ARTICLE IN PRESS

Public Relations Review xxx (xxxx) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pubrev

Full Length Article

Discourse of renewal: Developing multiple-item measurement and analyzing effects on relationships

Sifan Xu*

Department of Communication, University of Maryland, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Crisis communication
Discourse of renewal
Relationship
Measurement

ABSTRACT

Emphasis on protecting an organization's image and reputation has dominated crisis communication research. A crisis is assumed to only bring negative impacts because it tarnishes an organization's reputation. Priority is placed upon whether an organization can come up with response strategies that mitigate this harm, rather than on rebuilding relationships. Challenging these untested assumptions, discourse of renewal is complementary to the image- and reputation-centered perspectives and theorizes crises as opportunities to reflect, grow, and therefore renew to a better state. To further discourse of renewal, the current study first establishes a valid and reliable measure of discourse of renewal, and investigates how discourse of renewal influences publics' relationship with an organization. Results of the study indicate that engagement, prospective foci, communication efficiency, and emphasis on organizational culture and core values are four dimensions of discourse of renewal, and that discourse of renewal positively influences publics' relationship with an organization.

1. Introduction

Crisis communication has become increasingly interdisciplinary (Ha & Riffe, 2015), but as many researchers have noted, much crisis communication research carries the (sometimes implicit) assumption that crisis communication is essentially to help protect an organization's reputation and image (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010; Liu, Fraustino, & Jin, 2016; Seeger and Griffin Padgett, 2010; Ulmer, 2012). Reputation- and image-centered approaches in crisis communication have produced a fruitful line of investigations (e.g., Benoit, 1997, 2005; Coombs, 2006, 2007) and made valuable theoretical contributions to crisis communication and public relations. Yet, over emphasis on organizational reputation and image has left major gaps in the field.

The first gap is the lack of research on effects of organizational post-crisis communication on organization-public relationships. Even though public relations as a field has moved into the direction of co-orientation approaches with an emphasis on relationships (Botan & Tylor, 2004), crisis communication has yet fully embraced relationship research (Toth, 2010), and has been preoccupied with response strategies that are able to protect an organization's image (Kim & Cameron, 2011). Indeed, many authors have noted this major gap (e.g., Coombs, 2010; Liu & Fraustino, 2014), but there is an alarming lack of empirical research that investigates crisis communication from relational perspectives.

The second gap is more of a perspective one. A crisis is defined as a negative event that "threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can impact an organization's performance" (Coombs, 2009, p. 99). The negative connotations attached to a crisis prompt the scholars to accept that a crisis either tarnishes an organization's reputation, or brings harms to publics and communities. As such, discourse of renewal (Seeger and Griffin Padgett, 2010; Ulmer, 2012; Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007; Ulmer & Sellnow,

* Correspondence to: 2101E Skinner Building, 4300 Chapel Lane, College Park, MD 20742-7635, United States.
E-mail address: sifanxu@umd.edu.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.09.005
Received 8 December 2016; Received in revised form 20 July 2017; Accepted 13 September 2017
0363-8111/ © 2017 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

2002) emerges as a complementary response strategy to image repair theory and situational crisis communication theory, which shifts an image-centered perspective commonly found in crisis communication to an opportunity-inspired, prospect- and renewal-focused one.

Discourse of renewal has been fully conceptualized throughout decade-long efforts by key authors such as Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (e.g., Seeger & Ulmer, 2002; Seeger, Ulmer, Novak, & Sellnow, 2005; Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002; Ulmer et al., 2007; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2010a, 2010b, 2013), and has been applied mainly to case studies. Insights from these case studies strengthen the application of the theory to real-life situations, but a huge obstacle exists to move the theory forward as a valid and reliable measure of discourse of renewal is lacking. Establishing valid and reliable scales to measure discourse of renewal at this stage may prompt the scholars to push the theory forward.

In order to address these gaps, the purpose of the current study is to establish a valid and reliable measure for discourse of renewal, and investigate how discourse of renewal influences publics' perception of the relationship with an organization. To that end, the study first reviews key characteristics and elements of discourse of renewal, and then reviews the current state of relationship research in crisis communication and public relations in general. Finally, through two phases, a multiple-item measure for discourse of renewal is constructed through exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis, and the effects of discourse of renewal on publics' perception of the relationship with an organization are analyzed through structural equation modeling. Theoretical and practical implications of the results of this study are discussed at the end.

2. Discourse of renewal

Discourse of renewal represents a shift of mindset regarding a crisis. Traditionally, a crisis has been researched as a threat to an organization or a community. The assumption is easy to find in crisis communication theories. For example, image repair theory (cf. Benoit, 1997) posits that a crisis damages an organization's image, and people will have un unfavorable impression of an organization if people think the organization is responsible. Similarly, situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is primarily concerned with how an organization can respond in a way to maximize reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication (cf. Coombs, 2007). A crisis in this sense is largely treated as a reputational threat to an organization and causes damages to an organization if left unattended. Crisis communication therefore has been heavily focused on image repair and restoration (Liu & Fraustino, 2014).

While such a line of inquiry continues to thrive, crisis communication has witnessed an emergence of a perspective from which a crisis is not only researched as a negative event, but also as a focusing event that provides potential opportunities. Treating crises as focusing events located in a community opens up new approaches to studying crises. For example, Wolfe (2016) conducted a case study to analyze different narratives around DHL's departure from Wilmington, Ohio, and found that crisis, disaster, and opportunity narratives coexist from the community leaders. She concluded that such narratives positioned actors differently and created different implications for how the community reacted to the event. A crisis in this sense was socially constructed by different narratives as a focusing event that created intentional or unintentional consequences for the community.

Grafting upon crises as focusing events, discourse of renewal embraces the opportunities embedded in crises to "advance a particular issue agenda in the public domain" (Birkland, 1998, p. 128). Crises in this sense are not only events that bring harms to an organization or a local community, but also events that unlock potential development opportunities to improve and grow. Chaos theory lends the theoretical foundation to discourse of renewal as chaos theory believes that a system has the tendency to endure and reorganize into an equilibrium state, though the new state might be different from the previous one (Seeger and Griffin Padgett, 2010).

As such, discourse of renewal moves beyond image repair and restoration to understand how an organization, its stakeholders, and/or a community "reconstitute a system after it experiences a crisis" (Seeger and Griffin Padgett, 2010, p. 128). The theory is positioned as a challenge to the static or linear view of response strategies of the existing crisis communication theories mentioned above (Burns & Bruner, 2000). In fact, preoccupation over organizational image and reputation can backfire following a crisis because it gives an impression that the organization cares more about its self-interests than the well-being of the people.

One of the first studies by Ulmer and Sellnow (2002) examined the discourse after 9/11 terrorist attack from various organizations. They found that organizations engaged discourse of renewal by showing commitment to stakeholders, commitment to correction and growth, and by emphasizing core American values such as independence and freedom. A series of pieces were conducted later to theorize discourse of renewal. These studies have given an in-depth understanding of discourse of renewal to investigate post-crisis communication that represents repair, recovery, and rebuilding.

The conceptual development of the theory fleshes out what renewal means in a post-crisis context. A sense of renewal is communicated through an emphasis on management virtue, ethical concerns, and commitment to the community (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001; Seeger et al., 2010). A key component of the renewal process for an organization is to help a community "make sense of these events and reorder their beliefs to return to founding values" (Seeger et al., 2010, p. 135). "Faith, commitment to community and stakeholders, and the humanistic need to help those harmed by crisis" should be prioritized in the renewal process (Seeger et al., 2010, p. 135). In a similar vein, Littlefield, Reierson, Cowden, Stowman, & Feather (2009) suggest that organizational renewal is achieved through "stakeholder commitment, correction, and a reestablishment of core values" (p. 363) following a tragedy or crisis. Therefore, the success of renewal depends on whether an organization can make sense of and position the crisis in a community context. Postcrisis communication that echoes with the core values of the community is also essential to the process.

Based on the principles of renewal, several characteristics emerge that further demonstrate how an organization can engage discourse of renewal to communicate with the constituents in order to restore people's confidence in an organization and rebuild the community. These characteristics include (1) provisional vs. strategic communication; (2) a prospective focus vs. retrospective focus;

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6575871

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/6575871

Daneshyari.com