Competing frames and tone in corporate communication versus media coverage during a crisis

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ABSTRACT

Managing corporate communication through a crisis response strategy may limit negative media coverage, thereby affecting public perceptions during crisis situations. However, because different stakeholders are being informed via multiple channels, different messages may reach the public, creating competing frames. This study examines how an organization's crisis response affects media coverage. Using content analysis, media coverage messages ($N = 128$) and corporate communication messages ($N = 24$) were compared regarding an organization in crisis. All messages were analyzed considering five news frames and tone (ranging from very negative to very positive) toward internal and external stakeholders. Findings indicate that the media reframed corporate communication messages, using more and different news frames than the organization in crisis. Furthermore, media coverage messages and corporate communication messages differed in the mentioned aspects within various news frames. All stakeholders are covered significantly more negatively in media coverage.

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In April 2011, a midsized hospital in a major city in the Netherlands was confronted with a bacteria outbreak. The outbreak was leading to hundreds of patients being infected by the *Klebsiella pneumoniae* bacteria and for at least three people the bacteria was the direct cause of death. Consequently, the hospital was put under stricter surveillance by the Dutch Health Care Inspectorate, the hospital manager resigned, and the bacteria outbreak was being investigated by several independent commissions. Further, for the hospital – that was involved in a large-scale relocation to a new building – this was not the first bacteria outbreak. As a result of a large bacteria outbreak in 2002 and a temporary closing due to a bacteria outbreak in 2010, the hospital already had a crisis history. From late May 2011, the hospital's stakeholders were proactively informed about the crisis situation by means of press releases. However, especially in times of crisis, stakeholders tend to rely on media coverage because information through the media is being perceived as more credible than direct communication (Bond & Kirshenbaum, 1998). Although existing literature underlines the importance of a(ny) crisis response (e.g., reputational damage control), the relation between an organization's crisis response and the contents of media coverage is still understudied. Thus, in this study, corporate communication about a crisis – in the form of press releases – is compared to media coverage regarding the same crisis.

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1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Crisis communication from an organizational perspective

Coombs (2007) defines a crisis as "a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat." Because crises are characterized by high levels of uncertainty, without timely information dissemination, chances are that rumors will dominate the crisis discourse, increasing uncertainty and exacerbating the situation (Veil & Ojeda, 2010). Therefore, organizations need to determine how to communicate with their various stakeholders to preserve the relationship (Stephens & Malone, 2009), especially because it is assumed corporate communication during and after a crisis is one of the most important factors in determining the long-term effects of a crisis (Coombs, 1999). Corporate communication can limit negative media coverage and manage perceptions both during a crisis and at the recovery/resolution stage (Ritchie, Dorell, Miller, & Miller, 2004).

Crisis communication managers may try to frame the crisis is such a way that reputational damage to the organization should be minimized. Framing refers to highlighting bits of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience (Entman, 1993). The way a message is framed shapes how people define problems, causes of problems, attributions of responsibility, and solutions to problems (Cooper, 2002), ultimately influencing public perception (Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001). Therefore, creating frames for understanding and offering explanatory definitions are both crucial for effective communication during a crisis (Coombs, 1999), as they indicate how stakeholders should interpret a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). By means of press releases or news releases, produced by organizations wishing to highlight certain circumstances or to provide a given interpretation of events, these frames are then distributed to various media channels in the hope that the latter will republish the information to reach a wide audience (Gilpin, 2008). However, the question is whether these frames will be supported or not by other stakeholders with a wide access to the public, namely the news media.

1.2. Crisis communication from a media coverage perspective

Most of the information to stakeholders is provided by the news media, not by corporate communication (Coombs, 2007), making the media the final arbiter of crisis frames in most cases. Where organizations want to reduce uncertainty and repair their reputation in times of crisis (e.g., Coombs, 2007), overt goals of mass media are primarily to inform and entertain (McCombs, 1977). Although the media do not create a crisis, they can move them to center stage or keep them out of public view (Nelkin, 1988), and through deliberate coverage of events and issues, the media have the ability to set the agenda for public discussion (Barnes, Hanson, Novilla, Meacham, & McIntyre, 2008). Thus, journalists' daily decisions do significantly influence their audience's pictures of the world (Carroll & McCombs, 2003). Given the different goals and stakes for an organization in crisis and journalists, it is likely to assume that media coverage and corporate communication differ in the way they communicate about a crisis (i.e., in terms of the tone toward stakeholders, and facts included or emphasized; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001).

In general, tone can be positive, neutral or negative and influences audience members to think in a certain way about a particular issue (Brunken, 2006). Similarly, Deephouse (2000) states that an organization can be subject to media coverage that is favorable (i.e., an organization is praised for its actions), unfavorable (i.e., an organization is criticized for its actions), or neutral (i.e., no evaluative modifier is included in the media coverage). Several studies have found that the tone in media coverage has a significant effect on public opinion (see for example: Gunther, 1998; Kim, Carvalho, & Cooksey, 2007). Furthermore, and not surprisingly, tone in media coverage concerning parties involved in a crisis (e.g., employees, investors, management, governments) tends to be mainly negative or neutral. However, because these parties may differ in their levels of responsibility, blame, and/or involvement, tone toward these parties may vary (Valentini & Romenti, 2011). For example, although tone in media coverage of Hurricane Katrina varied depending on the different levels of government in the coverage, the general tone was relatively neutral (Brunken, 2006). Regarding the explosions at a fireworks facility in the Netherlands in 2000, the tone was mildly negative toward local and national governments (Kuttschreuter, Gutteling, & de Hond, 2011). In sum: very few news stories involving a crisis are positively covered. However, in terms of tone, differences do exist concerning the various parties involved in a crisis.

In addition to tone, the content of media coverage is also characterized by the presence of certain news frames. News frames can affect perceptions of issues and of people in the news (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997). By prompting the activation of certain constructs at the expense of others, news frames can directly influence what enters the minds of audience members. Concerning Neuman, Just, and Crigler's (1992) four dominant news frames (i.e., conflict, economic consequences, morality, and human impact), Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) added the responsibility frame and renamed the human-impact frame into human-interest frame. The human-interest frame brings an emotional, personal angle to the presentation of an event, and the responsibility frame is present when some actor (e.g., an individual or organization) is held responsible for the causes of an event. Both these news frames might stimulate the formation of more negative attitudes toward the crisis and perhaps also the organization that is blamed for the crisis (An & Gower, 2009). News stories with a conflict frame emphasize conflicts between individuals, groups or organizations. The conflict frame is very common in newspapers and other news media (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Neuman et al., 1992) and it is to be expected that it might contribute to the attribution of blame to the organization in crisis. The economic-consequences frame reports an issue in