Moreover, disclosure-related themes involved also individual consideration about whether the media should offer full explanation of the native advertising processes somewhere within the media. Hence, it should be considered,

'whether the readers can easily find more information about the commercial content creation and media cooperation?'

Transparency in Content Level

Transparency requires authenticity and truthfulness as a basis of the actions (Taiminen et al., forthcoming; Baker, 2008; Gilpin et al., 2010). This way the sincerity of the actions is ensured (Shen & Kim, 2012) and performativity decreases (Gilpin et al., 2010). Here we follow the idea of transparency signaling (Carroll and Einwiller, 2014) as a way to evaluate transparency of commercial hybrid content. First of all, previous literature has suggested accuracy, clarity, reliability, relevance and timeliness (Rawlins, 2009; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2014) as key elements of transparent content. In addition, the content should avoid too much subjectivity (Baker & Martinson, 2001), at least when it has not been overtly stated or then on the other hand the advertiser should have a solid expertise in the subject (Taiminen et al., forthcoming; Gilpin et al., 2010; Cole and Creer, 2012). The importance of content quality was confirmed also in this study and there are multiple point of views to be considered:

'Is the content presented from brand point of view or includes multiple point of views?'

'Is the content subjective by its nature?'

'Does the brand have enough expertise and understanding in the topic?'

'Is the content accurate enough?'

'Is the content based on facts?'

'Is the content understandable enough?'

'Will the incorrect information be revived?'

'Does the content go through an editorial review process?'

Another point of view to consider in content level is brand promotionality (Baker & Martinson, 2001), which was also considered in five articles in the empirical study. In advertising and public relation, content messages are often persuasive (Roberts, 2012; Baker & Martinson, 2001; Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012). Here the questions relate into

'whether the brand is purposely included in the story?'

'whether the content includes endorsing or promoting the brand?'

Self-Evaluating the Transparency of Commercial Hybrid Content

As a conclusion from the bottom of earlier theory and empirical study made, we suggest that evaluating the transparency of commercial hybrid content several levels should be considered. Hence, we propose the Quality-ADDED transparency model for self-evaluation of commercial hybrid content (Figure 1).

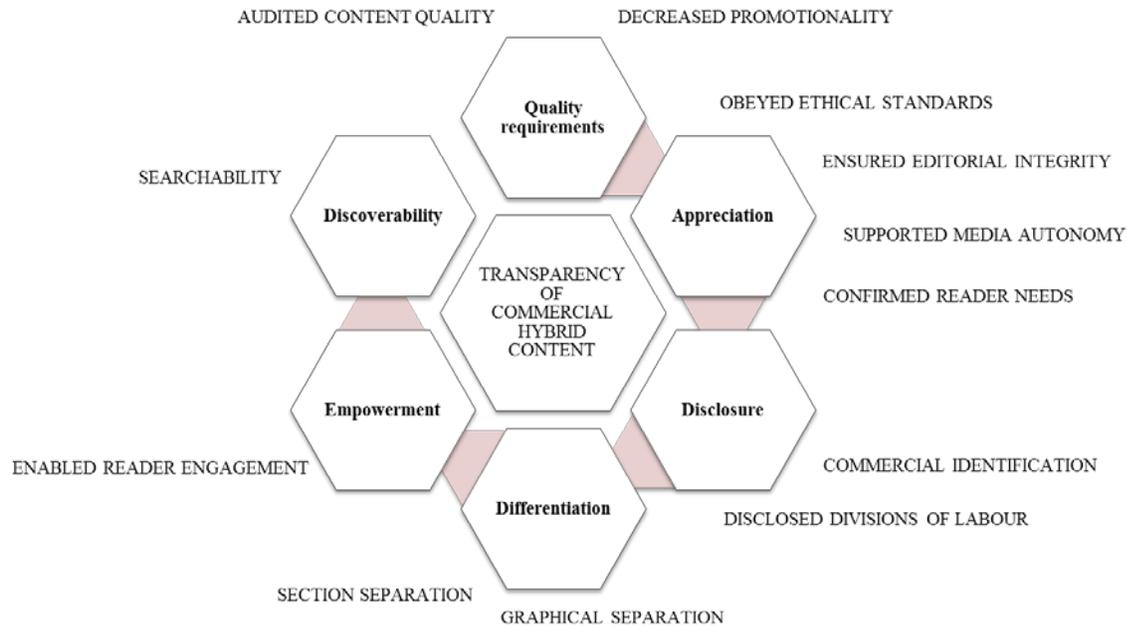


Figure 1. Quality-ADDED transparency model for commercial hybrid content self-evaluation.

In the field of communication self-evaluation and self-regulations are prevalent ways to act. However, Rawlins (2009) argues transparency self-evaluation having only a little value. This is reasonable as transparency to be real the situation must be understood from the bottom of the receiver (Baker, 2008; Rawlins, 2009). However, for organizations it is important to pursue transparency and hence, self-evaluation and asking the right questions from oneself is still central. From the ethical point of view, the right question is whether the certain aspect being present or absent has an effect on the evaluation and valuing the content?

While there are opposition about the strategically transparency, we argue that to achieve the genuine transparency, organizations must be conscious about themselves, their identity, procedures as well as receivers needs. This way ethically forward-looking transparency is eligible. Hence, the self-evaluation of transparency is from the very end the only way to increase the transparency and keep in in the level the public appreciates.

It is possible that consumers cannot discern the optimal means and levels transparency that could satisfy them, without giving them at least some kind on possibilities to evaluate the actions. This should be taken into account and thus, the Quality-ADDED transparency self-evaluation model could be adjusted for the use of measuring the public perceptions or expectations of the transparency of native advertising. This way combining this information might help the communication practitioners to steer their transparency efforts towards the expected level. This way organization may also implement the participatory dimension of transparency.

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Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility in Corporate America

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Abstract

As organizations look at creating CSR programs, developing new initiatives or trying to figure out where to focus their time and energy they need a more comprehensive look at best practices. This research showcases 206 CSR initiatives promoted on the websites of 16 U.S. organizations leading the industry in CSR.

Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility in Corporate America

Today's organizations are not only expected to be profitable and successful, they are expected to be responsible global citizens. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a necessary component in the overall strategy of an organization. For the most part, CSR has become an accepted part of business for many organizations. When a company is socially responsible, it takes ownership of its social, environmental, and ethical actions (Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010). Maon, Lindgreen, and Swaen (2010) examined definitions of corporate social responsibility and found that, for the most part, CSR is driven by a moral obligation, be it ethical, political, integrative, and instrumental in nature, with the focus on affecting shareholders, stockholders, and society at large. Davis (1977) defines corporate social responsibility as "the firm's consideration of, and response to, issues beyond the narrow economic, technical, and legal requirements of the firm. . . . It is a firm's acceptance of a social obligation beyond the requirements of the law" (p. 312-313). Campbell (2007) continues that socially responsible companies "must not knowingly do anything that could harm their stakeholders—notably, their investors, employees, customers, suppliers, or the local community within which they operate" (p. 951).

In communicating CSR efforts, an organization must be strategic with the corporate communication channels it chooses to use. For example, corporate websites are vital public relations tools (Hill & White, 2000; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003), which contain repositories of information for broadcasting self-promoting messages about CSR initiatives to stakeholders (Capriotti & Moreno, 2007; Gomez & Chalmeta, 2011; Tang, Gallagher, & Bie; 2015).

As organizations look at creating CSR programs, developing new initiatives or trying to figure out where to focus their time and energy, they need a more comprehensive look at best practices to follow. Despite the importance of corporate communication about CSR programs (Capriotti & Moreno, 2007; Gomez & Chalmeta, 2011; Tang, Gallagher, & Bie; 2015), information on effective CSR initiatives is limited, particularly among those recognized for their approach to CSR. In order to further the understanding of effective CSR programs, this study looks at companies with the top-rated CSR programs in the United States to gain insight into what these organizations are communicating about their programs, which issues they are working towards solving, and how they are approaching their program.

Literature Review

Communication messages must be consistent with the goals put forward by the organization. When discussing CSR, Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2010) identified several factors an organization should highlight in its communication efforts, namely "its commitment to a cause, the impact it has on the cause, why it engages in a particular social initiative, and the congruity between the cause and the company's business" (p. 11). The effectiveness of CSR communication is dependent not only upon the company's strategy but also upon how it positions its CSR program (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). Companies should be consistent in its communication about CSR so that employees, outside vendors, and stakeholders are aware of their programs and initiatives. Internal and external communication should help stakeholders' understand what the company is socially responsible for (Clarkson, 1995).

Communicating CSR

The reasons why an organization implements CSR initiatives drives how it approaches its CSR efforts. Among the reasons corporations should be socially responsible, include "long-run

self-interest,” “public image,” “viability of business,” “avoidance of government regulation,” “sociocultural norms,” and “stockholder interest” (Davis, 1977, p. 313–317).

In today’s society CSR has “become the hallmark of a mature, global civilization” and is seen as “necessary for an interdependent one world” (Davis, 1977, p. 321). With the rise in globalization, companies have begun to realize that they cannot live in a “moral vacuum” (Pratt, 2006) while conducting their business. It is no longer enough to simply focus on the bottom line. Now organizations include a strategy that is referred to as a “triple bottom line” or “people, planet, [and] profit” (Elkington, 2004; Norman & MacDonald, 2004). Stated more plainly, companies now concern themselves with more than just profitability. They also concern themselves with maintaining positive relationships with their stakeholders by ensuring that they take care to be environmentally and socially responsible global citizens (Saxena & Kohli, 2012).

Capriotti and Moreno (2007) explored what CSR information corporations liked to highlight on their websites. Of the 35 organizations they examined, companies were less likely to discuss their economic impact. Instead, emphasis was placed on the environmental and societal impact, or the “double bottom line” (Capriotti & Moreno, 2007, p. 88). Similarly, when comparing corporate communications by Chinese and U.S.-based companies Tang, Gallagher and Bie (2015) found U.S. companies were more likely to justify their CSR efforts using an “ethical rationale” whereas Chinese-based companies offered an “economic rationale.”

To see if those organizations regarded for their CSR engagement discuss this overarching and shifting in mindset from being focused solely on the bottom line to also being concerned with the double bottom line (Capriotti & Moreno, 2007; Elkington, 2004; Norman & MacDonald, 2004), we explored what organizations are communicating about their CSR initiatives.

RQ1a. When the top-performing CSR organizations communicate about its CSR initiatives are they emphasizing a broader approach to their programs, namely emphasizing people and planet opposed to its profits?

More than being able to tout their own CSR efforts, organizations rely on and need the news media to publicize their CSR programs and efforts to stakeholders (Einweller, Carroll, & Korn, 2010). News coverage of CSR efforts can however reflect a negative in tone (Tench, Bowd, & Jones, 2007). Interviews with and surveys completed by news reporters revealed journalists have a “latent willingness to cover more positive or optimistic angles on CSR” (p. 368) as some consider a “CSR failure [to be] better story than success...” (Tench, Bowd, & Jones, 2007, p. 364).

Gomez and Chalmeta (2011) examined the top 50 Fortune 500 companies to see what content organizations are presenting on their websites. They found organizations are much more likely to highlight their current and past CSR reports, but they are not likely to mention CSR-related news. Only 37% of the organizations examined mentioned any relevant news on this topic. To better understand how organizations interact with and respond to coverage of the CSR programs, we proposed the following question:

RQ1b. When the top-performing CSR organizations communicate about its CSR initiatives are they referencing news coverage about their CSR programs on their websites?

Stakeholders and CSR initiatives

Corporate social responsibility has been attributed with giving companies increased competitiveness and marketability and improving the overall brand and image of the company

(Fontaine, 2013; Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010). One of the most broadly noted benefits of such a program is the improved relationship and perception that is gained with and by stakeholders (Dentchev, 2004; Husted, 2003). These benefits are likely to affect all stakeholders associated with an organization, both those within the company (management and employees) and those outside of the company (shareholders, customers, suppliers, etc.) Specifically, for those outside the company, CSR efforts can help generate a favorable attitude of the organization, strengthen stakeholder-company relationships, increase the likelihood of investment in the company, improve the advocacy behaviors, and engender feelings of gratitude in the consumer (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Romani, Grappi, & Bagozzi, 2013).

Stakeholder theory examines how companies manage relationships with their stakeholders and how these relationships in turn affect a company's actions. The benefits of CSR on stakeholder relationships are enhanced when an organization's CSR program centers on a social issue (or issues) that fit well with the organization's overall mission or with their organizational strengths. If an organization has a close relationship with a social issue, cause-related marketing can do much for the organization, so long as both the organization and the social issue serve the same consumer market or if both parties share a similar value (Nan & Heo, 2007). Stakeholders respond more favorably when organizations have a personal connection with the cause they are aligning themselves with (Ratner, Zhao, & Clarke, 2011). Failing to maintain positive relationships with stakeholders can be detrimental to the overall success of an organization (Clarkson, 1995). Thus, stakeholders play an important role in the strategic decisions organizations make, including decisions about its CSR initiatives.

Stakeholder interests are not the only forces with the ability to influence the focus and direction of CSR initiatives. Research on agenda setting theory shows the media have the ability to turn the heads of the public in one direction or another, telling the public what to think *about* rather than telling them what to think (Cohen, 1963; McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). When examining the relationship between the news media and those issues corporations focus on Pollach (2013) found the issues examined in environmental news stories reported on between 1997 and 2008 were then reflected in the environmental issues organizations chose to focus on. Of note, however, in this study corporate issue agendas were not found to influence the media's agenda (Pollach, 2013). As the relationship between the influence of the news media's agenda on corporate issues exists for environmental issues, it is also reasonable to assume this relationship exists for other types of issues organizations choose to focus their CSR programs on.

Additionally, agenda building theory suggests multiple actors have the ability to influence or build the media's agenda. Such actors may include corporate spokespersons, NGOs, policymakers, or interest groups (Grafström & Windell, 2011). This influence is not considered unidirectional; rather, it is a reciprocal exchange of influence between the news media and these other actors in building an agenda (Tedesco, 2001).

Agenda setting and agenda building provide a framework with which to explore how issues of importance to the public relate to how corporations choose and to attempt to solve them. The news media decide the agenda by giving greater prominence to issues they feel are most important, which in turn influences the stakeholders' opinions of what is important. This relationship has the ability to influence issues organizations choose to incorporate into their CSR programs.

To date, no study has analyzed the types of social issues CSR programs are trying to address and compared them to important issues identified by stakeholders. Understanding this will help to reveal the reciprocal relationship the agenda of the stakeholders and the news media

have with the issues being addressed by these organizations. Thus, this study explores the following research questions:

- RQ2a. What issues are organizations focusing their CSR initiatives on?
- RQ2b. Are organizations addressing the issues that are important to stakeholders?

Geographic locations of CSR initiatives

Research regarding CSR in developing countries is currently a contentious and polarized area of study. Businesses are seen as actors in the policy-making and development arenas. CSR programs are still in their infancy as organizations, governments, and communities grapple with how to best alleviate the issues that plague the developing world and try to find the balance between the role of the state in development and the role of business in contributing to society (Peinado-Vara, 2006). Some wonder what the function of CSR serves for these developing countries, as CSR is “clearly a Western construct” (Hilson, 2012, p. 132). About this controversy Blowfield and Frynas (2005, p. 499) noted the following:

A critical agenda is needed because many policy-makers see business as important in meeting development challenges: not just those of economic growth, but also in areas such as combating HIV/AIDS, reducing poverty and building human capital. Moreover, government, civil society and business all to some extent see CSR as a bridge connecting the arenas of business and development, and increasingly discuss CSR programmes in terms of their contribution to development.

Despite the debate regarding locations of CSR initiatives, the literature is lacking information about how CSR is being conducted in the developing world. This is a necessary and vital component of CSR programs that needs to be better understood, especially as many of these countries are places where large corporations gather the raw materials they need to conduct their business. To better understand this area, we propose the following question:

- RQ3. In what countries are organizations focusing their CSR initiatives?

Approaches to CSR programs

Organizations have three different options for how they want to govern their CSR programs: they can run the program in-house and have sole ownership, they can collaborate with another organization (typically a nonprofit organization) and act as a partner, or they can give charitable contributions of time, money, or goods and be a sponsor (Husted, 2003). Husted (2003) posits that ownership is the best approach for organizations to take, as the organization has the greatest investment and control over its CSR program through this approach. However, in 2003, he found that most organizations were giving charitable contributions as their form of CSR (Husted, 2003).

As organizations choose how to approach CSR initiatives, it seems logical for them to play to their strengths as an organization. For instance, an organization may excel in product development, thus it may choose to engineer more environmentally friendly product that reduces the organization’s carbon footprint. Thus, to better understand how the organizations are both approaching and implementing their respective CSR programs, the following question is explored:

- RQ4. What approaches are organizations taking to solve the issues they choose to address?

Methodology

This study employs a content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) to explore the CSR initiatives highlighted on corporate websites of organizations based in the United States and ranked as leaders in CSR.

Sample Population

In order to identify organizations with the leading CSR programs, a list of the top-performing CSR organizations was compiled from five industry-recognized lists that ranked the quality of CSR programs in 2013. These lists included *Forbes*' 100 Best Corporate Citizens, *Fortune*'s Most Admired Companies in Social Responsibility, Reputation Institute's CSR RepTrak 100 Study, *PR News*' 2013 Overall Leaders in corporate social responsibility, and the Global 100 Index's Most Sustainable Corporations. The companies identified on each list were then compared to the 2013 *Fortune 500* to eliminate organizations headquartered outside of the United States or lacking influence in their respective industries. As there are thousands of organizations with CSR programs worldwide, this study was delimited to examining only organizations headquartered in the United States as this provides a consistent set of issues.

Of those organizations with top CSR programs, 106 of the 181 were based in the United States. In an effort to obtain an exemplar of the best-performing CSR programs, the sample was limited to only those organizations that appeared on three or more industry lists resulting in 16 organizations.

Units of Analysis and Coding Procedure

Individual CSR initiatives/programs identified on the corporate websites of organizations ranked as having the top-performing CSR programs within the *Fortune 500* served as the unit of analysis. Among the 16 organizations examined, there were more than 200 initiatives analyzed between April 3 and April 22, 2014. Information was contained within separate tabs on more than 200 CSR webpages contained within the corporate websites and accessed through each of the websites' homepages. No other corporate communication about CSR initiatives was gathered from other locations on these websites.

Two coders conducted a content analysis of the CSR programs using a coding sheet that captured information about each individual CSR initiative mentioned on the corporate websites examined. Inter-coder reliability was established between the two coders using two corporate websites, which consisted of 10% of the population. The organizations were chosen randomly from the sample and coded independently. Holsti's (1969) formula was used to calculate inter-coder reliability for nominal level data (Holsti: 94.9%). Once inter-coder reliability was established, coders discussed their areas of difference until a consensus was reached. The remaining organizations were divided between the two coders equally and coded.

Data Gathering

To answer the first research question, this study analyzed different ways organizations discuss CSR initiatives. First, does communication focus on the triple-bottom line? Second, does communication spotlight news coverage about CSR engagement?

The triple bottom line was examined through implicit or explicit mentions to people, planet, and profit (Capriotti & Moreno, 2007; Elkington, 2004; Norman & MacDonald, 2004).

References of media coverage mentioned on the corporate webpage were also examined to determine the importance organizations place in reporting the news coverage they receive on

their CSR programs.

The second research question looked at whether or not there were issues these organizations were addressing through their CSR programs that were a reflection of the issues Americans identified as being the most important issues facing the nation. A list was created of important social issues considered the most important issues in the United States. These issues came from a Gallup poll conducted January 5–8, 2014, which surveyed respondents with the following question: “How important is it to you that the president and Congress deal with each of the following issues in the next year?” This question, as presented by Gallup, was followed by a list of most important issues and its ranking of importance of the issue according to the American public. Additions were also made to this list of issues based on issues that had salience within the consensus of the literature such as women’s issues, children’s issues, health, employee engagement, and disaster relief.

To answer the third research question this study analyzed whether or not the organizations with the top-performing CSR programs focused their initiatives in the United States (where they were headquartered) or internationally and which regions received the most attention.

The fourth research question examined how the initiatives were governed utilizing an ownership of program, a partnership or a sponsorship (Husted, 2003). Additionally, initiatives were coded to identify whether or not the organization created its own nonprofit to conduct its CSR initiatives. As many organizations incentivize employees to give back by utilizing matching initiatives, mentions of any matching programs were also coded. Last, each initiative was coded for how organizations chose to implement the initiative. Six items identified throughout the literature and evident in other CSR programs were examined, namely supply chain ethics, community involvement, stakeholder engagement, product development, brick and mortar innovation, and lobbying.

Results

Among the 16 organizations analyzed, there were 206 total initiatives. Overall the number of initiatives per organization ranged from six to 24, with an average of 12.25 initiatives per organization. All organizations had CSR pages, requiring an average of 1.53 clicks ($SD = .74$) to obtain CSR information from the websites’ homepage.

Research Question 1

The first research question looked at what organizations are commentating about their programs. We looked at discussions about the triple bottom line to see if organizations mention an overarching shifting mindset from being focused solely on the bottom line to also being concerned with environmental impact and an ethical approach that focused on people (Elkington, 2004; Norman & MacDonald, 2004). People, planet, and profit were collectively mentioned 38 times out of a total of 206 initiatives (18.4%), with people being mentioned in 6.3% of the initiatives, planet being mentioned in 6.8%, and profit being mentioned in 5.3%. Next, each initiative was examined for references to supporting media coverage. There were 13 total mentions of news coverage about the CSR initiatives, comprising 6.3% of the total sample. News stories were identified for six of the 16 companies.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 looks at where organizations are focusing their time and effort to

develop initiatives and whether or not the issues organizations are addressing are of importance to Americans. Overall, environment-related issues were more widely covered with 92 separate initiatives (44.7%) working on some type of environmental issue. Of environment-related issues, emissions (18.9%) and energy (17%) were covered most frequently, with recycling and water scarcity being covered with the same frequency (15.5%). Other issues included in the environment category were clean water (10.2%), climate change (10.2%), and waste management (7.28%).

Health-related issues comprised 16.5% of the issues covered from the total population with 24 separate initiatives. Healthcare was the most frequently covered health-related issue (8.70%). Other issues coded as health-related were public health (6.30%), disease treatment/prevention (4.85%), and obesity (3.90%).

Economy-related issues comprised 15% of the total population's initiatives. Unemployment consisted of 7.8% of the total population.

Children-related issues made up 13.6% of the issues covered by the population. Children's health (5.34%) and children's education (4.85%) were the most prominent of the issues relating to children.

Poverty-related issues were addressed by 9.7% of the population. Hunger was addressed in nearly half of the total initiatives that had poverty-related issues (4.4%).

Education, diversity, disaster relief, military, immigration, gun policy, and privacy were all issues without subcategories. Education was covered by 24.3% of the population, being the third-most addressed issue in this population. Many of these education initiatives addressed children's education (4.85%) and a lesser number covered women's education (1.9%). Diversity was covered by 8.7% of the issues. The organizations that included diversity in their initiatives did things such as partnering with minority groups or making mention of not hiring based on gender or race. Women-related issues were addressed by 7.8% of the population. Military-related issues were addressed by 3.4% of the population. Organizations that included military or veteran related issues had hiring initiatives for veterans. Disaster relief was addressed by 7.3% of the population with 15 initiatives. UPS was the only organization to have an immigration-related initiative and Xerox the only organization to have a privacy-related issue.

As can be seen in Table 1, the issues that are most important to the national population are not proportional to those communicated by organizations in this sample. A much higher emphasis is placed on environmental issues than on issues that have a higher national importance, such as the economy, education, or healthcare. Additionally, there were no initiatives that mentioned Social Security, terrorism, taxes, distribution of wealth, gun policy, or abortion.

Research Question 3

Research question 3 explored where organizations with the top-performing CSR programs were focusing their initiatives and whether they focused their initiatives more abroad (internationally) or at home (nationally). As Table 2 illustrates, 81.55% of the initiatives mentioned being implemented in North America, with 160 in the United States and eight in Canada. Asia was the second most mentioned region with 42.72% (88 initiatives) mentioning initiatives implemented in this region.

Of the 206 initiatives analyzed, 160 (77.7%) were implemented nationally and 151 (73.3%) were focused abroad. The programs were implemented in a total of 105 countries. India (10.68%), China (10.19%), Mexico (8.74%), Brazil (7.28%), Kenya (5.34%), and South Africa

(5.34%) were the most frequently referenced countries.

Research Question 4

Research question 4 examined the approaches organizations implemented in their initiatives. To answer this question, the organizations in the population were coded to see if they took ownership of their programs, partnered with other organizations, or if they used sponsorship of time, money, or goods. The majority of the initiatives were owned by the organizations, making up 70.4% of the population, with 16.5% using partnering, and 13.1% using sponsorship.

Note: Initiatives may address or focus on multiple issues. The list of most important issues facing the nation were compiled from a Gallup poll conducted January 5–8, 2014, which asked participants the social issues considered the most important issues in the United States.

Table 1. Comparison of most important issues facing the nation to CSR initiatives addressed.

Issue	Most Important Issues Facing the Nation	Issues in CSR Initiatives Address
Economy	89%	15%
Education	81%	24.30%
Healthcare	77%	8.70%
Social Security and Medicare	73%	0%
Terrorism	72%	0%
Poverty and homelessness	69%	9.70%
Military and national defense	68%	3.40%
Crime	68%	11.20%
Taxes	62%	0%
Distribution of wealth	57%	0%
Energy policy	56%	17%
Environment	55%	44.70%
Gun policy	54%	0%
Immigration	50%	0.50%
Abortion	39%	0%
Minority issues	39%	8.70%

Note. Total initiatives = 206. Additionally, Latin America includes Mexico, Asia includes Southeast Asia, and North America includes the United States and Canada. Definitions created by the United Nations to determine the division between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa were used.

Table 2. Frequency of CSR initiatives by geographic region.

Region	Number of Initiatives	Percent
North America	168	81.55%
Asia	88	42.72%
Latin America	79	38.35%
Sub-Saharan Africa	75	36.40%

Europe	63	30.58%
Middle East and North Africa	15	7.28%
Pacific	10	4.85%

Organizations were coded to see how frequently they mentioned running their initiatives through nonprofits. It was found that seven organizations made no mention of creating a separate nonprofit and nine did create separate nonprofit foundations, always named after the organization, such as “The Coca-Cola Foundation.” Of those nine organizations, there were 15 initiatives that mentioned using nonprofits.

Additionally, organizations were also coded to see if there was any type of mention of a matching program. It was found that 11 initiatives mentioned a matching program of some kind.

These organizations were also coded to understand ways they conduct their initiatives, such as community involvement, product development, or brick and mortar innovation. Table 3 shows the distribution of each approach.

Table 3. How organizations implement CSR initiatives.

Method of Implementing Program	Number of Initiatives	Percent
Supply Chain Ethics	62	30.10%
Community Involvement	93	45.10%
Stakeholder Engagement	160	77.70%
Product Development	82	39.80%
Brick and Mortar Innovations	39	18.90%
Lobbying	1	0.50%
Pacific	10	4.85%

Note. Total initiatives = 206. The methods of implementation were not mutually exclusive, allowing for the selection of multiple approaches.

Discussion

This study set out to understand what these top-performing organizations were communicating about their CSR programs, where and how these programs were being implemented throughout the world, what issues these programs were striving to approach, and how they relate to issues that are the most important to stakeholders. This study provides a unique perspective on the state of CSR in corporate America by examining individual CSR initiatives companies are engaging in. Thus, this study can speak with some authority about what these leaders in CSR value, which may, in turn, affect how other organizations conduct their CSR programs.

Influence of Stakeholders

This study found that stakeholder engagement was overwhelmingly the most frequently communicated aspect of CSR. Within this sample, companies mentioned stakeholder engagement either in a majority of their initiatives. This shows that the majority of these organizations highly value the input and opinion of their stakeholders and they want to communicate it.

Valuing the opinion of stakeholders is reasonable for organizations, as CSR has been shown to garner a positive relationship with stakeholders, earning them social capital (Godfrey, 2005). These organizations must also maintain a positive relationship with their stakeholders, as,

in many cases, these organizations have contracts with their stakeholders, which drives how they go about making management and organizational decisions (Jones, 1995). By its very nature, CSR concedes that organizations must conduct their business differently. As stated by Doh and Guay (2006), “CSR suggests that companies have responsibilities beyond those of their shareholders to include those of other stakeholders (employees, suppliers, environmentalists, communities, etc.) and the broader society in which they operate” (p. 65). These stakeholders influence the high-level decisions of what to include in a CSR program and whether or not to have one at all.

However, organizations can only do so much to please stakeholders. They must also move forward their business goals. The issue of pleasing stakeholders is only growing more demanding with the rise and mainstreaming of CSR in large organizations.

This study only proved to show the power stakeholders have in affecting the agenda that organizations have in their CSR programs. For example, Colgate-Palmolive has an initiative called “Supporting Colgate People” that provides professional development, gives seed money to Colgate people to develop innovative products and give back to the community, supports diversity and inclusion, and promotes the health, wellness, and safety of Colgate-Palmolive’s employees. More than any other element examined in this study, organizations mentioned stakeholders, such as employees who volunteered to give back or shareholders who espouse their corporate values, and their involvement in their CSR programs. For organizations such as those included in this study, stakeholders wield great power, as these types of organizations are the organizations that hold immense power in the global economy. Better understanding the agenda of these stakeholders and how they assert their influence would serve to enrich the study of CSR.

CSR News Coverage

There was little mention on CSR webpages of news coverage or reference (e.g., links to news articles) to news reports or articles about CSR initiatives. In fact, only six organizations mentioned any type of news coverage, Disney referenced news coverage the most out of the sample. This study shows that organizations either do not value the news coverage that is created about its CSR initiatives or there is little coverage of these initiatives. Another possibility is that news coverage of CSR initiatives could be mostly negative in tone (Tench, Bowd, & Jones, 2007), causing organizations to avoid putting any indication of news coverage on their websites, as they would likely want their CSR programs to be viewed in a positive light. More research needs to be done in this area to better understand this relationship. Future studies could interview these organizations about their views on media coverage and their relationship with news media. This could work in conjunction with an analysis of the news coverage of these CSR initiatives to gauge how positive or negative it is.

Issues Addressed by CSR Programs

Within this study, the top six issues approached by these organizations were the environment, education, the economy, crime, poverty and homelessness, and healthcare. Of these six, the economy, education, and healthcare were the top issues listed in the most important issues list gathered by Gallup. This could indicate some influence by the public at large for the agenda of these CSR programs, or it could indicate the influence of the public on the organizations’ stakeholders, or perhaps these variables are all unrelated, though this is unlikely. Further research would need to prove some type of positive correlation between these issues and the issues approached by these CSR programs. It’s entirely possible that organizations include

initiatives that address these issues either because they are the proverbial low hanging fruit (i.e. it is much easier to incorporate a corporate recycling program than it is to stop violence against women) or because they have received negative news coverage in that past (i.e. for unethical treatment of those in its global supply chain, such as farmers and miners) and they are using CSR to help bolster their public reputation. The remaining issues these organizations communicated about did not align with the priority of the issues that are the most important in the nation. For instance, the environment ranked in the bottom third of the most important issues, and yet it was twice as prevalent as education, the second-most mentioned issue in this study. Clarkson (1995) stated, “It is necessary to distinguish between stakeholder issues and social issues because corporations and their managers manage relationships with their stakeholders and not with society” (p. 100). Perhaps then, corporations are more concerned with the issues that are of importance to their stakeholders, rather than those that are of most importance to society as a whole.

It is likely that the agenda of the awards these companies were listed in has an influence on the agenda of these organizations’ CSR programs. For example, *Forbes* 100 Best Corporate Citizens places greater emphasis on programs that include environmental impact and employee relations initiatives, whereas the RepTrak100 rated organizations based on their stakeholder relations in various aspects of the entire organization’s governance. These awards could serve to drive the agenda of these CSR programs, as winning an award would likely foster positive feelings toward the organization among stakeholders. Additionally, the news media may influence the agenda of these awards by influencing what Americans identify as the most important issues. These issues then comprise the agenda for the awards that these organizations strive to receive.

Geographic Placement of CSR Programs

Within the area of CSR and geographical focus, there was a large emphasis placed on initiatives that were implemented in the North American region, with the majority of those initiatives being implemented in the United States. As this is the area that has the most stakeholders for these organizations, it seems logical that these organizations would want to focus a significant portion of their philanthropic efforts where the largest contingents of their stakeholders reside. These stakeholders would be able to more readily see the impact of these positively intended programs, as they are located within areas that are likely to be more visible. Among the other areas of the world, the Asian, Latin American, and Sub-Saharan African regions were the most frequently mentioned international areas of emphasis. These areas are likely areas of interest because of their relationships with the organizations that are implementing programs there. They could either be areas where they have a supplier base or plant or where they have a population of customers.

Although some wonder what the function of CSR serves for these developing countries as CSR is “clearly a Western construct” (Hilson, 2012, p. 132), it is unlikely that organizations will halt doing business or implement CSR programs in developing countries as they are some of the most rapidly growing economies. They are also where many social and environmental issues are located (Visser, 2008). Large organizations have much to be gained by investing in these developing countries. They offer a venue for financial prosperity and for social good. However, though the benefits may be many for the organization implementing the CSR program, the developing countries on the receiving end of these programs may actually be impeded in their progress (Blowfield & Frynas, 2005; Hilston, 2012).

When developing countries distort rules and incentives for business, for example, they penalize productive companies. Such countries are doomed to poverty, low wages, and selling off their natural resources. Corporations have the know-how and resources to change this state of affairs, not only in the developing world but also in economically disadvantaged communities in advanced economies (Porter & Kramer, 2006, p. 91–92). Having organizations conduct CSR programs in developing countries is obviously a complicated issue and, as recent literature states—and applies to many of the areas of CSR research—“[it] is certainly a gray area in need of further research” (Hilson, 2012, p. 135–136).

CSR Implementation Methods

Organizations have three different options for how they want to govern their CSR programs: they can run the program in-house and have sole ownership, they can collaborate with another organization (typically a nonprofit organization) and act as a partner, or they can give charitable contributions of time, money, or goods and be a sponsor (Husted, 2003). Husted (2003) found that most organizations were giving charitable contributions as their form of CSR. Contrary to this finding, this study found that the vast majority of the initiatives were run in-house and were owned entirely by the organization being studied. This could indicate a shift in how CSR programs are governed. Rather than simply giving donations, which is the least time-intensive of the options, these large corporations are becoming more involved and taking a much more time-intensive approach to how they are governing their CSR programs. This shift in governance toward organizations running their programs in-house seems entirely reasonable. If organizations have their names attached to any type of effort (philanthropic or otherwise) they would most likely want those efforts to reflect well on their organization. The best way to ensure that a CSR effort is reflecting well on their organizations is to have the greatest amount of control over it, which they get through running their own programs and initiatives.

As nonprofit organizations and for-profit ventures have complimentary resources, they often make good pairings (Jamali & Keshishian, 2009). However, partnerships only comprised 16.5% of the initiatives in the population. According to Seitanidi and Crane (2009) partnerships between businesses and nonprofit organizations are becoming increasingly important for businesses in their CSR implementations. Though it appears that many of these organizations within this sample population (nine of the 16) have created their own nonprofit organizations, typically named after the organization (e.g. The Coca-Cola Foundation). Along with this, it was unclear from much of the information presented on the corporate websites examined if the organization was running their CSR initiatives through their own nonprofit organizations or if the nonprofit organization was involved in something else entirely.

Thus, more research is needed in this area. This study was unable to ascertain clearly what the relationship was between the parent organization and its nonprofit organization, if there was any mention of one to begin with. It also remains to be seen whether having ownership of CSR programs is the most effective approach for organizations to take. As the organizations in this study largely run their own programs, it would be beneficial to conduct further research to verify if this is, indeed, the best route for organizations to take as they endeavor to develop, modify, and implement CSR initiatives in their organizations. This study also set out to understand the implementation methods that organizations used in their CSR programs, such as whether they use community outreach, brick and mortar innovations, product development, lobbying, stakeholder engagement, supply chain ethics, or a combination

of these factors. This study found that many of the organizations that were studied tend to choose implementation methods and topics that were closely tied to their brand. For companies that were more product-driven, such as Dell, they implemented CSR initiatives that were also more product driven, such as designing products with less of a carbon footprint or products that were easier to recycle. Dell includes this in part of its mission statement, “Through innovations in packaging, energy efficiency and e-recycling, we're giving our customers the power to do more while consuming less to minimize their eco-footprint.” By closely aligning its CSR program with its mission statement, Dell can foster greater trust in its brand by promoting social issues that are a good brand fit.

Additionally Coca-Cola, for example, has done extensive community outreach, specifically in health initiatives. This may seem counterintuitive for a brand that is largely known for selling sugary beverages; however, Coca-Cola has many brands that are also aligned closely with a healthy lifestyle, such as Evian, Odwalla and Honest Tea. These initiatives align closely with part of Coca-Cola’s values statement, which states, sustainability is at the heart of the Coca-Cola story. Together with our bottling partners, we've long worked to build stronger, healthier, more active communities and advance environmental conservation. Why? Because we know our business can only be as healthy, vibrant and resilient as the communities we proudly serve. Here the company mentions valuing the community and health, which it then implements in its CSR program.

Organizations are wise to choose implementation methods and issues that are closely aligned with their brand. It will most likely be viewed with less skepticism by the organization’s stakeholders as they will be able to more clearly see the rationale behind the selection of these CSR elements. These stakeholders are probably more likely to buy in to the CSR initiatives of the organizations that choose CSR initiatives with a strong brand fit.

Conclusions

If an organization would like to, at the very least, receive one of the top awards these organizations in this study earned, they would do well to follow the patterns of these top-performing organizations. These organizations serve as an exemplar of best practices for CSR programs for other organizations to follow. The organizations in this study reveal certain patterns in their CSR programs, such as running their own CSR initiatives, rather than choosing sponsorship through money, goods, or time or partnering with other organizations. Additionally, they keep their CSR programs aligned with their strengths and with their brand, revealing that other organizations would do well to choose CSR efforts that have a good brand fit. These organizations also value stakeholder input in their programs along with focusing on the environment. It is simply smart business to pay attention to the needs and wants of an organization’s stakeholders, as they have the most vested interest in the success of that organization. If they remain happy, they will remain invested in the organization.

Limitations

There were several limitations within this study. Its inherently descriptive nature limits the ability to understand the motivations behind these trends and also the relationships among the elements explored. Additionally, this study was limited to the information that these organizations were willing to communicate. This significantly limits the discovery of whether what the organization is communicating is a truly transparent representation of what is happening in their programs; however, as this was a communications study, it was the aim of this

study to understand what they were communicating, rather than how what they communicated was compared to the nature of these organizations' CSR programs. As some of the organizations were more expansive in their explanations than other organizations, it is possible that what these organizations are actually doing is different from the findings of this study. However, what they communicated was the aim of this study. Further research could delve into this comparison if an appropriate method were outlined.

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**Toward Professional Standards for Media Transparency in the United States:
Comparison of Perceptions of Non-transparency in National vs. Regional Media**

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Abstract

The paper reports the results of the national survey of 287 PRSA members regarding the current media transparency practices in the United States. The purpose of the study was to understand forms of media non-transparency that exist in the United States, levels of non-transparency at the national and local/regional media, and perceptions of non-transparent practices by the PR practitioners in the USA. The project builds on previous research on global media transparency (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2011) and uses Tsetsura's (2005) framework to study media transparency. The survey results showed that direct media bribery is not a pressing issue in the United States; however, indirect media pressures that involve new forms of content creation, including native advertising and content marketing, are worrisome. Specifically, forms of indirect media bribery are common at the local and regional media level in the USA. Research findings demonstrated that U.S. practitioners experience particular non-transparent challenges when working with the media and recognize financial pressures U.S. media outlets face today. The results provide basis for creating standards in the U.S. practice to ensure media bribery is not acceptable at any level and sources of content are disclosed. The study concludes with the discussion about the importance of understanding how new forms of sponsored content relate to media transparency in the USA and why U.S. practitioners should understand how media non-transparency relates to the issues of native advertising and brand journalism.

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, media transparency has seen more attention from scholars, and for important reasons. Kruckeberg and Tsetsura (2003) argued media bribery and non-transparency mock ethics and professionalism of journalism and public relations, and it keeps citizens of different countries from making informed decisions. Furthermore, when media bribery, which can be direct cash-for-coverage, or indirect influences from advertisers, news sources, governments, or corporations for coverage, takes place, it can hurt the credibility of public relations, which is a profession that has historically struggled with credibility (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003). However, the research on media transparency is relatively young, also referred to as media non-transparency and media bribery. The first time media transparency research was conducted was 2003 when a media bribery index was published that ranked countries on the likelihood journalists would seek cash for news coverage (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003). Since then, several studies on media bribery have been conducted (Grynko & Tsetsura, 2009; Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010, 2011; Tsetsura, 2005; Tsetsura, 2008). Currently, the majority of the existing research is focused in Eastern European countries ranked low on the index, such as Poland (Tsetsura, 2005), Russia (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2011; Tsetsura & Luoma-aho, 2009), Ukraine (Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009), and Romania (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010). However, there is no research on countries ranked high on the 2003 Media Bribery Index. The purpose of the study was to understand if media bribery exists in the United States, at which levels (national or local/regional), and if communication leaders view media bribery practices as acceptable. The study utilized Tsetsura's (2005) framework to study media transparency, and the survey instrument used has been used in previous media transparency research, which can help with cross-country comparisons in the future.

The purpose of this study was to describe a current media transparency situation in the United States, which is ranked fifth on the media bribery index, as U.S. media practices might have changed since the original index was published in 2003. Practical implication of this study is that U.S. public relations professionals will understand the state of media transparency in the United States and will evaluate ethical implications of the situation for the profession, not only in the USA, but also abroad.

As previous scholars have identified, there are issues of media transparency in terms of sourcing, as well as the role press releases play as an information subsidy. As the number of public relations professionals in the United States, as well as worldwide, increases, and as the number of journalists decreases, researchers need to understand what kind of effect the potential shift in the public relations/journalism relationship might have on media transparency. If American public relations professionals want to continue to be industry leaders, they must understand the country's media transparency, which first requires research to understand the situation. By conducting research in the United States, it can allow the opportunity for American public relations professionals to be proactive about educating international professionals, as well as journalists, on why media transparency is imperative for public relations to be an ethical profession. Additionally, the researchers hope that by reviewing the research results of the survey among PRSA members, PRSA will have an opportunity support media transparency principles and guidelines and will encourage transparency between public relations professionals and journalists, both domestic and abroad. Furthermore, as native advertising emerges as a new phenomenon in the United States, new ethical implications of media transparency should be reviewed and discussed.

In addition to building upon the existing media transparency literature by studying a

country that, according to the media bribery index, has a lower likelihood of cash for media coverage, this study also has practical implications. The participants in the current study were members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), a prominent public relations and communications professional organization in the United States. By involving PRSA in the research, the organization and its members can engage in dialogue about media transparency in the United States, and potentially around the world, and why it is important, both professionally and ethically, for media bribery issues to be resolved. Additionally, PRSA has the opportunity to become a leader in the media transparency campaign.

Studying media transparency in the USA is an important step in continuing to move forward the public relations profession, as well as journalism. Although the United States is ranked fifth on the 2003 Media Bribery Index (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003), there is a good possibility media practices have since changed. The 2008 economic recession and the fact that tens of thousands of US journalists have since lost their jobs have implications for media transparency. Fewer journalists must now do more with smaller budgets and therefore rely heavily on public relations professionals as information subsidies. Therefore, it is important to examine US media practices to ensure that under these restricted timelines and budgets journalists and public relations professionals are being transparent and ethical in their practices. The current study will contribute to US practitioners' and scholars' body of knowledge about media practices, as well as help professionals understand why transparency is an important part of both public relations and journalism.

This research offers an extensive literature review that discusses previous media transparency research. The relationship between public relations and journalism, the changing nature of journalism, and media transparency are also discussed to provide further context for the study, followed by the methodology and results of the study. Finally, there will be a discussion section arguing the implications of the United States Media Transparency project on American media practices and public relations, as well as the state of media transparency as a whole.

Public Relations and Journalism's Relationship

Journalists recognize that public relations plays a vital role as an information subsidy (Gandy, 1982). Philips (2010) referred to an information subsidy, such as the press release, as "vanilla news," and then only through investigating and follow-up will value be added to the news. Building on Gandy's (1982) idea of information subsidies, Turk (1985) argued that public relations professionals use information subsidies to influence media content and opinions. Although journalists may see their practice as more "pure" than public relations, there is no doubt that the two professions need each other to survive (Briggs, 2008). Today, two professions are at a crossroads as the number of public relations professionals increases and the number of journalists decreases (Sissons, 2012).

As media transitions into a new age, the relationship between the two professions will likely change. This changing relationship has implications for media ethics and transparency. Sissons (2012) found that journalists are not rigorously – or even half-heartedly – fact-checking news releases as they once did – probably due to time and money constraints. Curtin and Rodenbaugh (2001) noted that journalists rely heavily on press releases for information, partially because it is less costly. Even though journalist's feelings toward public relations might be mixed, they accept their information because of time pressures, as well (Rim, Ha, & Kiouis, 2013).

Since press releases are one of the cheapest information subsidies and media outlets are

tightening their budgets, public relations professionals might feel they have a better chance now that their messages will be disseminated. However, as Sissons (2012) and other scholars found, journalists are not doing their own research and investigating these press releases, which could mean that audiences are not receiving the full truth behind stories. Moloney (2006) argued that if journalists simply accept public relations information subsidies uncorroborated, then those in powerful positions or with money could dominate the supply of information. This is important because Waters, Tindall, and Morton (2010) noted there is a clear link between an information subsidy, the coverage that follows, and beneficial outcomes for a source. Therefore, if the information subsidy is misleading and a journalist chooses not to take the time to investigate the information and simply publishes it, the public is stripped of the opportunity to make informed decisions. Although public relations professionals should be ethical when writing a press release, it is also a journalist's ethical duty to ensure the information they are publishing is truthful. To better understand the relationship between public relations and journalism and how information subsidies are used, it is important to understand the changing nature of journalism.

Changing Nature of Journalism

Spyridou, Matsiola, Veglis, Kalliris, and Dimoulas (2013) argued that journalism in a "state of flux" (p. 77), and Bennett (2011) argued the profession is "undergoing a vast transformation" (p. 378). This is hard to argue when in 2009 alone, 60,000 journalists lost their jobs, with the majority in newspapers (Peters, 2010). Along with the decrease in journalists is the concern that "professional journalism aimed at providing citizens with accurate, timely and relevant information will disappear as well" (Peters, 2010, p. 270).

Due to the declining number of journalists, those still employed must do more, all under restricted time and budgets. In a 2013 study conducted by the Pew Research Center, of those respondents who said they stopped going to a news outlet, 60.7% said it was because of the quality of stories. The results present an interesting paradox considering the fewer number of journalists is probably one of the reasons why the quality of news stories is declining, which then, in turn, hurts the news outlet even more. These results also have implications on media ethics and transparency – there is a possibility that with journalists focusing more on quantity over quality, news values and investigating are sacrificed.

Transparency in Journalism and Public Relations

In journalism, conflicts of interest are seen as one of the big ethics and transparency issues (Wilkins & Brennen, 2004). Journalists may think if they disclose information, they are being transparent, but as Wilkins and Brennen (2004) argued, "disclosure does not assure lack of influence" (p. 303). Karlsson (2010) noted that in journalism transparency is openness and argued for rituals of transparency to be routinely used by journalists. Allen (2008) argued that journalists and news media are being criticized daily for their content so journalism believes the answer is to be transparent and show people the news creation process. Additionally, Allen (2008) noted that transparency in journalism has been focused on US media outlets. Specifically, *the New York Times* has an extensive ethics and transparency policy. A journalist working for *the New York Times* cannot do any public relations work – whether it is paid or not, and they cannot accept gifts, tickets, etc. from an organization the newspaper covers (media bribery is forbidden), or be politically active. Additionally, if a journalist works in the financial section of the paper, they may not "play the market" and must disclose if they have any holdings. However, Allen (2008) called for a more complex ethical framework to understand transparency because

transparency seems to be the answer for a variety of issues, and being transparent does not necessarily increase the public's trust in media.

Media transparency is also just as important for public relations professionals because, as Coleman and Wilkins (2009) argued, "the ethical choices public relations professionals make are crucial to the profession's credibility" (p. 319). Therefore, public relations professionals need to understand media transparency's ethical implications. Trust of both parties is essential (Coleman & Wilkins, 2009), and transparency is one way to foster this trust. Stacks and Wright (1989) noted that although public relations practitioners may believe they are ethical, journalists may not view them as such. Therefore, public relations professionals need to pay particular attention to media transparency and begin to view it as a way to build trust and relationships with journalists, which is an important aspect of public relations (Parcell, Lamme, & Cooley, 2011). Finally, Tsetsura & Grynko (2009) identified two major ideals that journalism and public relations have in common: (1) commitment to truth and accuracy; and (2) concern about bribery. Authors concluded that two professions must work together to combat unethical media bribery practices.

Previous Media Transparency Studies

In 2003, the first media bribery index was published (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003). The index ranked 66 countries on the likelihood that print journalists would accept or seek cash for news coverage from news sources, businesses, public relations agencies, or the government (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura). Finland ranked first on the index, meaning there is very little likelihood that cash-for-coverage exists. The United States ranked fifth out of 33 ranks of 66 countries in the index (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura). While the variables used to rank countries are comprehensive and cover three main categories, the index did not directly measure the phenomenon of cash for coverage. However, the secondary data collected provided a good benchmark, especially for the first published media transparency research. Other media transparency research identifies two types: indirect and direct. Direct media bribery is defined as cash or monetary payments for coverage or material in the media (Tsetsura, 2005). Indirect media bribery is much more complex and may include a publication in exchange for advertising, conflict of interest, or a financial pressure that a news source or advertising department may put on a journalist. Previous studies of media non-transparency also identified differences at the national versus regional and local levels of media in Poland, Romania, Russia, and Ukraine, among others (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010, 2011; Tsetsura, 2005; Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009). These studies found that, according to PR practitioners, media bribery occurred more often at the local and regional level than at the national level across all media. However, some journalists denied these indirect influences in the survey (Tsetsura, 2005). Klyueva and Tsetsura (2011) argued the uneven distribution of financial resources at the local/regional media level and national media level could be one reason why media bribery is more frequent at the local and regional level.

Media Transparency in the USA

As the United States occupied the fifth place out of 33 ranks in the original index of media bribery (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003), few attempts were made to study media non-transparency in the country. One previous study separated responses of U.S. public relations practitioners and U.S. journalists from the global survey of media bribery to investigate what forms of direct and indirect forms of media bribery existed in the USA in 2008 and how,

according to U.S. communication professionals, various influences on the media might have affected media credibility in the USA (Tsetsura & Klyueva, 2010). The study found that U.S. communication professionals overwhelmingly disapprove media bribery. However, the results showed that various indirect media non-transparent practices exist in the United States, with advertising pressures being most widespread (Tsetsura & Klyueva, 2010). It is possible that the current trends to embrace native advertising and brand journalism by many media outlets may further increase the belief among the U.S. communicators that the media can still be credible even if it is influenced by news sources and advertisers. That is why a new, contemporary study of the scope of media non-transparent practices in the United States is warranted.

To understand whether media non-transparent practices are perceived acceptable or ethical in the United States, one should first examine a professional code of ethical standards agreed upon by the country's professionals (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2009). PRSA is a largest professional association of public relations practitioners in the USA and thus is a logical choice for investigation. PRSA code of ethics sets "the industry standard for the professional practice of public relations" (PRSA, 2013), and the organization requires members to sign the code of ethics and membership can be revoked if professionals do not abide. The code is based on core values, including advocacy, honesty, loyalty, professional development and objectivity. In addition to these core values, the code discusses other issues such as avoiding conflicts of interest, promoting healthy and fair competition, protecting confidential information, and working to strengthen the public's trust of public relations. In addition to the code, PRSA's board of ethics and professional standards periodically addresses current issues and challenges facing public relations, such as pay-for-play journalism, which falls into the media transparency category. Although this is certainly a step in the right direction for media transparency in the United States, does pay-for-play journalism only cover direct media bribery? If not, what does the board define as indirect bribery, and how can public relations leaders discuss with PRSA's members what to do if a professional is faced with direct or indirect media bribery requests? Today, PRSA does not have a clear answer to this question. With the results of this study, PRSA's board of ethics and professional standards has the opportunity to look at "pay-for-play journalism" in a more robust way, and perhaps add a section to the member code of ethics that defines direct and indirect media bribery, as well as provides practical guidelines to help with the decision-making process in light of the latest trend toward native advertising in the media. This study will also help other professional association and organizations in the country to generate discussions about the new kinds of media non-transparency that are closely related to native advertising.

Native Advertising

Native advertising (or content marketing) are emerging "buzzwords" in public relations, journalism, and advertising in the United States. However, as the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) (2013) argued, we are far from an agreed-upon definition of what native advertising is. Essentially, native advertising is a way for companies and marketers to engage with consumers in a new way online. The IAB (2013) argued that advertisers and publishers use native advertising to deliver "paid ads that are so cohesive with the page content, assimilated into the design, and consistent with the platform behavior that the viewer simply feels that they belong" there (p. 3).

The IAB (2013) identified six types of native advertising: (1) in-feed units (appear on Facebook as part of one's newsfeed); (2) paid search units (appear as Google search results); (3) recommendation widgets; (4) promoted listings (seen on Amazon); (5) in-ad native element

units; and (6) custom, or “can’t be contained” (as seen on Tumblr, Spotify, and Pandora). Google, Facebook, and Amazon are not the only big names to introduce native advertising on their websites. In early 2014, *The New York Times* debuted native advertising on their newly redesigned website, with Dell as the first advertiser (Sebastian, 2014).

Media ethics and transparency scholars and practitioners should continue to pay special attention to native advertising and its ethical and transparency implications. As the IAB (2013) noted, native advertising is *cohesive* with the normal page content and *assimilated* into the design.

However, nowhere in that description does the IAB argue that this advertising should be clearly marked as such.

This transparency issue is one that Forbes writer Dvorkin (2014) discussed, and argued “both consumer and marketer require equal parts transparency.” Castillo (2014) reported that BuzzFeed decided to change its native advertising label, to clearly mark content by placing a bright yellow box next to it containing the words “promoted by.” Previously, BuzzFeed marked its native advertising with the words “presented by” in a light yellow box, which some argued was hard to see on mobile devices. *The New York Times*, on the other hand, which, as discussed, has an extensive ethics policy, clearly marks its new native advertising section. When a consumer clicks on the “paid posts” on the Times websites, they are redirected to a site, paidpost.nytimes.com, and there are also additional disclaimers on the page (Sebastian, 2014). However, social media sites, such as Instagram and Facebook, are much more subtle when labeling their native advertising (Castillo, 2014).

This native advertising phenomenon is one that seems to be picking up in popularity among public relations, journalists, and advertisers alike. The Native Advertising Summit (NAS), for example, is the “premier conference dedicated to defining and discussing the future of native advertising” (National Advertising Summit official website, 2014, NPAG). In 2013, the NAS held four sold-out conferences across the United States. The next NAS summit was held in July 2014 in San Francisco and included high profile speakers from *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and even Pinterest.

However, it is important that public relations professionals and journalists are mindful of the transparency implications of native advertising. Is subtly including the word “promoted” above the ad enough? Or, does it need to be boldly marked, such as on the *Times* website? Furthermore, public relations professionals in the United States need to understand how they might be able to use native advertising to help disseminate messages to their publics in a new, innovative way, while also doing so ethically.

Examination of the current media transparency in the USA will help to investigate native advertising through a media transparency lens in the future. Lack of agreed-upon professional guidelines on how media should publish and label native advertising might create ambiguity about the intentions of the message and contribute to decrease in legitimacy of the media and distrust in society (Tolvanen, Olkkonen, & Luoma-aho, 2013). There is also a potential for native advertising to become a new form of indirect media bribery. Therefore, ambiguity of native advertising should be addressed, especially because this new phenomenon is an innovative and different way to connect with audiences. If organizations want to ethically publish native advertising in the media, they must think how non-transparency will affect future legitimacy and trust if these messages are not clearly labeled as advertisements. Already, there might be double standards for publishing native advertising, as we demonstrated in the case of *The New York Times* and the BuzzFeed. For public relations scholars and practitioners, such ambiguity presents

an interesting and relevant new way to study media transparency and indirect media bribery in the United States.

But first, we must understand the United States' current media transparency situation using Tsetsura's (2005) framework. Understanding U.S. communication leaders' views and opinions on media transparency will not only provide insight into the status of media transparency in the United States, but also the opportunity to create practical recommendations and guidelines for public relations professionals in the country. By advocating for the use of these recommendations and guidelines, U.S. public relations professionals might be able to encourage other U.S. professionals to consider the importance of media transparency and to examine new phenomena, such as native advertising, through the lens of media transparency. Thus, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: Do any direct or indirect forms of media bribery exist in the USA? If indirect forms of media bribery exist, what are they?

RQ1a: If any direct or indirect forms of media bribery exist, are they more common at the national or local/regional level?

RQ2: If any forms of media bribery exist in the USA, do communication leaders view them as acceptable?

Methodology

The sample for the study consisted of U.S. public relations who are members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). PRSA is the nation's largest community of PR and communications professionals, with over 21,000 members (PRSA, 2013). PRSA is a leader in the industry and an advocate for standards of excellence and principles of ethics. The sampling frame for the population was a database of PRSA's members with names, professional/academic title, and contact information. Researchers received endorsement from PRSA to collect the data. Once PRSA approved the research, a simple random sample was done by PRSA to select a total of 5,000 ($N = 5,000$) participants (the maximum sample allowed by PRSA). A 28-item survey was distributed online in April 2014. The survey, revised from Klyueva and Tsetsura's 2010 study, had Likert-scale and open-ended questions to gather respondents' attitudes and opinions about media non-transparency and personal examples of discussed media practices.

The practice of indirect payments and indirect influences were defined on the survey as: gifts of tangible goods such as tickets to an event or an actual product, benefitting from the provision of a product or service (such as a hotel stay or keeping equipment tested), a journalist who has a conflict of interest, an advertisement that is not clearly marked as an advertisement, financial pressures (withholding advertising, government subsidies, etc.), and the publishing of not newsworthy news releases in exchange for paid advertisements in the same publication. Direct bribery was defined on the survey as material that appears either on-air or in print as a result of a direct payment is identified as advertising or paid-for promotion, and is not presented as a news story.

Results

The researchers received 287 responses, of which 222 ($n = 222$) were useful, resulting in a 4% response rate. The sample reflected a demographic breakdown of the study population with about 66.4% ($n = 148$) of female and 30.6% ($n = 68$) male respondents (3% chose not to disclose their gender). About one third ($n = 76$) were members of other professional organizations. On average, respondents had 15 years of experience ($M = 14.95$). In regards to primary employment,

a fourth of respondents (25.3%, $n = 55$) were full-time employees at a non-profit organization, and approximately a fifth of respondents (19.3%, $n = 43$) were full-time employees at a corporate organization. Only 2.2% ($n = 5$) were full-time employees at a multinational PR/advertising firm. Thirty-one respondents (13.9%) owned their own PR agency, 15.2% ($n = 34$) were full-time government employees, 5.4% ($n = 12$) were full-time professors or lecturers at a higher education institution, and 4.9% ($n = 11$) were full-time employees at a national PR/advertising agency. Twenty-six respondents disclosed their primary employment as “other” (11.7%).

RQ1: Do any direct or indirect forms of media bribery exist in the USA? If indirect forms of media bribery exist, what are they?

RQ1a: If any direct or indirect forms of media bribery exist, are they more common at the national or local/regional level?

Overall, respondents did not identify that any forms of direct or indirect media bribery occurred frequently in the United States. However, there were some forms of indirect media bribery that occurred sometimes. Pertaining to direct media bribery, respondents reported that material that appears as a result of a direct payment clearly identified as either advertising or paid for promotion most frequently in national print media ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 1.3$), followed by national TV programming ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.15$), local/regional print media ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.11$), and finally, local/regional TV programming ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 1.1$). Although survey results showed direct media bribery does not occur as frequently in the United States as it does elsewhere, one communication leader stated:

I have personally run into many situations where monetary compensation was used to heighten coverage regarding a specific story. While I am no longer a practicing reporter, it is disheartening to be in the know regarding how heavily influenced the media is by money.

When asked how frequently it is disclosed in a report if a journalist or editor has benefited from the provision of a product or service (hotel stay, keeping the equipment tested), communication leaders reported this happened only rarely across all media platforms – most frequently in national print media ($M = 2.26$; $SD = 1.3$), followed by national TV programming ($M = 2.19$; $SD = 1.26$), local/regional print media ($M = 2.19$; $SD = 1.23$), and, finally, local/regional TV programming ($M = 2.12$; $SD = 1.21$). The difference between the frequencies of this type of media bribery in the local/regional and national media was significant in both print media and TV programming ($p \leq .05$, see tables 1 and 2). Additionally, only 47.5% of respondents indicated their company has a policy concerning gifts given to editors and/or journalists, and 36.2% of respondents said their company did not have a gift policy (16.4% were unsure).

--- Tables 1 and 2 are about here ---

Other forms of indirect media bribery were less frequent; however, a statistically significant difference between national media and local/regional media was found in three types of indirect media bribery (not news worthy news release published in exchange for paid ad; advertisement produced to look like regular article; not clearly labeled as ad; and advertising sales puts financial pressure on outlet) across both print and TV media, which indicates that the local/regional media face this type of indirect media bribery from advertisers more frequently than national media do ($p \leq .05$; see tables 1 and 2).

Even though media bribery does not seem to be a serious issue in the USA, according to respondents in this study, advertising pressures, occurred statistically significantly more at

local/regional levels. This finding is consistent with previous media transparency research (Tsetsura, 2005; Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010, 2011). For example, the most frequently reported form of indirect media bribery (a journalist who has benefited from a product or service and the following report), was more frequently disclosed in national media outlets than local/regional ones. The biggest statistically significant ($p \leq .001$) difference between national and local/regional media outlets and forms of media bribery pertains to not newsworthy press releases being published in exchange for paid advertising in the same publication. According to communication leaders, this rarely occurs in local/regional media (TV programming: $M = 2.34$; $SD = 1.43$; print media: $M = 2.55$; $SD = 1.42$), while it never happens in national media (TV programming: $M = 1.85$; $SD = 1.38$; print media: $M = 1.85$; $SD = 1.40$). Furthermore, as discussed, local/regional media face financial and advertising pressures (a form of indirect media bribery) more frequently than national media.

Commenting on the difference in media bribery practices between local/regional and national media, one respondent noted that many local media outlets are ethical, but that is not always the case: “Some local print for instance, is very ethical. Others? Not at all, and it is all pay to play.” Another respondent discussed this idea of “pay for play” in local media: I adhere to the philosophy that news should not be paid for placement. I continually hear from small town newspaper editors who want me to pay to have my news releases placed. I do not do it, and I try to be sure that the content of my releases is of news value.

When respondents were asked if they had any personal experiences they would like to discuss, several mentioned the media transparency issues facing local/regional media, specifically advertising pressures and gave more insight into the issue. According to one communication leader, “local news can be strongly influenced by advertisers’ threats. Have seen a few stories killed over 30+ years because of advertiser pressure.” Another respondent voiced frustration with these pressures on local media: “I am very frustrated by the local biases and practices of local media.” Furthermore, one communication leader discussed why local media might give in to these financial and advertising pressures, “In smaller markets, advertisers seem to have more leverage with what editors publish because the media organization relies on revenue from advertising to keep the publication alive.” This claim about why local/regional media partake in this form of indirect media bribery supports previous media transparency research (Tsetsura, 2005; Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010, 2011).

Another communication leader painted a gloomy picture of the current local media:

These transgressions occur frequently in the less strict, ethically and professionally, smaller local media. I believe that only the major daily newspapers and some networks are the only ones left that today prohibit journalists from taking indirect or minor gifts (tickets, meals, small gifts) from news sources.

Another communication leader discussed the corporate pressures they faced while working at a national media outlet:

As a day-one staffer at CNBC, I personally witnessed corporate pressure from GE while we were covering the trial of GE subsidiary for polluting the Hudson River at Schenectady, NY. While we were able to report on the story daily for about a week, eventually a phone call was received from corporate headquarters telling us to “find some other drum to bang...”

However, the respondent indicated that these pressures today are a “necessary evil” given the increased interests of corporations toward native advertising. This begs a question: do today’s communication leaders in the USA view media bribery forms as acceptable?

RQ2: If any forms of media bribery exist in the USA, do communication leaders view them as acceptable?

Although U.S. communication leaders reported that some forms of media bribery sometimes occurred in the USA, almost all ($n = 197$; 89%) of communication leaders did not think that the practice of accepting direct/indirect payments from news sources by media in the US was acceptable. One communication leader discussed the issue with media bribery as a concern about double standards across media platforms:

I definitely have [an] issue when content that has been paid for in one form or another is not marked as such. For example, I don't understand why radio DJs can go into a spiel about the latest laser eye surgery technology without specifying that they were paid to receive the treatment and to be a spokesperson, when a blogger (at least legally) is supposed to disclose such items.

When asked about journalistic integrity and public relations ethics, over half ($n = 124$; 56.3%) of respondents thought journalists and/or editors in the USA have high professional integrity, and almost a two-thirds ($n = 137$; 61.8%) of respondents thought public relations practices in the US are ethical. A communication leader discussed more in-depth journalists' and public relations professionals' ethics:

My experiences have been that most journalists have high professional integrity, but the few without significantly tarnish the overall image of journalists. Same holds true for PR; most have high ethical standards, but it's the ones who do not who cause harm to the profession's image.

In short, this study supported results of previous research in the USA and worldwide to demonstrate that the existence of media non-transparent practices is not considered acceptable or ethical by public relations practitioners. In the next section, we discuss how this gap between *knowing and doing* in relation to media non-transparency can be breached in the United States.

Discussion

According to previous media transparency research, media bribery is existent in many countries across the world (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003, 2011; Tsetsura, 2005; Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010, 2011; Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009). This study sought to understand the media transparency situation in the United States, which is ranked fifth on the 2003 Media Bribery Index, indicating there is a lower likelihood that media bribery exists among American media. The survey, which was sent out to communication leaders who are members of PRSA, confirmed the United States' rank on the index. Media bribery, direct or indirect, is not a frequent occurrence at the national or local/regional media levels in the USA. However, media bribery is not completely absent from the U.S. media practices, specifically indirect media bribery at the local/regional level, which is consistent with previous media transparency research.

Pertaining to indirect media bribery and gifts, communication leaders reported journalists only rarely disclose if journalists have benefited from the provisions of a product or service alongside a report. Furthermore, media outlets rarely have policies covering the receipt of samples, free gifts or discounted material from news sources, according to respondents in this study. Finally, less than half of respondents reported their company has a policy concerning gifts given to editors and/or journalists. Therefore, there seems to be ambiguity about gifts, what defines a gift, and how often a journalist should have to disclose if they received something from a news source. As described by one communication leader, some journalists choose not to accept

anything, but that could be because of their personal professional standards. Currently, this indirect form of indirect media bribery and the ways in which journalists and public relations professionals handle this form is very much decided on a case-by-case basis. Furthermore, the results showed that less than half of communication leaders reported their company has a clear media gift policy, which is alarming. Public relations professionals encounter gift-giving situations on a regular basis, according to this study. Journalists and public relations professions must work together to define what constitutes a gift, whether big or small, and to understand why it is important to disclose this information in a news report. Readers may or may not know that the gifts were received; they may perceive the article with a rave review of a hotel critically, or with certain skepticism, if they knew that a journalist who wrote that article was invited to stay in the hotel for free. Therefore, when journalists do not disclose such information, readers are stripped of the opportunity of making informed decisions.

However, as presented in the results, other forms of indirect media bribery, such as conflict of interest, occurred rarely in the United States. Additionally, in national media, a press release that is not newsworthy does not appear in the same publication in exchange for paid advertising in national media, according to these respondents. Other forms of indirect media bribery that occur rarely in the U.S. media include an advertisement that is published to look like a regular article and a situation in which a journalist has a conflict of interest but does not disclose this information. This is a positive sign not only for media transparency, but also for journalism and public relations practices and ethics in the USA. Although advertising pressures did not seem to be an issue in terms of publishing a not newsworthy press release in exchange for advertising, local/regional media face other advertising pressures statistically significantly more than national media.

Although, according to the data, advertising sales departments sometimes attempt to influence news making decisions in local/regional media, this practice occurs significantly more frequently at the local level than at the national level, which is consistent with previous media transparency research (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010; Tsetsura, 2005). Local and regional media also face more financial pressure from news sources than national media do. The qualitative data provided insight into this issue and made the researchers believe these indirect media bribery practices are of a serious concern for public relations practitioners who work with local/regional media. Several communication leaders shared their apprehension about the advertising and financial pressures faced by local and regional media, and how these pressures then influence coverage. This is a definite media transparency concern, and a situation that is not only occurring in the U.S. media, but across the world (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2011; Tsetsura & Zuo, 2009). In Eastern Europe, for instance, local and regional media face significant advertising and financial pressures (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010). As one communication leader in this study shared, local and regional media might partake in these forms of indirect media bribery because they require the advertising dollars and other forms of revenue to stay alive.

The fact that these transgressions occur not only in countries with media bribery issues at all levels, such as Poland, Romania, Russia, and Ukraine, but also in countries of the Western world, such as the United States, where the professions of public relations and journalism are well developed, sheds light on a potential global situation that media transparency scholars, journalists, and public relations professionals need to discuss. Additionally, despite the fact that local and regional U.S. media encounter advertising pressures more frequently than the national media, according to qualitative data of this study, both give in to these pressures. Yet, almost all communication leaders around the world thought advertising influences would hurt the

credibility of any media outlet (Tsetsura & Klyueva, 2010). Therefore, even though communication leaders recognize the credibility of media is diminished by advertising influences, local and regional media still partake in indirect media bribery involving advertisers. This paradox is one that, hopefully, with the results of this study, will be addressed through systematic discussions among U.S. public relations professionals, journalists, and advertisers who can engage in dialogue with their respected professional associations about the situation. Since, according to media transparency studies, local and regional media across the world face these indirect media bribery situations significantly more than national media, researchers and professionals should discuss how to make it clear to advertisers that these pressures are not acceptable, nor will be tolerated. Members of all these professional associations need to regularly discuss why media transparency is important and how media non-transparency might affect credibility and trust of the audiences. They also need to address what can be done to relieve local and regional media of these pressures.

The researchers believe that advertising pressures at the local and regional level are one of the most frequent indirect media bribery forms in several countries because of the power that advertisers believe they have. Advertisers might view themselves and their role as even more powerful if they are dealing with smaller media outlets that are struggling financially. As discussed, journalists now have to take on more roles with restricted budgets, which might be even worse at local and regional levels. Therefore, smaller media outlets might see advertisers and their dollars as a way to save their business. However, these communication leaders are then sacrificing the integrity and credibility of the media outlet, which is why this is a pertinent media transparency issue. Hopefully, with the results of this study and data supporting that indirect media bribery is an issue at the local/regional level, even in a country with well-developed journalism and public relations fields, U.S. practitioners and media transparency scholars can discuss why it is important advertising pressures are alleviated.

Practical Implications of the Study

The results of this study have several practical implications. First, the results and the corresponding report will be given to PRSA, specifically its board of ethics and professional standards. Since PRSA has the ability to reach tens of thousands of communications professionals in the United States (and potentially more) through their PRSA regional and local chapters, the researchers hope the results and implications of the study will be shared with many professionals across the country. This will encourage dialogue among PRSA members and other public relations professionals about what media transparency is and why it is important for public relations professionals, journalists, and other communications professionals to ensure the media practices are transparent and ethical. As mentioned before, this study not only has implications for the U.S. media, but also media practices worldwide, especially at the local/regional level. Furthermore, PRSA's board of ethics and professional standards has the opportunity to become a leader in the industry by discussing media transparency with its members, and by so doing, PRSA can encourage other professional organizations to follow suit in discussing transparent media practices with their members.

This study is a timely one for the board of ethics and professional standards, given that the board already periodically discusses pay-for-play journalism. The results of this study could help guide future board discussions on how to continue to define and look at this pay-for-play phenomenon, especially since indirect media bribery is more frequent in the United States. With the results and discussion of this research study, the board could suggest additions to the member

code of ethics that will address media bribery issues and provide examples of media transparency. For example, media transparency and the forms of media bribery should be defined. Since according to this study indirect media bribery is more frequent in the U.S. media, examples of indirect media bribery should be offered, which could help eliminate any ambiguity among members about what an indirect bribe is. Depending upon PRSA's board of ethics and professional standards decision about how to handle issues of media transparency, these decisions should be added to the code of ethics.

The researchers suggest that PRSA and other professional organizations define what a gift to a journalist is, whether it is anything over a certain monetary amount or any free products or services. Then, the organization's board can suggest how to enforce a zero-tolerance policy. Public relations professionals do not need to, and should not, wait for journalists to define what a gift is. By defining its own sets of standards and rules in regards to indirect bribery, public relations can become the leader in media transparency. Additionally, the boards of ethics and professional standards should provide examples of media transparency. For example, media transparency occurs when a public relations professional communicates openly and honestly in their role as an information subsidy, as well as when acting as a counselor for an organization. A public relations professional should enforce zero-tolerance policies when confronted with indirect or direct media bribery requests. Furthermore, public relations professionals must not attempt to indirectly influence a journalist's coverage by offering gifts, whether it is a product or service, such as a hotel stay or free dinner. As a part of the strategic communication industry, public relations professionals need to recognize that advertising and financial pressures occur and should work with journalists, as well as advertisers, to ensure advertising pressures are alleviated, especially at the local and regional media levels.

Additionally, this research has implications for future studies of native advertising, as well as the continuous discussion of native advertising's place in the modern world of journalism, public relations, and media relations. This is especially relevant, given the significant advertising pressures local and regional US media face, as seen in this study. Since advertising pressures are one of the most pressing media bribery issues, public relations professionals, journalists, as well as advertisers, need to discuss how native advertising can continue to move forward as an innovative way to connect with consumers, but in an ethical and transparent way, without pressures.

Although media transparency heavily involves journalists, too (Ristow, 2010), public relations professionals should not wait for journalists to call attention to these issues of media transparency. U.S. public relations professionals and their respected professional organizations should become leaders of the media transparency campaign in the USA, using the research conducted by public relations scholars as a platform for dialogue and discussion. Additionally, since this research involved PRSA members, PRSA should use the results as a catalyst for the media transparency campaign in the USA. As one communication leader in the study pointed out, the "bad apples" of public relations tarnish the credibility of the profession as a whole. Therefore, organizations and its members should have a vested interest in working toward media transparency, especially since public relations has historically struggled with credibility issues.

Additionally, PRSA's board of ethics and professional standards has the opportunity to lead an initiative with other professional organizations to create guidelines on how public relations professionals can handle media transparency issues if they are faced with them, especially at the local/regional level. Public relations firms, like Burson-Marsteller, a leading global public relations agency which was founded in the United States, vow that transparency is

one of their values (www.burson-marsteller.com). However, they do not offer practitioners guidelines on what to do or how to respond if a journalist demands a direct, or more importantly, an indirect bribe, since according to research, these are the most common. Public relations organizations, firms, and professionals can claim transparency as a value, but can we expect professionals to practice media transparency without guidelines? Additionally, these guidelines should be universal in nature, to eliminate the potential for double standards across media platforms, which was rightfully a concern of one communication leader in this study.

U.S. journalists have the opportunity to take the results of this study as a reason to discuss with their organizations and employers what constitutes a gift and when gifts should be disclosed in news reports. As discussed, journalists do not always disclose when they benefited from the provisions of a product or service in accompanying news reports, which may become problematic from the media transparency perspective. Journalists should work together to eliminate the confusion of what defines a gift and how they should handle receiving gifts if they choose accepting them. Additionally, there is the opportunity for media organizations to discuss how to define a gift, since journalists might argue it is the media organizations that present them with different guidelines on accepting gifts. If media organizations come together to help define gifts, this could help eliminate double standards. Finally, journalists and media organizations should inform public relations professionals of these decisions and begin to enforce a zero-tolerance policy.

Furthermore, media transparency does not only have practical implications for public relations and journalism, but also for the clients that are represented by these PR professionals and written about by journalists. Whether the client is a local one, or a multi-million dollar international account, public relations professionals must constantly think of the bigger picture. If a public relations professional bribes (directly or indirectly) a journalist to receive positive coverage for a client, not only is public relations' reputation at stake, but as is the client's reputation. Therefore, public relations professionals and journalists, as well as advertisers, must realize they are not only representing themselves and their professions, but also their clients. If a client were to find out it was receiving positive coverage due to media bribery, this could tarnish the relationship between the client and public relations professional, as well as potentially harm future relationships with potential clients.

Finally, these results have important practical implications for local and regional media. The fact that local and regional media face indirect media bribery pressures in the majority of media transparency studies presents a major media transparency issue that needs to be addressed, and the U.S. media, public relations professionals, journalists, and advertisers have the opportunity to lead the way in ending these media bribery issues. However, this means that advertisers also need to join the media transparency campaign by realizing that putting these pressures on local and regional media is not acceptable, ethical, or transparent, and journalists and public relations professionals at the local/regional level need to enforce zero-tolerance policies. Especially as native advertising emerges as a popular and innovative way to connect with consumers, these concerns about advertising pressures should become an important discussion. If not addressed, advertisers could begin to pressure media outlets into publishing this branded content without labels to receive the advertising dollars, which is indirect bribery. As discussed throughout this study, this is not a transparent practice, and could tarnish the image of not only journalists and public relations professionals, but also advertisers. Although the campaign for media transparency cannot restructure the American, or global, economy and help local and regional media outlets stay afloat, it can work to ensure they are receiving money in an

ethical and transparent way.

The researchers suggest that media transparency scholars collaborate with PRSA, as well as other professional communications organizations, to host a U.S. media transparency summit. Public relations professionals should take this as an opportunity to be leaders in the media transparency campaign, and media transparency scholars can use the summit to educate professionals on the importance of transparent media practices. Furthermore, the summit should be used to discuss the issues facing local and regional media. Whether the summit is held in several cities, similar to the Native Advertising Summit, or in one location, local and regional media should be invited and encouraged to openly discuss the indirect (or direct) bribery these smaller outlets might face, and what should be done to eliminate these financial and advertising pressures. Additionally, it would be beneficial for advertisers to attend the summit as well, so they, too, can learn more about why transparency is essential to the integrity and credibility of all parts of the strategic communication field. The summit should have several sessions, with media transparency scholars sharing their research, as well as “town-hall” style discussions about what can be done to ensure media practices are transparent. Additionally, the summit could be used to bring together public relations professionals and journalists to discuss what kind of decision-making guidelines should be drafted to help professionals make ethical and transparent decisions.

Media transparency is an essential part of public relations, but one that is sometimes overlooked. One of the researchers of this project started working for a global public relations firm in June 2014, and the first day on the job, she encountered a media bribery request when she tried to get a client spokesperson as a guest on a radio show. The radio show, which was a smaller, regional one, required a \$35 payment before guests would be considered. Although this may seem like a small monetary payment for a desired interview, this was, nonetheless, an example of direct media bribery, and one that, honestly, shocked the researcher. Additionally, when the researcher spoke with a director in the firm’s office about this study, the director replied, with a smile, “There is no [media] transparency.” These experiences have made the media transparency situation a much more real one for the researcher. It is important that media transparency becomes a continuous discussion in the public relations world, as well as in journalism and advertising, especially as native advertising continues to grow. Without this discussion, media transparency scholars and other professionals cannot expect media practices to change.

Additionally, media transparency should become a part of public relations, journalism, and advertising education at the undergraduate level. Media ethics classes are becoming more popular at universities across the country, and media transparency should become a part of these discussions. Since students are the future professionals and the ones who might face media bribery, they should be educated as early as possible about transparent and ethical practices, as well as what to do if faced with media bribery. Media transparency should also become a part of ethics chapters and discussions in the introduction courses. Media bribery is not a distant issue for the U.S. media practices, so it should not be treated as such in media and strategic communication education. Students who graduate with bachelor’s degree in public relations should not wait until the graduate school to learn about media transparency. What about those practitioners who do not choose to continue their education? Media transparency should become a part of core, undergraduate curriculum in public relations, journalism, and advertising. Educating students about media transparency is also a good topic to discuss at the upcoming U.S. public relations education summits and professional media relations seminars.

Limitations

Although the researchers believe the study was a successful first study of U.S. media transparency using Tsetsura's (2005) framework and an updated version of the Klyueva and Tsetsura's (2010) survey, there were a few limitations of the study. First, the survey instrument was shortened as advised by PRSA because of concerns of the length of the survey. This did not provide the opportunity to collect data on other media outlets, such as news websites or blogs, which might have provided interesting findings, given the native advertising movement. However, the researchers think this study provides a solid basis for the next step in future investigations of the United States media transparency online.

Additionally, the survey response rate was low. Despite the fact that PRSA warned researchers that an average response rate to online surveys is 2.5%, this study was able to secure a 4% response rate. One reason for the low response rate could be that PRSA members experience so-called survey saturation. Prior to this survey, PRSA had just concluded a survey of its own. Additionally, the survey was sent out over the Easter weekend, and the researchers received hundreds of automatic "out-of-the-office" replies.

Additionally, the researchers would have liked to provide respondents with a few more opportunities on the survey to share personal experiences through open-ended questions. The qualitative data that came from the one open-ended question was profound and provided interesting insight into the quantitative data. Much more could have been shared if more open-ended questions were allowed by PRSA. In-depth interviews with participants will help to collect more detailed data in the future.

Finally, it could be argued that the responses from this survey could be skewed due to the fact that PRSA members might be more aware of ethical issues than those who are not members. PRSA has a code of ethics and a board of ethics and professional standards. Therefore, members of PRSA might pay more attention to ethics than professionals who are not members of an organization at all. But PRSA membership is diverse, and this survey reflected the diversity. The respondents' years of experience varied from a few months to several decades, responses came from all regions of the country, and types of primary employment varied greatly. This diversity counteracts the argument that PRSA members might be more aware of ethical issues than other communication professionals. Finally, this first study aimed to benchmark the state of affairs in today's media transparency practices in the USA, and because PRSA members are at the forefront of media relations practices in the USA, they were an essential group to survey.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the United States' media transparency situation using Tsetsura's (2005) framework. The United States was ranked fifth on the 2003 Media Bribery Index, meaning there is a low likelihood that media bribery exists. After the index was published, researchers conducted multiple studies of media non-transparency across the world using Tsetsura's (2005) framework in Eastern European countries, which were all ranked lower on the media bribery index (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010, 2011; Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009). However, there was no research of this kind conducted in the countries which were ranked high on the original 2003 index. The current research of media transparency in the United States aimed to fulfill the gap to benchmark the opinions and attitudes of U.S. communication leaders, members of PRSA, toward media non-transparency practices in light of increasing popularity of native advertising in the U.S. media.

From the survey data, the researchers concluded that, although media bribery is not a severe issue in the United States, media non-transparency concerns, particularly in regard to indirect forms of media pressures, still exist. Specifically, three forms of indirect media bribery are more common among the local and regional U.S. media rather than among the national media: not news worthy news release published in exchange for paid ad; advertisement produced to look like regular article; not clearly labeled as ad; and advertising sales puts financial pressure on outlet. U.S. local and regional media face advertising and financial pressures to publish or air corporate materials – a finding that is consistent with previous research on media non-transparency in other parts of the world, including China, Poland, Russia, Romania, and Ukraine.

Several U.S. communication leaders in this study expressed their frustration with the challenges and pressures that the local and regional media outlets face. This could be due in part to the fact that there are fewer journalists in the United States today who work with strict time and financial demands. However, as the number of public relations professionals increases and the number of journalists decreases in the United States, professionals of both fields will need to work together to ensure media transparency is not being sacrificed.

Furthermore, this benchmarking study provides a great opportunity for PRSA and other professional organizations in the United States to lead a new media transparency campaign that will work to ensure that media bribery of any kind is not acceptable at any level across all media platforms. A clear distinction between media bribery, media non-transparency, native advertising, and brand journalism needs to be established by the U.S. professional organizations and associations. By creating guidelines and engaging in dialogue, public relations professionals and journalists can help achieve greater U.S. media transparency to increase the levels of trust and credibility of both professions. Public relations professionals can help ensure media transparency by making sure their information subsidies are news worthy and not manipulative. They should not give in to any media bribery demands. Journalists should work to define what a gift is, when they will accept one, if at all, and should ensure that they disclose in their news reports whether they personally, or their media outlets, have benefited from a product or service in any way. Such disclosure will help to eliminate indirect media bribery and address native advertising concerns.

The researchers hope that the results of this study will bring better awareness about media transparency and its importance to the U.S. media and public relations professionals in the country. If PRSA and other professional organizations choose to become advocates of media transparency, an opportunity for major steps forward exist in further pursuit of global media transparency (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2011). To ensure media transparency in the United States, and ultimately worldwide, communication leaders must understand the current situation, address what can be done, and make practical changes to current media practices. This study specifically encourages U.S. professionals to engage in dialogue about media transparency, which in turn can help professionals in the United States and across the world advocate for global media transparency.

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Table 1. Reported means for print media bribery constructs national media local/regional media

<i>Kind of bribery</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Material that appears as a result of direct payment	3.5*	1.12	222	3.3*	1.11	220
Benefit from provision of product/service with no clear disclosure	2.25	1.31	220	2.19	1.23	221
News media have written policy covering receipt of samples, free gifts, etc.	2.4	1.97	220	2.47	1.75	220
Not news worthy news release published in exchange for paid ad	1.89*	1.38	222	2.55*	1.42	222
Advertisement produced to look like regular article; not clearly labeled as ad	2.32*	1.14	221	2.61*	1.15	221
Conflict of interest	2.39	1.54	219	2.29	1.37	219

Advertising sales puts financial pressure on outlet	2.09*	1.41	219	2.68*	1.27	219
News source puts financial pressure on outlet	2.16	1.56	219	2.33	1.5	219

*A difference is significant at $p \leq .05$

Table 2. Reported means for TV programming media bribery constructs national media local/regional media

<i>Kind of bribery</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Material that appears as a result of direct payment	3.29*	1.51	221	3.11*	1.12	221
Benefiting from provision of product/service and not clearly disclosed	2.19	1.26	221	2.12	1.21	221
News media have written policy covering receipt of samples, free gifts, etc.	2.32	1.97	220	2.29	1.77	220
Not news worthy news release published in exchange for paid ad	1.85*	1.4	220	2.34*	1.43	222

Advertisement produced to look like regular article; not clearly labeled as ad	2.29*	1.17	221	2.49*	1.17	222
Conflict of interest	2.35	1.55	219	2.21	1.4	219
Advertising sales puts financial pressure on outlet	2.16*	1.42	219	2.66*	1.35	219
News source puts financial pressure on outlet	2.16	1.58	219	2.29	1.53	219

*A difference is significant at $p \leq .05$

**Beyond “Klout®”
A Qualitative Exploration of Influence, Online or Offline**

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines influence and its similarities and differences offline and on, applying Latane’s Social Impact Theory (1981). The results suggest a means of measuring influence online.

If the corporate communication and marketing industry has a *bête noire*, it surely is how to measure influence, particularly in the online world. Influence is defined by Merriam-Webster as “The power to change or affect someone or something: the power to cause changes without directly forcing them to happen” (Merriam-Webster 2014). The Word of Mouth Marketing Association defines influence thusly: “The ability to cause or contribute to a change in opinion or behavior” (Beam, et. al. 2013, p. 6). This latter definition has been adopted by the Coalition for Public Relations Research Standards, via the Social Media Measurement Standards initiative (SMMStandards 2015), and is currently being circulated for adoption among the coalition member organizations, which include the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), which are the primary public relations and corporate communications professional associations in the U.S., and many other trade and marketing and communication industry groups, including the Council of Public Relations Firms (CPRF), the Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC), and their Canadian and United Kingdom-based equivalents.

These bone fides for the definition of influence are important, because intrinsic to the arguments that make such matters controversial in the PR industry is the concept that influence is easily measured through observable public behavior online. A common definition has helped to sculpt the debate.

I use several terms interchangeably. The “social” world is comprised of Internet-based services, and when people interact with them, they are “online.” I also refer to “social networks,” that is, the people who are using one or more of these services. More specifically, Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, and Twitter are the highest ranked social networks by of Internet users (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart and Madden, 2015). Throughout this thesis, you will see social, online, networks, sites, and services used to describe the online world in general terms.

A social marketing company, Klout, makes its business in determining who is likely to be influential in the social realm and then delivering paid messaging to those people in their specific area of influence in hopes that they will amplify the messages to people within their social networks. Klout aggregates social behavior and uses a proprietary algorithm to who will be influential in what subject area. The result is a “Klout score,” a single number that purports to be an apples-to-apples comparison measure of someone’s influence (Klout 2015). Klout is important, not least because from its founding in 2008, it sought to be “the standard on influence,” and use of social media in public relations, and in marketing, depends on figuring out who influences whom.

With Twitter, for example, to form a network, users “follow” other users they find interesting, and get followed themselves. Posts from these followers, called “tweets,” can be forwarded on, or “retweeted” to share content with their network. The frequency of this retweeting and the number of followers a user has, creates an extended network. A users can retweet a posting without addition, comment or alteration. Or, can reply to a tweet, with a comment or question, and that action creates a “mention” that brings the tweet to the target’s attention. Otherwise, tweets from followers rush by in a stream, only being read or noticed if the user happens to be paying attention. The acts of replying and retweeting are frequently cited as evidence of influence.

Similarly, on Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, and other social networks, users post content and the people in their network have opportunity to share, comment and otherwise rate it. For Klout and other similar services, this behavior is what defines influence. In that analysis, there is no mention of the content of these posts, replies, shares and comments. It is not

difficult at all to reply, share or comment. How is this sufficient to describe those acts as influence?

In marketing, these activities might be influence. Marketing differs from public relations in terms of its direct purpose, which is to facilitate the exchange of value for goods and services. Marketers currently define their discipline as: "...the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" (AMA 2013). This is a much loftier description than was offered 30 years earlier: "the integrated analysis, planning, and control of the "marketing mix" variables (product, price, promotion, and distribution) to create exchange and satisfy both individual and organizational objectives," (AMA 1985 as quoted in Brodie, Corviello, Brookes, and Little 1997), in that the benefits described in the definition are broadened to include partners and society. From a more practical standpoint, marketing is primarily about driving sales, whether through traditional or more modern "relationship marketing" means. As marketing, for about the last 20 years, has sought to include relational as well as transactional techniques, social media and indeed, the whole online revolution in communication has permitted a more personalized and relationship-focused method of driving revenue (Brodie, et. al. 1997).

Conversely, for public relations practitioners, the "relations" side of our function has always been paramount, and though PR is perfectly capable of selling, it traditionally has focused more on "managing the relationship between an organization and its stakeholders" (Grunig and Hunt 1984, p. 6). PRSA conducted a public process to refine definition of the term, eventually declaring that, "Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA 2012).

The paramount researcher in support of this view is James Grunig, emeritus professor of public relations at the University of Maryland, and the leader of the Excellence Study conducted in the 1980s and 1990s. Grunig and his Excellence colleagues eschew the narrow view of public relations as only a means of generating publicity, media relations or marketing support, opting instead for a broader, more strategic view, namely, public relations as a management function. Further, Grunig avers in his Excellence Theory that public relations should be operated using two-way, symmetrical tactics, seeking not only to attain organizational objectives, but contributing to those of the organization's stakeholders and, idealistically, society as a whole (Grunig 1992).

These distinctions are not insignificant when considering how to evaluate and measure influence. A marketer seeks to maximize the number of people who see his message and the frequency with which they do, but in the new world of social networking, the scale is different. User-generated messaging far outpaces organizational messaging in this space and thus, the marketing metrics and measurements are still being determined and refined (Winer 2009). Still, maximizing the reach of messaging remains a primary goal in marketing, so an influence model that brings about wider reach and increased frequency could well be determined to be effective.

How then should influence be measured in the public relations sense? Blogger and public relations practitioner Justin Goldsborough considers the issue potentially unresolvable (Goldsborough 2011), as no one can know what is inside someone's head, regardless of whether they engage in social networking and message amplification behavior. Trade press and self-described experts offer facile, conflicting, and self-promoting methods of influence measurement that lack a serious research base. For example, companies like Vitruve and Altimeter, and the aforementioned Klout draw significant criticism from practitioners (Paine 2012, Gilliat 2012, Kadet 2012, Williams 2010). Vitruve assigned the value of a Facebook fan (now called a "like")

based on a series of arbitrary figures. Altimeter sought to prove a correlation between revenue or stock price and social media activity, never considering that successful organizations might invest more resources in social media than their less successful counterparts. Klout keeps its analytical platform and methodology a secret, and of late has been focused less on the measurement aspects of its business and more on helping people be more influential, albeit by its own definitions (Klout 2015).

Reaching back to the mid-twentieth century, we have tried to understand the process and power of influence in context of communication effectiveness. Pioneering public communication practitioner and researcher Harold Lasswell even has a maxim that should be familiar to anyone in the business of communication. An act of communication, he writes, involves “who says what to whom in what channel with what effect” (Lasswell 1948, p. 84)? Note that “with what effect?” polishes off the aphorism, implying that even so many years ago, there was a desire to measure the success of communication activity. In the first 50 years of mass communication scholarship, practitioners struggled to understand this basic mechanism of influence, person-to-person and many-to-few, even as the latter-most element became increasingly important. After all, if we cannot articulate the result of our communication activities, what is the point?

I have been thinking about online influence for some time (Williams 2013, Williams 2011, Williams 2010) and based on my experience and the paucity of conclusive evidence to the contrary, am becoming convinced that the path to effectively measuring influence lies in better understanding the nature of how influence works in real life. Measurement implies a quantitative element; things that can be counted are essential to measuring, but the qualitative approach can offer richer and more substantive insight owing to the flexibility of the methods of research (Peshkin 1993, Carson, et. al. 2001, Mason 2002).

The primary purpose here is to inform the process of measuring online influence for public relations purposes, even as we seek to better understand its foundations and behaviors. This is why I decided on a qualitative approach.

Review of Related Literature

I searched literature using the Kent State University Library database search tools. They draw upon several databases, include Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, and Communication and Mass Media Complete; Google Scholar was also used, primarily to ensure that articles in related disciplines not covered under the more specific databases could be included, as relevant. Initial search terms included: “Measuring Online Influence” and each permutation of those terms. I also consulted citation lists for potentially helpful materials, methods, ideas and additional terms to search under. This process was first conducted in 2012, repeated in 2013 and again in both 2014 and 2015.

I started with a large number of sources and eliminated duplicate or repetitive materials, (Mason 2002) selecting those that most strongly made their points. This process, while exhaustive, does not imply that all the potentially relevant research is included.

The main themes that emerge from the literature fall into these categories, which form the structure of the review of the literature. Though there was occasional overlap (a social network is a group, for example), the literature is clear on the differences among the categories. Those categories are:

1. Influence as a consequence of position within a social network.
2. Influence applied by a group on its individual members, to include the impact of homophily.

3. Influence concerning social impact and opinion leadership.

Table 1. Literature reviewed, by influence category

Position in social networks	Groups, homophily & common interest	Social impact & opinion leadership
Bakshy, Hofman, Mason, & Watts (2011)	Bagozzi, Dholakia & Mookerjee (2006)	Asch (1951)
Borge-Holthoefer & Moreno (2011)	Bisgin, Argarwal & Xu (2012)	Baldwin (2009)
Dwyer (2007)	Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo (2004)	Gu & Ye (2014)
Granovetter (1973, 1983)	Dwyer (2012)	Jin & Phua (2014)
Katona, Zubcsek & Sarvary (2011)	Hennig-Thurau (2004)	Karch (n.d.)
Kitsak, Gallos, Havlin, et.al. (2010)	Hogg, Terry & White (1995)	Miller & Brunner (2008)
Krebs (n.d.)	Liao (2005)	Ohanian (1990)
	Michalski & Helmig (2008)	Rubel (2008)
	Okazaki (2009)	Satell (2011)
	van Dijck (2012)	Shinton (2012)
		Trusov, Bodapati & Bucklin (2010)

In this paper, I omit the detailed review of literature for space. The final thesis is available beginning in June 2015. Please contact me for details.

Methodology

Zaltman (2003) avers that only from a strong foundation of what people think can we produce effective communication strategy. As noted in the review of literature, the current state of understanding online influence relies excessively on publicly observed online behavior (Klout, Kred, Twitter analytics, Facebook insights, etc.) Uncovering tacit knowledge through use of projective techniques in an interview situation permits the sort of depth of understanding only possible using qualitative means, and the use of qualitative research in public relations and marketing is well-supported (Mason 2002, Daymon and Holloway, 2002). Everett and Johnston (2012) call explicitly for expanded use of ethnography in public relations research, noting that so much of public relations relies on understanding culture that using research methods congruent with those used by scholars seeking to understand culture can only be wise. They stress the importance of understanding context, with the researcher participating in the research as a means to forge a new synthesis of understanding beyond single perspectives. Further, they claim, use of ethnography in public relations is infrequent, presenting an excellent opportunity to enhance the terms of research in a salient and positive way.

Social Impact Theory (Latané 1981) grounds this research, though the work on Network Theory from Granovetter (1973 and 1983), and Social Identity Theory of Tajfel (1979), explained well in Ashforth and Mael (1990), also provided salient insights. In particular, the elements of strength, immediacy and number of sources foots neatly with the public relations need to identify potential sources of influence on publics and the context under which those

influences can be harnessed in the organizational communication effort. Developing the application of Social Impact Theory may help explain both the group and network influences, as we could apply strength, immediacy and number of sources to groups, and to other types networks. That effort is beyond the scope of this thesis, but offers fertile ground for future research.

Research Design

I recruited participants from my personal network of colleagues, clients and acquaintances, starting with a convenience sample of 35 selected with age, ethnic and gender considered. Of these, 25 agreed to depth interviews, and five of those chosen agreed to including ethnography, where I observed the subjects performing their online routine and asked further questions about what they were doing, and why. Twenty interviews were conducted by telephone, with five combination interviews and ethnographies conducted during in-person interviews, all during the period between October 31, 2014 and January 6, 2015. The interview questionnaire and rationale for each question are listed in the appendix.

The ethnography questions depended on what behavior the subjects performed online. Mainly, these subjects' activity was related to news, but not exclusively. Those questions are also listed in the appendix.

I originally intended to conduct 10 ethnographies, but it was evident immediately that the observation and questioning added little insight. This was surprising, as Everett and Johnston (2012) had so strongly argued for including ethnography. There are several likely reasons why the effort proved not valuable. First, nearly all subjects remarked that they had never really thought much about the mechanisms of influence in their own personal and professional lives. Given the format of the ethnography, where I observed subjects' online behavior and asked them questions about it, it is possible that we did not offer enough of a period of reflection to enable them to consider their motivations carefully. Second, the ethnographies followed the depth interviews, and fatigue or repetition may have affected their ability to self-analyze. Third, the presence of a researcher could have inhibited the subjects' behavior. Finally, the variety of possible reasons for subjects' online behavior may have made it difficult for them to focus on which had the most impact at any given point during the ethnography.

Description of Research Subjects

Subjects included 14 men and 11 women; 10 are currently employed as professional communicators in marketing or public relations. Ordinarily, this would represent an issue, as researchers often exclude such subjects. I chose to move forward because much of the need to effectively target those to be influenced is carried in the marketing and communications industry. Gathering specific knowledge about how industry professionals see influence is useful in this regard.

Respondents were largely of the professional class, though from many different family economic and geographic backgrounds. Many different industries and job types are represented, and professional communicators (those in public relations, marketing, advertising, etc.) make up 40% of the total number of subjects, the largest single group. Age range was from 20s to 50s, with one subject aged 70; 11 were in their 50s, five in their 40s, two in their 30s and six in their 20s. A notable limitation here is a lack of ethnic diversity. One subject was African-American, one Hispanic (of native Central American and Caucasian descent), and one Asian-American. Further detail on research subjects is available upon request.

Each interview appointment was set for 60 minutes; the ethnographies added 45 minutes to that appointment, however, on average, the interviews ran 44 minutes. The ethnography/interview combinations averaged 15 minutes longer. All were audio-recorded and transcribed by an online transcription service, www.Rev.com, then analyzed first using the questionnaire as categorization tool, question by question, summarizing the subjects' answers in a spreadsheet to determine themes and inform a preliminary coding structure. I then performed a qualitative content analysis (Elo and Kyngas 2007, Hsieh and Shannon 2005) of all 25 transcripts, coding against a 34-item matrix using NVIVO, a qualitative research computer application. Field notes for all 25 were written in two bound notebooks, which were scanned and saved along with interview transcripts and notes to a Google Drive folder that is encrypted and password-protected.

The coding matrix used Latané's (1981) principle of social forces (p. 344) as the first two tiers. Thus, if Strength is the first of Latane's social forces, he describes salience, power, importance or intensity as the components that define strength. By analyzing the degree to which each of these four attributes are mentioned by the subject, we can evaluate strength. I did not provide any information about Latane, the Social Impact Theory, or his structure to subjects in advance. In this research, subjects described what influenced them, and what they believed influenced others, providing a lexicon of terms that were then arranged according to Latané. Latané (1981) does not provide specific definitions for all terms, but his intent seems clear, and I have proceeded accordingly. The research's procedure also corrects a redundancy in Latané's four-part schema; salience and importance are closely related terms, with the former describing what we might call the most important characteristic. In this research, age, homophily, prior relationship and status, which Latané stipulated as attributes of strength in general, I have defined as attributes of importance. Salience is defined here as the product of a source's behavioral attributes, conceptual attributes and personal interest. Personal interest is further defined as a product of self-gratification, source and topic; that is, a subject's interest can derive from a given source, a given topic, or the whims of desire (gratification), or a product of all three, where subjects' descriptions of the reasons for their personal interest do not fall into either conceptual or behavioral categories. Conceptual attributes are defined by the subjects' description of the attributes an influencer possesses, such as respect, trust, credibility or empathy that make them influential – who or what they are. Behavioral attributes are defined as subjects' description of what the influencer does that makes them influential – what they do. In all cases where I define a term as “this research,” the interview data have informed the definition. Further information, including the coding matrix and definitions, is available upon request.

From the 25 interviews and five ethnographies, 2,353 references were coded. There is a high degree of overlap among these items; frequently, for example, the description of an influencer touched on status, prior relationship, and behavioral and conceptual attributes. Therefore one subject data record could yield four references coded. Additionally, when analyzing the coded data, I looked for differences between sexes by calculating the total number of references for each question by coding category by sex, then the percentage of references of the total for each category. This removed, effectively, the difference in number of male and female subjects as an analytical issue. A similar method was employed to compare professional communicators and non-communicators.

Results

All subjects of this research defined influence in their own words. The four most

frequently mentioned were “something,” “change,” “ability,” and “behavior.” Influence, then, is “something with the ability to change behavior.” Influence is a highly complex process that is not easily distilled, and this research demonstrates that it is so. Latané’s (1981) simple schema omits classification at the most individual level, retaining flexibility to define what is meant by strength, immediacy, and number. I take full advantage of that flexibility here, as noted in the methodology section above. Refer to Table 5 for a distillation of the relationship between Latané’s definitions and my own. In the paragraphs that follow, I summarize the results of the research, then provide more detailed information.

Primary Attributes: Strength, Immediacy, & Number, by the Numbers

Judged by sheer number of references, nothing is more important than strength when describing the reasons for influence. Of the four primary characteristics of strength (salience, power, importance and intensity), salience and importance dominate, and the components of salience describe the ideal influencer in terms of behavioral and conceptual attributes. The influencer behaves in a way that the subject values, and models the behavior the subject aspires to. Conceptually, they are respected, trusted, and have credibility. The subject’s personal interest also plays a role in salience, either by dint of topic, source or gratification. The overall importance of the influencer depends greatly on status, the position of the person in the hierarchy of sources a subject describes as influential. These are parents and grandparents, teachers and business mentors, people who have a prior relationship with the subject and whom they feel a kinship to. These are people the subjects have ready access to, even if separated by geography, as half the interviewees note; they are close thanks to technology. If they aren’t related, they often are described as nearly friends, even in unbalanced power situations at work or school.

There were 549 references coded to strength, representing nearly 20% of the total number of references coded. Salience accounts for 330 of the strength references. Of the 189 references coded to importance, 100 of them come from status. Just 30 mention power or intensity.

Immediacy (the absence of filters or barriers, and closeness in space and time) produced 107 references from 24 of 25 subjects. Closeness produced 63 references, and descriptions reflecting emotional proximity referenced 22 times and physical proximity 10 times. Absence of filters/barriers yields 42 references, 29 of which are coded availability.

The topic of number was mentioned just 10 times. Only two subjects stipulated that the size of an ideal influencers network would be important to them when assessing their capacity to influence.

By sheer numbers, of course, there are more references for male over female subjects given the difference in number of subjects of each sex. Evaluated on the basis of percentage of references against total references by gender, a similarity of perspective is revealed. Only one attribute differs by 5 percentage points or more, “prior relationship with.” Men referenced that attribute nearly twice as often as women. Two other attributes crested 3 percentage points in difference. Women were 25% more likely to reference conceptual attributes than men, and less likely to reference personal interest than men by more than 11%. With regard to professional communicators, there are significant differences when contrasted with those subjects who are not in that industry, save with regard to social media use. Communicators referenced social media to a greater extent than did non-communicators. Other differences were so small as to be irrelevant, especially given the small total number of subjects.

Question 1: Who Has Influenced You the Most?

Subjects were permitted to choose more than one main source of influence, and many did. As a group, relatives, parents, grandparents or others outpaced other types of influencer as primary. Business mentors were cited 10 times. The reasons for their influence? The combination of salience driven by behavioral attributes – what they did; and conceptual attributes – what they were. These were people who were wise, respected, credible, open-minded and empathetic. They taught, shared, presented alternative viewpoints, wrote cogently, demonstrated curiosity, or gave back. These influencers often offered a clear reason for following their counsel, laying out challenges and daring others to prove them wrong. They are brave, forthright, supportive. The results show the proof of the axiom that actions speak louder than words.

The influencers' position in the hierarchy of sources of influence is high. They occupy places of authority, but few subjects saw them as exercising power over them. Instead, they were seen as more concerned with helping others, leading by example and not attempting to dictate. These were people less interested in their own success than in the success of others.

From a commercial standpoint, these findings present a difficult problem. How do you demonstrate leadership without it seeming self-regarding? If we measure people by their behavior only, we miss what is intrinsic about them; we don't understand them at all. The people these subjects claim as most influential, even those in a business context, are evidently more interested in others than themselves.

It's a servant mentality. It's a "I want to help you." "I want to guide." "I want to coach."
Very much invested in the outcome of the success of the person across the table, and very, at least outwardly, uninterested in his own success at the expense of anybody else's
(Subject 108, 2014)

My family history being what it is, the parents getting divorced at a young age, I spent a lot of time with my mother and not as much time with my father but, the primary influencer in the family was definitely my mother... one of things that something, my mother and my father do is allow people in their sphere of social sphere to be who they are...(Subject 102, 2014)

Question 2: Who or What Do You Think Influences Other People?

This question asks the subject to project the sources of influence on others. Among the 86 references within the answers to this question, 61 refer to salience attributes, 48 of which are in the category of personal interest. We can conclude, therefore, that subjects saw the main source of influence on others as a function of personal interest, plus behavioral and conceptual attributes. Subjects were critical of others in terms of influence and motivation, citing popular culture and the desire for acceptance and attention as sources of influence. Several subjects mentioned work and family as influencers of others, sometimes similar in comparison to their own and sometimes not. The need to be known, to exercise their subject matter expertise, to learn and be inspired, were all mentioned. Interestingly, subjects tended to focus not on the people who might be influencing others, but instead on the overall subject matter or situations that would bring about influence. An exception was multiple mentions of the impact of celebrities and popular cultural dynamics, of political figures or ideological sources. This finding reinforces the concept that perceptions of influence are dependent on personal perspectives. Table 8 summarizes these attributes.

Though there are few differences between men and women on this question, those that

are different are notable. Female subjects referenced immediacy attributes more frequently than did males, and men referenced importance and salience attributes more frequently than women. Among salience attributes referenced, the largest variance between men and women was the “source.” Men referenced this characteristic of others being influenced by their personal interest in the source just once, while women referenced it seven times. Table 9 summarizes these data.

There are critical drivers that impact the decisions we make, and critical influencers, and there are some people who are influenced by a desire to get self-recognized there. There are those who are seeking status because it makes them feel better about themselves. There are those who are more pragmatic and just wanting to get effectively from A to Z and whatever they're trying to accomplish. (Subject 107, 2014)

I think a lot of people use the Internet to kind of fill voids. I also think that people are afraid of face-to-face interaction and find the anonymity of the web comforting (Subject 125, 2015)

I don't know if our influence is located in the person or in the information or something about the information? If it's in a person, what about this person makes them influential? Is there a characteristic, is there some history with this person that they look up to makes them influential and credible, right? (Subject 110, 2014)

Question 3: Who Would Always Influence You?

The question asks the subject to create a fictitious person who always would be influential to them. The strength dimension is most referenced, with 72, with salience representing 49 of them. Of those 49, behavioral attributes account for 23 references, including giving back in the community, sharing knowledge, helping others, and modeling the behavior the subject aspires to. Conceptual attributes, things like respect, credibility, trust, inspiration, passion and wisdom, for 16 and personal interest for 14. There is some overlap in coding as subjects mention multiple reasons for their perspectives. The conclusion suggested by these findings is that subjects saw that actions speak louder than characteristics. It isn't enough to simply be, one must do if one is to exert influence.

Homophily plays a role here, with 11 subjects mentioning similar interests or capabilities, and 8 mentioning like-mindedness as important attributes in being consistently influenced. Table 10 shows the overall frequencies.

The idea of like-mindedness as a critical piece in influence suggests that people are reluctant to deviate from their coterie of existing sources. As one subject quite baldly put it, “Fox News is not going to influence me.” (Subject 101, 2014)

The attributes of an ideal influencer differ by sex, mainly in that males reference Strength>Importance>Status at a higher rate than females. Women reference Strength>Salience>Conceptual attributes at a higher rate than men. Women also referenced Immediacy attributes more frequently than men, suggesting that their consistent influencer would be available to them as opposed to a more removed, perhaps famous, figure.

This online person would have a wealth of experience in whatever I'm seeking information on or whatever experience I'm pursuing. Along with that experience ... Would come credibility and a sense of trust (Subject 107, 2014)

I was not willing to learn from just anybody. I wanted to learn from somebody who[m] I

thought had a similar background to me and weren't [sic] too many steps removed from where I was (Subject 104, 2014)

...[S]omebody who would influence me would be somebody, I don't care if he's male or female, but highly educated, higher socioeconomic status. One of those people who are kind of like me, they'd be politically liberal. Age wouldn't matter much (Subject 109, 2014)

Question 4: What Influences You When You Decide What to View or Watch, or More Substantive Things?

How does a subject characterize influence in more specific terms? In this case, the question asks for examples of influences for a full range of subject matter, whether as critical as looking for a job, or as ephemeral as merely selecting a television show to watch. Recommendations carry a significant role, but not from just anybody. The source of the recommendation matters, but in different ways to different subjects. One in particular said the recommender has to know her tastes and have a certain appreciation for worldview and history. Another talked being more likely to read or view something that matches his self-imposed narrative. Being challenged to think differently was important to another. Simple authority might not be enough. As one subject commented, official sources and experts may be less credible when commerce is involved. Several subjects mentioned they were more likely to trust a recommendation from someone sincerely trying to educate, rather than simply make a buck. This holds fascinating implications in the realm of social media influence.

Examining the reasons why subjects are influenced shows the role of specific attributes of the influencer. The secondary attributes of strength, importance and salience reveal much here. In contrast to subjects' answers to Question 1, about who influenced them the most, where behavioral attributes dominated, in this question, twice as many subjects refer to conceptual attributes. Generally, however, personal interest, prior relationship and the status of the influencer share frequencies. Salience attributes (behavioral attributes, conceptual attributes, and personal interest) yield 128 references to this question versus 59 for importance attributes (age, homophily, prior relationship with, and status), continuing the trend.

There are no appreciable differences between men and women subjects on this question. Salience attributes are referenced 47% of the time by both sexes (the actual difference between male and female is 0.43%, a fractional amount.) Where there are more significant differences, for example, in references to conceptual versus behavioral attributes, women referenced both at the same rate while men referenced Strength>Importance>Prior relationship more frequently.

I think it all comes back to the closed group of people that I'm around, whether or not it has their stamp of approval... (Subject 105, 2014)

I have these moments where I'm reading something, and I'm like, yes, this is exactly my thoughts on a subject. Then I start reading them and following them more, and I realize that it's like cronyism. All they're doing is saying things that I had already thought, or maybe, it's not, I'd already thought, that I would eventually think, if I had put the time into it (Subject 112, 2014)

[I rely on] Personal recommendations from people I trust. For something like books or

shopping it's somebody with similar tastes. For a job it would be somebody with similar experience, or experience at a company that I'm considering, whose opinion I trust (Subject 121, 2015).

Prospectively, it's, who's delivering the message, and in what context do I know that source? (Subject 103, 2014)

Question 5: What Are Some of the Most Important Activities on the Internet for You?

While it was tempting to select only subjects with significant social media activity for this study, I wanted to hear from people whose influence profile would be different from those who live in the digital realm. Because one of the salient questions here is whether there is a difference between online and offline influence, this question sought to understand the role of the Internet in the subjects' lives in general terms, regardless of their use or nonuse of social media.

Clearly, nearly all subjects use the Internet in some capacity. The way they describe their Internet use, however, differs. Most use the Internet for interpersonal communication (19 subjects, 21 references), with social media (18 subjects, 25 references) and news (17 subjects, 22 references) as next most frequent. Two subjects averred that they preferred other forms of communication, including telephone calls and personal meetings. One mentioned winning a business deal because of his willingness to travel to a remote place to have a personal discussion. A subject mentioned that she preferred to get news from newspapers, television and radio rather than on the Internet. Several subjects mentioned multiple activities in the context of news consumption. For example, a subject would watch a television newscast with tablet PC in hand and research claims of the guests and hosts. Another mentioned the role of YouTube, the video-based content distribution service, in learning how to do household chores, such as replacing a bicycle derailleur. One summarized his use of the Internet in two categories, information and entertainment.

There are few variances in Internet use between male and female subjects, aside from a difference in subject use of social media (higher among females) and in communication uses (higher among males.) Nor were there many differences among age groups, except a tendency among the youngest subjects to spread their Internet use more broadly across these activities. Social media use, however, is more commonly referenced among professional communicators, with nearly twice as many references as for non-communicators.

A part of this question asked what subjects would like to see more of or less of in terms of the Internet. The most mentioned two words were "find" and "news," "integrity" and "security" were mentioned five times each. Again, the top mentioned words very nearly form a sentence that summarizes what people want to see more of in the Internet -- "find," "news," "integrity," "security."

When asked what they would like to see less of on the Internet, subjects phrased things in different terms, though the overall meaning comes through. Less garbage. Fewer barriers to finding what they want. Less advertising and more relevancy.

The basic stuff of email, and...my outlook calendar, I'm very wedded to. I use my iPhone for addresses and phone numbers and all that as a depository of all those things. I am a Facebook mostly observer, not a poster, but I don't go on Facebook every day. There are certain people that I can keep up with... (Subject 113, 2014).

I do spend a large among of time on the Internet, but it's usually very focused on what I

...Influence is to impact the decisions that others make on a day-to-day basis by virtue of your words, your actions, behaviors, your communications, your messaging, your demeanor. This can be done in a positive way or negative way, obviously somewhere in between (Subject 107, 2014)

Influence is the ability for one's thoughts to be shaped by other ideas, by other people, by other sources. It's the input that one accumulates to help form, [or] that helps form that individual's perspective on things (Subject 115, 2014)

Influence is credibility. I guess credibility has honesty, transparency, all wrapped up into it (Subject 124, 2015)

Influence is influence. It's neither good nor bad. Basically it's something that has an effect on you (Subject 120, 2015)

I think that it [influence] is having the capability of persuading someone in one direction or another, regardless of whether we're talking about a product, an opinion or otherwise (Subject 118, 2014)

Discussion

The popular conception that online behavior is a proxy for influence may or may not be true, according to this research. Aside from the broadest themes, influence varies in its applications for individual people. Online, despite the anonymity of the avatar, people are people. Some live and die with the light of the public eye shining on them 24/7, comfortable in their minor celebrity. Others reveal themselves in shade, picking and choosing how and when to be public, where and withal to accept the responsibility of leading and guiding others, and to be led and be guided. Determining under what conditions they will be persuaded, moved to act, to change, to, "do it," as one subject (Subject 125, 2015) stated, is a much more complicated schema than the *doyens* of the social media insider's club would have us believe. I suggest that this research supports the concept that influence is a multi-way phenomenon. That is, we in public relations and marketing have focused too tightly on identifying influencers and not nearly enough on determining the receptiveness of those to be influenced. Herein we can apply the lessons of the literature and the research explored.

If observed online behavior is representative of influencer impact, then most people online are neither influenced or influencer, unless and until certain conditions exist. The receiver of influence must be willing to be influenced. The right combination of source, topic, personal interest, behavioral and conceptual attributes must be present – it must be salient for the influenced at that moment in time. The importance of the influencer to the influenced has to be determined; unless there is a prior relationship, it will be very difficult even for a member of the receiver's network to break through the cordon that surrounds him or her. Referrals help, but only situationally. It will be exceedingly hard for even the most ideal influencer to gain attention and action at the precise moment the influenced is ready for it. If the influencer's intent is anything but pure, the barriers get taller. We must know more about the influenced. Influencer marketing and public relations strategies are made much more difficult when we know too little about those who are the target of influence, particularly when aiming our campaigns at the most

affluent, educated consumers. Subjects told me that an influencer's pursuit of commercial gain in their communication will breed skepticism, unless the receiver already has an interest in the product or service. That finding confirms, conceptually, that influence needs to be evaluated from both source and target perspectives. This implies that the current practice of analyzing online behavior and making judgments about people's capacity to influence other is backwards. These findings are confirmed in the literature as well.

Consider that within networks, as discussed earlier, for example, in the works of Bakshy, et. al. (2011), Borge-Holthoefer and Moreno (2010), and Granovetter (1973 and 1983). The amount and direction of influence has no standard. Whether a given person in a network acts as a node, fostering influence, or a sink, limiting influence, depends predominately on the individual network and the individual people in it. This theory is quite attractive in its application to online influence because we perceive so many networks as online entities; Facebook and its burgeoning legion of fellow travelers are even referred to as "social networks." This literature supports my research conclusion that the perspective of the influenced must be taken into account in any exploration of network theory, whether that network is online or off, as the identified influencer might well turn out to be more of a hindrance than a help. This certainly is a case where evaluating influence from both directions would make great sense. Whole new patterns within the network could emerge based on Strength>Importance>Status and Strength>Salience attributes, helping to determine how the target of influence might be more receptive.

In groups, salience attributes again apply, as Salience>Personal Interest>Gratification, Personal Interest>Behavioral attributes and Personal Interest>Conceptual attributes could explain why people join and stay in them. Hogg, Terry and White (1995) posited that people play different roles within groups, and I would suggest that each may have different motivations and influence pathways. Okazaki (2009) finds that social identity fosters group identification, "who" a person is when playing that role; my research avers that Strength>Importance>Status attributes are present in influencers when the influenced assigns value to them. These examples suggest that the diversity of thought and opinion within groups can act to suppress influence, connecting the network and group analyses. My research supports the idea that influence relies more on the willingness of group members to be influenced, both actively, owing to their decision to join the group, and passively, owing to the mutual influence among members and that conferred on members by their presence in a group, regardless of whether the group is online or offline.

Latané's theory shows much promise for framing the question of influence as a function mainly of strength, in particular in terms of importance and salience as I have defined them. I will claim that I have confirmed Latané's work, as evidenced by the role of strength attributes in explaining how influence works, and have expanded upon it, because the discovery of Strength>Salience>Personal Interest attributes provides a previously unexplored set of reasons why people are influenced. Online, it is more difficult to see these attributes reflected without a broader exploration. Perhaps there are more behaviors to be analyzed than mere social media activities, such as those in Dwyer (2012). It is a compelling idea to look at the content of social comments that follow posts (such as on discussion boards, blogs, or Facebook) for congruent or divergent thoughts and ideas, evidence, if you will, of the influencer of the poster on the commenter. Such an analysis might lead to correlation to other types of activity, such as web traffic, or online purchases, but would require evaluating both ends of the influence chain.

The subjects of my research defined influence substantively. Changing or confirming thoughts and ideas, causing an action to be taken or one avoided, and doing so with a genuine desire to help others is a far more important and noble purpose than positioning one's brand,

chasing eyeballs or driving web traffic. These interviews make it abundantly clear that whatever currently passes for online influence, isn't. There is popularity, entertainment, and passing interest, but little in the way of substantive change or action in terms of thought or behavior. Subjects differentiated between the lexicon of influence established in the first three questions (heavily weighted to behavioral and conceptual attributes of Strength>Salience), and those of Question 4, which focuses on the tactics of online behavior. Credible sources and prior relationships become more important. For anyone in professional communication, the key to success is in knowing who will be most receptive to a campaign, and who among influencers is most likely to connect with the influenced at the time. This is a far more tailored strategy than the current one; this is, perhaps, an ironic finding, as so many communicators have been driving for scale in online communication at the very time they need to be more precise and customized. The literature also demonstrates this conundrum, as Latane (1981), Katona, Zubcsek, and Sarvary (2011), and Miller and Brunner (2008), all note the decline in influence as a social network increases in scale.

People have different criteria for what constitutes an influencer, but they agree on the basic definition of influence. The point is, however, that they have a set of criteria in their minds that is not easily adjusted (or influenced, to coin a phrase.) Even when they say that open-mindedness is a virtue of an influencer, they also say like-mindedness is as well. How can both of these attributes be reconciled? Under questioning, subjects extolled the importance of their own agreement with the influencer's attributes, even as they tended to discount the opinions of others in that regard. The subject's motives and impulses were pure, whilst others were influenced by base culture, by self-aggrandizement, by mere gratification. Whither open-mindedness now?

Some subjects differentiated between the on- and off-line worlds; a potentially explosive finding for communicators, but this was not common enough in the data to count as a trend and requires more investigation. Those who projected their opinions in this matter concluded that, were they online, their influencers would be the same as offline, but that they did not believe this would be the case for other people. The paradox continues, as some subjects stated that what influencers do (behavioral attributes) is more important than who they are (importance attributes), or what they are (conceptual attributes.) The explanations of influence offered here describe the processes by which people believe they, and others, are influenced, and the majority of references to these factors relate more to influence in general than specifically to it online. Simply put, influence is influence, regardless of where it occurs, where it originates, or in which direction it flows, but its actual impact depends mainly on whom shall be influenced.

There are several ways to apply this research to public communication strategy. First, let us as an industry return to strategic planning that starts with research. These findings indicate clearly that we must evaluate influence from both the influencer and influenced standpoint. There has been a disturbing tendency to think that research is passé, replaced by "crowd-sourced" intelligence via social media. My research shows, however, that drawing conclusions about influence and influencers from social media is complicated at best.

Second, the search for influencers revisits Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) from 60 years ago! The influencer communication effort is merely two-step flow writ onto the online screen and transferred to people other than the news media. In an age where direct communication is cheaper and more available than ever before, why would we relegate public communication to third parties on the basis of their social media activity, as Klout would have us do? Unless the third party has appropriate appeal to the influence target, either by virtue of source or other

factor, the effort will fail. That said, Klout is drawing conclusions about potential influence based on subject matter, to some degree (Klout keeps its own counsel with respect to its analytical algorithm), but mainly does so on the basis of online behavior.

Finally, we must measure influence in the same way we prepare communication campaigns, through research to know our customer, through careful planning, strategy, tactics and measures. Based on my research, there are eight dimensions of influence that could be measured directly, thorough a survey, or indirectly (and likely less effectively) through a content analysis of online postings. Note that we would not analyze the frequency of postings, or the subsequent sharing of them, but instead the subject matter and specific language of the postings. This method could follow Dwyer (2012), using qualitative thematic modeling, and centering resonance analysis to determine what happens to content of following comments and posts. Those data could then be correlated to other behaviors online, creating a fuller picture of the relationship between influencer and influenced. Table 18 shows the influence dimensions, together with a brief description of each.

Table 2. Eight dimensions of influence to be measured

Dimensions of Influence	Description
Immediacy>Closeness in space/time	Emotional or physical proximity of influencer to subject.
Strength>Importance> Prior relationship	The subject's past experience of the influencer.
Strength>Importance>Homophily	The sense that an influencer is similar to a subject in outlook, demographics, interests or other factors.
Strength>Importance>Status	Authority of the influencer over the subject, personal, professional or otherwise, as a consequence of position.
Strength>Salience>Behavioral attributes	What an influencer does that makes them influential.
Strength>Salience>Conceptual attributes	Attributes an influencer possesses that makes them influential
Strength>Salience>Personal Interest>Source	The overall interest in a source.
Strength>Salience>Personal Interest>Topic	The overall interest in a topic.

A survey could be entirely open-ended, permitting the subject to offer a wide variety of answers to a series of questions, or more focused. I propose the latter approach, with Table 19 showing a sample survey. The survey asks respondents to rate the importance of 12 attributes of influence based on my research. The order of questions should be randomized, but for the sake of clarity I have placed them in the order that illustrates the contrast between terms. The exact text of each item can be adjusted; my recommendation is that the rationale guide specifics. There are six sets of statements set up to measure the eight dimensions of influence.

Table 3. Influence sample survey

Please rate the following according to importance to you:		Rationale
The source of information	The subject matter of	Determining

	information	Saliency>Personal Interest Source/Topic priority
A recommendation from an authority	The aggregate opinions of many people	Determining
Someone who agrees with me	Someone who offers new perspectives	Importance>Status priority Determining
Someone who knows me well	Someone other people trust	Importance>Homophily priority Determining
Someone who inspires me with actions	Someone I trust	Importance>Prior Relationship priority Determining
Someone in my local area	Someone who is easy to reach	Saliency>Conceptual/Behavioral priority Determining
		Immediacy>Closeness in space/time priority

The goal is to determine which set of attributes is most likely to influence the subject. These eight attributes should provide insight into what people value with respect to influence. Additional items can be added as needed, such as specific subject-matter variables, or deeper explorations of each attribute, or additional items to further test assumptions and resolve any biases. A rating range of 1 (not at all important) to 5 (of utmost importance) will produce scores for each of the dimensions. The survey can be used with groups of subjects, perhaps controlling for demographic factors, with weighted averages for each dimension. For the sample survey, conducting a pilot test is highly advisable, followed by analysis to determine whether an index can be compiled based on the results.

The sample survey is geared to examine receptiveness to influence, but similar survey methodology and design could assess people's potential for becoming influencers, testing, for example, the extent to which someone possesses the saliency and importance attributes required by those being influenced. Self-reporting is risky, however, as persons wishing to be perceived as influential might not answer honestly. Asking people in further detail whom they find influential may release some new thinking in this area.

Another application of this research would be in the area of internal communications. Peer influencers are often sought out to serve as champions for organizational initiatives; these types of surveys could shed light on employees' receptiveness to influence from those champions as well as identifying potential champions.

The content analysis of online postings and comments would need to be tailored to specific situations and objectives.

Limitations & Opportunities for Further Research

This study is qualitative and exploratory in nature. Its findings are suggestive rather than generalizable. The range of subjects is quite limited in diversity, with insufficient participants in each age and ethnic category to permit investigations of similarities and differences in results, and the sample is unbalanced male to female. The limited usefulness of ethnography as performed suggests use of other methods to deepen understanding of online behavior.

There are many opportunities for further research based on this study, including expanding the qualitative assessment to include more people overall, and especially among non-

North American subjects. How different might these results be among Asian subjects, or those from Africa or Eastern Europe? Sharpening the focus to online influence is a reasonable tactic, as well, perhaps attempting to map online behavior to these dimensions and testing those assumptions with further qualitative research. Examining influence in terms of web usability and information architecture could be an avenue to employing different ethnographic techniques, even at the basic participant observation level. Online ethnographies may be helpful in this respect.

With few notable differences among men and women on the topic of influence in general, but a few exceptions given the situation, source or subject matter, further exploration of the sex differences in influence would be interesting. There also is the question of gender identity as a factor, rather than sex. As notions of masculinity and femininity expand past biological determinants, there are myriad paths a researcher might take.

Examining influence in the workplace, specifically applying these dimensions to the official and interpersonal relationships within an organization could prove instructive. Finally, there is the question of a quantitative study to determine whether the dimensions outlined here might produce a standard for measuring influence. This latter effort I find personally compelling, as standardization on an intellectually compelling and measurable basis could significantly change the practice of communication as regards influence. What is apparent is that furthering the research in this area is essential.

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View from the Upper Echelon: Examining Dominant Coalition Members' Values of Openness and Perceptions of Environmental Complexity and Organizational Autonomy

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Abstract

Research has shown that decisions about how organizations practice public relations are ultimately the domain of the dominant coalition. However, scholarship has yet to fully examine the values and perceptions that influence dominant coalition members' public relations decisions. Drawing on insights from systems theory and research on relationships, this study identifies one value (i.e., organizational openness) and two perceptions (i.e., environmental complexity and organizational autonomy) that have the potential to influence dominant coalition members' decision making. The study adopts the upper echelons perspective from organization theory to examine the relationships among these variables. It also considers the impact of formal environmental scanning by a public relations department on dominant coalition members' values and perceptions. The population of interest for this study was dominant coalition members of for-profit businesses, government agencies, and tax-exempt nonprofits in the United States. Data were collected through a national survey employing a purposive sample of 201 dominant coalition members at three for-profit businesses, three government agencies, and four non-profit organizations. These organizations were from the West, Mountain West, Midwest, South, and Southeast regions of the U.S. Both online and paper-and-pencil surveys were used. There were 118 usable questionnaires (58.71% response rate). The results show that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment were positively related to their perceptions of environmental complexity. Moreover, dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental complexity were positively related to their perceptions of organizational autonomy. Finally, the frequency of the public relations department's use of formal environmental scanning was positively related to dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness and perceptions of environmental complexity.

Purpose of the Study

Organizations today face the challenge of pursuing their missions and achieving their goals while maintaining positive relationships (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999) with a variety of stakeholder groups and publics that demand transparency (Rawlins, 2008), expect authenticity (Molleda 2010; Arthur W. Page Society, 2007), and are empowered through social media and other new media technologies to affect organizational reputation and behavior (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2012). In addition, organizations must deal with increased pressure from skeptical consumers, globalization, political polarization, and technological development (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2012; Edelman, 2011). After reviewing the complex nature of the contemporary business environment, a report by the Arthur W. Page Society (2007) concluded that “all of this makes the 21st century enterprise vulnerable at a wholly new level to unexpected developments that can damage brand, negatively affect employee commitment, undercut outside relationships and destabilize management” (p. 14).

A reality of this increasing complexity is that organizations must deal with a wide variety of stakeholders and publics, some seeking to limit an organization’s autonomy and others attempting to enhance it. Practitioners and scholars have proposed that the public relations function contributes to organizational effectiveness by ensuring that an organization has sufficient autonomy to pursue its mission and goals (Edelman, 2011; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). A loss of autonomy not only makes it harder for an organization to accomplish its goals, but also can result in significant financial loss as the organization is compelled to make costly changes to accommodate pressure from stakeholder groups (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Ehling, 1992). However, stakeholder groups that support an organization and trust it to make decisions that benefit them typically allow that organization more latitude to pursue its goals. In other words, organizational autonomy is tied to positive relationships.

Practitioners and scholars agree that in order for the public relations function to assist organizations in maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders, public relations practitioners must do more than just communicate messages; they must play an integral role in shaping organizational policy (Edelman, 2011; L. A. Grunig, et al., 2002; The Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2012). Nonetheless, Edelman (2011) noted that “many organizations still determine policy and operating approach in a vacuum, and then hand it to the PR folks to explain” (p. 2). Similarly, scholars have developed a power-control perspective of public relations, which asserts that a group of the most powerful people in an organization (i.e., dominant coalition) makes decisions about how public relations will be practiced by an organization (Berger, 2005; Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001; L. A. Grunig, et al., 2002; Kelly, 1995; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992). While this research has largely focused on what public relations practitioners can do to become part of the dominant coalition (Berger, 2005), scholars have yet to fully examine “how things work inside the dominant coalition” (Berger 2007, p. 229), which includes the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members that influence their thinking and decisions about public relations.

The purpose of this study is to build theory about the values (i.e., organizational openness) and perceptions (i.e., environmental complexity and organizational autonomy) that have the potential to influence dominant coalition members’ decisions about public relations. This study draws on research from public relations and organizational theory to identify and explore these values and perceptions. Specifically, research based in systems theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978), including work by O. G. Mink, B. P. Mink, Downes, & Owen (1994) and Lauzen and Dozier (1992, 1994), identifies openness to the environment as a key value that should play a

role in how dominant coalition members interpret and respond to their organization's operating environment (Katz & Kahn, 1978). In addition, the upper echelons perspective (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) proposes that dominant coalition members' values serve as a filter through which they form perceptions the organization's environment, such as environmental complexity and organizational autonomy. According to public relations theory, these perceptions are likely to be influenced by the information practitioners gather and package through environmental scanning.

This study contributes to the power-control literature in public relations by incorporating insights from organization theory that had not previously been adopted. In addition, prior public relations scholarship assumes that organizational autonomy and openness to the environment are important dominant coalition variables; however, only a few studies have attempted to measure either concept. Finally, previous studies have typically used public relations practitioners to evaluate dominant coalition members' perceptions (e.g., Berger, 2005; Lauzen & Dozier, 1994; Okura et al., 2008). A few studies have examined the perceptions of public relations practitioners and dominant coalition members (e.g., L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; Plowman, 1998, 2005a). One recent study focused on dominant coalition members' perceptions of the strategic perspective of public relations managers and their participation in strategic decision making (Brønn, 2014). However, most of these studies have focused on the characteristics of public relations departments and have not fully examined the characteristics of dominant coalition members. Therefore, this study expands the perspective by measuring the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members directly.

Literature Review

Systems Theory

Public relations scholars have adopted systems theory to explain the role of public relations in organizations (Broom, 2009; Plowman, 2005b). Systems theory is based on the concept of interdependence, or the mutually dependent relationship of organizations and their external environments (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Because organizations are interdependent with their environments, interaction with and adjustment to the environment is required for organizational success and survival. Public relations is suited to play a boundary spanning role that can facilitate the necessary interaction and adjustment. However, organizations cannot completely abandon the mission and goals that define them in an effort to adapt to change pressures from their environments. In other words, too much adaptation can have a negative impact on organizational survival. Therefore, organizations must strike a delicate balance between being open to their environments and being selective about the parts of the environment to which they pay attention.

Resource Dependence

Pfeffer and Salancik's (2003/1978) resource dependence perspective explores the complexities of interdependence. It proposes that organizations are engaged in a constant struggle for autonomy and survival because of their dependence on their external environments for resources. Because organizations need resources from their environments to survive, resource dependence proposes that an organization can be controlled by the constituencies that possess those resources. As a result, organizational behavior can only be understood in the context of the relationships that the organization has with other social actors. Public relations scholars have explained that these external constraints can result in costly adaptation for organizations that must bend to the pressure of activist groups, comply with government regulations, and meet employee demands or customers' expectations (L. A. Grunig et al., 1992). That is, organizations

desire autonomy from their environments to “pursue their goals with the least interference from the outside” (p. 67). Nonetheless, because organizations are interdependent with their stakeholders, they are never completely autonomous. They only attain a degree of autonomy by engaging and cooperating with the very groups that can limit or enhance their autonomy. Given this reality, L. A. Grunig and colleagues concluded that organizations give up some autonomy by cultivating relationships, but ironically, in giving up some autonomy, they maximize their autonomy from the environment.

Power-Control Perspective

J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1989) concluded that systems theory alone does not provide a sufficient explanation of public relations behavior. In establishing the theoretical framework for the Excellence Study, Dozier and L. A. Grunig (1992) and L. A. Grunig (1992a) turned to the power-control perspective to explain why research had not found a relationship between an organization’s environment and its public relations behavior. According to this perspective, organizations do not adapt to their environments by selecting optimum structures for that environment because within the organization “there is no consensus as to what is being optimized” (Dozier & L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 407). A key concept in the power-control perspective is the recognition of a *dominant coalition* within organizations, composed of individuals who have “power to influence decisions, set organizational goals, and decide how those goals will be met” (Dozier, 1990, p. 9). According to Berger (2005), the concept of a dominant coalition is important in public relations theory because “this group of powerful insiders makes strategic choices, allocates resources, and influences public relations practices” (p. 8). While the environment does not directly determine the structure or behavior of organizations, the power-control perspective holds that the environment plays a role in shaping the values and knowledge of constraints held by the dominant coalition (Child, 1972; Hage, 1980). Accordingly, Hage (1980) said that “if one knows the coalition’s values — their preferences about utilities and performances — then one can predict what the organization will do” (p. 16).

Upper Echelons Theory

Research in organization theory has explained that organizations reflect the values and thinking of their top management teams (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). The upper echelon perspective seeks to identify the factors that influence the decision making of top managers (Finklestein & Hambrick, 1990) and, thus, can provide insights about the values and cognitions of dominant coalition members and how those values and cognitions arise. According to Hambrick and Mason (1984), and as shown in Figure 1, managers’ values and cognitions act as a screen between the actual environment and their perception of the environment. They assert that managers can only pay attention to certain aspects of an organization’s environment because it is impossible for managers to pay attention to every aspect of it. In addition, managers only selectively perceive certain aspects of the environment within their narrow field of vision. And in the end, the information managers pay attention to is “*interpreted* through a filter woven by one’s cognitive base and values” (p. 195, italics in original). This theory has been used predominantly to argue that the senior leaders of the organization “provide an interface between the firm and its environment, and are relatively powerful, and therefore their choices and actions are likely to have an impact on the organization” (Carpenter, Geletkanycz, & Sanders, 2004, p. 753). Additionally, this theory is compatible with systems theory and resource dependence theory,

which both recognize the enacted nature of an organization's environment.

Values of Openness to the Environment

Of the many values held by members of the dominant coalition, the value that potentially has the greatest bearing on how organizations practice public relations is the value of organizational openness. Public relations scholars have long made a connection between the degree of openness of an organization and its support of and reliance on the public relations function (e.g., Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Public relations scholars have examined the consequences of organizations choosing to behave as open or closed systems using a variety of measures, however, little research has been conducted to understand the antecedents of openness. Specifically, Lauzen and Dozier (1994) examined the impact of dominant coalition openness on public relations. They found that outer-directed issues management and a participative organizational culture, both of which can be seen as an indication of a dominant coalition's values of organizational openness, had a mediating influence on public relations participation in organizational decision making and public relations manager role enactment.

Because of the inconsistency in approaches and measurement regarding values of organizational openness, this study adopts the Open Organization Model (OOM) developed by O. G. Mink et al. (1994) to explore these values among dominant coalition members. The OOM is based on systems theory and defines openness as full interaction among all the parts of the organization and with its external environment. It identifies three dimensions of openness that can be studied at any level of analysis: (1) unity, (2) internal responsiveness, and (3) external responsiveness. The model has been tested through the authors' consulting work with for-profit, government, and nonprofit organizations. The validity and reliability of the model also have been tested as part of a dissertation study (Stubbs, 2007). The current research will focus specifically on the openness dimension of external responsiveness, as this dimension is the most reflective of public relations thinking. Furthermore, the current study assumes that the dimension of openness can be measured at the individual level as a value held by dominant coalition members.

Perceived Environmental Uncertainty

Consistent with systems theory, resource dependence, and upper echelon's theory, public relations scholars view organizational environments as psychological constructions that are formed in the minds of organizational members as information comes into an organization (White & Dozier, 1992). According to Weick (1979), people in organizations pay attention to specific information from particular parts of the organization's environment while ignoring other information in a process called enactment. Furthermore, White and Dozier (1992) explained that the information to which organizations pay attention becomes "the perception of the external world upon which all subsequent decisions are based" (p. 92).

Public relations researchers have relied on Child's (1972) conceptualization of environmental uncertainty, which consists of three dimensions: complexity, turbulence, and threat. Environmental complexity as "the heterogeneity and range of environmental activities which are relevant to an organization's operations" (p. 3). Environmental turbulence is "the degree of change which characterizes environmental activities relevant to an organization's operations" (p. 3). And environmental threat is "the degree of threat that faces organizational decision-makers in the achievement of their goals from external competition, hostility or even indifference" (p. 4). Child recognized that the external environment constrains organizational

action; however, he also proposed that top organizational decision makers have agency to make strategic choices independent of environmental conditions.

Lauzen and Dozier (1992) found that public relations practitioners' perceptions of environmental complexity and turbulence were related to manager role enactment. Lauzen and Dozier (1994) reported that practitioner's perceptions of complexity and turbulence were positively related to their perceptions of dominant coalition openness. Okura et al. (2008) studied all three dimensions of environmental uncertainty and concluded that practitioners' perceptions of the organization's environment did not have a direct influence on organizational decision making; however, they did find that formal environmental scanning mediated the relationship between perceived environmental uncertainty and use of scanning research in organizational decision making

Perceived Organizational Autonomy

Ultimately, the perceptions that dominant coalition members have formed about their environments will shape their perceptions of their organization's freedom to operate. This is because information about an organization's environment contributes to dominant coalition members' perceptions of the organization's interdependence with stakeholders in its environment. Most public relations scholarship has focused on the autonomy of the public relations department rather than the autonomy of the organization (e.g., Cloudman & Hallahan, 2006). Few public relations scholars have examined the impact that public relations has on organizational autonomy. J. E. Grunig (1984) found that organizations with high and low degrees of environmental constraint used asymmetrical public relations, while organizations with moderate constraints used symmetrical public relations. L. A. Grunig (1987) reported that mechanical organizations (large scale, low complexity) had the most autonomy and the most cooperative relationships, while organic organizations exhibited the least autonomy and the most competitive relationships. Kelly (1995) attempted to measure a charitable nonprofit organizations' propensity to forfeit autonomy in exchange for gifts. She concluded that she actually measured accountability to donors and, as a result, proposed that autonomy and accountability are two ends of a continuum. Similarly, Wilson, Rawlins, and Stoker (2013) studied the impact of paradoxical tensions, resulting from simultaneous pressure exerted by both poles of the relationship paradox (autonomy and dependence), can influence the decision-making process in organizations. They reported that when managers fail to recognize that their organization is dependent on (i.e., accountable to) stakeholders to achieve organizational goals, paradoxical tensions can focus decision making on exerting autonomy and, ultimately, have a negative effect on the organization.

While public relations scholars have identified organizational autonomy as a key concept in explaining the value of the public relations function (L. A. Grunig et al., 1992), they have not provided a concise conceptual definition of the construct. Following Kelly's (1991) approach to defining autonomy, the current study examined the construct and its dimensions using the scholarly literature from higher education, nonprofit and government, organization theory, entrepreneurship, and organizational behavior. As a result, this study adopted Stainton's (1994) definition of organizational autonomy: "the organization's freedom from both internal and external constraints to formulate and pursue self-determined plans and purposes" (pp. 21-22). This definition is broad enough to describe the perceptions of autonomy held by decision makers at a variety of organizations. Further, this definition takes into account potential constraints from stakeholders inside and outside the organization, reflecting the range of stakeholders with whom

public relations practitioners are typically concerned. In addition, as the literature from multiple disciplines consistently differentiates between substantive and procedural autonomy, this study adopts the two dimensional structure of autonomy (e.g., Berdahl, Altbach, & Gumpert, 2011; Lumpkin, Coglisier, Schneider, 2009). Substantive autonomy is the power of an organization to determine its own mission, goals, objectives, policies, and priorities. Procedural autonomy is the power of an organization to determine the means by which it will pursue its mission, goals, and objectives, and implement its policies and priorities.

Environmental Scanning

Scholars have defined environmental scanning as a public relations function that detects changes or problems in an organization's environment (Dozier, 1990; Okura et al, 2008). According to White and Dozier (1992), information provided by boundary spanners, such as public relations managers, can be crucial to dominant coalition members because their perceptions of the organization's environment are only as accurate as the information they have received about it.

Research about the environmental scanning activities of public relations practitioners has found two types of scanning activities: formal and informal. Formal environmental scanning uses rigorous social scientific research methods such as surveys, public opinion polls, and content analyses (Dozier, 1990; Dozier & Broom, 2006). On the other hand, informal environmental scanning reflects "informal 'gut' feelings about 'what is going on' and 'what works'" (Dozier, 1990, p. 7). While research has demonstrated that public relations practitioners use both types of scanning activities (Dozier, 1990; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002), Broom and Dozier (2006) noted that scanning research is not useful to the dominant coalition unless "the practitioner can translate scanning . . . data into information that makes sense to other managers and clarifies implications of vying decisions" (p. 153). According to Okura et al. (2008), formal environmental scanning incorporates the idea of translation because its activities involve "packaging scanning information into the numeric rhetoric of management" (p. 57). Lauzen (1995) reported that formal environmental scanning allowed organizations to track a greater number of external issues in a shorter amount of time. Additionally, Okura et al. (2008) reported that formal environmental scanning mediates the relationship between perceived environmental complexity (as evaluated by a public relations practitioner) and use of scanning research in organizational decision making. Based on these findings, the current study assumes that public relations can have an influence on dominant coalition members' perceptions of the environment through formal environmental scanning.

Hypotheses

Based on upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), this study proposes that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness serve as a filter through which they form their perceptions of the organization's environment, which can be influenced by formal environmental scanning by the public relations function. In turn, dominant coalition members' perceptions of the organization's environment should affect their perceptions of organizational autonomy. This assumption is based on the resource dependence notion that because of interdependence with their environments, organizations seek autonomy to pursue their goals (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003/1978). Subsequently, dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy likely impact their values of organizational openness to the organization's environment. This assumption is based on the OOM conceptualization of

values as “beliefs based upon our most fundamental understanding of our world” (O. G. Mink et al., 1994, p. 21). Based on these assumptions, which are diagrammed in Figure 1, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: The more dominant coalition members value organizational openness to the organization’s environment, the lower their perceptions of environmental uncertainty.

H2: Dominant coalition members’ perceptions of environmental uncertainty will be negatively associated with their perceptions of organizational autonomy.

H3: The lower dominant coalition members perceive the autonomy of their organization, the less they will value organizational openness to the organization’s environment.

H4: The more public relations conducts formal environmental scanning, the more dominant coalition members’ will perceive uncertainty in their organization’s environment.

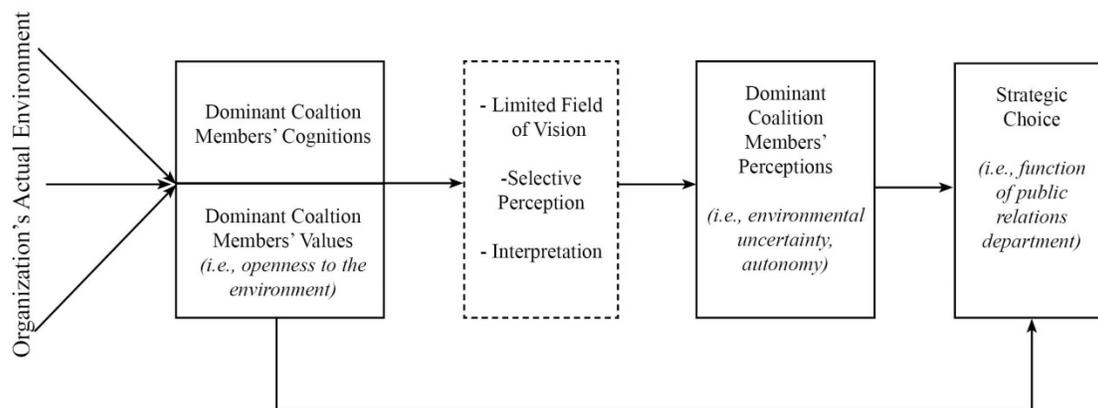


Figure 1. Upper echelons model, adapted from Hambrick and Mason (1984), applied to public relations management.

Method

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design to test its hypotheses. This method was deemed appropriate because surveys allow researchers to examine how participants respond to phenomena in their natural settings, gather a large amount of data from large and diverse populations, and include responses from participants who are geographically distant (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). All of the scales used interval measurement, specifically 5-point Likert-type scales as researchers have generally recommended that such scales range from five to nine points (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991).

Population and Sample

The population of interest for this study is dominant coalition members of for-profit businesses, government agencies, and tax-exempt nonprofits in the United States that employ at

least one full-time public relations practitioner. Dominant coalition members from these three types of organizations, representing the three primary sectors in the United States, were selected for study because different goods produced by each sector (i.e., private, public, and common; Lohmann, 1992; Kelly, 1998) are expected to result in variance among dominant coalition members' values and perceptions. There are no lists of all dominant coalition members working in for-profit businesses, government agencies, or tax-exempt nonprofits in the United States. Furthermore, members of this population are only likely to participate in research where the study is approved and valued organizationally. For these reasons, drawing a random sample of the population of interest was not feasible. As a result, this study employed a two-stage purposive sampling procedure. The first stage involved the identification of organizations from each sector with at least one full-time public relations practitioner. The second stage focused on identifying members of the organizations' dominant coalition for each organization.

Organizations were identified in the first stage of sampling based on the researcher's prior experience working in the public relations field and his membership in professional associations for public relations practitioners. The researcher made a conscious effort to include a variety of organizations from different industries and subsectors, as well as different geographical regions of the country. The first stage of sampling resulted in 32 prospective organizations: 19 for-profit organizations, five government agencies, and eight nonprofit organizations. The researcher contacted either the chief executive officer or the senior public relations manager at each of these organizations by sending a research invitation letter. Ten organizations agreed to participate: a public biomedical company in the Southeast (For-profit A), a private health and fitness company in the Southeast (For-profit B), and a public energy company in the Midwest (For-profit C), a school district in the West (Government A), a state government agency in the Mountain West (Government B), a convention and visitor's bureau in the Southeast (Government C), a public university in the Mountain West (Nonprofit A), a public broadcasting (PBS) network in the Midwest (Nonprofit B), an art museum in the Northeast (Nonprofit C), and a hospital in the South (Nonprofit D).

After recruiting organizations to participate, the researcher worked with contact people at each organization on the second stage of sampling. Working directly with contacts in each organization allowed the researcher to identify those individuals who were part of the dominant coalition due to their formal position in the organization, as well as those individuals who participated in decision making by exercising informal power. This approach is consistent with the public relations and upper echelons literature. The researcher instructed each organizational contact person to identify the dominant coalition by including the top two levels of management, members of the organization's board of directors or trustees, if appropriate, and individuals who were outside of these formal structures of power but who still had considerable influence on decision making in the organization. Following this process, the researcher produced a sampling frame of 201 dominant coalition members from the 10 organizations participating in the study.

Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire for this study included measures of the four concepts of interest as well as questions to gather demographic information. It was pretested by six public relations and management experts. These experts included senior public relations officers at a large healthcare organization, a private university, a regional utilities company, and a government transportation agency. The other two experts were a former public relations officer for large corporations and an assistant chief financial officer of a Fortune 500 company. Following the pretest, a pilot study

was conducted to further refine the questionnaire. The researcher secured the approval of a utility company in the Southeast to administer a Web-based version of the questionnaire to 60 of the organization's senior managers.

Values of organizational openness to the environment. This study measured dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment by adopting 10 indicators from the external responsiveness scale from the OOM (O.G. Mink et al., 1994). External responsiveness is defined as a continuous free flow of information "in and out of the organization so its products, services, and systems can adapt readily to changes in its social, economic, and technical environment" (p. 18). The 10 items adopted for this study represent the organization's openness to its environment. This subscale is one of three that form the overall measure of external responsiveness. The other two subscales measure the openness of individuals to each other and the openness of work groups to each other within the organization. The adopted subscale is the only one of the three to focus on the adaptability and openness of the organization. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that each statement generally applied in their organization. Stubbs (2007) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.91 for this specific scale. The pilot study produced an alpha of 0.94.

Perceived environmental uncertainty. This study measured dominant coalition members' perceived environmental uncertainty using a scale developed by Okura et al. (2008), which encompasses three distinct dimensions: complexity, turbulence, and threat. The original scale developed by Okura et al. (2008) asked respondents to rate six different publics: (1) consumers/clients, (2) stockholders/investors, (3) media, (4) government/regulatory agencies, (5) community members, and (6) labor organizations. Respondents rated each public based on one attribute that reflected each of the three dimensions of environmental uncertainty. The current study added a seventh public that traditionally has been important to public relations—employees. By adding this public, the measure of environmental uncertainty used in this study captures the influence of internal and external publics on the uncertainty faced by dominant coalition members. As a result of this addition, environmental uncertainty was measured using 21 indicators, seven publics on each of the three dimensions.

Perceived environmental complexity was measured by asking respondents to "rate the importance of the following publics to the survival and growth of your organization" (Okura et al., 2008, p. 59). Perceived environmental turbulence was measured by asking respondents, "How often do the attitudes or behaviors of the following publics change in a manner that affects the survival and growth of your organization?" (p. 60). Perceived environmental threat was measured by asking respondents, "To what degree do the following publics pose an immediate or potential threat to the survival and growth of your organization?" (p. 60). Okura and colleagues reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79 for an index created from all three scales. The pilot study produced an alpha of 0.70.

Perceived organizational autonomy. A review of the research on autonomy from higher education, nonprofit and government, organization theory, entrepreneurship, and organizational behavior did not find a measurement scale that could be adapted easily to suit the purposes of this study. Therefore, a new scale was created to measure dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy following the eight steps identified by DeVellis (1991). Using Stainton's (1994) conceptual definition of autonomy, the researcher made an initial selection of 20 items, 10 to measure substantive autonomy and 10 to measure procedural autonomy. These items were adopted and modified from existing autonomy measures from a variety of disciplines. This procedure was used successfully by Lumpkin et al. (2009) in

producing an index to measure autonomy in an entrepreneurship context. Each of the items was modified to reflect the concerns of public relations scholars about an organization's ability to determine and pursue its mission, goals, objectives, policies, and priorities.

To ensure that the autonomy scale assessed the overall autonomy of the organization, both dimensions of perceived organizational autonomy were measured by asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed that each of the 20 items applied to their organization. In addition, respondents were asked to consider the combined impact of all organizational stakeholders (e.g., consumers and employees) in their responses to each item. The pretest and pilot study allowed the research to refine this scale. Exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis enabled the researcher to reduce the scale to eight items, four for substantive autonomy and four for procedural autonomy, which loaded on their intended factors. The substantive autonomy subscale had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 and the procedural autonomy subscale had an alpha of 0.88. The overall perceived organizational autonomy scale had an alpha of 0.90.

Perceived public relations use of formal environmental scanning. Perceived use of formal environmental scanning was measured with the six-item scale used by Okura et al. (2008). This scale rates participants' agreement about how often public relations practitioners engage in formal environmental scanning behaviors. Formal environmental scanning differs from informal methods because it entails "*translating or packaging* scanning information into the numeric rhetoric of management (p. 57, italics in original). In the Okura et al. (2008) study, the scale was administered to individual public relations practitioners. In the present study, the scale was administered to dominant coalition members, therefore, the wording of the instructions was adapted to reflect this change. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which the public relations department in their organization is involved in the activities described by each of the items. Okura et al. (2008) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 for this scale. The pilot study produced an alpha of 0.81.

Questionnaire Administration

This study gathered data based on the survey administration preferences of the participating organizations. Namely, the choice was between a paper-and-pencil questionnaire and an online questionnaire. The researcher adopted this approach because of the difficulty in gaining access to and getting survey responses from this study's elite population. As the researcher worked with his organizational contacts to identify dominant coalition members, he asked each contact person to choose the type of questionnaire that would yield the highest response rates for that particular organization. In all, two organizations (Government B and Nonprofit D) chose the paper-and-pencil questionnaire, while the remaining eight organizations chose the online questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered during the months of January through March 2014. A total of 118 usable questionnaires were collected by return United States Postal Service (USPS) mail or through the online survey database. This represents a response rate of 58.71%.

Results

Demographic Profile

The 118 total dominant coalition members' responses included seven (5.93%) from For-profit A, seven (5.93%) from For-profit B, four (3.39%) from For-profit C, 21 (17.80%) from Government A, 38 (32.20%) from Government B, seven (6.03%) from Government C, 13

(11.21%) from Nonprofit A, six (5.08%) from Nonprofit B, nine (7.63%) from Nonprofit C, and six (5.08%) from Nonprofit D.

Not uncommonly, a few of the respondents who returned usable questionnaires did not answer all of the demographic questions. There were 74 (63.79%) male respondents and 42 (36.21%) female respondents. Two respondents did not provide information about their gender. Turning to race/ethnicity, a large majority of the respondents were Caucasian ($N = 107$, or 92.24%). Asian American respondents ($N = 4$ or 3.51%) and Hispanic American respondents ($N = 4$, or 3.45%) were equally represented. In addition, there was one (0.86%) Native American respondent.

With regard to education, 117 respondents provided information about the highest level of education they attained. There were 8 (6.84%) who had some college, 39 (33.33%) who received a bachelor's degree, 50 (42.74%) who earned a master's degree, one (0.85%) who had a Juris Doctorate, and 17 (14.53%) who had doctoral degrees. More than half of the respondents ($N = 68$, or 58.12%) held a graduate degree, including MA, JD, and PhD. Two of respondents selected the "other" category.

A related question asked respondents to indicate their college major if they had completed at least some college. Among the 113 participants who provided information about their college major, 26 (23.01%) majored in business, 12 (10.62%) majored in engineering, 14 (12.39%) majored in social science, 14 (12.39%) majored in journalism/communication, 17 (15.04%) majored in natural/physical science, two (1.77%) majored in computer science, and 16 (14.16%) majored in humanities/liberal arts. There were 12 (10.62%) who selected "other."

Regarding the past job experience of the 115 dominant coalition members who answered this question, 36 (31.30%) reported general administration, four (3.48%) human resources, two (1.74%) legal, four (3.48%) research and development, 10 (7.83%) finance, four (3.48%) accounting, and nine (7.83%) marketing. Almost half ($N = 46$, or 40%) of the respondents selected the "other" category in answer to this question. Their responses included the following categories: (1) academics, (2) administration/secretarial, (3) education, (4) healthcare/medicine, (5) hospitality, (6) information technology, (7) journalism, (8) natural resource management, (9) nonprofit/arts management, (10) operations, (11) production, and (12) sales.

In terms of the participants' current positions, the questionnaire asked two different questions. First, the respondents were asked if they were a board member or trustee of the organization. A total of 8 participants indicated that they were board members or trustees. Out of these 8 responses, 4 (50%) participants indicated that they were board members or trustees, while the other 4 (50%) selected the "other" category. Next, if respondents indicated that they were not a board member or trustee, they were asked about their current position. Among the 107 dominant coalition members who answered this question, 16 (14.95%) were in the C-Suite (i.e., a chief officer in their organization), 52 (48.60%) were senior managers, 25 (23.36%) were middle managers, and six (5.61%) were supervisors. There were 8 (7.48%) respondents who selected the "other" category.

In addition, all respondents were asked their age, the number of their direct reports, the number of years they had worked at their current organization, and the number of years they had been employed in their current position. The average age (in years) of the respondents was 50.47 ($SD = 9.75$), and ages ranged from 27 to 71. The average number of direct reports of the respondents was 17.27 ($SD = 53.29$). The responses to this question fell between a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 380. The average number of years that respondents have worked at their current organization was 13.98 ($SD = 9.57$). Finally, the average number of years that

respondents have been in their current position was 6.41 ($SD = 7.38$).

Preliminary Data Analysis

Before testing the hypotheses of this study, a preliminary data analysis was conducted using SPSS 20.0. Variables were computed for each the scales by calculating an average score for each scale. Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha, and Pearson correlations among the variables used in this study. The means of the variables ranged from 2.77 to 4.34, and the corresponding standard deviations were between 0.40 and 0.89. Reliabilities ranged from 0.74 to 0.92. The correlation coefficients were between from .05 to .26.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for the study's four variables

Variables	Descriptive Statistics			Pearson Correlations		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	1	2	3
1 = Values of openness to the environment	4.34	.55	.89	1		
2 = Perceived environmental uncertainty	3.30	.40	.74	.26* (<i>n</i> = 93) ^a	1	
3 = Perceived organizational autonomy	4.01	.56	.86	.17 (<i>n</i> = 113)	.05 (<i>n</i> = 96) ^a	1
4 = Perceived public relations use of formal environmental scanning	2.77	.89	.92	.25** (<i>n</i> = 114)	.27** (<i>n</i> = 96) ^a	.23* (<i>n</i> = 117)

Note. ^aAn analysis of missing data revealed that responding to perceived environmental uncertainty index was difficult for some participants. Twenty-two (18.64%) of the 118 respondents did not respond to one or more of the indicators for this index. As a result the number of participants in these analysis are lower than the sample total. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2. Pearson's *r* correlations of three dimensions of environmental uncertainty and two dimensions of autonomy with values of organizational openness to the environment.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Values of organizational openness to the environment	1				
2. Perceived environmental complexity	.43*** (<i>n</i> = 98)	1			
3. Perceived environmental turbulence	-.004 (<i>n</i> = 105)	.09 (<i>n</i> = 99)	1		
4. Perceived environmental threat	.14 (<i>n</i> = 104)	.02 (<i>n</i> = 98)	.34*** (<i>n</i> = 105)	1	
5. Perceived substantive autonomy	.05 (<i>n</i> = 114)	.30** (<i>n</i> = 102)	.05 (<i>n</i> = 109)	-.07 (<i>n</i> = 107)	1
6. Perceived procedural autonomy	.24** (<i>n</i> = 113)	.11 (<i>n</i> = 102)	-.16 (<i>n</i> = 108)	-.06 (<i>n</i> = 106)	.59*** (<i>n</i> = 117)

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Hypothesis Testing

The first hypothesis predicted a negative relationship between dominant coalition

members' values of organizational openness to the environment and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty. In other words, as dominant coalition members' value of organizational openness increases, they will perceive less uncertainty in their organization's environment. This hypothesis was tested using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation. As shown in Table 1, there was a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty ($r = 0.26$, $n = 93$) that was significant at the $p < .05$ level. This hypothesis was also tested by calculating correlation coefficients among dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment and the three dimensions of environmental uncertainty: complexity, turbulence, and threat. The results of this analysis, presented in Table 2, revealed that there is a moderate positive relationship between dominant coalition members' openness to the environment and their perceptions of environmental complexity ($r = 0.43$, $n = 98$) that was significant at the $p < .001$ level. The relationships between dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness and the other two dimensions of environmental uncertainty were small and not significant.

While these tests found a statistically significant relationship between values of organizational openness to the environment and perceived environmental uncertainty, the results are contrary to the direction stated in the hypothesis and demonstrate that as dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness increase, they perceive more uncertainty in their organization's environment. Specifically, as dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness increase, they perceive more complexity in their organization's environment. Therefore, although the relationship has theoretical value, H1 was not supported as stated.

The second hypothesis predicted a negative relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental uncertainty and their perceptions of organizational autonomy. This hypothesis also was tested using Pearson correlation analysis. As reported in Table 1, there was a small but non-significant positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental uncertainty and their perceptions of organizational autonomy ($r = 0.05$, $p > .05$, $n = 96$). This hypothesis also was tested by calculating correlation coefficients among the dimensions of environmental uncertainty (i.e., complexity, turbulence, and threat) and dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy. Whereas there were no significant relationships between either perceptions of environmental turbulence or perceptions of environmental threat and perceptions of organizational autonomy, there was a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental complexity and their perceptions of organizational autonomy ($r = 0.24$, $n = 102$). This relationship was significant at the $p < .05$ level. This means that as dominant coalition members perceive more complexity in their organization's environment, they also perceive that their organization has increased autonomy. While this relationship was significant, it was in the opposite direction than that predicted in the hypothesis.

A final test of this hypothesis used Pearson correlations to examine the relationships among the three dimensions of perceived environmental uncertainty and the two dimensions of perceived organizational autonomy. The results of this analysis, presented in Table 2, indicate a relatively moderate positive relationship between perceptions of environmental complexity and perceptions of substantive autonomy ($r = 0.30$, $n = 102$) that was significant at the $p < .01$ level. In other words, as dominant coalition members' perceptions of complexity in their organization's

environment increase, their perceptions of substantive autonomy also increase. Again, this relationship was in the opposite direction than predicted. No significant relationships were found between the other dimensions of both variables. Therefore, although the relationship reported in this analysis has theoretical value, H2 was not supported as stated.

The third hypothesis predicted a positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy and their values of organizational openness to the environment. Again, this hypothesis was tested using Pearson correlation analysis. As shown in Table 1, there was a small but non-significant positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy and their values of organizational openness to the environment. This hypothesis was also tested by calculating correlation coefficients among the two dimensions of perceived organizational autonomy (i.e., procedural and substantive) and dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment. Table 2 shows that there is a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of procedural autonomy and their values of organizational openness to the environment ($r = 0.24, n = 113$) that was significant at the $p < .01$ level. This means that as dominant coalition members' perceptions of the procedural autonomy of their organization decrease, their values of organizational openness to the organization's environment also decrease. There was no significant relationship between perceived substantive autonomy and dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness. Therefore, based on these correlational analyses, H3 was partially supported.

Table 3. Pearson's r correlations of three dimensions of environmental uncertainty with perceptions of public relations use of formal environmental scanning

	1	2	3
1. Perceived environmental complexity	1		
2. Perceived environmental turbulence	.09 ($n = 99$)	1	
3. Perceived environmental threat	.02 ($n = 98$)	.34*** ($n = 105$)	1
4. Use of formal environmental scanning	.33** ($n = 102$)	.003 ($n = 109$)	.22* ($n = 107$)

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Hypothesis four proposed an inverse relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of public relations' formal environmental scanning activities and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty. The correlation matrix in Table 1 shows a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of the public relations' use of formal environmental scanning and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty ($r = 0.27, n = 96$). This relationship was significant at the $p < .01$ level. This means that as dominant coalition members' perceptions that the public relations uses formal methods to scan the environment increase, their perceptions of environmental uncertainty also increase. Specifically, Table 3 illustrates how perceptions of the public relations department's use of formal environmental scanning are related to the three dimensions of perceived environmental uncertainty: complexity, turbulence, and threat. The correlation coefficients show that perceptions of the public relations' use of formal environmental scanning have a significant, positive relationship with perceived

environmental complexity ($r = 0.33, p < .001, n = 102$) and perceived environmental threat ($r = 0.22, p = .02, n = 107$). In other words, as dominant coalition members perceive that the public relations department's use of formal environmental scanning increases, their perceptions of environmental complexity and environmental threat increase. Table 3 also shows that the relationship between perceptions of the public relations' use of formal environmental scanning and perceived environmental turbulence was small and non-significant. Therefore, based on the results of the Pearson correlations, H10 was not supported because the results were significant, but in the opposite direction than was predicted by the hypothesis. While not a hypothesis of this study, it is worth noting that dominant coalition members' perceptions of public relations' formal environmental scanning activities were positively related to dominant coalition members values of organizational openness ($r = 0.25, p < .01, n = 114$). As a result, an increase in formal environmental scanning by public relations can also increase dominant coalition members' values of openness to the organization's environment.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to build theory about the values (i.e., organizational openness) and perceptions (i.e., environmental complexity and organizational autonomy) that have the potential to influence dominant coalition members' decisions about public relations. An in-depth understanding of dominant coalitions is critical to public relations because scholars have adopted a power-control perspective that focuses on the central role of the dominant coalition in determining how organizations will relate to their environments (e.g., Berger, 2005; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002) and practice public relations. While previous research has provided hints about the factors that shape the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002), it has yet to explain "how things work inside the dominant coalition" (Berger, 2007, p. 229). Understanding the dominant coalition is an important endeavor for public relations managers because if public relations managers know the dominant coalition members' values and perceptions they will be able to predict the decisions the dominant coalition will make (Hage, 1980).

In an effort to examine the factors that influence dominant coalition members' values and perceptions that could impact the management of public relations within organizations, this study adopted upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). This theory provided a framework that was used to conceptualize the relationships involved in shaping dominant coalition members' values and perceptions. Specifically, this study proposed that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness would serve as a filter through which they would form perceptions of environmental uncertainty, or the complexity, turbulence, and threat faced by the organization. Subsequently, these perceptions of environmental uncertainty would influence dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy. The results of this study support the theoretical propositions drawn from upper echelon's theory.

First, the results showed that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment were positively related to environmental uncertainty. Further analysis revealed that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment were positively correlated with only one of the three dimensions of environmental uncertainty: environmental complexity. It should be recalled that openness to the environment was defined as the continuous free flow of information "in and out of the organization so its products, services, and systems can adapt readily to changes in its social, economic, and technical environment" (O. G. Mink et al., 1994, p. 18). In addition, environmental complexity

was defined as “the number of external forces or influences that the organization must attend to pursue its objectives” (Okura et al., 2008, p. 56). Therefore, this relationship signifies that the more dominant coalition members value the free flow of information for the purposes of adaptation and change, the greater their perception of the number of stakeholder groups the organization must attend to as it pursues organizational goals.

This result is in line with previous theoretical assumptions drawn by J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1989) that dominant coalition values would play a role in the model of public relations employed by an organization. Specifically, they proposed that liberal political values, external values, and innovativeness would be related to symmetrical communication, which represents an open-system approach to public relations. The current study’s finding also corresponds with the results reported by Cancel, Mitrook, and Cameron (1999), who found strong support for the relationship between dominant coalition enlightenment about maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders and individual characteristics of dominant coalition members, including open-mindedness.

This study’s results also demonstrated that dominant coalition members’ perceptions of environmental complexity were positively related to their perceptions of organizational autonomy. In other words, information about an organization’s environment contributes to dominant coalition members’ perceptions of their organization’s interdependence with stakeholders in its environment. Moreover, detailed analysis found that dominant coalition members’ perceptions of environmental complexity were positively related to their perceptions of substantive autonomy, which was defined in this study as the power of an organization to determine its own mission, goals, objectives, and priorities. Therefore, this relationship signifies that as dominant coalition members perceive a greater number of stakeholders that their organization must attend to pursue its objectives, the more they will perceive that their organization has power to determine its own mission, goals, objectives, and priorities. On the surface, this relationship appears to be counterintuitive. It seems more reasonable that as an organization must attend to an increased number of stakeholders, constraints imposed on the organization by these stakeholders would result in decreased organizational autonomy. However, the results of the current study seem to indicate that environmental complexity is not a reflection of constraint but a recognition of interdependence with stakeholders and publics who have a relationship to the organization “whether they [the organization or its publics] want such relationships or not” (L. A. Grunig et al., 1992, p. 69). In fact, the results obtained in this study support Pfeffer and Salancik’s (2003/1978) contention that the great irony of interdependence is that organizations must surrender some of their autonomy to “gain some control over the activities of another organization” (p. 261).

L. A. Grunig et al. (1992) explained this irony in terms of an organization’s relationship with publics. While they theorized that relationships limit autonomy generally, they noted that positive relationships with publics “make organizations more effective because they allow organizations more freedom—more autonomy to achieve their missions” (p. 69). This idea is also supported by results from Kelly’s (1995) research about fundraising and organizational autonomy. She reported that larger nonprofit charitable organizations were more likely to practice the two-way symmetrical model of fundraising because their broad base of donors allowed them to “be more flexible in meeting donors’ needs and interests” (p. 129) without giving up control of the organization. Based on this logic, an increase in the number of quality relationships with organizational stakeholders equates to an increase in the autonomy of an organization to choose its mission and goals. In other words, organizational autonomy does not

appear to be a finite organizational resource that is divvied up among stakeholder relationships until it is exhausted. Rather, it seems that organizational autonomy is a renewable resource that arises from relationships with stakeholders. Therefore, organizations have much more to gain than they have to lose by opening themselves to relationships with multiple stakeholders in a complex environment.

Moreover, the study found that dominant coalition members' perceptions of procedural autonomy were positively related to their values of organizational openness to the environment. This finding supports Katz and Kahn's (1978) linkage of autonomy with a system's degree of openness to environmental input. In the current study, procedural autonomy was conceptualized as the power of an organization to determine the means by which it pursues its goals and objectives. Therefore, when dominant coalition members perceive that they have great latitude in determining the methods they will use to accomplish organizational goals, they will also place a high value on the free flow of information between an organization and its environment for the purposes of adapting and changing the organization. Conversely, when dominant coalition members have little latitude in determining the methods they will use to accomplish organizational goals, they will not be as interested in exchanging information with the environment in order to adapt and change. The conclusions seem to indicate that organizational decision makers do not want to be forced into or constrained to adopt a particular course of action. Their openness to the environment is contingent on stakeholders not overstepping their bounds to dictate the way the organization should go about pursuing its goals and objectives. This relationship was first reported by J. E. Grunig (1976) who found that organizations closed themselves off from the environment when they had high internal and external constraints, while organizations that faced few constraints opened themselves up to the environment. In addition, this finding supports L. A. Grunig's (1992b) contention that changes in an organization's environment that threaten the power of the dominant coalition can lead members of a dominant coalition to try to control their environment rather than adapting and adjusting to it.

While the results of the current study seem to indicate a natural tendency for dominant coalition members to devalue openness to the environment when faced with a loss of procedural autonomy, both Kelly (1995) and Wilson et al. (2013) explained that autonomy is only one side of a two-sided coin, and that both sides of the coin—autonomy and accountability—must be considered simultaneously. The very nature of interdependent relationships suggests that relationship partners are autonomous from, but at the same time responsible to each other. Therefore, when inevitable infringements on autonomy occur in imperfect relationships between organizations and publics, Wilson et al. (2013) explained that tensions can arise that cause organizational decision makers to ignore responsibility (i.e., become closed to the environment) in order to maintain a high degree of organizational autonomy. Moreover, both Kelly (1995) and Wilson et al. (2013) noted that public relations should seek to assist the organization in finding a balance between autonomy and accountability through two-way symmetrical communication, an approach to public relations based on openness to the environment.

Finally, the current study proposed that public relations could influence dominant coalition members' perceptions of the environment through the use of formal environmental scanning. The results show that dominant coalition members' perceptions of public relations' use of formal environmental scanning were positively related to their perceptions of environmental uncertainty. That is, as the public relations' use of formal environmental scanning increases, dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental uncertainty increase as well. An in-depth analysis of the three dimensions of environmental uncertainty discovered that formal

environmental scanning was positively related with dominant coalition member perceptions of environmental complexity and threat. This means that formal environmental scanning activities help dominant coalition members understand the degree of complexity and threat in the organization's environment. As discussed earlier, perceptions of higher environmental complexity are related to perceptions of higher substantive autonomy. Therefore, formal environmental scanning is one avenue through which public relations departments can help maximize the autonomy of their organizations. In addition, formal environmental scanning can help dominant coalition members understand and anticipate potential threats in the organization's environment. This result supports the contention of Okura et al. (2008) that environmental scanning can serve as "an organization's early warning system that detects problems in the organizational environment" (p. 53). It is also in line with open-systems thinking about the role of adaptive subsystems (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Implications for Public Relations Practice

A number of implications for public relations practice can be drawn from the results of this study. First, the descriptive statistics indicate that the dominant coalition members in the 10 organizations studied have low evaluations public relations' use of formal environmental scanning ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.06$). In addition, dominant coalition members' who participated in this study reported a high familiarity ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.75$) with the public relations function in their organizations. Therefore, it appears that these low scores are not the result of dominant coalition members lacking awareness of the activities of their public relations departments; rather, they seem to indicate that the dominant coalition members are not that impressed with the formal scanning activity of their public relations departments. Therefore, these findings seem to suggest that in the eyes of organizational managers, public relations practitioners are still lacking in skills and abilities related to formal environmental scanning, which include the use of rigorous social scientific research methods, such as surveys, public opinion polls, and content analyses, to collect and package scanning data.

Second, public relations can influence dominant coalition members' perceptions of the environment and values of openness through formal environmental scanning. When public relations departments conduct formal research to track the reactions of stakeholders to the organization, they are able to have an impact on the values and perceptions that shape the decisions of dominant coalition members. Therefore, when public relations departments use formal environmental scanning to "translate scanning . . . data into information that makes sense to other managers and clarifies implications of vying decisions" (Broom & Dozier, 2006, p. 153), departments can influence dominant coalition members to see increasing complexity in their environments, leading to an increase in substantive autonomy as well as, potentially, in their values of organizational openness to the environment. From the power-control perspective, it seems that formal environmental scanning is an important factor in moving an organization toward two-way interaction and communication with publics.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study contributed to public relations theory by examining the relationships among dominant coalition members' values and perceptions, there were several limitations that should be acknowledged. Moreover, these limitations can be seen as opportunities to further test and examine the ideas and relationships reported in this research. The first limitation of this study relates to its external validity. This study had high ecological validity (i.e., the research was

conducted in the natural setting of the participants rather than in a laboratory); however, the purposive sampling method used in the study limits the generalizability of the findings. While the demographic composition of dominant coalition members in the current study's sample did not differ noticeably from the characteristics of senior executives reported in other studies (e.g., Cook & Glass, 2011; Lantz, 2008), the number of dominant coalition members sampled in this study from the three primary types of organizations were not equal. Also, the sample contained an underrepresentation of board members who, theoretically, are considered to be the most powerful members of an organization's dominant coalition. In this study, there were only four valid responses from board members. On the other hand, low representation of board members may indicate perceptions of low power among board members or high power among an organization's paid employees. In addition, the purposive sample seemed to reflect responses of dominant coalition members working for organizations that valued openness to the environment. The high mean score ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.55$) for respondents on the openness index indicates that the organizations, and subsequently, the dominant coalition members who agreed to participate in this study likely did so because they were open to sharing information about themselves and their organizations with someone from outside the organization. Future research could address issues of external validity and dominant coalition membership by using random samples of dominant coalition members. One way this might be accomplished is by focusing on one type of organization, such as nonprofits, and generating a random sample of organizations that employ at least one public relations practitioner from the membership lists of professional associations like the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). A senior leader from each organization could then be randomly selected to represent the dominant coalition.

Conclusion

Public relations scholars and practitioners have defined the value of public relations in terms of its ability to protect and enhance organizational autonomy. Because of the complexities of the current business environment, organizations must deal with a variety of stakeholder groups and publics, some seeking to limit an organization's autonomy and others attempting to enhance it. However, little research has been conducted to understand the factors that influence dominant coalition members' perceptions of the organization's operating environment and its autonomy. This study addressed this gap in the research by examining dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty and organizational autonomy. In addition, it examined the role that formal environmental scanning plays in the formation of dominant coalition members' perceptions. Specifically, this study found support for the upper echelons perspective that dominant coalition members' values act as a filter through which they form perceptions about their organization's environment and their organization's place in it. Moreover, this study found that public relations can play a role in shaping dominant coalition members' values and perceptions of their organization's operating environment through the use of formal environmental scanning. This means that public relations managers need to be adept at using rigorous social scientific research methods to collect scanning data and package it in a way that will be meaningful for dominant coalition members in order to help their organizations become more aware of and open to their complex environments.

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**Today's and Tomorrow's Challenges in Public Relations:
Comparing the Views of Chief Communication Officers and Next Generation Leaders**

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Abstract

This study takes a close look at leaders shaping the professional field now and in the future. Qualitative interviews with 20 chief communication officers (CCOs) from global brands like Bayer, BASF, Bosch, BP, DHL, Microsoft, Pfizer, Puma, Siemens and 20 future leaders (Generation Y) in the same companies were conducted. The analysis identifies cognitive patterns and offers ideas for further, comparative research.

Introduction

The field of public relations has undergone continuous differentiation, expansion and upgrading in recent decades. Communication is not seen as an end in itself anymore, but is accepted as a tool for positioning and legitimizing business in society. An analysis of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics even showed that public relations are outpacing journalism, in both number of jobs and salary growth (Williams, 2014). However, most research is focused on communication processes and the instruments, strategies and objectives in use. Less is known about the men and women who are and will be responsible for managing strategic communication in organizations today and tomorrow.

The history of public relations has researched the influence of pioneers like Arthur W. Page (AT&T) in the United States, Albert Oeckl (BASF) in Germany and Lucien Matrat (Elf) in France (Bentele, 2005; Griese, 2001; Russell, 2014; Xifra, 2012). The experiences and visions of these pioneers strongly affected the institutionalization of the professional field. Their ideas are often quoted, and serve as popular subjects for teaching in university and further education. By contrast, current communication leaders are less well known – although their influence on the economic success and social acceptance of companies is substantially higher than that of communication leaders in the times of the pioneers mentioned above. The understanding of strategic communication of these current leaders is crucial for the perception of the profession by top management, internal business partners and other stakeholders. In addition, they are role models for employees and trainees in communication departments.

This article takes a closer look at those communication leaders. First, a literature review will support the idea that the dynamics of an expanding field like public relations can partly be analyzed by understanding today's and tomorrow's leaders and their perceptions of the profession. On the basis of this assumption, a qualitative interview study was conducted to explore the views of 20 chief communication officers as well as 20 future communication leaders in the same companies. These individuals manage communications for prominent brands like Bayer, BASF, Bosch, BP, DHL, Microsoft, Pfizer, Puma, and Siemens. Comparing the views, experiences and expectations of the two age groups helps to identify routes of development in practice as well as new areas for research.

Literature Review: Researching Leadership and Leaders

While the general importance of leaders for the development of professional fields is well known in many different fields, leadership research in the field of public relations and corporate communications has only recently begun (Berger & Meng, 2014, pp. 3, 16). Leaders are generally defined as “the people who engage in leadership” (Northouse, 2007, p. 3), and the special case of leadership in PR is defined as:

A dynamic process that encompasses a complex mix of individual skills and personal attributes, values, and behaviors that consistently produce ethical and effective communication practice. Such practice fuels and guides successful communication teams, helps organizations achieve their goals, and legitimizes organizations in society (Berger & Meng, 2010, p. 427).

While there are different approaches to analyzing leadership, a major stream in the literature explores the mindsets and activities of chief communication officers (CCOs) and the ways in which these individuals manage the communication function (Röttger, Zerfass, Kiesenbauer, & Stahl, 2013, p. 5). This research tradition provides information about the leadership style of PR practitioners in the United States and in Europe (Werder & Holtzhausen,

2009; Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, Moreno, & Verčič, 2011), important issues affecting leadership today and strategies to manage these issues (Berger & Meng, 2014), excellent leadership and the required competencies of communication leaders (Jin, 2010; Meng, 2009), ethical aspects of leadership (Lee & Cheng, 2011), similarities and differences of leadership in communication management and other corporate functions (Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2012) and gender-specific perceptions (Aldoory & Toth, 2004). Until now, the most comprehensive study in the field has been the global study of leadership in public relations and communication management (Berger & Meng, 2014). This shows that “the potential power of individual leaders and of professional and educational systems to affect practice should not be underestimated or marginalized” (Berger & Meng, 2014, p. 301). In-depth interviews in 23 countries revealed that individual leaders can have a dramatic positive impact on what the profession does and on how it is viewed or supported in an organization. On the other hand, some respondents complained about a lack of great leaders across the profession in their countries and an absence of role models (Berger & Meng, 2014, pp. 301-302).

Addressing the leadership topic is all the more important because corporate communication is a practice characterized by rather weak regulations and standards. Acting in this professional field is not shaped by a consistent model but is subject to multiple negotiations between different groups inside and outside the organization (Cloos, 2014, p. 146). In other words, communication management is not characterized by a fixed set of tasks, by clear career paths, or by hierarchies. Therefore, individual professionals and the profession (as a collective actor) are supposed to demonstrate their capacities and performance in order to differentiate themselves from those in other positions and thereby create and expand their scope of action. In addition to organizational structures and processes, the identity negotiations and cognitive structures of the relevant actors are highly important. According to social construction theory by Berger and Luckmann (1969, p. 151-152) public relations practitioners produce their identity by an interaction of their organism, individual consciousness and social structure. Their objectively tangible world is based on role-specific knowledge which is among other things acquired through vocational training and professional activity. The varying understanding amongst practitioners of the same field is caused by different individual experiences. Applying social construction theory to the field of public relations (Tsetsura, 2010) leads to the idea to identify changes in the professional field over time by studying discourses of professionals. In terms of new sociological institutionalism (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008), based inter alia on the above mentioned social construction theory, cultural-cognitive institutions comprise common scripts and shared beliefs that constitute social reality. Factors such as the basic understanding of concepts (e.g., communication) and expectations of an organizational function (e.g., corporate communications) are typically not limited to single organizations, but are part of shared visions in peer groups. While it is difficult to identify all influencing factors, sociologists have been able to show remarkable and consistent patterns in the mindsets of top managers (see, for example, Pohlmann, Liebold, Bär, Schanne, & Schmidt, 2015).

Following this line, researchers in general management and some areas of public communication have used interview studies to explore the cognitive mindsets of leaders. Chief executive officers in the United States were portrayed by scholars from Harvard Business School (Wetlaufer & Magretta, 2000). Later, the idea was taken up for the executive levels in Germany (Nolte & Heidtmann, 2009) in order to give us an idea of the role enactments, worldviews and visions of general managers. In Germany there are also publications portraying professionals in

the media industry (Kohle & Döge-Kohle, 1999; Sjurts, 2014), journalism (Pörksen, 2005; Rippler, 2007) and social media (Beyer & Rolke, 2013).

However, leaders in corporate communications and public relations have barely been studied so far. One of the first attempts to find out about the perceptions and experiences of leaders in the field was initiated by The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations, in 2007 (<http://plankcenter.ua.edu/resources/leaders>). In an anthology called *Legacies from legends in public relations*, well-known US professionals were asked to share their views and observations with students (Berger, 2007; Gower, 2009). Their statements focus mainly on how to become a leader in the field and on important competencies for a professional career. This publication made an important contribution to the development of PR practice and education, but it has not been used for identifying role concepts or for developing scenarios on the future of the field. Another study commissioned by the Plank Center goes beyond storytelling. Berger (2008) profiled 20 emerging leaders with diverse backgrounds, and provided a descriptive analysis of common patterns and themes such as leadership skills considered important by the majority of the respondents. The interviewees point out the necessity of maintaining the relevance of PR by understanding the trends affecting the field and by sharpening one's own competency profile. Moreover, it is shown that having and being a good role model, as well as learning from mentors, is an important prerequisite for personal development (Berger, 2008, pp. 173-189). In Europe, several surveys about communication managers in executive positions have been conducted (Marshall & Dedrijvere, 2014; Verčič, Zeffass, & Wiesenberg, 2014). Moreover, an observation study of CCOs provides insights into their daily working life (Nothhaft, 2011), and a series of portraits reveals career pathways (Spiller & Scheurer, 2010). Globally, only a very few research projects have conducted interviews with PR leaders as part of a mixed-method design (e.g., Berger & Meng, 2014; Tench et al., 2013, pp. 64-79). Nevertheless those studies did not go far beyond publishing selected quotes or cases.

In summary, a portrait study of communication leaders that uses qualitative statements to identify common patterns is still missing. Moreover, the literature review shows that it is useful to compare perceptions of current leaders with those of the next generation. On the one hand, these people are going to shape the practice of the profession in the future. On the other hand, their self-image, as well as the interactions, similarities and differences between the present and future generations of leaders, will have an impact on the further institutionalization of corporate communications.

Research Questions

Given the limited status of theoretical and empirical research comparing the understandings and experiences of CCOs and future leaders in PR, research questions were derived from key results of previous studies. Naturally, the project reported here cannot include all possible units of analysis. We had to focus on those topics that can be seen as especially relevant for the cognitive structures of the leading actors in the professional field.

RQ1: How Do (Future) Communication Leaders Conceptualize Strategic Communication and Its Contribution to Organizational Goals?

The understanding of corporate communications has changed during recent decades (Cornelissen, 2014). The move of corporate communications closer to the top management increases the requirement to outline the contribution to the value of the company and its intangible assets (Watson & Noble, 2014). This is also reflected in the ongoing debate about

strategic communication, which is defined by a clear alignment towards overarching organizational goals (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015).

Empirical evidence about possible factors for excellence in communication management can be found in a variety of studies that form part of the body of knowledge about corporate communications. One of the most recent additions has been the European Communication Monitor 2014, which identified several statistically significant drivers: strong alignment with top management, particular organizational structures (the CCO being part of the executive board or reporting directly to the CEO), established routines for linking business strategy and communication, and a strong involvement in CEO positioning (Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven, & Moreno, 2014b, p. 133).

RQ2: How Do (Future) Communication Leaders Understand Leadership, and What Are the Most Relevant Individual Skills for Being a Good Leader in Corporate Communications?

When it comes to the question of how to characterize a communication leader, we need to keep in mind that leaders are often conceptualized as top managers who have to oversee a bundle of different activities. They design structures, processes and strategies on the one hand, and they manage human resources, as well as the activities of co-workers and subordinates, on the other hand (Böhmer, 2013, p. 33; Wunderer, 2011, pp. 4-5). Both areas have received attention in previous research. Questions such as how the structures and processes of corporate communications should be designed so as to create an attractive environment for employees, as the most important resource of this function (Klewes & Zerfaß, 2011), show that structural and individual components are closely linked to each other. Recommended measures for leading a communication department include: introducing transparent career paths, performance standards and feedback schemes; offering internal and external training opportunities (if necessary with an international perspective); and creating a clear team structure supporting flexibility and permeability (Klewes & Zerfaß, 2011, p. 53). Early leadership surveys in the United States showed that the management of communication departments is especially characterized by a transformational leadership style (defining a vision and appealing to followers' ideals and standards), a transactional style (drawing on authority and reminding followers of common standards) or an inclusive leadership style (naming challenges and involving followers in shared decision making), with the transformational leadership style being considered ideal (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Grunig, 1992; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009). In Europe, nearly every second respondent (46.6 percent) in a survey conducted among 2,249 PR professionals in 43 countries stated that the inclusive leadership style is predominant in their department, with the transformational (34.9 percent) and transactional (18.5 percent) approaches following (Zerfass et al., 2011, p. 39). The study, furthermore, discovered that an inclusive style of leadership is positively correlated with the job satisfaction of the PR practitioners. Reciprocally, this satisfaction provides the framework for inclusive practices of leaders (Zerfass, Tench, Verhoeven, Verčič, & Moreno, 2010, p. 54).

Past surveys focusing on CCOs showed that they are today taking on expanded and highly strategic roles that go well beyond the traditional responsibilities of media relations, internal communications, crisis management, and executive communications. They are increasingly involved with corporate advertising and/or branding, corporate reputation and, more recently, social media, while “an important component of their roles is to ensure operational excellence as part of the senior leadership arsenal of talent and strategic skill sets” (Marshall & Dedrijvere, 2014, pp. 2-3).

An empirical study comparing the CCO's understanding of his or her own role with the board member's understanding of the CCO role identified significant differences (Zerfass, Bentele, Schwalbach, & Sherzada, 2014a). On the one hand, 48.7 percent of CEOs and top executives perceive the CCO as a personal adviser. On the other hand, the CCO is perceived almost as frequently as a spokesperson for the company (43.0 percent), and more frequently as an intermediary between the company and the public (64.6 percent). The adviser role is mentioned significantly more often if there are stronger structural links and more intense contacts between CEO and CCO (Zerfass et al., 2014a, pp. 72-73).

Crucial individual characteristics of excellent leaders, identified by Berger (2008, pp. 179-189), are: creativity, integrity, passion, motivation, fundamental skills and a diverse background. A qualitative survey of European CCOs about those characteristics that have become more important to them gained strongest support for topics like business acumen (73 percent), the ability to make complex decisions (51 percent) and character and ethics (47 percent) (Marshall & Dedrijvere, 2014, p. 6). Even though an accurate definition of the main terms like characteristics and skills is missing from this study, some interesting statements were collected. One CCO, for example, stated that "distinct skill sets for which leaders were hired in the past, although still important, take second place to the managerial maturity required to build and run a business function tasked with handling many of the more confusing items on the CEO's to-do list" (Marshall & Dedrijvere, 2014, p. 5). Furthermore, the study showed that CCOs share important characteristics with other C-level executives such as chief marketing officers (CMOs), chief financial officers (CFOs), and chief human resources officers (CHROs). From the perspective of a CEO, it does not seem to matter whether strategic input comes from a CCO, a CMO, or another senior executive: "More important is the person's ability to provide a 360-degree perspective of the landscape, an attitude and skill set that uniquely positions the savvy CCO within the leadership circle – acting more like a chief collaboration officer" (Marshall & Dedrijvere, 2014, p. 6).

A slightly different angle was offered by the global study of leadership in public relations and communication management (Berger & Meng, 2014). The respondents did not see much difference between leadership in PR and leadership in other occupations. Furthermore, they rated communication skills to be slightly more important than leadership skills for the job (Erzikova & Petersone, 2014, p. 130). When asked to name the most important skills for future leaders, respondents supported often-heard answers (e.g., digital media and measurement skills), but also pointed out the importance of the so-called "soft people skills" (e.g., better listening, cultural sensitivity or emotional intelligence) in an uncertain future (Berger & Meng, 2014, p. 298). The prototypical profile of the future PR leader included the following core characteristics: female, multidisciplinary academic education, regular professional training, data-based decision making, strong internal and team focus, global view, working experience abroad, inclusive leadership style, role model, ethically branded (Berger & Meng, 2014, pp. 303-304).

RQ3: Which Are the Most Relevant Measures Supporting a Management Career from the Point of View of (Future) Communication Leaders?

Study results, and reports provided by experienced recruitment companies, show that the multiple and highly complex demands made of CCOs raise a talent challenge (Marshall & Dedrijvere, 2014, pp. 9-12). On the one hand, the task portfolio of communicators has been expanded continuously during recent years by topics such as social media, community relations and corporate social responsibility. On the other hand, young people having the necessary

knowledge about these new topics lack in-depth leadership experience. This observation leads directly to the question of how to become a good leader in the professional field. A large-scale study among communication professionals in Europe revealed that the most important factor for career development and for obtaining one's current position was networking among peers and colleagues (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 46). This supports previous claims that "having extended personalized networks of influence is an asset for a career conscious PR practitioner" (Valentini, 2010, p. 156). Networks seem to be helpful for building one's own career path, on the one hand, and for the achievement of the business and communication goals of the organization on the other. They are relevant in formal manifestations (e.g., professional body membership, or structured events) and informally too (e.g., serendipity, or irregular meetings) (Ghosh & Reio, 2013, p. 107; Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 61).

In the study mentioned above, further education (on or off the job), moving to a new employer, academic education prior to the job, mentoring by senior colleagues, job rotation or new assignments in the same organization, and internships prior to taking the position were all seen as important for career development (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 46). Comparing different age groups shows that for young employees the most significant factor was having work experience or an internship prior to the job (agreed to by 74.1 percent) while for the mid-career, middle aged employees (aged 30-39 and 40-49) the most significant career booster is a change in employer (74.4 and 72.1 percent respectively) (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 46). Both the youngest and the oldest practitioners cite mentoring as one of the top three aspects of career development. This is not surprising, given that a mentoring relationship has the potential to enhance the career development and the psychosocial development of both participants – the experienced mentor and his or her young mentee (Kram, 1983, p. 613). A very recent investigation of formal mentoring programs in the PR field has shown that it is not only the mentee but also the mentor who benefits from internal or cross-company mentoring schemes (Kiesenbauer, Burkert, & Zerfass, 2015). In the global study on leadership in public relations and communication management, 68.1 percent of the respondents reported that they learned more about excellent leadership in communications from role models or mentors on the job than from university education or management development programs (Berger & Meng, 2014, p. 128). The importance of mentors and role models for shaping young professionals was also a recurring theme in the study conducted by Berger (2008). Both mentors and role models are seen as important supporters, providing guidance for professional development and helping to enhance key qualities: "For new professionals to become excellent leaders in public relations, excellent examples of leadership must be visible to them. They are able to find a set of role models of excellent leadership and pattern their profession decisions and actions while taking into consideration the example their mentors have set." (Berger, 2008, pp. 175-177). Mentors and role models cited in the interviews ranged from parents to professors to professionals.

RQ4: What Trends in Corporate Communications Are Relevant from the Point of View of (Future) Communication Leaders?

Asked about the most important strategic issues in the professional field for future years, most respondents in the largest survey on strategic communication worldwide (n = 2,777) mentioned the challenge of linking business and communication strategies (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 83). Only one third of the professionals interviewed believed that coping with the digital revolution and the social web is one of the top challenges. A longitudinal analysis shows that this issue has become less important. It was the number one topic in 2010-2012, but went down to

second in 2013 and third in 2014. Another topic that fell in importance was sustainable development and social responsibility, ranked second in 2008 and ninth in 2014, while the importance of building and maintaining trust seems to have increased (it was ranked fourth in 2008, and second in 2014) (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 87). This comparison shows that professionals have either learned how to deal with certain challenges, or that normative exaggerations have now been replaced.

Regarding the importance of various communication channels, the same study shows that online communication is clearly the leader here. Traditional press relations that interact with print media face a dramatic loss of importance. Only 41.8 percent of the respondents believe that such activities will be important in 2017, which is far fewer than believe they are important today (76.3 percent), and a great decline since 2011 and 2008, when this was the most important of all instruments (Zerfass et al., 2014b, pp. 83-91). Similar findings can be found in the global study on leadership in public relations and communication management. The three issues rated most important for PR leaders were: addressing the speed and volume of information flow, dealing with crises, and managing social media and the digital revolution (Berger & Meng, 2014, p. 298).

Methodological Design

In order to address the issues at hand, a qualitative approach was applied. This research aims to derive idiographic rather than nomothetic statements, and differs from hypothetico-deductive research models that focus on testing hypotheses and finding generalizable causal relationships (Kuckartz, 2012, p. 75). Within qualitative research, generalizable conclusions do "... not mean to identify general time and place independent laws, but the formulation of a theory about which mechanism produces certain results." (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2010, p. 317). Data collection in qualitative research can be done in many different ways, such as by conducting interviews, experiments or observations. The topic of the present study is embedded in a dynamic context and has rarely been investigated. Thus we opted for an exploratory and inductive approach (Froschauer & Lueger, 2003, p. 11). We assumed that the required information can be verbalized by actors in the field, and therefore chose to conduct interviews, which are usually chosen for exploratory research. In this way, we aimed to examine factors of social change as soon as they were created (Bogner & Menz, 2005, p. 37).

The study was conducted in Germany, the largest country in Europe and one of the most powerful economies in the world. As the total number of corporate communication professionals working in this country is unknown, we performed selective sampling. In the first step, we identified a group of companies that represent various industries and have a high level of communication expertise. These companies are members of the Academic Society for Corporate Management and Communication, which had 30 corporate members at the time of the survey (www.akademische-gesellschaft.com). All members were invited to join the study. Twenty of them decided to participate (see Table 1). The response rate (66.7 percent) was very satisfactory.

In each company both the CCO and an emerging communication leader (named by the CCO) were interviewed. All CCOs report directly to the CEO of their company. They are responsible for annual budgets of several million Euros, and manage up to several hundred employees in communication departments either nationally or internationally. The next-generation communicators are members of Generation Y, are 35 years old on average and have several years of working experience. Out of the 40 interviewees, five CCOs and nine next-generation leaders were female and 15, respectively 11, were male. Each of them held a graduate

degree; six of the CCOs and two in the younger group had a doctorate.

All interviews were conducted by phone and lasted up to 60 minutes. The interviews were non-standardized, which means that neither questions nor answers were necessarily exactly the same for each interview (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, p. 41). The research questions were operationalized using guidelines with 15 sets of questions to guide the interviewer. The guidelines had been pretested with former CCOs and younger communicators who were not part of the sample. During the course of the telephone conversation, the interviewer was free to deviate from the interview guidelines to deepen his or her knowledge about topics with a particular importance for the target person.

Tab 1. Corporations represented in the study

<i>Company</i>	<i>Sector</i>
BASF	Chemical/Pharmaceutical/Healthcare
Bayer	Chemical/Pharmaceutical/Healthcare
BMW	Industrial/Manufacturing
Boehringer Ingelheim	Chemical/Pharmaceutical/Healthcare
Robert Bosch	Industrial/Manufacturing
BP Europe	Energy/Utilities
B. Braun Melsungen	Industrial/Healthcare
Celesio	Wholesale/Retail/Healthcare
Clariant	Chemical/Pharmaceutical/Healthcare
Deutsche Bahn	Transport/Logistics
Deutsche Post DHL	Logistics/Mail
GIZ	International Cooperation
Hochtief	Construction
Ing-Diba	Banking/Financial Services
Microsoft Germany	Software/Consumer
Nord Stream	Energy/Utilities
Otto Group	Consumer/Retail
Pfizer Germany	Chemical/Pharmaceutical/Healthcare
Puma	Consumer/Retail
Siemens Energy	Energy/Utilities

After transcribing the audio material according to uniform rules, and generating a personal portrait for each respondent, we conducted an extensive qualitative content analysis. This was used to identify overlapping perceptions, differences between the generations, and commonly stated challenges for the future of corporate communications. In contrast to classical content analysis, which is limited to the manifest content of a text, human understanding and interpretation played an essential role in our case (Kuckartz, 2012, p. 39). Ambiguity and the meaning of the words analyzed were not ignored, and intersubjective validation was performed by jointly discussing interpretations in a team. This procedure helps to avoid an over-identification with the interviewee, or tunnel vision. On the one hand, the qualitative survey is able to delve deeply into the views of today's and tomorrow's leaders. On the other hand, we need to keep in mind that the essence of the interpreted material is reconstructed rather than being clearly identifiable. This limitation on the qualitative content analysis method derives from the ambiguity of language and epistemological boundaries (Bock, 1992, pp. 100-101; Froschauer

& Lueger, 2003, p. 82).

Findings

Conceptualization of Corporate Communications and Value Contribution (RQ1)

The basic understanding of corporate communications has changed during recent decades. The CCOs in the sample are well aware of that. They look at communication as a strategic variable that supports the goals and visions of the company, controls its reputation and helps to build acceptance, and is carried out especially by managing stakeholder relationships:

From my perspective, it is the task of strategic communications to establish and maintain an ongoing dialogue between a company and its internal and external stakeholders. (CCO)

Although internal communication was often emphasized in the past as an important success factor (Ruck & Welch, 2012; Tkalac Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012), only one quarter of the CCOs surveyed mentioned its function as a key performance driver. From the responses to the question of what makes communication strategic, a uniform understanding of the term could not be identified. A quarter of the interviewees emphasized the need for analysis and clear objective definitions. Two interviewees explained that the ultimate purpose of strategic communication is to anticipate stakeholders' needs rather than to persuade target groups. Attributes assigned to strategic communication include being honest, authentic and continuous. This result confirms the observation that the term "strategic communication" is highly complex and has until now been understood in diverse ways (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015).

In contrast to this rather fuzzy picture given by today's leaders, the next generation presents a much sharper – but rather narrow – vision of the communication function. From their point of view, reputation management is the primary task of communication departments. Half of the emergent leaders state that corporate communication adds value by presenting a credible, consistent image of the company in the perception of different target groups and promoting dialogue, as well as by building and protecting the brand. Only a few interviewees name internal communication goals, reflect the relationship between corporate communications and acceptance in society (legitimacy), or see advising the top management as a goal of the communication function.

One of our main goals is to preserve and increase the good reputation of our company. Without reputation, our products would not sell as well. (Emerging communication leader)

Different opinions were expressed about the measurability of communication. Some CCOs are confident of being able to quantify the value proposition of communication. Others are more reluctant, and state that the appreciation of the communication function is reflected by the standing of the department at board level and by how it is involved in strategic decision making by other top managers:

I am also a firm believer that we can measure the success of a communicator as well as the success of an engineer or sales representative; maybe not exactly quantifiable in Euros or Dollars, but at least in a reasonable way if asked for that.

(CCO)

The importance of communication is measured today by asking how far you are part of the corporate strategy and whether communication is taken into consideration in all the company does. But that means that we too have to connect to the aims and methods of other departments in the company. (CCO)

Leadership in Corporate Communications (RQ2)

When it comes to the question of how to lead a communication department, more than one way is mentioned. About half of the CCOs interviewed support the idea that employees should be made capable of performing their tasks independently:

We should provide the overall framework of action and empower our employees to make decisions and act more independently within their area of responsibility. (CCO)

I am constantly working on eliminating my own position. That must be my real goal. (CCO)

What makes a good leader in the eyes of younger communicators? Different ideas have been expressed, but an inclusive, non-authoritarian approach by leaders is expected by the clear majority of the younger communication managers. From their perspective, executives should, above all, have an open ear for employees' ideas. They should be able to make decisions and involve employees in their decision making. A quarter of the interviewees ask for leaders to serve as a role model and to give them guidance and impetus for their daily work. They demand that leaders should support their employees. Empathy and trust in employees are characteristics that were often mentioned. Some interviewees pointed out that a CCO should provide his employees with enough freedom, and accept criticism:

I think a successful leader must have a very clear inner compass. Also, the ability to listen is fundamental because a manager's success is based on the feedback and input of his own employees. (Emerging communication leader)

A successful executive is characterized by the fact that he always has an open ear for the team and is receptive to suggestions and criticism. (Emerging communication leader)

Almost all emerging leaders report on an "open door policy" in their communication departments, which means that decision makers are open to the ideas of younger employees and allow these employees to contribute their own perspectives and suggestions. One respondent pointed out that the ideas of the younger generation are often ignored when it comes to the final decision, because a basic understanding of the overall change in the culture of society is still missing. The reason for this is, however, not just a lack of understanding of today's decision makers. Another issue is that the members of the younger generation cannot completely overlook the implications of the cultural change and therefore are sometimes not able to convince their superiors of new ideas for change.

The daily work of CCOs consists of many tasks, and their job profiles differ widely according to the specific company and industry. Nevertheless, similarities can be identified. For almost half of the communication leaders, CEO communication is one of the most important tasks, especially coaching for public events and advising the CEO or the top management group on strategic decisions. Human resource management (the individual dimension of leadership), and the organizational development of the communications department (the structural dimension) follow closely on the agenda. Beyond the above-mentioned management tasks, CCOs often focus on the development of the communication strategy and its key messages:

Based on the corporate strategy we develop a communications strategy. We derive key messages from it and define appropriate implementing measures which we finally spread in our master plan over the year. (CCO)

I set the strategy and always have one foot in the outside world in order to pick up trends proactively. Further primary tasks of a CCO are personnel development and human resource management. In addition, the advice to the top management, preferably at board level, is an essential part of my job. (CCO)

Young professionals do see the need for CCOs to delegate tasks and work on a strategic level. However, some interviewees appreciate a CCO who is close to the base:

I like to have a boss who does not hover somewhere above my head and who is just a position in the hierarchy for me. It is important that he goes into the depths of my work, that he knows where I stand and gives impetus. (Emerging communication leader)

Hardly any of the CCOs understand themselves primarily as the foremost representatives or mouthpieces of their organizations, or report doing operational tasks such as answering press requests. Accompanying change processes and ensuring a high degree of transparency is also mentioned rather sporadically in the interviews. One quarter of interviewees reports on the challenge of preventing damage to the company and avoiding negative media coverage.

Asking the question of whether leadership in the field of communication differs from that in other fields revealed a mixed picture. Some CCOs mentioned specific characteristics of the communication department that have an impact on leadership style, such as a high diversity in the teams, an extraordinary spread of competency levels, high time pressure or a strong outward orientation of communication activities. Other interviewees see no difference at all to other areas:

How to lead employees in a communication department does not differ from leading other departments. I think that my peers lead as I do: at eye level, with plenty of room for maneuver and with a lot of openness for different and controversial discussions that move things forward. (CCO)

Career paths leading into the corporate communication profession can be as diverse as the starting point, which might have been a degree in business administration, communication science, or another academic discipline. When asked about their individual development, the

CCOs repeatedly reported on their journalistic skills. One third of today's communication leaders consider the journalistic skills and knowledge they developed earlier in their career to be essential for the quality of their work today. Half of the young communicators thought about entering journalism at the start of their careers, too. But the proportion of those who have actually collected experience in this field is clearly much smaller in the younger group than in the generation of today's leaders. A quarter of the emerging leaders indicated that they were interested in journalism as a teenager or did journalistic work in secondary school. The main reasons for the changing mindset from pursuing a career in journalism to entering corporate communications were either poor prospects of success in the media industry or the desire to work in a commercial enterprise and contribute to the success of a company. Positive experiences in internships were crucial for the career choice in almost half of the cases. A quarter of the interviewees indicated that concrete development opportunities from the present employer determined the course of their career.

I faced the decision of which academic career I wanted to pursue: traditional journalism studies or the other pathway via business administration studies. I opted for the latter, because I had the feeling of being in a better position with economics. (Emergent communication leader)

A look at the curricula of today's corporate communications and public relations education in Germany shows that it barely includes any content that deals with journalistic practice – probably due to the decreasing importance of traditional media work. On the other hand, editorial work is still an important tool of corporate communications. It will be important to reflect about which specific forms of journalistic competencies are part of the portfolio of communication managers and which ones are superfluous in the future.

Key Measures for Leadership Development in Corporate Communications (RQ3)

Experience shows that positive internship experiences help to bind young professionals as loyal employees to a company. Along this line, the CCOs particularly emphasize the usefulness of internal staff development and high-quality trainee programs, out of which talents can quickly be passed on to another positions.

After they have studied various subjects, we offer young professionals the opportunity to gain experience in the different fields of the communication department within our company. During their traineeship they go through all necessary stations for a sound basic education. (CCO)

I believe that a leader must develop a sense for assessing the potential of individual employees. An employee must have good general management skills, for example the ability to motivate people. If he furthermore has a broad range of professional skills and has proven himself in different communication disciplines, he is a potential leadership candidate in my eyes. Those who specialized in one part of the field of communication only will not be able to manage a communication department. (CCO)

This insight is also supported by the next-generation leaders:

When I think back to the end of my studies and the first professional years, I had the opportunity to work closely with colleagues from various areas of the communication department. I had a lot to do with strategic communication issues and got insight into many topics from the beginning. (Emerging communication leader)

When promoting young talent, it is not only hierarchical advancement but also the development of basic competencies that seem to play a crucial role. The competency cited most often in interviews was teamwork:

According to our understanding, a career does not necessarily go up, but also in the width of the company. Career does not mean to have more and more stripes on the sleeves, but also to do many different things. Our communication managers rotate between teams or between our different locations. We take great care that no one is working too long in the same function. (CCO)

I need employees who can work in a team and not individual fighters who smash my crew. (CCO)

One quarter of CCOs emphasize the quality and size of personal networks as well as many years of knowledge and experience in their own company and in their industry as important factors for their success. When asked about the importance of internal networking, three-quarters of the interviewees explain that it is mainly useful in exchanges with other departments, as a mood barometer or in order to learn of developments in other parts of the company at an early stage, for example. Internal networking happens either at formal occasions, such as meetings and conferences, or informally at lunch or fireside chats. One third of interviewees especially associate with this topic a consistent networking with the board of management. From their experience, this is a clever approach, because it helps to accelerate coordination processes and facilitate task performance:

Of course, I am also closely linked with other top management colleagues. We are regularly exchanging thoughts about current topics. I also keep in contact with my communication colleagues in other countries and constantly exchange with colleagues in the different areas of our company to keep a holistic view. Communication is not just any department but covers all the information that is exchanged in our company between employees. (CCO)

For the younger generation, external networking mainly takes place during events run by professional communication associations, and through virtual platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Xing. This supports the quantitative results of a recent study among European communication professionals, which show that communication professionals in the under-40 age group use LinkedIn, Xing and similar platforms most intensely and are the only age cohort who judge Facebook to be important for professional networking (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 71). Few interviewees in our qualitative study argued that everyday work leaves little time for external networks, and they still see potential for development in this area.

Internal networking is rated as very important by half of the emerging communication leaders. Knowing the right contacts is essential for the daily work of a corporate communication manager, because it helps him or her to respond to external enquiries quickly and competently and to act as an “early warning system” for the organization. According to half of the interviewees, internal networking takes place almost automatically at regular meetings. A quarter of the interviewees named the lunch break as an important informal occasion. Some companies offer events and projects for the purpose of networking:

It is crucial that the internal networking works both horizontally and vertically and that it is extending across various subject areas because this is the only way to get information relatively quickly. (Emerging communication leader)

I am participating in various projects and therefore I have cross-departmental contacts. Naturally, I like to have lunch with those colleagues I want to exchange views privately with. (Emerging communication leader)

Potential leaders are characterized by the search for higher positions and the motivation to evolve constantly. Half of the younger communications managers interviewed said they would like to take more responsibility in future years – be it theme, budget or management responsibility. Four of the interviewees indicated that they wanted to specialize thematically by, for example, switching from internal to external communication, or the other way round. However, the majority are not pursuing a specific career strategy:

I have never had a master plan for my career. I am mainly guided by my interests. (Emerging communication leader)

I think it is a good idea to change job from time to time. However, it is not necessary to enter a new area as often as every two years. (Emerging communication leader)

When talking about career development, many interviewees talked about their role models. The statements made it clear that younger communicators closely follow the example of their current supervisors and CCOs. This is not surprising, given the fact that many of today’s CCOs also say that they learned the essential elements of strategic communication from their former bosses in the first years of their professional careers. A quarter of those interviewed named former teachers, professors and colleagues as influential personalities. Interestingly, a quarter of the interviewees did not name a role model at all. This might be due to the dynamic growth of the profession and the comparatively low visibility of outstanding leaders. The results emphasize the need to produce portraits or comparable studies like this one in order to enhance transparency and enable reflection about leadership in corporate communications.

Asked about alternative jobs, one quarter of all emerging leaders could imagine working in the field of training and further education instead of working in communication management. Jobs in journalism, politics and strategic consultancy were mentioned by three interviewees.

Future Trends in Corporate Communications (RQ4)

When asked about future challenges for the profession, CCOs and emerging

communication leaders agreed on two points. In ten years' time, the main tasks and content of corporate communications will be no different from today. However, both groups are expecting fundamental changes in the instruments and channels of communication, as well as in communication activities in growth markets such as Asia. Depending on the company and industry, different developments are highlighted. The predictions range from increasingly individualistic consumer behavior to a progressive internationalization or digitalization and "hyper-transparency":

Organizing communication between the company and its various stakeholders will still be the core task of a PR director. Now as well as in the future, it is all about telling stories, placing messages and communicating strategically to increase the value of the company. (CCO)

Even in 20 years' time, we will still read newspapers, but certainly the digitalization is making progress. (CCO)

Due to the time difference and distance it is quite a challenge to manage a risk situation or crises in such areas (like Asia). (CCO)

Some CCOs state that they are planning to react to these developments by paying more attention to internal communication, increasing corporate publishing or enhancing the flexibility of departmental structures. But which long-term tasks are connected with these trends? One third of the interviewees admitted that the importance of selecting and developing talent is going to increase in the future. Others emphasized the great need to improve the international communications of the company. In addition, some CCOs identified the ever-increasing expectations of politics and the media environment as a difficult problem:

As a corporate communicator you will never meet all external expectations 100 percent today. (CCO)

Workload and securing a work-life balance is a topic of particular interest to the younger generation. For example, the majority of young professionals agree with their bosses that balancing work and leisure time is each person's own responsibility. This statement can be linked to the results of a quantitative study that shows that nearly half of all communication managers in Europe work at least a quarter more hours than are formally required of them (Zerfass et al., 2014b, p. 19). Those who are not able to cope with much work are judged not to be suitable for a communications job:

I believe that we will never have a nine-to-five job in communications. You did not choose the right profession, if that is your main goal. (Emerging communication leader)

Again, this attitude fits the results of quantitative research that the work-life balance is the weakest driver for job satisfaction for communication managers – in contrast to task diversity, great career opportunities and appreciation from superiors and internal clients (Zerfass et al., 2014b, pp. 33-45). Occasionally, young communicators interviewed in our study expressed the

wish that their bosses would demonstrate a better approach towards managing their high workload, which shows that the work-life balance is an important consideration for some professionals.

In the wake of the much-discussed internationalization of communication activities (Ingenhoff, 2013), emergent leaders were asked whether traditional, stationary work in the corporate headquarters would remain the norm in the future or would be obsolete because of increasing mobility needs. Three-quarters of young communicators expressed the opinion that communication departments should continue to have their key office in the home market to serve the local needs of the stakeholders. One quarter emphasized the relevance of the physical proximity of communication managers to the board of management, for strategic reasons. The same number of interviewees argued that the relevance of an office workplace at the headquarters would be less for an individual communicator who would increasingly operate “between the markets”. Numerous devices such as smartphones, laptops, tablets and cloud computing already offer the opportunity to work at any time and from anywhere today. “Always on the road and always available” – this seems to be the credo of mobile workers. First, suggested solutions to increase the flexibility of communication departments are the introduction of transnational 24/7 shift work, home office working and retrofitting with mobile devices. Furthermore, almost all interviewees indicated that they could imagine themselves working abroad:

The call for permanent availability rules our communication profession. Basically, we have to be available 24/7. (Emerging communication leader)

I think that people will work more flexibly and independently of location in 20 years. (Emerging communication leader)

In addition to these structural topics, further trends put forward by the emerging leaders can be attributed to technical progress. One quarter of the interviewees said that a tailored approach and openness to dialogue were key challenges for future stakeholder management. In addition, the interviewees predicted an increasing importance of intercultural aspects in their work. They foresaw a challenge in identifying new opinion makers and in placing messages in the flood of information in modern-day society, where the competition for stakeholders’ attention has already become considerably more intense. In their opinion, the areas of employer branding and reputation management would be even more prominent in the future. Some interviewees saw the need for communicators to expand their technical knowledge further and to enter into closer dialogue with top management. Young communicators can only guess at the development of corporate communications over the next ten years, but one thing seems certain: factors such as authenticity, trust, listening and dialogue remain fundamental principles for the communication success of companies. While the majority of communicators in Europe today think that social media have a major impact on a company’s public reputation (Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2013, p. 25), some emerging leaders believe that the issue will not be as relevant in ten years’ time:

In my opinion, Social Media will be not so much discussed in ten years anymore because other issues will arise that are not yet foreseeable. (Emerging communication leader)

One of the last questions for the next-generation leaders was how they would change their work environment if they were a CCO for a day. Proposals for optimization ranged from measures for organizing the department (e.g., internal communications guidelines, innovation workshops, and interdepartmental cooperation) to actions for improving the public perception of the company (e.g., enhanced social media activities, image campaigns, storytelling strategies, and integrated communications). Emerging leaders receive their visions of modern communication management mainly from conversations with colleagues and by reading industry magazines and newsletters. Moreover, input from outside the communications field, as well as training events and conferences, were repeatedly mentioned as a source of inspiration.

Conclusion

A wealth of material has been collected in this qualitative study, which interviewed 40 chief communication officers and next generation leaders working in global companies. The study revealed a wide range of answers to questions that are crucial in professional life. One of the results is that there is no one single prototype of today's leader in public relations. Emerging communication leaders represent a more consistent mindset in some aspects, but they still comprise a broad range of personalities, career expectations, and visions. This shows that public relations is still a nascent field and is far from being institutionalized, in a sociological sense, by a collective identity, a set of shared cognitive interpretations of the profession and its role. It is also obvious that communication management is less advanced in practice than is suggested by many textbooks and self-portraits by organizations and professional associations.

Nevertheless, our research was able to identify a number of overlapping issues that were supported by both today's and tomorrow's communication leaders. These can be interpreted as cornerstones for developing a public relations function in practice, and might inspire future research. The propositions to be taken into account are:

- Give a clear picture of (leadership in) strategic communication
- Establish talent management in communication departments
- Reassess the relevance of journalistic skills in the digital age
- Strengthen internal networks and mentoring across generations
- Establish new work routines to balance 24/7 reachability and personal lifestyles
- Shape joint visions for the profession

This study can be read as an insight into the professional field, as a forecast of its development and, between the lines, as a critical analysis of the status quo. Examining the statements of leaders in different age groups provides a change of perspective. However, the results presented here are not to be understood as an exact description of today's practice, because of the limitations linked to the sampling procedure. We consider this kind of qualitative in-depth research essential. On the one hand, it provides a better understanding of development in the field for researchers, and, on the other, it supports the critical self-reassurance of professionals.

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