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Multiple voices and multiple media: Co-constructing BP's crisis response

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of new Information and Communication Technology (ICT) on the field of crisis communication, and argues that the term "crisis response" needs to be re-conceptualized in order to include the polyvocality of crisis response enabled by online media. This article deconstructs the crisis response to the British Petroleum (BP) Oil Spill from organizational, media, and stakeholder perspectives. Using semantic network analysis, linguistic maps of news articles, press releases, BP Facebook posts, and stakeholder Facebook posts were created to detect the core messages of each group and to determine the roles that source and media play in creating crisis response. Findings support the idea that both source and media contribute to the overall crisis narrative, emphasizing the importance of online media in both organizational and stakeholder response. This study offers insight into the emotional contributions of stakeholder response to the overall crisis narrative, as well as, suggests a new element of dialogic communication called *inter-media dialog.*

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1. Introduction

New media is changing the face of crisis communication. This change has implications not only for how organizations communicate with stakeholders, but also for the role of stakeholders in crisis communication. Traditionally, crisis response has been conceptualized in terms of how the organization presents itself to stakeholders during the crisis, and has been classified in terms of message strategies. However, such a focus ignores the fact that now many stakeholder voices are present when a crisis occurs, and that online media provides an opportunity for those voices to be heard. Essentially, there can be multiple narratives for any crisis: the organization's narrative, that of the media, and those of the stakeholders.

This study explores the concept of considering the contributions of the multiple voices present during a crisis as part of crisis response by deconstructing the British Petroleum (BP) Deepwater Horizon oil spill in terms of organizational, media and stakeholder response. Theoretically, this idea departs from a traditional conceptualization of crisis communication, setting the stage for further inquiry into the evolving role of online media in crisis communication.

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2. Literature review

Over the last two decades, the field of public relations has undergone a shift from largely one-way communication to a two-way dialog between organizations and stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 2002). This shift toward dialogic communication has been facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICT), which enable organizations and stakeholders to communicate directly and synchronously. The same technologies allow for stakeholders, formerly an anonymous amalgam identified only by the organization, to communicate and identify with each other. The result is multiple authors, using multiple media, co-existing within the same information environment. Within this environment, both source and medium play a role in how messages are created, shared, received, and responded to.

2.1. Multiple media and multiple voices

Medium choice and use on the part of both organizations and stakeholders impacts communication on many levels. Medium theory suggests that each medium has characteristics that distinguish it from other media, and that these differences can have both micro- and macro-level ramifications (Hallahan, 2010; Meyrowitz, 1994). Micro-level questions of medium use address the issue of how "the choice of one medium over another affects a particular situation or interaction" (Meyrowitz, 1997, p. 61). Previous research has shown that organizations use multiple media to communicate different elements of their image (Gilpin, 2010), that stakeholders respond differently to messages shared through different media (Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011; Schutlz, Utz, & Goritz, 2011; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013), and that stakeholder use of different media can impact their perception of a crisis (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Accordingly, organizations are choosing to utilize a variety of platforms, such as publicity, social media, and controlled media, in order to create an integrated organizational message and interact with stakeholders.

Medium choice also has the ability to "alter social interactions and social structure in general" (Meyrowitz, 1997, p. 61). For example, ICT are changing the relationship between the organization and the traditional media. Organizations have more of a direct line to the stakeholder, as online newsrooms, corporate blogs, and social media platforms allow the organization to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and broadcast its version of a story. News releases can become a tool for establishing dialog, in that organizations can use them to create an autobiographical narrative, in which they "establish the organization's contextual position" (Gilpin, 2008, p. 12). Research has also shown that journalists turn to the online media platforms of organizations for information, changing the dynamic of pitching a story from push to pull (Caldiero, Taylor, & Ungureanu, 2009).

Perhaps more importantly, ICT give stakeholders the same opportunities to influence the other stakeholders as organizations have. For example, actor Kevin Smith took to Twitter in 2010 when he was allegedly asked to leave a Southwest Airlines flight for being "too fat" (Townes, 2010). While Southwest tweeted an apology the same day, the story had already been picked up by Smith's 1.6 million followers and at least four major news outlets. In a similar situation, Senator Barbara Boxer wrote on her website about being stuck on the tarmac on a Jet Blue flight, using language comparing the ordeal to being "held hostage" (Zeller, 2007). The same language was picked up by a *New York Times* blogger who used Senator Boxer's quote in his article. Bakshy, Hofmanp, Mason, and Watts (2011) found that both prominent individuals (such as Smith or Boxer) and "ordinary influencers" have the ability to create cascades of retweets on Twitter, disseminating information and opinion similar to word of mouth. Arguably, ICT have democratized public relations, as social media and blogs have given public voice to once private stakeholders.

2.2. Co-creating crisis narratives

As crisis is a time that traditionally challenges both the reputation and communication strategies of an organization, attention to the ways that new media encourage multiple voices takes on added importance. Organizational crisis has been defined as "a fundamental threat to the very stability of a system, a questioning of core assumptions and beliefs, and risk to high priority goals, including organizational image, legitimacy, profitability, and ultimately, survival" (Sellnow, Seeger & Ulmer, 2002, p. 126). Because conditions are ambiguous and consequences are high, actions taken by organizations during and following a crisis have serious implications for the short- or long-term survival of the organization. Specifically, organizational-stakeholder communication during this time can make the difference between preservation and loss of reputation.

Ideally, crisis communication should be empathetic, transparent, frequent, and two-way. As such, crisis communication can be used to create shared meaning and "co-create frameworks for understanding and action even within the highly uncertain, demanding, and threatening context of a crisis" (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 11). Frames rely on the presence or absence of keywords, images, and sources of information to activate schemas that encourage audiences to think or feel a particular way (Entman, 1993, 2007), which taken together, create a narrative. According to Fisher (1984, 1985) narratives are symbolic actions that have sequence and meaning for those who live them. We use narratives to construct identity and make sense of the world around us and then confirm these narratives through communication. Through this symbolic representation of events, organizations seek to regain control over the crisis and move toward resolution. Crisis narratives have traditionally been conceptualized in terms of communication strategy, including: apologia, renewal, image restoration,

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