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## Public Relations Review



# Communicating crisis uncertainty: A review of the knowledge gaps



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 1 February 2016

Received in revised form 21 March 2016

Accepted 23 March 2016

Available online 12 April 2016

### Keywords:

Risk

Crisis

Communication

Uncertainty

## ABSTRACT

The communication discipline offers an abundance of guidance on what, how, and when to communicate information in crisis situations. However, there is very little direction on handling crises where this knowledge is lacking including situations with a high degree of uncertainty. Indeed, best practices in risk and crisis communication emphasize acknowledging uncertainty, and crisis definitions focus on uncertainty. Yet, empirical research on the intersection of uncertainty, crisis, and communication is lacking. The purpose of this article is to review and synthesize the limited research on communicating uncertainty in crisis contexts and relevant theory development outside of crisis research. The article concludes by proposing promising directions for future research on the intersection of uncertainty, communication, and crises.

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## 1. Introduction

There is a sizable body of research on best practices in risk and crisis communication, the vast majority of which focuses on what, when, and how information should be conveyed to at-risk publics (Janoske, Liu, & Madden, 2013; Seeger, 2006). These guidelines are invaluable in most crisis situations; however, they all require certain base knowledge about the specific crisis before any meaningful communication can take place. Crises create unique opportunities for practitioners to demonstrate the value of strategic public relations to senior leadership, which in turn can increase the support for public relations if crises are successfully resolved (Liu & Pompper, 2012). Yet the uncertainty inherent in any crisis challenges the capacity of public relations practitioners to know how to best proceed.

Indeed, crises like terrorist attacks and pandemics are often defined by uncertainty including: who/what caused the crisis; the number of human lives lost and amount of infrastructure damaged; what individuals can do to protect themselves; and when the crisis will be over. Many crisis definitions include a focus on uncertainty (e.g., Coombs, 2015; Seeger, 2006), and best practices literature often emphasizes the importance of acknowledging uncertainty in crisis communication (e.g., Covello, 2003; Heath, 2006; Janoske et al., 2013; Seeger, 2006). History also emphasizes the importance of handling crisis uncertainty properly (Lanard & Sandman, 2014; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). Despite the well-recognized role of uncertainty in crisis communication, research has not theorized exactly how communicators should best “manage” uncertainty to help publics cope and respond appropriately. Consequently, this review provides a research roadmap for developing a strong,

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theory-driven understanding of how to effectively communicate uncertainty, with the understanding that all crises are different.

## 2. Literature review

This section first defines uncertainty, and then reviews existing research on communicating uncertainty under two crisis contexts: (a) when governments introduce emergency vaccines during public health crises and (b) when governments communicate about terrorist threats. These two crisis types were selected primarily because the majority of found research on uncertainty and crisis communication focused on these crisis types. In addition, findings from research on these two crisis types are likely to be applicable to other crisis types because they represent crises that are intentional (terrorism), unintentional (pandemics), or both (terrorism-related outbreaks such as the 2001 Anthrax attacks).

### 2.1. Crisis defined

Definitions and descriptions of the term “crisis” often reference uncertainty as a key characteristic. Seeger (2006) described this relationship by remarking, “Risks are always associated with some level of uncertainty, and crises are, by definition, high-uncertainty events, where information is often not immediately available” (p. 239–240). Seeger, Vennette, Ulmer, and Sellnow (2002) provided an alternate definition of crisis: “a targeted event that creates high uncertainty and perceived threat” (p. 2). Finally, Reynolds and Seeger (2005), in a discussion of unique communication concerns during a crisis, stated: “The immediate communication needs are to reduce uncertainty, allowing audiences to create a general understanding of what happened so that they may act appropriately” (p. 50). Overall, research indicates that uncertainty is an important and widely recognized factor in crises that practitioners need to address, but how exactly to do so has not been adequately addressed. To accomplish this objective, we must first define “uncertainty.”

### 2.2. Uncertainty defined

The specific meaning of the term “uncertainty,” when it is mentioned in crisis communication research, is seldom defined. In a wide search, we found only one study on uncertainty and crisis communication that approached a definition of uncertainty (in the context of psychological responses to crisis news): “uncertainty is an inherently uncomfortable state, and information seeking is a common cognitive strategy when uncertainty is directly related to a perceived threat” (Lachlan, Spence, & Nelson, 2010). This description came from information theory (Heath & Gay, 1997) and serves as a starting point for understanding a role of uncertainty in crisis communication.

Outside of crisis communication, research on both interpersonal communication and health communication has extensively examined uncertainty communication and offered concrete definitions. For example, in building problematic integration theory, Brashers (2001) stated “uncertainty exists when details of situations are ambiguous, complex, unpredictable, or probabilistic; when information is unavailable or inconsistent; and when people feel insecure about their own state of knowledge or the state of knowledge in general” (p. 478). An alternate definition of uncertainty, this one building on Berger and Calabrese’s (1975) uncertainty reduction theory, defined uncertainty as “a cognitive state resulting from an individual’s assessment of the number of alternative predictions available” (Bradac, 2001, p. 464).

In addition to these fixed definitions, a number of researchers have emphasized the importance of addressing different sources or categories of uncertainty in fields connected to crisis communication (e.g., Brashers, 2001; Markon & Lemrye, 2013; Rogers, Amlôt, Rubin, Wessely, & Krieger, 2007; Politi, Han, & Col, 2007). When taken as a group, these different sources create a quasi-definition of the relationship of uncertainty communication and crises. For example, Markon and Lemrye (2013) conducted a study analyzing the effect of different sources of uncertainty on risk communication about a new micro-organism found in tap water. This study emphasized three sources of uncertainty: lack of knowledge, contradictory data, and ambiguity (contradiction between experts). As another example, Rogers et al. (2007) analyzed the role of risk communication following a chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear incident, and presented sources of uncertainty in the following manner:

The majority of the public can differentiate between at least four forms of uncertainty, including: (1) opinion poll uncertainty: knowledge based on sampling is valid, but subject to error; (2) statistical uncertainty: people are also used to dealing with what they might think of as randomness or probability; (3) information uncertainty: the data on which a decision is based may or may not be true; and (4) complexity uncertainty: in theory, one can understand what is happening, but the sheer complexity means that one also has to rely on monitoring and reaction (p. 283).

However, no single list treats uncertainty the same.

### 2.3. Uncertainty communication: terrorism and emergency use vaccines

Incidents of terrorism and emergency use authorized vaccines are almost always shrouded in uncertainty, posing a unique challenge for risk and crisis communication. For terrorist attacks, a part of this challenge comes from the fact that terrorism is fundamentally different from other types of crisis—terrorism is a relatively new threat that breaks from the traditional

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