BUSHOR-1455; No. of Pages 10
ARTICLE IN PRESS
Business Horizons (2018) xxx, xxx—xxx

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
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A 'glocalization' approach to the internationalizing of crisis communication

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KEYWORDS
Crisis communication;
Glocalization;
International crisis communication;
McDonald's Japan;
Crisis plan

Abstract This article focuses on the field of international crisis communication, whereby multinationals and their expatriate staff respond to crisis events in international and/or multicultural contexts. The field of international crisis communication is at or near a state of crisis due to lack of research and, more importantly, methods useful for practitioners. 'Glocalization'—which is used successfully in fields as diverse as marketing, education, theology, and others as an effective and expedient way of leveraging global capabilities to meet local demands—is proposed as one method for addressing this need pragmatically. Using glocalization for the internationalizing of crisis communication benefits practitioners and researchers alike in a way that avoids imposing Western frameworks and interpretations onto non-Western crisis situations. We demonstrate the approach with a case study involving multinational McDonald's Corporation and its foreign subsidiary, McDonald's Japan.

1. Is there a crisis in international crisis communication?

Is international crisis communication in a state of crisis? The answer depends on whom you ask, but for researchers, the answer is unequivocally yes. Despite 30 years of crisis communication research, international and/or multicultural crisis communication research remains limited and dominated by Western perspectives. Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, and Johansen (2010, p. 343) wrote that "crises are increasingly becoming international because of extended supply chains and corporations selling products globally. Yet we know little about the effects of the international context on crisis communication." More recently, Audra Diers-Lawson (2017, p. 2) wrote of a "state of emergency" in

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0007-6813/$ — see front matter
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2018.01.002

crisis communication research, which "remains shockingly American-centric and fails to reflect the needs and global reality of crisis communication today."

Communications practitioners have a different perspective. Practitioners in Europe and the U.S., for example, agree that crisis communication is becoming more international and multicultural in scope and they are not fully prepared—either individually or organizationally—for these coming changes (Oliveira, 2013; Zerfas, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2013). However, they do not see the unavailability of academic research as a major impediment to improving their practice, and certainly do not describe anything approaching the level of a crisis. In fact, a rather inconvenient truth, as reported by practitioners in the U.S. (e.g., Kovoor-Misra, Zammuto, & Mitroff, 2000; Oliveira, 2013), Europe (e.g., Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016) and China (e.g., Liu, Chang, & Zhao, 2009), is that historically, many practitioners have not made routine use of the academic research on crisis communication that is and has long been available. In other words, while practitioners agree with the need to better prepare for international and multicultural crisis communication, they do not express a strong expectation that the methods for how to do so will come from academic research.

From our perspective, having spent considerable time as practitioners (about 30 years combined) before transitioning to our current university roles, these differing views on crisis communication can be considered an example of the scholar-practitioner divide. We believe this divide is far wider, unfortunately, than is often reported. During our time as practitioners, we never referred to ourselves as such. These days, during our executive education classes, any discussion of the scholar-practitioner divide begins by explaining to the participants that the term 'practitioner' refers to them. Most of these participants—mid- to senior-level executives with a minimum of 10 to 15 years of successful work experience in a variety of industry and functional backgrounds—are either unaware of the divide or skeptical of the degree to which it can be bridged, particularly when it comes to crisis management and communication. Similar to the practitioners referenced above, their view is that the sheer complexity of crisis events—particularly when they are international and/or intercultural in scope—precludes the use of any formulaic approach. They agree that the frequency of international and multicultural crises will increase; that pre-crisis planning is important; and that handling crises well depends ultimately on the talents of their team, their own leadership in the moment and, of course, luck.

Is it possible to help someone who is not asking for your help? This is the kind of difficult question that arises if we take seriously the goal of narrowing the longstanding scholar-practitioner divide and the longstanding low uptake on crisis communication research. Can we truly be helpful to those with on-the-ground responsibilities for responding to crisis events in international and/or multicultural contexts? Our view is that we have no choice but to try, as our answer to the question at the beginning of this section is yes: We believe that the field of international crisis communication is in fact at or near a state of crisis. More specifically, as the pace of global interconnectedness continues to accelerate, so too does the frequency of crises that begin as, or quickly become, international or even global in scope. U.S.-based United Airlines suffered significant damage to its reputation in China due to the ill-treatment of one of its passengers in the U.S. In addition to the pervasive negative coverage in the U.S. (and a $1 billion loss in company valuation), the incident also drew 110 million views and 72,000 mostly negative comments on the Chinese social media site Weibo—all within 24 hours and despite the fact that the passenger involved was not Chinese but Vietnamese (Meyers, 2017). Another multinational, U.S.-based McDonald's Corporation (MDC), struggled with its own international crisis. When food safety violations in 2014 by an independent supplier in Shanghai escalated within hours, McDonald's Japan's timely and decisive response to the crisis—which might have been considered acceptable or perhaps even exemplary in the U.S.—turned out to be nothing short of disastrous in Japan (Lehmberg, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). We explore the McDonald's case in more detail in Section 3.

In Section 2, we propose that *glocalization* (Robertson, 1995)—the process of attending simultaneously to both global and local requirements—can assist in the internationalizing of crisis communication in a way that is useful for both practitioners and researchers and that avoids the "naïve universalism" (Esser, 2013, p. 113) of inappropriately imposing Western interpretations onto non-Western crisis situations and actors.

2. A glocalization approach

Theodore Levitt got it half right. In his seminal article "The Globalization of Markets," Levitt (1983) predicted consumers in every country would increasingly have an appetite for and access to products and services from all over the world. The part he got wrong, however, was his assertion that these same consumers would not mind giving