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When frames align: The interplay between PR, news media, and the public in times of crisis



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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the frame-building process of organizational-crisis situations in the interplay between the domains public relations (PR), news media, and the public. The purpose of the study is to investigate whether the crisis frames of the domains align over time. To empirically analyze frame alignment, an automated semantic-network analysis is introduced to compare implicit framing among the domains. By examining press releases, news articles, and social-media manifestations of four Dutch crisis cases, the dynamic character of crisis framing became apparent. The study documents the rise of crisis-frame alignment among PR, news media, and the public over time. After frame alignment the domains' discourses move away from one another resulting in more variation between frames. This pattern of alignment is considered to be crisis specific as a necessity to collectively make sense of a complex crisis situation. The collective sensemaking might be crucial to solve organizational crises and to avoid uncontrollable crisis magnification.

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1. Introduction

Societies are frequently confronted with disruptive organizational crises that have a significant impact. Because organizational crises are characterized by a rapid succession of emotional and stressful events in combination with high media attention, they are often complex (Weick, 1988). Moreover, it is hard to decide how to act without intensifying the crisis, because small incremental organizational changes can easily magnify in an uncontrollable way (Seeger, 2002; Weick, 2001).

In organizational-crisis situations, communication is generally acknowledged to play a crucial role (e.g., Coombs, 2007; Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz, & Van Atteveldt, 2012). Crisis research is primarily approached from an organization-centric perspective (Coombs, 2006). However, in a media-saturated society, media coverage of crises should not be overlooked (e.g., Cornelissen, Carroll, & Elving, 2009). Additionally, the public can be considered of vital importance in crisis communication due to their social-media empowerment (Castells, 2007). The key objective of this study is to investigate communication about organizational crises within three domains: organizational public relations (PR), news media and the public, and the mutual relations, or interplay, between these domains.

In order to analyze communication about organizational-crisis situations, this study uses the well-established concept of framing, extrapolated from political communication (e.g., Vliegthart, Schuck, Boomgaarden, & De Vreese, 2008) and mass communication (e.g., Scheufele, 1999). In the context of a crisis, when time passes, the interplay between the domains PR, news media, and the public might result in what can be labeled 'crisis-frame alignment'. This alignment implies an increase

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in frame linkage, congruency, and complementarity between the domains (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). The overall research question reads as follows: *Does the organizational-crisis framing of the domains PR, news media, and the public align over time?*

To answer this question, the study introduces and applies a method innovation of semantic-network analysis (Hellsten, Dawson, & Leydesdorff, 2010) on three types of communication about several organizational crises: Organizational press releases, media coverage, and public's social-media messages.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Framing approach

The dynamic process of meaning construction is commonly investigated through the key theoretical concept of framing. During organizational crises, the frame-building processes are of fundamental importance for the formation of an organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007), the prevention of crisis escalation (e.g., Seeger, 2002), and the avoidance of public confusion or panic (Liu & Kim, 2011; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2013). Because issues can be viewed from different perspectives, frames of an organizational crisis are likely to differ between the domains of organizational PR, news media, and the public.

Considering the ambiguous and complex interrelations and communications between domains (Holmström, 2005, 2010; Luhmann, 1995), framing can be approached as a set of discourses that interact in complex ways within and among domains. This perspective to communication and framing can be labeled as a 'semantic-network approach'. This approach emphasizes the changing distributions of words, their co-occurrence, and the variance in meanings and relations (Leydesdorff & Hellsten, 2006). The meanings of the words, that form the basis of a frame, are found in the word network they are part of. In this context, a distinction is made between sets of words (vocabularies) and repertoires, or underlying contexts, which provide meanings to the words (Hellsten et al., 2010). This approach builds upon the analytical distinction in which a frame can either be explicit or implicit (Hellsten et al., 2010). Explicit frames are observable in the words that are chosen in communication utterances, whereas implicit frames refer to latent patterns of words that co-occur in communication about, in this case, organizational crises. The majority of frames are not explicit (Hellsten, 2002). Additionally, the analytical approach to frames as implicit carriers of specific meanings enables to highlight frame development over time and indicates the contextualization of communication (Jonkman & Verhoeven, 2013; Leydesdorff & Hellsten, 2005). The current study tracks how implicit frames change in the communication about organizational crises in the domains of organizational PR, news media, and the public.

2.2. Frame alignment over time

In organizational-crisis situations, sensemaking activities rapidly emerge, resulting in frames that help to understand what is going on (Cornelissen et al., 2009; Schultz & Raupp, 2010; Weick, 1988). Various interested parties or domains are likely to differ in their initial production of frames of a crisis situation. Therefore, initially, meaning and frame variation is the norm (Leydesdorff & Hellsten, 2005; McCammon, 2012) and frame alignment is not to be expected (Snow et al., 1986). The initial frame-building processes of PR professionals and journalists will be based on their respective professional identities and beliefs about the issue based on external cues (Cornelissen et al., 2009; Scheufele, 1999), whereas the public will make sense of a crisis situation based on their personal identities and interpretations of the crisis. In other words, each domain may use the same information or codes, but they differ in terms of their criteria which underpin the selection of relevant information and meaning provision to words (Leydesdorff & Hellsten, 2005).

After the domain-specific frame-building processes, the frames will meet on platforms provided by the media. In order to solve organizational crises and to avoid uncontrollable crisis magnification, it is crucial to arrive at collective sensemaking of the complex situation (Seeger, 2002; Weick, 1988). Therefore, in a complex nexus of competing frames, inherent to organizational crises, there will be a need to provide coherence to the issue (Hellsten et al., 2010; Snow et al., 1986) and reduce ambiguity and uncertainty (Leydesdorff & Ivanova, in press), resulting in mutual borrowings and frame alignment among the domains. The need for meaning coherence may urge domain-specific discourses to open up, move toward one another, and eventually overlap, instead of remaining isolated. This domain rapprochement does not imply total fusion of the domains' perspectives. However, the interplay between the various domains' meaning provision and framing may lead to frame alignment regarding the meaning of the crisis among the domains of PR, news media, and the public.

The notion of frame alignment in organizational crises relates to several empirical findings. First, some evidence of frame crystallization (i.e., consensus in framing), among several newspapers in different countries, was found over time with regard to the French riots in 2005 (Snow, Vliegthart, & Corrigan-Brown, 2007). Second, similarities were observed in the general framing of the 2009 H1N1 flu-pandemic crisis among several organizations of different industry types (Liu & Kim, 2011). Third, corporate and economic domains were found to develop a common narrative regarding the financial crisis, whereas their initial sensemaking differed (Schultz & Raupp, 2010). Fourth, PR and news media were found to differ in associative framing in the initial phase of the BP oil spill crisis, whereas, afterward, their frames became more alike (Schultz et al., 2012). Fifth, after the public expressed skepticism through their framing regarding the fair-trade policy of Max Havelaar, they adopted the frame provided by the stricken organization (Van der Meer, 2014). Finally, a case study, related to the question of crisis-frame alignment, revealed the dynamic characteristics of initial crisis framing (Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2013).

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