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Crisis communication within a community: Bonding, coping, and making sense together

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ABSTRACT

Crisis communication has been researched extensively from managerial and functionalist approaches, and little empirical research exists exploring the role of a community in helping community members cope with crises. Situated in this major gap, the current investigation adopts a community-centered approach that combines insights from chaos theory, uncertainty reduction theory, and sensemaking theory. This study used a mixed method design to examine the role of a campus community in dealing with a variety of campus crises. The qualitative study gave an in-depth understanding of how a crisis is perceived and the underlying process of how a community helps to make sense of a crisis. The quantitative study tested and further illustrated this process through path analysis. The major contributions of this study to the current crisis communication literature are twofold: (1) a crisis-induced community building model that demonstrates a community's role in helping community members self-organize, collectively make sense of a crisis, and reproduce community experiences; and (2) instruments to measure a crisis and community functionalities. Theoretical implications of this study on chaos theory, uncertainty reduction theory, and sensemaking theory are discussed.

Crisis communication, a dynamic and thriving research field, is considered an indispensable role of public relations (Coombs, 2012; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001). However, scholars have increasingly exposed the shortcomings in the crisis communication literature, including the managerial and organization-centered functionalistic biases, and the negligence of marginalized voices (e.g. Leitch & Neilson, 2001; Kim & Dutta, 2009). Compared to a research emphasis on formulating strategic responses in crisis situations, community-centered approaches emphasize the role of a community in a crisis situation (Heath, Lee, & Ni, 2009; Procopio & Procopio, 2007; Smith, Coffelt, Rives, & Sollitto, 2012).

An emphasis on reputation protection in corporate contexts promotes public relations and crisis communication to create effective strategies and reduce harms (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006), which leads to a proliferation of applied and corporate-focused lines of research (Kim & Dutta, 2009). However, individuals who do not possess much economic or political power are marginalized and excluded (Curtin & Gaither, 2005), and little is known on how a community may organize itself in a crisis situation. College campuses provide an ideal context to investigate such a role of a community because the campus population is usually confined in a specific geographical area. Therefore, adopting a community-centered approach, the purpose of this study is to understand the mechanism through which a college community responds to a crisis.

A community-centered approach to crisis communication in a college campus is also a timely one. With universities dedicating efforts to cultivating a sense of community among their students and seeking better ways to serve the student population, crisis and risk communication research can gain valuable insights from how a campus community functions in a crisis situation to theorize the community building process.

Challenges exist as much of the existent literature in crisis communication from corporate contexts may not be easily applied to communities. Indeed, crisis communication for corporations is "to move beyond the crisis as quickly and thoroughly as possible while maintaining economic viability and social legitimacy" (Seeger et al., 2001, p. 162). Crisis communication in college campuses, however, may emphasize the social responsibilities of a university and building an inclusive community (Hade & Meisenbach, 2012). The shift of perspectives and expectations on crisis communication creates a need to theorize crisis communication from a more compatible community-centered approach.

To that end, this study first defines crisis in a community context, then reviews community-centered approaches in crisis communication and management research. Particular attention is given to theories such as chaos theory and uncertainty reduction theory to understand the dynamic process of community building. Using a mixed method design, this study investigates the role of a university community in dealing with campus crises and tests a crisis-induced community building model. Implications of the model are discussed for its potential contributions to theorizing the role of a community in crisis communication.

1. Crisis defined

Crisis communication and management is an indispensable part of public relations (Fearn-Banks, 2001), as a major role of public relations is to "mitigate harm, responding to stakeholder needs, and repairing image following an organizational crisis" (Seeger et al., 2001, p. 155). However, an emphasis on mitigating harms when describing the role of crisis communication reveals a priority to protect an organization's image and reputation in the crisis communication research agenda (Seeger et al., 2001; Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2011).

The current definition of crisis also reflects this inclination. For example, Coombs (2012) defines crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p. 2). Even though an organization is an intrinsic part of a community (Palenchar & Heath, 2007), the unilateral emphasis on organizations diminishes the value of approaching a crisis from a community angle. One may find such a definition very restrictive when it is applied to a community context.

For example, universities often find themselves involved in a wide range of campus crises from sexual assaults to natural disasters and racial tensions to campus shootings. Crises can indeed bring harm to a university's reputation, as a university's legitimacy can be seriously damaged when publics perceive a gap between an organization's responsibility and its response (Waymer & Heath, 2007), but campus crises bring up other priorities other than protecting the university's reputation. In a concentrated geographic area, the impact of a crisis on the psychological and physical well-being of the community cannot be ignored (Leeper & Leeper, 2006), which makes a community-oriented approach to defining crisis not only appropriate but also much needed (Enander Lajksjö, & Tedfeldt, 2010; Seeger et al., 2001; Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002). Therefore, to capture and preserve the essence of crises from both organizational and communal perspectives, crises in this study are defined as events that bring a high level of uncertainty to a community composed of social networks, and whose impact can potentially threaten the legitimacy of an organization that occupies a primary position in the community.

2. Community-centered approach

A community-centered definition of crises is underdeveloped, let alone a research agenda theorizing the role of a community in crisis communication. To study crisis communication at a university campus, a community approach makes intuitive sense as a campus is a physical confined environment of which connections among the members are close and organic. Yet, the few existing empirical studies regarding campus crisis only focus on communication channels or communication content (e.g. Fortunato, 2008; Wigley and Fontenot, 2010; Jin, Park, & Len-Ríos, 2010). These studies either approach crisis communication as a function to restore reputation, or approach crisis from a message framing perspective. These approaches undoubtedly add value to campus crisis communication, especially from an organizational management perspective, but investigating how a community (re)organizes itself when crises happen may complement our understanding of how and why a community works in crisis situations.

Chaos theory, a theory different from functionalist approaches (Seeger, 2002), is a suitable framework. The theory contextualizes a crisis as a disruption to the order and equilibrium of a system. According to Sellnow et al. (2002), the premise of the theory is that crises trigger the collapse of sensemaking, which further prompts a reorganization of the existing knowledge, followed by a new structure within the system restoring the balance. The process can be understood through the concepts of bifurcations, fractals, and strange attractors. Bifurcation is the disruption, which comes with cosmology episodes and self-organization. Cosmology episodes happen at a time when observers of a crisis realize that the preexisting experiences are not sufficient to account for the sensation and experiences brought by a crisis (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). Cosmology episodes are usually followed by self-organization to create a new structure to buffer the effects of crises. An attractor, as a result, is introduced to the system as an organizing principle to mediate and facilitate the self-organization process.

Chaos theory provides a compatible framework to analyze the dynamics that take place within a community when crises happen. More importantly, it predicts that self-organization in a system will happen after disruptions. Crises in this sense create a turmoil condition where previous knowledge is not enough to offer directions to cope with the disorder. For example, the variety of unique campus crises makes it harder, if not impossible, for a university to *manage* them. Universities may be able to come up with general principles beforehand, but the uniqueness of every event may hardly provide an exact framework to deal with future crises. In comparison, chaos theory focuses on the process through which a new structure emerges that helps the community self-organize and restore balance.