



The state of strategic organizational crisis communication research in the context of global and digital communication¹

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1. CRISIS COMMUNICATION: RELEVANCE AND CONCEPTUAL BASIS

Since the mid 1990s the field of crisis communication research has grown substantially as a topic of international communication studies. Especially in public relations journals a growth of the publication output has been observed recently, whereas broader communication journals still publish scarcely on crisis communication (An & Cheng, 2012; Ha & Boynton, 2014). The increasing number of conferences and specialized working groups at major academic communication associations such as the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) as well as the

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publication of specialized journals such as the *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication* indicate the ongoing institutionalization of the field (Schwarz, Seeger, & Auer, 2016a). Moreover, an increasing number of academic and public research centers, primarily at American and European universities, point to the rapid growth and societal relevance of the field (Palenchar, 2010).

Within the field of public relations and strategic communication research the management of crisis communication already counts as a vital sub-discipline (Coombs, 2012b). This gain in importance can also be explained by the numerous devastating crisis events which do not only have tremendous social, political, ecological, and economic impact, but also reveal in many cases the complexity and limitations of managing crisis communication as practiced by organizations in various fields of society. This complexity and scope of crises go along with the interdisciplinarity and multiperspectivity of the research field, which in most cases lacks reciprocal reference (Coombs, 2012a; Löffelholz & Schwarz, 2008).

However, the key role of communication in the context of crisis situations and especially the role of strategically planned and research-based communication by organizations before, during and after crisis situations have been recognized in practice as well as in academia. This has stimulated further efforts of developing a stronger conceptual and theoretical basis of crisis communication research. Compared to past ontological descriptions of crises, scholars now emphasize the social construction of crises as well as the role of individual and organizational observers and their perceptions. Pearson and Clair (1998, p. 66) defined organizational crisis as “low-probability, high-impact situation that is perceived by critical stakeholders to threaten the viability of the organization and that is subjectively experienced by these individuals as personally and socially threatening.” Hearit and Courtright (2004) argued that communication is a constitutive element of the construction of social reality in crisis contexts. Applying this to organizational crises, the authors concluded that “[c]rises are terminological creations conceived by human agents, and consequently, are managed and resolved terminologically. As such, instead of being one component, communication constitutes the quintessence of crisis management” (p. 205). Hence, crises and their interpretations

as well as perceptions of scope and severity are socially constructed by individual and organizational actors, who are involved in the crisis communication process in different constellations and with different impact.

Within such contexts of perceived dangerous or disruptive situations, crisis communication can be characterized as a social negotiation process in which observers intuitively or strategically attribute the status of a crisis to certain observed processes or events. From a chronological perspective, crisis communication refers to public and interpersonal communication processes in anticipation of crisis, during crisis as well as in the aftermath of crisis. From a social perspective, crisis communication refers to all individual and institutional actors, who participate in crisis communication and interact in the context of a crisis. From a communication or symbolic perspective crisis communication refers to all messages that are related to the crisis situation and its social meaning. Different to this broad understanding of crisis communication, *strategic* crisis communication is conceptualized as the management of communication to proactively detect or prevent crises, to prepare for crises, to cope with ongoing crisis situations, and to deal with post-crisis concerns as well as to evaluate organizational crisis communication performance. The goal of strategic crisis communication is to minimize the expected or the observed loss of trust and reputation of organizations as perceived by relevant crisis stakeholders in order to maximize the scope of action of organizations to attain their strategic goals under crisis conditions (Schwarz & Löffelholz, 2014). Depending on the type of organization (e.g., business organizations, disaster protection agencies) and the type of crisis (e.g., management fraud, natural disaster), these goals may refer to manifold aspects such as generating turnover and profits or to protect people from negative consequences of natural disasters. In general, strategic crisis communication should effectively spread information and enact communication processes that prevent crisis stakeholders from physical harm and to support them psychologically to cope with a crisis (Coombs, 2012b; Sturges, 1994). Both functions of strategic crisis communication – protecting the well-being of crisis stakeholders and protecting organizational assets such as reputation and goal attainment – are highly interdependent, of course. Organizations that fail protecting their stakeholders from

harm loose reputation or trust; and organizations with bad reputation will be less effective in protecting stakeholders because these stakeholders do not trust in the organizations' instructing and adjusting messages in crisis contexts.

This article gives a non-exhaustive condensed overview on the state of research on strategic crisis communication by referring to organizational crises in particular. Based on this literature review, conclusions will be drawn for future research and trends in crisis communication mainly concerning international dimensions of crisis communication as well as implications of the growing importance of communication in on social media and the use of algorithms to analyze and/or automate communication.

2. THREE PERSPECTIVES OF STRATEGIC ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

The international state of research with focus on strategic crisis communication of organizations can be described as unsystematic and fragmented, though remarkable in extend and complexity. The prevailing disciplinary orientations are public relations, communications, and psychology. Only a few communication scholars have employed frameworks based on economics, sociology, or political science (Ha & Boynton, 2014), even though some of these disciplines have produced a rich body of knowledge which is relevant for crisis communication such as disaster sociology (Vollmer, 2013), crisis management (Hart, Heyes, & Boin, 2001), or political crisis communication (Schneider & Jordan, 2016). In the field of communication studies, we have suggested to categorize research into the three perspectives of institutional, technical-instrumental, and symbolic-relational crisis communication research (Löffelholz & Schwarz, 2008; Schwarz, 2010) with each asking the following main questions:

1. Institutional perspective: What are the most relevant structural and cultural context variables at organizational and societal levels that influence the development, implementation, and effectiveness of crisis communication practice and strategies?

2. Technical-instrumental perspective: What are the characteristics of effective instrumental and technological measures/tactics for crisis communication across sectors, industries, and societies and to what extent have these technologies and tactics diffused among practitioners?
3. Symbolic-relational perspective: What are characteristics and effects of content and form of crisis communication as well as stakeholder relationships in crisis contexts?

These three analytical dimensions of crisis communication help to identify and empirically study important variables that influence the crisis communication process including precrisis (crisis prevention, early detection, crisis preparation), crisis, and post-crisis (Coombs, 2012a). Following this broad understanding of strategic organizational crisis communication, risk communication is an element of this process in all three phases of crisis communication. This points to an understanding of “crisis as risk manifested” (Heath & O’Hair, 2010, p. 5) which means that the management of risk communication and crisis communication are heavily intertwined, though not equivalent. With the help of risk communication, organizations can anticipate possible crisis scenarios and sensitize relevant stakeholders to them. The goal of risk communication is “to provide people with all insights they need in order to make decisions or judgments that reflect the best available knowledge and their own preferences” (Renn, 2009, p. 80) in order to better protect them against risks. Risk communication thus makes a contribution to crisis prevention or at least mitigates the course of a crisis. Even in acute crisis phases, risks can arise that should be communicated directly to potentially affected stakeholders in order to protect them from damage. In this respect, risk communication can also be seen as an instrument for preparing for and overcoming crises (Coombs, 2019). A number of approaches such as the Extended Parallel Processing Model (Roberto, Goodall, & Witte, 2009) or the IDEA model (Sellnow, Lane, Sellnow, & Littlefield, 2017) provide a valuable basis for developing risk communication strategies or the appropriate handling of potentially threatened stakeholder groups. The present research, however, relates primarily to natural disasters or pandemic threats and less to organizational crises. Hence, the

following literature review will reduce complexity by mainly focusing on strategic organizational crisis communication. For an overview on the intertwined emergence of risk and crisis communication as well as their intersections see Palenchar (2010).

Institutional crisis communication research that draws primarily on the disciplines of crisis management and organizational communication, deals with organizational structures, roles, cultural dimensions as well as characteristics of individual organizational actors or roles and their influence on the effectiveness of crisis anticipation and the management of crisis response. This is often based on the assumption, that organizations vary concerning their crisis vulnerability and that this variance can be estimated by specific internal organizational factors (Schwarz, 2010).

Pauchant and Mitroff (2006) have contributed to this field from a crisis management perspective. They argued that specific qualities of the organizational culture can favor the emergence of an increased crisis threat and make an organization a crisis prone organization as opposed to more crisis avoiding organizations. Organizational culture was understood as “basic, taken-for-granted assumptions that an organization makes about itself, its customers, employees, and surrounding environment” (Pauchant & Mitroff, 2006, p. 136). Based on qualitative interviews with high-ranking executives in 23 organizations, the authors concluded that crisis prone organizations have a tendency to neglect the probability of crisis that might affect them or downplay their significance for the organizations. Such ‘unhealthy’ organizational cultures observe their environment and stakeholders (e.g., customers) primarily in terms of their benefit for the organization and its goals. In these organizations an understanding of crisis prevails that crisis is first of all a threat for the own organization, while the threat for external stakeholders is not of equal importance. Pauchant and Mitroff also found feelings of grandiosity and perfection among managers as well as idealized CEOs in crisis prone organizations, which hindered their efforts in crisis management. Also overemphasizing corporate excellence limited companies’ efforts and abilities in crisis management, whereas such efforts were even attributed to ‘bad companies’ by one of the interviewed executives. In addition, crisis prone organizations seem to observe their environment according to a bad-evil dichotomy where only those stakeholders are perceived as ‘good

guys' who agree with the sense of perfection that prevails within the company. Especially the media were found to be perceived as 'evil' stakeholders who threaten organizations in crisis contexts and, thus, must be controlled or fought against. As a consequence, crisis prone organizations have a tendency to attribute causes and responsibility for crises to external instead of internal factors.

In the crisis communication literature, Marra (1998) has early emphasized the important role of organizational culture, more specifically organizational communication culture, for the management of organizational crisis response. Based on two cases studies, one on AT&T in 1990 and one on the University of Maryland in 1986, the author concluded that an organizational philosophy that emphasizes proactive and cooperative communication principles, which are accepted by employees, are a much stronger predictor of effective crisis response practices than the existence of crisis management plans. These plans would only work well in an environment where such communication cultures have emerged and, in addition, where the public relations function is sufficiently autonomous to implement effective crisis communication tactics. This autonomy is an important precondition for PR executives to have sufficient access to resources and information in anticipation of crises and during ongoing crises. A more recent survey of PR practitioners in US companies, nonprofit organizations, and government authorities, for instance, has revealed a positive relationship between the autonomy and the power of the PR department within an organization and the extent of crisis preparation in the organization (Cloudman & Hallahan, 2006). Another survey of Taiwanese companies showed that more PR autonomy and strategic orientation in crisis communication as well as decreasing dominance of the legal department increases the likelihood that companies communicate quickly, actively, and consistently in response to a crisis (Huang & Su, 2009).

Guth (1995), on the other hand, was interested in explaining increased management competences and, thus, autonomy. He assumed that the increasing crisis experience of organizations favor the implementation of PR functions with managerial roles. Although he only found a weak relationship, other studies produced similar findings. The authors of the so-called excellence study on public relations stated that organizations that are

confronted with more critical stakeholders (activists) over time and experience more crises in this regard, tend to have better equipped and more powerful PR departments (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Studies on German companies in the chemistry and pharmaceutical sector (Kunczik, Heintzel, & Zipfel, 1995) as well as German nonprofit organizations (Schwarz & Pforr, 2011) also found positive correlations between an organization's crisis experience and its crisis preparation efforts.

The *technical-instrumental perspective* of crisis communication research focusses on the diffusion, implementation and effectiveness of communication measures and technologies across the different stages of crisis (Schwarz, 2010). Research on this aspect usually is of descriptive nature and predominantly deals with crisis preparedness of organizations (Bechler, 2004). For the crisis prevention stage, the use of issues management as well as risk communication to anticipate and detect crises was studied. The vast proportion of studies looked at the diffusion and implementation of crisis preparation measures such as crisis plans, crisis teams, and crisis trainings (Cloudman & Hallahan, 2006; Guth, 1995; J. Lee, Woeste, & Heath, 2007; Schwarz & Pforr, 2011). More recently, scholars have analyzed the diffusion of web-based communication instruments of crisis communication among different types of organizations to either monitor or communicate with stakeholders in crisis contexts (Schwarz & Pforr, 2011; Taylor & Kent, 2007; Zeffass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2013).

The largest share of studies conducted by communication scholars on organizational crisis management contributes to the *symbolic-relational perspective*. Especially communication theory and concepts from social psychology such as attribution theory have been applied here in order to identify rhetorical crisis communication strategies used by organizations and to analyze their effects on certain stakeholder groups or audiences in specific crisis situations. In addition, the impact of crises on building and maintaining relationships between organizations and publics has been studied from this perspective (Claeys & Schwarz, 2016; Ha & Boynton, 2014; Schwarz, 2010).

Coombs (2006) distinguishes between *form* and *content* of crisis response as the main categories that would pertain to the symbolic approach. *Form* focusses on how to

respond effectively to crisis and *content* on what to say in crisis contexts. Both aspects have usually been studied from an audience perspective where stakeholder perceptions were studied by applying experimental designs or content analysis of web-based communication channels.

Form-recommendation for effective crisis communication are often not based on sound research and evidence. Some smaller-scaled experimental studies in Europe have dealt with aspects of non-verbal communication in public statements in a crisis context. These have shown that speakers with lower voices are perceived as more influential and competent than those with higher voices (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014a). In addition, low voices are more effective in terms of reputation effects in combination with a slower speech rate, while higher voices are more effective in combination with a higher speech rate (Waele, 2018). This applies only to preventable crises though and that a matched crisis communication strategy is used in accordance with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (see next section).

Recent literature reviews and discussion on this perspective (Claeys & Schwarz, 2016; Coombs, 2006, 2012b; Fediuk, Coombs, & Botero, 2012) agree that *content* of crisis response was mostly emphasized, more specifically reputation restoring strategies such as full apology or denial. One of the first theoretical frameworks of crisis response strategies was Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995, 1997). Its main purpose is to investigate and categorize the crisis response strategies that individuals or organizations use to react towards an external public during or after a crisis. This typology has been applied to numerous crisis cases, in order to identify and analyze the image repair strategies of politicians, celebrities and organizations. However, the framework remained on a rather descriptive level. Therefore, Coombs and Holladay (Coombs, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2001, 2004) developed and validated Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) which together with attribution theory, image repair theory, and framing theory is one of the most often used frameworks in strategic organizational crisis communication research (An & Cheng, 2012; Ha & Boynton, 2014).

SCCT is mainly based on attribution theory which focuses on the universal concern with causal explanation. It aims at explaining peoples' perception of what causes certain behaviors or behavioral outcomes (Heider, 1958). While *attribution theories* are concerned with conditions and antecedents of causal attributions, *attributional theories* focus on cognitive, affective and behavioral consequences of causal inferences (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Because of an assumed fundamental need of individuals to reduce uncertainty with regard to perceptions of their environment they try to attribute certain causes to observed behavior in order to feel more confident about events or behavior they observe. Especially unexpected events that are perceived to be personally relevant and threatening are likely to trigger spontaneous attributional activity (Malle & Knobe, 1997; Weiner, 1985). This notion was used by the authors of SCCT as a rationale to apply attribution theory to organizational crisis. According to Coombs and Holladay (2004) the threat of a crisis is mainly a function of crisis responsibility. The more stakeholders attribute crisis responsibility to an organization, the more the organizational reputation suffers. Based on experimental studies, SCCT distinguishes between three clusters of crisis types (victim crises, accidental crises, preventable crises) which were differentiated by stakeholders' attributions of responsibility to the organization in crisis. These crisis types were matched to three clusters of crisis response strategies (deny, diminish, and rebuild crisis response strategies), which were differentiated by the level of publicly accepted responsibility by the organization. According to SCCT, crisis managers should adapt their crisis response strategy (acceptance of responsibility) to stakeholders' attribution of responsibility which can be deduced from the crisis type and so-called modifiers such as crisis history and prior reputation. Findings of primarily experimental research have indicated that stakeholders evaluate organizations more positively when their crisis response strategy is matched to the crisis type compared to either no response or a mismatched response (Coombs & Holladay, 2004). Further studies have intended to test and extend the SCCT framework. One finding was that stakeholders' attributions of responsibility can be affected by a number of additional variables such as the publics' level of involvement with the crisis and their prior relationship history with the organization. Those studies have shown, for instance, that

a matched crisis response strategy has a positive impact on stakeholders' attitudes towards an organization compared to a mismatched crisis response strategy, yet only when the stakeholder group is highly involved with the crisis situation. A possible explanation was that stakeholders that are involved with a crisis scrutinize crisis information more thoroughly than those less involved with the events (Y. Choi & Y.-H. Lin, 2009; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014b). Moreover, the use of crisis communication strategies according to SCCT is apparently only necessary if organizations do not proactively reveal their own crisis to the public. If, on the other hand, so-called 'stealing thunder' strategies are applied (a company first uncovers the internal causes of the crisis before the media or other actors do), a simple information strategy is sufficient to limit the loss of reputation according to Claeys and Cauberghe (2012). However, further replication studies are needed to validate these findings.

Another extension of SCCT was provided by Schwarz (2008, 2012b) who argued for a more systematic study of causal antecedents of organizational crisis by applying Kelley's covariation principle. Kelley (1973) hypothesized that individuals observe persons' behaviors in multiple occasions and explain behavioral outcomes by the causes they covary with over time. When persons attribute causes to certain behavioral outcomes, they roughly refer to three categories according to Kelly: effects can be attributed either to persons (person attribution), to entities a person is interacting with (entity attribution), or to circumstances of the specific situation (circumstance attribution). Such causal attributions are based on three informational dimensions: consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency. Consensus refers to information about a person's behavior towards a certain entity in comparison to other persons' behaviors with regard to that entity. Distinctiveness refers to information on the person's behavior towards a certain entity in comparison to his or her behavior towards other comparable entities. Information about the person's behavior towards the entity across time or settings is labeled as consistency. The three information dimensions can be perceived as low or high by individual observers of persons or organizations. That means there is a total of at least eight possible covariation information patterns that would influence individuals' or stakeholders' causal perception.

By applying the covariation principle to organizational crises, Schwarz (2010, 2012) found support for the assumption that stakeholders covary causes with organizations by relying on these information patterns. They predict causal attributions, though with low to moderate effects. Moreover, covariation-based causal attributions were found to have substantial impact on responsibility attributions and subsequently on evaluations of organizational reputation. However, depending on the crisis scenario, stakeholders seem to weight the three information dimensions differently (Schwarz, 2010). This points to a common finding in the broader field of attribution research that the attribution process is not always rational or logical, but rather is subject to biases and inconsistencies. In social psychology, certain phenomena such as the correspondence bias and the fundamental attribution error, self-serving attributions, or the underuse of consensus information have been studied extensively (Försterling, 2001).

Further extensions of SCCT have introduced the concept of emotions. Jin, Pang and Cameron (2012) argued that organizational crisis response strategies should take into account the emotions experienced by stakeholders in order to address their specific needs and support their psychological coping with crises as earlier pointed out by Sturges (1994). Crisis communication research started investigating the role of emotions (Coombs & Holladay, 2005) and developed publics-based, emotion-driven perspectives (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2012). Emotions were also related to attributions of organizational responsibility, for instance by comparing the impact of preventable and victim crises (Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013). According to this, preventable crises (high levels of perceived responsibility) result in more anger than victim crises (low levels of perceived responsibility). Anger in turn leads to more reputation damage. Other scholars have further distinguished between attribution-independent and attribution-dependent emotions in the context of organizational crises (Yoonhyeung Choi & Ying-Hsuan Lin, 2009; Jin, Liu, Anagondahalli, & Austin, 2014).

In addition to Image Repair Theory, SCCT, and attribution theory, crisis communication scholars have worked most often with framing, the situational theory of publics, contingency theory, and excellence theory. Most of this research also exemplifies a

symbolic-relational perspective on organizational crisis communication with the exception of excellence theory (Grunig et al., 2002) and contingency theory (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2012) where a number of institutional aspects were taken into account (e.g., professional roles, department structures, autonomy, etc.). For the symbolic-relational approach, the concept of organization-public relationships has also been applied to organizational crisis. Findings indicate that the quality of relationships as perceived by crisis stakeholders can have substantial impact on crisis evaluations and attributions of responsibility towards an organization. Organization-public relationships that are evaluated positively by stakeholders can increase the effectiveness of crisis response strategies and protect organizations temporarily from spontaneous attributions of responsibility (Brown & White, 2011).

After this condensed review of the state of research on strategic organizational crisis communication, the relevance and implications of two societal and communicational trends will be discussed, namely the globalization and the hybridization of crisis communication.

3. CRISIS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN A GLOBAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

In the last decades, communication scholars have increasingly recognized that the study of communication processes can no longer be reduced to national contexts (Brüggemann & Wessler, 2014). This is due to a significant increase in the number of transnational actors and the magnitude of their international operations and relationships in most sectors of society such as politics, business, religion, media, and even civil society. Transnational corporations conducting international marketing and public relations, national governments or transnational political entities such as the EU or the United Nations practicing public diplomacy, as well as international NGOs such as Plan International practicing international PR and activism demonstrate the global presence and impact of strategic organizational communication including crisis communication (Gilboa, 2008; Schwarz & Fritsch, 2014; Verčič, 2003). According to a survey of more than 2,000 European communication professionals in 43 countries, almost half of the practitioners (45%) have to communicate internationally across

different countries on a regular basis, whereas only less than one fifth (18%) stated to not engage at all in international communication in their daily work. This validates the assumption that “[i]t is increasingly impossible [for communication practitioners] to escape communicating across national, cultural, and linguistic borders” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 27).

Despite the importance of international dimensions of strategic organizational communication, scholars have only recently begun to explore international or cross-cultural dimensions of crisis communication (Schwarz et al., 2016a). The authors of the few existing publications on this topic are largely agreeing that the internationalization of companies, NGO’s, political organizations, and the media are linked to a growing number and relevance of crises with cross-border impact, which significantly increase the complexity and needed skills of strategic crisis communication practice (Coombs, 2008; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; B. K. Lee, 2005a). However, the academic state of the art in this respect has been assessed rather pessimistically: “That international crisis communication is underdeveloped, if not undeveloped, reflects either insensitivity or ethnocentrism in the current crisis communication field” (B. K. Lee, 2005a, p. 286). This raises some serious questions concerning the external validity of the established theoretical frameworks, concepts, and practice recommendations in the crisis communication literature which in most cases implicitly claim to be universally valid across national or cultural boundaries. However, the conceptual foundations of crisis and crisis communication imply a highly culture-sensitive character of crises and related communication processes. Crises as social constructs emerge in social negotiation processes where (the violation of) societal values, beliefs, expectancies, and norms serve as a fundamental reference for crisis stakeholders to decide whether a certain event, behavior, or process is labeled as crisis. This is more or less explicitly stated in many definitions of the crisis concept (Coombs, 2012b; Hearit & Courtright, 2004; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Schwarz, 2010; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). On the other hand, such values and beliefs are assumed to be one of the core elements of the complex construct of culture (Hofstede, 1980; House, Javidan, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002; Schwartz, 2006). Schwartz (2006) defines cultural values as “shared conceptions

of what is good and desirable in the culture” (p. 139). In addition, he argues that cultural values “shape and justify individual and group beliefs, actions, and goals. Institutional arrangements and policies, norms, and everyday practices express underlying cultural value emphases in societies” (p. 139). This suggests that the way organizations organize, perceive, and practice crisis communication as well as the way stakeholders engage in “co-creating the meaning of crises” (Coombs, 2012b, p. 19) is highly dependent on the cultural context and cultural value emphases that shape perception, communication, and behavior of these social entities.

However, the state of research of international crisis communication is still limited in quantity and scope. According to Schwarz (2013), studies related to this topic can be categorized by two dimensions: (1) the consideration of national or cultural context factors as independent or explaining variable and (2) the observation of crisis communication as a cross-national or cross-cultural communication process. The first dimension has two categories: (1a) Studies that use the national and respectively the cultural context as a variable (or set of variables) to explain similarities and differences of certain crisis communication phenomena. The identification of such context variables can happen more theory-driven by deducing these factors from the state of research or established theoretical frameworks (e.g., cultural values). In most studies, however, context factors are used in a more explorative way to interpret differences on a post-hoc basis. (1b) The second category of the first dimension refers to studies that do not involve context variables to explain differences or similarities; or they do not involve any systematic variation of these context factors to explain domestic, cross-national, or cross-cultural crisis communication processes. The second dimension can be divided into (2a) crises with observable physical or symbolic cross-border effects or (2b) crises that are limited to national or regional contexts in terms of scope and effects. In addition, this can refer to studies that focus on either (2a) cross-border or (2b) context-specific activities or communications of (corporate) actors in the context of crises. This results in four analytical categories of international crisis communication research, namely (I) international-comparative crisis communication research; (II) comparative crisis communication research; (III) international or cross-cultural crisis communication

as object of study; and (IV) context-specific or country-specific crisis communication research (Schwarz, 2013; Schwarz et al., 2016a).

Most crisis communication research that deals with international dimensions, or at least claims to do so, is limited to the analysis and contextualization of crisis communication practices in a certain country, mostly by using some kind of framework or theory that was developed by Western-based scholars (category IV). Often, the goal was to test the external validity of a model or theory by applying it to a different population or to a different (national/cultural) context. As to that, Lee (2005b) showed that with a few exceptions the basic assumptions of SCCT can be adopted for consumers in Hong Kong. Other studies focused on identifying and validating existing typologies of crisis response strategies based on Corporate Apologia, Impression Management, Image Repair Theory, or SCCT in nations outside the US (e.g., Huang, Lin, & Su, 2005). In addition, case studies from various countries, that contextualize crisis communication practices, perceptions, or effects to some extent, can be placed in this category (George & Pratt, 2012). However, such studies often do not apply any theoretical framework or do not include any systematic comparison across nations or cultures.

Comparative crisis communication studies where context factors are used to explain applications and effects of cross-national or cross-cultural crisis communication processes are rare (category I). In most cases multinational or international organizations being involved in cross-border crisis were observed. Usually these studies do not test hypotheses or well-established theoretical frameworks, but are of explorative character and use context-factors only as post-hoc explanations for differences or similarities that were found in advance. An often cited study in this category is the one by Taylor (2000), who analyzed an international crisis of Coca Cola in June 1999 where 42 Belgian school children fell sick after the consumption of Coca Cola soft drinks. As a result Belgian, French, and Spanish government authorities insisted on stronger regulations of the beverage market and a stronger control of the Coca Cola Group compared to Danish, Norwegian and Swedish authorities. Taylor attributed the consequences of the crisis – more than 20 percent loss in profits and the resignation of CEO Douglas Ivester – to the lack of accounting for the specific cultural and national

contexts in Europe. According to Hofstede's (1980) conceptualization of cultural value emphases, in Belgium France and Spain high levels of uncertainty avoidance and power distance can be found. According to Taylor, this would explain their higher need of regulations after the Coca Cola crisis. In comparison, in Denmark, Norway and Sweden the incident did not have such severe political or economic consequences, which Taylor attributed to the relatively lower levels of power distance and uncertainty avoidance in these countries. Another study in this category compared the international media coverage on the Fukushima crisis, where several nuclear power plants experienced a nuclear meltdown as a consequence of a major Tsunami in Japan, applying framing, crisis communication concepts, and attribution theory (Schwarz, 2014). The content analysis identified eight different frames in the international media coverage of six countries and some significant differences between these countries in terms of the prominence of these frames. These differences were explained by variations in cultural value emphases of these countries based on Schwartz' (2006) value dimensions of autonomy, embeddedness, harmony, mastery, egalitarianism, and hierarchy.

Comparative crisis communication research without consideration of cross-border communication processes (category II) refers to studies where, for instance, country-specific characteristics or perceptions of crisis communication are compared across countries and possible differences are explained by specific context variables. Other examples would be studies comparing the extent and characteristics of crisis management or civil protection measures in different nation-states depending on their political system or cultural factors. This kind of research represents a significant desideratum of the crisis communication literature. One of the few quasi-experimental studies that applied an actual cross-cultural research design was conducted by An et al. (2010). The study indicated that cultural (or national) differences, namely the difference between individualist culture (American students) and collectivist culture (Korean students), have an impact on both perceptions of crisis responsibility and crisis-related emotions.

Category III refers to studies that treat cross-national or cross-cultural crisis communication as object of study without any intention to explain differences across

boundaries by context variables. Also this kind of research is rare in the crisis communication literature. As an example, studies would be needed that analyze the coordination of crisis communication in or between transnational organizations (e.g., centralization vs. decentralization) or studies that deal with the design of cross-national crisis communication messages or strategies (e.g., standardization vs. differentiation). A survey of communication professionals at international NGOs revealed that 71 percent of the organizations actually have an international crisis communication function. In most cases this function was coordinated centrally by NGOs' headquarter (50%) or in a collaborative way between headquarters and local offices (25%) (Schwarz & Fritsch, 2015). Another contribution to this research category is the concept of cross-national conflict shifting by Molleda and Connolly-Ahern (2002) who argue that “[d]omestic conflicts are increasingly shifting worldwide because of the growth of international transactions, transportation and communication, especially information technology” (p. 4). The authors proposed ten (later 13) propositions about the nature of domestic conflicts affecting transnational organizations and how these conflicts may shift across national borders and by that tarnish international organizational reputation (Molleda & Quinn, 2004). So far, this framework has primarily been applied to individual case studies.

This condensed review of research on international and comparative crisis communication underlines the urgent need for more academic efforts in the field. Also governmental institutions responsible for disaster protection, disease control, or terrorism become increasingly aware of the challenges of addressing multicultural publics within domestic or international crises. In terms of the symbolic-relational perspective as described earlier, multicultural stakeholders affected by crises are likely to differ with regard to their perception and evaluation of risks, their preferred communication channels, or how much they trust in different institutions involved in crisis communication (e.g., Lachlan, Burke, Spence, & Griffin, 2009). Social psychology has produced some evidence that attributions of cause and responsibility are highly culture-dependent (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999). Given the importance of attributions as found in crisis communication research, this points to the urgency of

testing the established frameworks such as SCCT across cultural settings (Claeys & Schwarz, in press; Schwarz, 2013). Also with regard to the institutional perspective of crisis communication research, more international comparative studies are needed. Management scholars, for example, have shown that organizational cultures are heavily influenced by the dominating national culture, though not equivalent (Quigley, Luque, & House, 2005). That means that organizations with strong roots in countries with high levels of power distance are more hierarchic, more bureaucratic, and less transparent in handling information as compared to countries with low power distance (Quigley et al., 2005). Considering the findings on organizational culture for crisis management as described above, this raises important questions concerning cross-national differences between the strategic crisis communication practice and structures of organizations. Research on such aspects has only just begun as more recent overviews show (Schwarz, Seeger, & Auer, 2016b). In other words, to date, transnational corporations, political institutions, disaster relief organizations, and other actors involved in cross-cultural crises and communication have almost no evidence-based and well-established guidelines they can use to organize or coordinate international crisis communication or to develop culture-sensitive crisis communication strategies or messages (instruction, adjusting information, etc.).

4. SOCIAL MEDIA AND AUTOMATED COMMUNICATION: IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATION

In the last two decades the rapid worldwide diffusion of the internet as communication channel in all day life as well as in organizational and professional contexts has substantially changed communication habits. By 2018, approximately 55% of the world population had access to the internet with North America (95%), Europe (85%), and Australia/Oceania (69%) having the highest penetration rates. Since the year 2000 internet penetration has grown by 1,066% (Internet World Stats, 2018). The attention of communication scholars and practitioners has been shifting to the growing use and importance of social media and different algorithms or applications used in the context of crisis and disaster response. The social media marketing agency We Are Social (2019) estimated a worldwide social media penetration of 45% with The Americas (66%) as the

leading continent followed by Europe (55%). On web-based communication platforms traditional media such as text, audio, and video are quickly converging on just one technical platform. In addition, mass communication and interpersonal communication have merged together in a new form of hybrid communication where mediated dialogue between individuals can be followed and commented by a dispersed mass audience at the same time, for example on social network platforms such as Facebook. Besides the convergence of mass communication and interpersonal communication, algorithms and applications of artificial intelligence (AI) are increasingly used as means of automated communication. Thus, also human communication and machine communication are more and more converging as the use of social bots, personal assistants, and other AI applications show. However, there is a lack of systematic research with regard to the application of artificial intelligence in crisis communication.

Without doubt, the use of websites, social networks, video communities, weblogs, microblogs, online discussion boards, and other social media platforms has changed and influenced communication processes in the context of crises including corporate crises, natural disasters, terrorism attacks, and other crisis types. Although approximately half of the European communication professionals across sectors (business, politics, NGOs, etc.) reported to use social media such social networks (56%), online videos (47%), or microblogs (42%) for their daily application in communication management (Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2012), the importance of for crisis communication is less significant. An according survey revealed that in contexts of crises including, for example, organizational crises and natural disasters, most communication professionals consider media relations (76%) and interpersonal communication (73%) as the most important means of communication. Social media were only used by 38% of these European practitioners in the crises they had experienced (Zerfass et al., 2013). However, there seems to be a perceived growth in importance of social media for crisis communication among practitioners as well as in the academia. In the last years, a growing number of publications on the diffusion of social media, their use by organizations, and the content produced by crisis stakeholders has been contributed to the body of knowledge.

Most of the social media research with reference to crisis communication deals with the technical-instrumental or the symbolic-relational perspective. For the first, most studies have focused the diffusion of web-based and interactive communication features for crisis communication among different kinds of organizations. A common finding of earlier studies was, that most organization still relied on traditional one-way tactics of 'new media relations' and do not sufficiently explore the benefits of real interactive and dialogic forms of online communication in crisis contexts including natural disasters (Muralidharan, Rasmussen, Patterson, & Shin, 2011; Schwarz & Pforr, 2011; Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Kent, 2007; Taylor & Perry, 2005). Other contributions from computer science showed that during natural disasters, social media such as microblogs (e.g., Twitter) are usually used as information hubs with users primarily linking to other 'traditional' online news platforms, whereas links to other social media or websites of official government authorities or disaster relief NGOs only seem to play a minor role (Hughes & Palen, 2009; Murthy & Longwell, 2013).

Concerning symbolic-relational crisis communication research, several content analyses of social media content (mostly Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and online discussion boards) have contributed to the state of research and the SCCT framework. Choi and Lin (2009) analyzed postings from two online bulletin boards to assess consumer reactions to the Mattel product recalls in 2007. They found significant relationships between perceived crisis responsibility as well as different kinds of emotions and reputation. Kim and Lee (2010) analyzed online news articles and blog postings on the Samsung oil spill crisis in 2007. Their findings indicated significant differences between journalists and blog users in terms of attributing blame and expressing emotions toward Samsung. Coombs and Holladay (2010) examined discussion board responses on the Amazon/Kindle crisis in 2009 and looked for reactions to Amazon's apology posted by its CEO. They concluded that online postings are worthwhile objects of analysis to identify stakeholders' unfiltered reactions to crisis response strategies and their behavioral intentions. Schwarz (2012a) analyzed the use of online discussion boards during the Love Parade accidents in Germany 2010. He found that social media are relevant platforms for crisis stakeholders to express attributions of cause and responsibility and that increasing levels of

attributions correlate significantly with negative evaluations of organizational reputation. Similar results were found by Niedermeir (2012) with an analysis of Facebook postings on the Nestlé-Greenpeace palm oil crisis in 2010. Others have used large-scale Twitter data to identify dominant narratives of social media publics in crisis contexts (Zhao, Zhan, & Jie, 2018). They differentiated between sharing-based narratives, which are strongly influenced by the media's crisis narratives, and conversation-based narratives that focus more on the expression of opinions and emotional venting.

Another often cited study was conducted by Schultz, Utz, and Göritz (2011). Their experimental study tested the effect of different media channels used by an organization in crisis including traditional media and social media channels as well as crisis response messages. They found that the selection of the communication channel had significant effects on reputation, secondary crisis communication, and behavioral dispositions towards the organization. These effects were even more pronounced compared to the effect of the actual crisis response messages of the organization. Further studies analyzed information seeking patterns of crisis stakeholders and factors related to the person or the crisis messages that facilitate or discourage social media use (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012; Procopio & Procopio, 2007). Others showed that government organizations tend to focus on disseminating instructing information on social media channels in the context of pandemic whereas private companies stressed reputation management in the same situation (S. Kim & Liu, 2012).

Although a considerable amount of studies have been conducted on social media use and crisis communication, we still need more systematic research in order to understand how social media extends, limits, facilitates, or hinders crisis communication processes in different crisis contexts. Besides comparisons of media channels and organization types, we need to understand more thoroughly how specific crisis situations affect information seeking patterns of crisis stakeholders and the effectiveness of organizational crisis messages in terms of instruction, psychological coping, and reputation management. In addition, the role of social media communication for triggering crises or worsening crises by circulating false information or rumors has not

been well explored (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Also the international dimension of social media communication, which transcends national and cultural borders, has not received much attention, so far. Concerning the three perspectives of crisis communication research as described earlier, especially the institutional perspective needs to be focused in future studies. This is related to questions such as the relationship between organizational culture, the likelihood of social media adoption for crisis communication, and the likelihood to use social media effectively. These aspects including the implementation of organizational social media policies and their impact on crisis management will have to be analyzed on a more solid theoretical and empirical basis in the future in order to provide useful and evidence-based guidelines for communication professionals in different organizational environments. This lack of theory-driven descriptions and explanations of social media-related crisis communication research has also been addressed by Austin and Jin (2017). Their Social Mediated Crisis Communication Model (SMCC) (Austin et al., 2012), which has been applied in various organizational and crisis contexts, describes the relationship between organizations, relevant publics, social media, traditional media, and offline word-of-mouth communication before, during, and after crises. Publics were identified as influential social media creators, social media followers, and social media inactives. The model describes information flows, mutual effects, the role of different publics and the impact of certain variables (e.g., organizational factors) in crisis contexts. SMCC is an applied framework as it was “developed to provide 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” (Austin & Jin, 2017, p. 169).

Increasingly, algorithms of artificial intelligence or deep learning applications are also being used to collect data on company stakeholders or even to communicate with them (e.g. social bots). However, the application in the context of crisis communication has hardly been systematically investigated so far. Among other things, artificial intelligence can accelerate crisis reactions or tailor them more precisely to specific affected crisis stakeholders and channels. Deep learning applications can help to develop effective

crisis simulations for crisis preparation. At the same time, however, artificial intelligence or the mishandling of user data can become the cause of crises, as the scandal surrounding Facebook and Cambridge Analytica in 2018 or the case of the Microsoft chat bot Tay showed, which in 2016, after a short learning phase on Twitter and other platforms, took on racist, sexist and conspiracy-theoretical traits.

5. CONCLUSION

This chapter gives a condensed and non-exhaustive overview on crisis communication and points out some important avenues for future research on strategic organizational crisis communication. It is non-exhaustive in the way that the fields of risk communication, science communication, and political communication have been largely excluded although they contribute substantially to the understanding of crisis management, especially in contexts of public health crises, natural disasters, and political crises. However, the frameworks and findings of organizational crisis communication research offer fruitful starting points and applications for different crisis scenarios as well as different institutional environments. So far, the different disciplinary research outputs have rarely been linked to each other. Further conceptual and empirical efforts will be necessary to establish a more solid body of knowledge in risk and crisis communication. In terms of the challenges and tendencies discussed above, especially the international and cross-cultural dimensions of risk and crisis communication urgently need more research. The globalization of organizations and their crisis management practice is far ahead of the academia and, thus, lacks a solid foundation for making strategic decisions related to crisis prevention, crisis preparation, crisis management, and post-crisis communication.

A recent survey among European communication managers in private companies, government organizations, nonprofit organizations, and consulting firms revealed that almost 70% of these practitioners and their respective organizations had to deal with one or even several crisis situations in the year preceding the survey (Zerfass et al., 2013). Thus, crises different in type and magnitude are part of most organizations' lifecycles. In addition, organizations are increasingly operating and communicating with

international and multi-cultural stakeholders in an increasingly hybrid, digital, and networked communication environment. Hence, crisis communication scholars will have to develop theoretical frameworks, methodological designs, as well as smart and flexible funding models to capture the increasing social and technological complexity of risk and crisis communication in the 21st century.

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