

# **State of Crisis Communication: Evidence and the Bleeding Edge**

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***Abstract:** This article attempts to summarize the strongest evidence that has emerged from crisis communication research, a rapidly evolving practice area of scholarly research. The article provides guidance for crisis communicators by pointing out what researchers have found to be the most effective crisis communication practices. It also identifies the bleeding edge of crisis communication research and the tentative findings that are emerging from it. The bleeding edge of crisis communication is driven by the crisis communicators who are faced with changing concerns such as the role of social media channels in crisis communication.*

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This article summarizes the strongest evidence that has emerged from crisis communication research, a rapidly evolving practice area of scholarly research. Crisis communication is an applied field that seeks to provide guidance for crisis managers in an attempt to limit the harm that crisis can inflict on stakeholders and the organization. The goal of the article is to highlight what researchers have found to be the most successful crisis communications practices.

The majority of crises can be categorized as reputational or operational. Operational crises typically create some threat to public safety and/or stakeholder welfare while reputational crises are far less likely to produce the same level of public safety or stakeholder welfare concerns generated by an operational crisis.

The first area of this article specifies the evidence that has emerged within the realm of crisis communication research. By focusing on the lines of research that are producing consistent evidence, the article classifies crisis into three basic frameworks for crisis managers: (1) timing, being the first to report the crisis is beneficial to the organization; (2) victim focus, emphasizing the victim in public crisis messages, and (3) misinformation, the need to aggressively fight inaccurate information.

The article's second area explores the bleeding edge of crisis communication research and the potential implications for the practice. Bleeding edge is a technological term that indicates something has a high risk of being unreliable because it has not been fully tested. Social media is the driving force in the bleeding edge of crisis communication.

The paper culminates by explaining how social media crisis has been refined and replaced by the term paracrisis. This section of the article examines paracrises/social media crises in more detail to uncover where the true grey areas are for this crisis topic. While

stakeholders are the most common source for paracrises, there are three variations of stakeholder-generated paracrises: customer service, venting, and challenge.

In the near future, it is hopeful that this state of crisis communication will inspire new directions among crisis communication researchers.

## **State of Crisis Communication: Evidence and the Bleeding Edge**

### **Preface**

Crisis communication is an applied field that seeks to provide guidance for crisis managers in order to limit the harm the crisis can inflict on stakeholders and the organization. In the U.S., crisis communication appears as a serious research concern in the 1980s and interest in the topic has expanded rapidly since that time (Coombs, 2015). The end result is a growing body of crisis communication research that should serve to illuminate the crisis communication practice. The challenge is finding, evaluating, and synthesizing all the knowledge about crisis communication. By knowledge I mean the advice crisis managers can trust as being useful in their efforts. What do we know about crisis communication that can be applied reliably when a crisis occurs?

This article seeks to identify the keys research findings that have consistently emerged through systematic research efforts and emerging ideas that could benefit crisis communication. The idea is to identify evidence-based knowledge for crisis communication and areas that demand further attention from researchers and practitioners. Knowledge in applied fields like crisis communication begins with practitioners wrestling with problems. From the work of practitioners, researchers then seek to validate what factors actually work and do not work for addressing the problem. The goal is to build an evidence-based approach to problem solving (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Evidence-based means the ideas have been empirically tested through careful research studies and do not represent simple speculation offered by researchers. The idea is to isolate the research findings that can offer the most utility to crisis managers because this advice has been properly vetted through the research process. The first part of this article specifies the crisis communication evidence that has emerged for the crisis communication research.

But crisis communication is a rapidly evolving practice. Practitioners must cope with new problems and factors as they emerge. Crisis communication researchers are constantly trying to catch up to the demands of the practice. There is a lag between when a problem in crisis communication is identified and the ways to respond to the problem are verified. The initial research designed to reduce the lag can be called the bleeding edge. Bleeding edge is a term from technology that indicates something is still a high risk of being unreliable because it has not been fully tested. The second part of this article identifies the bleeding edge of crisis communication research and the potential implications for the practice.

## **Defining Crisis**

The term crisis has a wide range of definitions that include such actions as disasters and personal problems. This article narrows the term crisis to organizational crises—those experiences by organizations such as corporations and non-profits. An organizational crisis can be defined as a significant threat to organizational operations or reputations that can have negative consequences for stakeholders and/or the organization if not handled properly (Coombs, 2015). Following this definition, organizational crises can be further divided into operational and reputational crises. Operational crises create an actual or potential disruption to organizational operations. Fires, explosions, CEO criminal actions, and product harm-driven recalls all can disrupt operations in some fashion. Crisis management initially was created to address operational crises. Reputational crises threaten to inflict serious damage on an organization's reputation. Reputation crises include irresponsible behavior by management and corporate messages that offend some stakeholders. The idea is that the crisis will cause stakeholders to perceive the organization much less favorably (Sohn & Lariscy, 2014). Clearly, an operational crisis will inflict some reputational damage. However, reputational crises do not impact operations in any meaningful fashion. The majority of crises can be categorized as primarily reputational or operational. A key difference between the two crises is that operational crises typically create some threat to public safety and/or stakeholder welfare while reputational crises are far less likely to produce the same level of public safety or stakeholder welfare concerns generated by an operational crisis (Coombs, 2015).

## **Selecting Research for Practitioner Consumption**

As noted in the introduction, researchers are producing crisis communication research at an amazing rate. I have narrowed the research by focusing on the lines of research that are producing consistent evidence. Consistent evidence is critical if we are to translate the research into practice. Crisis managers must be confident the evidence presented in the research is likely to be effective in their crises. Consistent evidence indicates the same results are found across a number of studies. The consistent results remove the fear that the research findings were just some anomaly that might be unreliable. The ever expanding crisis communication has produced three consistent findings that should serve as the base knowledge for crisis managers: (1) timing, being the first to report the crisis is beneficial to the organization; (2) victim focus, emphasizing the victim in public crisis messages, and (3) misinformation, the need to aggressively fight inaccurate information.

## **Timing**

There is a concept in law known as stealing thunder. Stealing thunder posits that if there is a weakness in a defendant's case, the defense should raise the weakness first. This sounds counterintuitive but a weakness does less harm to a defendant's case as much when the defense raises the weakness rather than when the prosecution raises the weakness (Williams, Bourgeois & Croyle, 1993). A number of research studies have found a similar stealing thunder effect in crisis communication (e.g., Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). When an organization is the first to report it is in a crisis, the organization suffers less damage than if some

outside source, such as the news media, is the first to report the existence of the crisis. Again, being the one to report the crisis first is counterintuitive and resisted by many managers. Some managers prefer an ostrich approach—if they do not acknowledge the crisis no one else will learn about it either. Just as ostriches do not really hide their heads in the sand, managers should not hope that stakeholders will not learn about a crisis. Information has a way leaking from an organization and that leaking ability is only enhanced through social media. A comment or a photograph posted online can reveal a crisis very quickly in the digital age.

Stealing thunder asks managers to take an action most are uncomfortable with performing. There often is a reluctance among managers to disclose negative information. However, multiple studies have documented the benefits of stealing thunder for organizations. The stealing thunder studies have used experimental designs to document a cause and effect relationship between stealing thunder and organizational benefits such as reduced reputational damage and decreases in purchase intentions created by a crisis. The research findings are consistent and strong. The evidence firmly suggests that disclosing the crisis is an effective crisis response because it helps to decrease the damage an organization can suffer from the crisis. Social media is one option an organization can use to steal thunder. The immediacy of social media allows an organization to report a crisis at any time and not rely upon the traditional news media to help facilitate the release of a story.

### **Victim Focus**

Historically, crisis management has centered on operational crisis—events that threatened to disrupt the operations of an organization. These operational crises also involved a clear threat of potential harm to stakeholders. Typical operational crises would include natural disasters, industrial accidents, hazardous chemical releases, transportation accidents, workplace violence, product harm, and management misconduct (management knowingly violating the law or placing stakeholders at risk). A victim can be considered to be any stakeholder who was harmed (actual victim) or who had the potential to be harmed (potential victim). The harm can be physical, psychological, and/or financial. For instance, a product harm crisis places consumer or users of the product at risk while a chemical release can threaten the health of workers and people living near the facility. When a crisis produces real or actual victims, the crisis response must be victim-centered.

A victim-centered approach is accommodative toward the victims. The crisis messages emphasize the victim and how the organization is trying to help the victims. During the Costa Concordia crisis, Carnival Cruise Lines was criticized in traditional and social media for not doing enough to help the victims. We can debate if this perception is accurate but the perceptions dominated media discussions of the crisis and, therefore, became the reality for the crisis—it was the frame most stakeholders had for viewing the crisis. To focus on victims, the initial crisis statements need address concerns about public safety and welfare. Public safety concerns are information that helps stakeholders to avoid or to lessen the harm a crisis might have on them while public welfare messages help stakeholders to cope psychologically with the crisis (Holladay, 2009; Holladay & Coombs, 2013; Sturges, 1994). The public safety messages would include details about the crisis event and recommended courses of actions for stakeholders

to take to prevent being harmed by the crisis. Public safety messages would include expressions of sympathy, offers to provide assistance such as counseling, and steps taken to prevent a repeat of the crisis (Coombs, 2015).

On a related note, research has proven that the victim-centered messages helped to limit reputational damage and negative effects on purchase intentions (Claeys, Cauberghe & Vyncke, 2010; Cooley & Cooley, 2011; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; 2002). However, there are limits to the utility of the victim-centered strategies. When stakeholders strongly believe the organization could and should have prevented the crisis, the victim-centered messages are not enough. When stakeholders strongly believe the organization is responsible for the crisis, the use compensation and/or an apology should be added to the crisis response. It should be noted that managers are hesitant to use apology due to legal concerns (Tyler, 1997). Additionally, research has found that when an organization has a history of crises or a negative reputation prior to a crisis the organization is perceived as more responsible for the crisis. Hence, organizations might have to use compensation and/or apology if their prior reputation is negative and/or they have had crises in the recent past even if the organization has minimal responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 2004; 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Additionally, an aggressive communication approach is preferable to a passive approach for crisis communication. An aggressive approach means that the organization actively communicates with stakeholders about the crisis such as utilizing the victim-centered messages. In the passive approach the organization sends out very few messages about the crisis. An aggressive communication approach initially causes a sharper drop in both stock prices and reputation scores for organizations. However, the stock prices and reputations rebound faster and stronger from the aggressive communication approach than from a passive communication approach (Moran & Gregory, 2014; Raithel, 2014).

### **Misinformation and Denial**

It is important at this point to discuss the denial crisis response strategy. Denial is the opposite of the victim-oriented response because it claims no involvement with crisis or no crisis exists thus the organization has no responsibility to the victims. The focus is on the organization not being responsible, not concern for the victims of the crisis. Academic studies often make the mistake of simply comparing the effects of a denial response and a victim-oriented response and conclude the denial response is more effective. It has long been documented in the crisis communication literature that denial will reduce reputational damage because it eliminates the connection between the crisis and the organization (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 2008). If the organization is not involved in a crisis, the crisis will not damage the organization's reputation. However, if the organization is then shown to have any connection to the crisis, even minimal crisis responsibility, the reputational damaged is intensified if a denial strategy had been used. Some researchers refer to this as a double crisis where the response creates a second crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Grebe, 2013).

However, as recently as 2014 some academics have mistakenly compared denial and victim-oriented responses and claim denial was more effective. This is a false choice, managers

do not choose between denial and a victim-oriented response (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). If the organization has responsibility for the crisis, the managers choose among the victim-oriented response options. If the organization has no connection to the crisis, the managers choose some form of denial. Crisis responsibility is the deciding factor about the use of denial or victim-oriented responses. Even if responsibility is ambiguous, it may or may not be the organization's fault, denial should be avoided. Managers risk intensifying crisis damage if they use denial then the ambiguous situations becomes one where the organization has some responsibility for the crisis.

Denial is best reserved for when a crisis is a result of inaccurate or untrue information (a rumor), what we can be called misinformation crises. Managers must aggressively respond to misinformation crises (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2000; Kimmel & Audrain-Pontevia, 2010). Especially in the digital environment, misinformation can spread and be accepted as fact. Managers must act quickly to debunk and to deny the misinformation (Rowan, 1991). It is helpful if the managers explain what the actual situation is and provide evidence to support their position. Two examples will help to clarify when denial is effect and appropriate. During the peanut paste recall of 2009, the American public wrongly believed peanut butter was part of the recall. All three major brands of peanut butter placed statements on their home pages denying any recall and explaining the situation to its stakeholders. Proctor and Gamble aggressively denied that its product Febreze was dangerous for dogs and cats.

***Table 1:***  
**The Best Research-Based Evidence from Crisis Communication Research**

1. If possible, release information about a crisis before it is reported in tradition or digital media.
2. Report information about a crisis on the organization's online communication channels. Stakeholders depending on social media for news are likely to learn about the crisis from the organization's social media rather than traditional media providing another opportunity to steal thunder.
3. Whenever there are victims or potential victims, immediately tell people how to protect themselves physically from the crisis.
4. Whenever there are victims or potential victims, immediately provide people with information and actions designed to help them cope psychologically with the crisis. This would include details about the crisis event, expressions of sympathy, corrective action, and counseling.
5. Organizations recover reputations and stock prices quicker when they communicate aggressively (frequently and through many channels) than when they communicate passively (release very little information).
6. Denial should only be used when an organization faces a rumor or misinformation about the crisis.

The company web site debunked the rumor and had testimony from a number of expert third party sources to support their claims (Coombs, 2015; Mourdoukoutas & Siomkos, 2009; Powers, 2002). Denial has its place in crisis communication. As Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) posits, denial should be reserved for misinformation crises (Coombs, 2007). If there is any possibility the organization has some responsibility for a crisis,

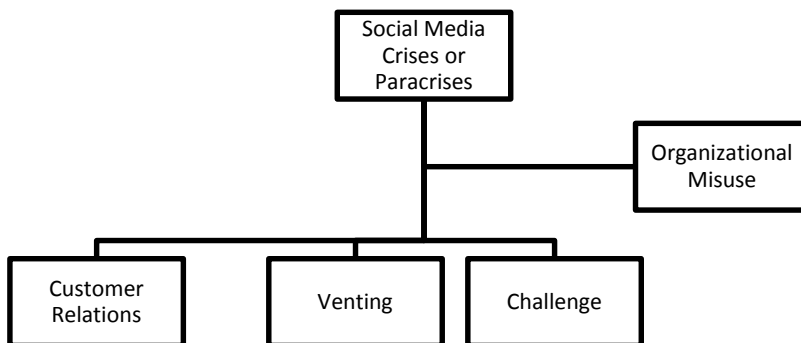
denial will only make the crisis situation worse for the organization in crisis. Table 1 provides a summary of the best evidence created by crisis communication research that crisis communicators can use to help improve the practice.

### **The Emergence of the Social Media Crisis**

We shift our attention from what we definitely know about crisis communication to the bleeding edge of research and practice. The results here are less reliable meaning we are unsure at this point how useful the advice is but advice is needed to address new concerns in crisis communication. Social media is the driving force in the bleeding edge of crisis communication. Researchers and practitioners wrestle with what has been called social media crises. A social media crisis is a situation that emergence in or is amplified by social media. Unfortunately that is very vague definition that even people who helped to popularize the term now find does not work well at all. Social media crises essentially are risks that an organization is managing in public view. These risks look like crises and often demand a communicative response. These situations have been called paracrises because the situation is like a crisis (para means like) but is actually a form of risk management (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b). This section examines paracrises/social media crises in more detail to uncover where the true grey areas are for this crisis topic.

Again, social media crisis is a very vague concept. When you carefully study the cases that are called social media crises, patterns do emerge. Figure 1 presents a more refined view of social media crises or what can be called paracrises. An organization can create its own paracrisis by misusing social media channels. In 2014, American Apparel posted an image of fireworks on social media to celebrate July 4<sup>th</sup>. However, the image was of the 1986 explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. There were many angry posts about how insensitive American Apparel was for the posted image. The resolution of this paracrisis is simple. An organization acknowledges its mistake and pledges not repeat the mistake. The paracrisis can become a crisis if the organization repeatedly abuses social media channels as a way to gain attention. Repeated violations could create a situation that can be considered a management misconduct crisis.

**Figure 1:**  
**Social Media Crises or Paracrises**



Stakeholders are the most common source for paracrises. There are three variations of stakeholder-generated paracrises: customer service, venting, and challenge. Customer service is when a customer makes public the customer service problem they have experienced. An example would be when a person uploaded to YouTube the video of a FedEx employee throwing a computer monitor over a fence. This is a customer relations problem, not a crisis. However, it is a risk that threatens the organization's reputation. The organization must publicly address the customer service issue. A crisis can ensue when the identified problem persists or the problem is really product harm rather than a customer service problem.

Venting is when stakeholders, usually customers, are angry and want to hurt the organization in some way. The stakeholders will post negative comments about the organization on line, often using the organization's own social media channels. Venting differs from customer service in that the stakeholders is not presenting problem that can be resolved. Instead, the stakeholder is expressing anger through statements designed to hurt the organization (Mattila & Wirtz, 2004). For instance, Qantas Airlines had a Twitter campaign that did not have the desired effect among customers. Instead of posting their idea of the perfect luxury vacation, the customers complained about the recent grounding of Qantas flight due to a labor dispute. Most of the comments were meant to ridicule Qantas and were not customer problems that could be resolved. When stakeholders vent, organizations need to have a sense of humor and a thick skin. The best response is to allow the venting to occur. Venting is not about engagement, it is more about revenge (Grégoire, Laufer & Tripp, 2010) so let stakeholders have their say, even if the comments are hurtful to the organization.

Challenge is the most complicated of the paracrises and the most difficult to both assess and response to effectively. The challenge paracrisis is a very grey area of crisis communication and may be the tip of the bleeding edge. A challenge paracrisis occurs when some stakeholders publicly claim that current organizational practices are irresponsible. The stakeholders redefine the organization's behavior as irresponsible (Lange & Washburn, 2012). Because corporate social responsibility is an essential component of reputations (2005), a challenge is a crisis risk because it threatens the organizational reputation. A challenge can escalate from a risk into a reputational crisis. Stakeholders create and seek to amplify the crisis risk in challenge. Research suggests the incidents of challenges are on the rise (King, 2011).

Challenges are complicated because they revolve around social issues. Social issues are moral problems with opposing points of view and no definitive answers. Common social issues include human rights, abortion, same sex marriage, and discrimination. It becomes difficult to identify specific red flags that indicate when managers must address a challenge and change organizational actions and when managers can argue that current practices are correct. For instance, Honeywell defended its use of same sex partners in a commercial about graham crackers while H&M agreed to remove certain hazardous chemical from its supply chain. Both companies faced strong opposition to its actions in social media but selected divergent responses.

There are a few rough markers that can serve as potential red flags for challenges. Those red flags include traditional media reporting on the social media activity (what is termed crossover), a steadily increasing number of negative comments being posted about the



organization, the challenge spreading to other social media channels, and the challenger using sophisticated communication efforts or having a history of successfully forcing other organizations to change (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a). However, these are only rough markers and managers must consider a wide array of information when deciding how to react to challenge.

### Conclusion

The every expanding crisis communication research is designed to advance knowledge about that field. Part of that knowledge includes insights into crisis communication that can be used to enhance the practice of crisis communication. Effective applied communication does help to improve the field to which it is applied. Unfortunately the academic literature on crisis communication is both vast and difficult to access at times making it of limited value to crisis communicators. The primary purpose of this article is to synthesize the most reliable results from the academic research into a usable set of guidance for practitioners. Toward this end I have identified the most consistent findings from the academic research involving timing, a victim focus, and the use of denial for misinformation situations. A secondary purpose is to discuss the concerns arising from the poorly conceived idea of social media crises. The idea of social media crisis was refined and replaced by the term paracrisis. The different types of paracrises were considered along with how crisis communicators might address them. The problem is that the research on social media crises/paracrises is very limited and the advice is still speculative at this time representing the bleeding edge of crisis communication research and practice. Hopefully this state of the field will offer some new ideas for crisis communication practitioners and inspire new directions among crisis communication researchers.

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