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Commentary

Beyond image repair: Suggestions for crisis communication theory development

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ABSTRACT

This commentary explores whether and how crisis communication theory needs to be adapted to account for the rise of social media. Through a review of existing theory, we offer recommendations for future research in the evolving media landscape.

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Publics use social media during crises because of convenience; based on social norms and personal recommendations; for humor and levity; for information seeking, timely information, and unfiltered information; to determine disaster magnitude; to check in with family and friends, self-mobilize, maintain a sense of community; and to seek emotional support and healing (Fraustino, Liu, & Jin, 2012). Importantly, these reasons are not for image repair, but dominant crisis communication theory focuses on how organizations can repair their tarnished reputations (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). Further, although research conducted before the advent of social media cannot be expected to address concerns related to new media, burgeoning research on social media and crisis communication prompts us to contend that now is the time to reflect on where we have been, are, and should go in terms of theory development. We now turn to a review of existing crisis communication theories that frame our recommendations for theory development. We propose three conceptual groupings of current theories: image-making, complexity-understanding, and resilience generating.

1. Image-making crisis theories

Quantitative analyses of crisis communication research reveal that image repair theory and situational crisis communication theory dominate (e.g., Avery et al., 2010). Contingency theory (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997) and framing theory (Durham, 1998) could also fit within this category, but are not reviewed here due to space constraints.

1.1. Image repair theory

Benoit (1997) developed image repair theory to help understand how organizations and individuals respond to crises based on two assumptions: (1) someone accuses an organization/individual as responsible for an action and (2) that action is offensive. The theory provides a typology of image repair strategies ranging from denial to apology (Benoit, 1997).

The majority of image repair research has not investigated social media, but there are exceptions (e.g., Liu & Kim, 2011; Moody, 2011; Muralidhara, Dillistone, & Shin, 2011), and in all found cases researchers did not make theory modifications. Researchers, however, have found that social media use during crises can create new image management issues (Moody, 2011) and that social media use can be less effective in repairing images when it replicates strategies used via traditional media (Liu & Kim, 2011). In sum, despite that image repair theory is useful, we agree that for social media it may be too linear (Gilpin, 2010) and static (Seeger & Padgett, 2010). Thus, researchers may want to consider adaptations and expansions when applying image repair to social media.

1.2. Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT)

SCCT dictates that organizations must first protect their stakeholders by providing *instructing information* for physical coping and *adjusting information* for psychological coping. After an organization has secured stakeholders' protection in these ways, it turns to mending its reputation through deny, diminish, rebuild, and/or reinforce strategies reflecting varying levels of accommodation (Coombs, 2012). SCCT is a clear example of theory that primarily focuses on organization-based concerns, actions, and outcomes. Research has yet to fully investigate whether and how the SCCT framework transfers to social media (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2012) and the extent to which publics may use social media to counter organizational messages (e.g., Schwarz, 2012).

2. Complexity-understanding theories

Compared to image-making theories, complexity-understanding theories are more recent additions to our scholarship and include chaos theory and complexity theory.

2.1. Chaos theory

Chaos theory seeks to advance understanding of systems that are nonlinear, complex, and unpredictable, recognizing that intricately small differences in an event's initial conditions can result in widely different outcomes. This sensitivity to initial conditions is sometimes referred to as the *butterfly effect* (Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002). Chaos theory also speaks to several related concepts: bifurcation, cosmology episodes, self-organization, fractals, and strange attractors. Applied to crisis communication, chaos theory points to communication as potentially facilitating a point of system bifurcation as well as acting as a strange attractor prompting organizations to respond to and recover from crises. Although this work often gives more attention to publics' meaning making, little found research has begun to investigate the chaos principles in social media (e.g., Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2008).

2.2. Complexity theory

An offshoot of chaos, Gilpin and Murphy (2008) extensively adapted this theory for the crisis management context. Complexity theory provides seven key constructs: (1) interacting agents, (2) adaptability, (3) self-organization, (4) instability, (5) influence of history, (6) permeable boundaries, and (7) irreducibility. Complexity is gaining traction in the public relations crisis scholarship (e.g., Gilpin & Murphy, 2010; Liu & Pompper, 2012), but much like chaos theory work, this body of research has yet to focus comprehensively on the roles social media can play in complex systems during crises.

3. Resilience-generating theories

Some work has extended beyond the organization to consider how publics can best cope and move forward after crises, perhaps most dominantly the discourse of renewal. Situational theory of publics (Grunig, 1989) may also be considered in this category, though it is not reviewed here due to space constraints.

The discourse of renewal explains how leaders and communities can use communication to rebuild and recover, requiring: (1) a prospective focus, (2) recognizing the opportunities inherent in the crisis, (3) provisional responses, and (4) a leader's ethical communication (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Veil, Sellnow, & Heald, 2011). While the discourse of renewal successfully moves beyond viewing all crises as "problems of image as opposed to issues of substance" (Seeger & Padgett, 2010, p. 132), the theory remains primarily management focused, providing insights into how organizations can best communicate after crises. Finally, scholars have yet to extensively apply this theory to determine whether its core components hold in the new media environment.

4. Social media crisis communication theories

There are two budding crisis communication theories that attempt to comprehensively incorporate social media and that potentially may provide image making, complexity understanding, and resilience generating insights: the networked crisis communication model (NCC) and the social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC).