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Communication in times of crisis: The interplay between the organization, news media, and the public

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SUMMARY

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In today's society, organization-related crisis situations frequently dominate the news and public agenda. Examples of these so-called organizational crises are plane crashes, explosions at chemical plants, recalls of harmful products, bankruptcies, or oil spills. The potential negative outcomes of organizational crises extend beyond financial loss for the organization as these crises can drastically affect and disrupt all segments of society. The omnipresence and potential profound impact of these crises lead to multiple questions regarding the communicative role of several key actors. The central aim of this dissertation is to unravel how the communication between the organization in crisis, news media, and the public evolves in times of organizational crisis.

This dissertation uses theories of communication science to study crisis evolution. In general, it is acknowledged that communication plays an essential role in the process and the consequences of an organizational crisis. The current body of crisis research mainly applies an organization-centred perspective to expose how organizations' reputational damage can be prevented or limited. The aim of this dissertation is to study crisis situations from different perspectives and emphasize the role of key actors to go beyond the one-sided organizational perspective. Communication theories such as framing, stakeholder theory, and gatekeeping are used to examine the communicative interaction between the organization, news media, and the public. The investigation into the triangular interplay between these key actors serves as a first step to form a complete picture of how communication evolves in times of crisis.

In the *first chapter* of this dissertation, crisis communication is examined from the perspectives of the organization, news media, and the public. This study examined how the three actors relate to each other when it comes to framing organizational crises. By applying automatic content analyses for four Dutch crisis cases (N = 51.170 messages), the crisis frames of the three actors are compared for the level of agreement. The findings showed that after a period of frame differentiation, the frames aligned and became more comparable across the three actors. However, this frame alignment was only a temporary phenomenon as the frames de-aligned in the final phase of the crisis. The alignment in frames seems to be a phenomenon specific to crisis situations. Over time, the frames come together, arguably as a temporal necessity to make sense of the complex crisis situation.

The *second chapter* emphasizes the perspective of the organization and how they deal with other involved actors at times of crisis. In accordance with stakeholder theory, it is assumed that the relationship with stakeholders is very important when an organization is in a crisis. This study investigates the development of stakeholder-organization relationships in the initial phase of an organizational crisis. At these critical times, external actors (i.e., news media and the public) and internal actors (i.e., management and employees) are likely to increase their pressure on the stricken organization and its PR professionals, affecting the relationship with these specific stakeholders. A survey among 444 experienced European PR professionals asked about crisis times and normal times. The PR professionals indicated that the management is the key stakeholder in times of crisis. Furthermore, the

findings demonstrate that the pressure from news media, the public, and other employees has a negative impact on the organizations' relationship with these stakeholders while a positive effect of pressure from management has been found. The findings seem to indicate that organizations have the tendency to individually, at management level, make sense of what is going on in the initial phase of a crisis and keep others stakeholders at a distance.

The *third chapter* addresses the perspective of news media. Because media coverage can affect how an organizational crisis evolves, this study explores how news coverage is built during a crisis. The central question is how journalists select news sources when reporting on the crisis. Based on gatekeeping theory several expectations were formulated to predict how journalists determine the news value of the organization in crisis, news agencies, and the public. Journalists' judgement (i.e., source credibility and knowledge), sources' activities (i.e., sources' willingness to share information and timely communication), and the source-journalists relationship are assumed to be decisive in the choice what sources obtain a voice in the news. A questionnaire was distributed to Dutch journalists (N = 214) that asked how they determine what sources are included in the news in the early phase of an organizational crisis. The results detail how the investigated factors can indeed determine the selection of news sources. The effect of these factors depended on source type. The selection of the organization, news agencies, and the public is therefore assessed on the basis of criteria that are specific to the various potential news sources. Furthermore, findings showed that journalists have a strong tendency to rely on news agencies as a source in times of crisis.

The *fourth chapter* explores organizational crisis communication from the perspective of the public. The advent of social media has changed the communicative role of the public. The public can now easily reach a mass audience and thus influence how a crisis is framed. Since most members of the public do not first-hand experience an organizational crisis, this study explores how news sources can influence public crisis framing and when sources are selected. A dual study approach is applied to obtain a more complete understanding of public framing processes. The first study combines manual and automated content analysis to explore four datasets of public tweets (N = 252.711) regarding organizational crises. The aim is to understand how source usage – i.e., national and local news media, the organization central to the crisis, or other members of the public – correlates with the frame functions addressed online by the public. To complement the findings of the first study, the second study experimentally tests how the public selects sources. A vignette study examined how external (i.e., source type, crisis magnitude, and crisis origin) and internal (i.e., crisis involvement and habitual source use) factors affect the use of crisis information. On the basis of the findings of the two studies, it can be concluded that sources play an important role in how the public frames a crisis. The public mainly used sources to address frame functions related to later phases of the crises, for example, functions such as causal interpretation and treatment recommendation. In doing so, the public prefers to rely on national news media as a source. Furthermore, the results show how external and internal factors determine which sources the public uses for crisis information.

Crisis situations, as external circumstances, bring forward new mechanisms of communication and interaction among the organization in crisis, news media, and the public. Despite differences in size and shape, this dissertation exposed certain fundamental characteristics in the communicative interplay that seem to hold across different crisis situations.

During a crisis, multiple actors are involved that can influence the evolution of the crisis. Despite the importance of communication and collective understanding in order to prevent crisis escalation, it appears that the communication between the central actors is absent or limited in the crucial initial phase of a crisis. The initial phase of the crisis seems to be characterized by actors' autonomous sense making of the complex situation. However, over time, the actors approach each other, possibly to collectively understand and define the crisis. Collective sense making and framing may help to reduce the uncertainty and confusion caused by the crisis. In other words, the communicative alignment of crisis frames between actors may be an unavoidable necessity in order to communicate about the crisis and ultimately to solve the crisis. However, this level of alignment is only a temporary phenomenon.

In times of crisis, news media appear to be the central actor in the interaction with the organization and the public. News media can significantly pressure the organization in crisis and serves as an important information source for the public. The central role of news media offers certain opportunities to, for example, reduce confusion or avoid public panic during a crisis. In their role of directive actor, news media can contribute to the acceleration of solving an organizational crisis. Additionally, the central position of news media in times of crisis comes with certain responsibilities as it amplifies the gatekeeping role. As the coverage of a crisis has potentially far-reaching consequences, the validation of information becomes even more crucial. When information is incorrect, panic may break out and the crisis can escalate uncontrollably. In conclusion, an organizational crisis can be approached as being a mediatized event, news media provide a platform for different actors to communicate about the crisis and play a central role in the communicative interplay among the actors.

The findings of this dissertation contribute to scientific knowledge concerning how the occurrence of a crisis can disrupt and change communicative dynamics and processes. The findings of the studies show how crisis accelerate and scale up communication processes. Already in the first hours of a crisis, the occurrence of a crisis results in extensive media coverage and public online attention for organizations that are normally not considered newsworthy. Besides that the occurrence of a crisis can accelerate the flow of communication, it also affects the communicative interplay among actors.