Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review

Enduring image: Capturing defining moments in crises

Benjamin Ho*, Augustine Pang, Grace Xiao-Pei AuYong, Liang-Tong Lau

Wee Kim Wee School of Communications and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

A B S T R A C T

In today's media environment, crises are magnified as media events and are rich sites for the inception of images. Particular images, like a photograph or a sound bite are found to endure as representations of defining moments of crises. This study seeks to examine the concept of an enduring image, how it is engendered and how it impacts crisis communication efforts. The study utilizes five case studies of crisis with an inherent enduring image. An enduring image constitutes a prime representation of the accused in a given crisis. These images are loaded with symbolic potential and exhibit a sense of permanence in public consciousness. Understanding the implications of an enduring image can offer insights to organizations on how to better manage one's public and media image during or after a crisis. The study is arguably the first in examining the significance and potency of enduring images in crises.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The study of image and reputation has been approached by either taking the internal (organizational) or the external (audience) perspective. From the organizational perspective, image can be constructed, projected, or desired (Pang, 2012). It includes notions that can be classified on a continuum ranging from organizational reputation – collective long-term assessments (Fombrun, 1996), to images – subjective, short-term transient impressions (Grunig, 1993). Many scholars also discussed the interdependent relationship between one's identity, image, reputation and the external images from the media and how these concepts contribute to the overall perception of an organization (Carroll & McCombs, 2003).

This study argues that certain images cannot be fully represented on the reputation-image continuum. In some crises, there are images engendered that exhibit not only the particularistic, subjective nature of transient images, but also a sense of permanence and salience that is atypical of how transient images are classified. This is what Pang (2012) described as an enduring image, the "shared image of first mention: When stakeholders think of the organization, what is the image comes to mind? This can be formed from their last experience, their consistent experience with the organization, or what they know of the organization through the media" (p. 372). These images can be developed from extracts of the crisis event and their defining moments found in a photograph or a sound bite. Such an enduring image lingers in the minds of the public, and can be revisited by the media as prime representations of that crisis.

The authors seek to explore the concept of an enduring image, determine what characterizes its engenderment, and evaluate how it impacts the organization. The recall value (Charles, Mather, & Carstensen, 2003), or how lasting a particular image is in the public eye, will also be examined. Five crisis cases and their respective enduring images will be

systematically examined to attain a deeper understanding of significant events that exacerbated the crisis through picking out the qualities that propelled certain events toward a defining moment, and exploring the engenderment of an enduring image. Observations from these case studies would serve as justification for the study's exploratory theorization for the concept of "enduring image". The study would also make recommendations for how organizations faced with negative enduring images should respond to win back the goodwill of their stakeholders. The concept of an enduring image is relevant to image management as it impacts how stakeholders think about the organization (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000).

2. Literature review

2.1. Corporate image

A key role of public relations practitioners is to help organizations project a favorable and consistent image to their multiple stakeholders (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008). Benoit and Pang (2008) defined organizational image as the perception of an organization that is formed "through one's experience" interpreted based on past experience (p. 245). Gioia et al. (2000) argued that image is a "wide-ranging concept connoting perceptions that are both internal and external to the organization as well as perceptions that are both projected and received" (p. 66). Benoit and Pang (2008) argued that what stakeholders know about the organization is "filtered or interpreted by their personal attitudes and experiences" (p. 245). Therefore, an organization can have multiple images and when these fragmented images converge, they produce a strong reputation whereas when contradictory images emerge, the overall reputation suffers (Fombrun, 1996).

2.2. Images of an organization in times of crisis

In times of crisis, one's image is damaged. Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2011) argue that such damage could be so detrimental that an organization could risk losing its livelihood. Balmer and Greyser (2003) suggest that besides the organization's reputation, self image and corporate image, transient image, which is described as "an immediate, but fleeting, mental picture that is construed by the receiver through direct observation and interpretation of symbols . . . emitted by the organization" (p. 175), can also linger in stakeholders' minds. "Transient images" of an organization are "all verbal, graphic, and symbolic representations of an organization" and its words and actions are typically closely associated with immediate and "specific contexts, events, issues, and audiences" (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 66).

This study shall refer to such transient images as 'impressions' henceforth to reflect the theoretical distinction with better clarity. The primary focus of this study would be on the classification of such images that are external to the organization, coined "transient impressions" (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 66). The authors argue that Gioia et al.'s (2000) study lacked further differentiation of these external impressions.

2.3. Enduring images from crises

While most impressions of an organization are short-lived, in some instances some impressions are hard to get rid of (Christensen et al., 2008). Every crisis consists of many key events and crisis moments and arguably some are more significant than others, which compel the almost fanatical attention of the media and the public. The authors refer to such moments as *defining moments*. It is from these defining moments that an enduring image is engendered; a singular impression that is further, which collectively endures in the minds of the public. Pang (2012) described the above as "images of first mention which can subsequently serve as memory cues for crisis recall" (p. 372). Enduring images linger beyond the crisis timeline therefore presenting a tricky conjecture between theoretical image concepts. It conveys the idea of a snapshot in time (Fombrun, 1996) but seems to linger, as contrasted to the fleeting nature of "transient impressions" (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 66). The concept needs to be further clarified. The study seeks to examine:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of defining moments in times of crises?
RQ2: How do enduring images come about becoming etched in minds of stakeholders?

3. Method

The authors propose the use of case study analysis to examine the two RQs. The case study approach "involves an in-depth, intensive and sharply focused exploration" of the case; "a situation, an incident or an experience" (Willig, 2001, p. 70) or "rare phenomena" (Jackson, 2003, p. 55) such as the topic of enduring image. Case studies can be based on documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts (Yin, 1994). This study utilizes documentation and archival records in its analysis.

3.1. Data collection

Five crisis case studies were selected from a variety of crisis types, countries and cultures and they commanded intense public attention and debate at the time of its engenderment. The five crises were selected based on the opinions and