

Discuss how developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are affecting the theory and practice of crisis communications.

Introduction

This essay will attempt to overview the effects of ICT on Crisis Communications in theory and in practice, firstly by defining what we mean by ICT, Social Media, Crisis, and Crisis Communications. Then by looking at just two challenges – Advancements in the technology and its use in by PR professionals, before looking at Stakeholders and influencers. This essay is not an attempt at an in depth look, but rather an introduction to a wider and young field.

Defining...

...Information and Communications Technologies

ICT or Information and Communications Technologies '*refers to technologies that provide access to information through telecommunications. It is similar to Information Technology (IT), but focuses primarily on communication technologies. This includes the Internet, wireless networks, cell phones, and other communication mediums.*' (Christensson, *ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) Definition*, 2010).

Whilst this essay attempts to deal with ICT generally, there will be reference to specific forms of ICT, primarily the rise of Social Media, which '*has been defined as "a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content"...*' (Roshan, Warren & Carr, "Understanding the use of social media by organisations for crisis communication", 2016, p. 351). Tench, Verčič, Zerfass, Moreno, & Verhoeven refer to Social Media interchangeable as '*computer-mediated communication (CMC)*' (*Communication Excellence*, 2017, p. 28-29). Classic examples of Social Media (Social Networking) or CMCs are Facebook and Twitter, and by far this is where most studies have focused.

...Crisis Communications?

What is a Crisis?

A Crisis is often described using Coombs framework of "*an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes*" (Roshan, Warren & Carr, 2016, p. 351), or worded another way '*as an unpredictable organizational event that potentially generates negative outcomes for the stakeholders of the organization and its performance*' (van der Meer, Verhoeven, W.J. Beentjes & Vliegenthart, "Communication in times of crisis: The stakeholder relationship under pressure", 2017, p. 426). It can be called a 'double crisis' affecting an organisation (Taekke, "Crisis Communication and Social Media. A Systems and Medium-Theoretical Perspective", 2017, p. 184). Crisis' can and do affect all kinds of organisations, with

no organisation being immune to the possibility of a crisis (van der Meer, Verhoeven, W.J. Beentjes & Vliegenthart, 2017, p. 426).¹

What is Crisis Communications?

Taekke writes that:

'The field [of Crisis Communications] deals with how organizations can best explain themselves to stakeholders and the public when a crisis occurs. This is whether the crisis is self-imposed or externally imposed, but where the organization meets criticism for its behaviour in relation to the crisis.' ("Crisis Communication and Social Media. A Systems and Medium-Theoretical Perspective", 2017, p. 182)

Essentially Crisis communications therefore deals with *how* we communicate during a crisis. There are two types of crisis, the first is self-imposed, or 'risks' as Taekke calls them;² and juxtaposes this as *'Organisational Risk (loss due to self-imposed actions) vs Organisational Danger (loss caused by external events) discussed.'* (ibid., p. 184-185). It should be added that Crisis Communications is also definable *'as organizations' rhetorical efforts (contributions) with regard to emergent conflict systems.'* (ibid., p. 184).

Papalova summaries nicely, writing that *'Crisis communications is a company effort to communicate with the public and shareholders in case of an unexpected event with a potential negative impact on the company reputation. Crisis communications is a specific company communication or institutional communication in an exceptional situation.'* (Papalova, "Media Impact on Crisis Communications", 2015, p. 3)

Challenges

Advancements

By advancements, therefore, in ICT we do not speak exclusively to the internet, nor do we speak exclusively to Social Media – these each had and have profound effects on Crisis Communications, however, there is a history to Public Relations and its relationship with ICT that needs to be addressed, before considering *how* today's developments effect Public Relations practice.

In a study conducted by Timothy Watson, he covered 20 years from 1977 until 1997 of journal articles in IPRA (Watson, "PR's early response to the "information superhighway": the IPRA narrative", 2015), at the time the longest-running and most-

¹ For further discussion see Appendix I.

² Quotation: *'In a risk perspective, conflict systems emerge within organizations with the function of acting as an immune system when decisions (risk) are observed as a threat to the organization. Likewise, conflict systems emerge between organizations and their external social world when organizations' decisions (risk behaviour) are observed as a danger by social systems in their environment, which can be seen as an activation of the societal immune system.'* (Taekke, 2017, p. 185)

established Public Relations professional body globally, but more specifically within the United States.

Watson's study brings up interesting points, primarily that PR practitioners want to adapt digital technology but in line with Tench et al.,'s findings don't always know how to put that technology into practice within the field (2017, p. 29). Roshan et al.'s study writes that:

In spite of the increasing importance of social media in crisis communication... various scholars emphasise that still organisations do not yet fully understand how to communicate via social media during a crisis... (Roshan, et al., 2016, p. 350)

Whilst Tench et al., and Roshan et al., both assume a desire to implement new technology, it is Watson's study that places that into a historical context – there has always been a desire amongst (many) PR professionals to implement new technology, but the know-how is not always there. One of the biggest affects ICT has had then, on PR, is that it develops so fast our theories and practice aren't always able to keep up, for practice it is a problem for know-how and for theory it is an inability to provide enough of a corpus of research on each and every desired technology before that research expires in terms of usefulness. As Roshan, et al.'s study noted the importance of Coombs' 'SCCT' (Situational Crisis Communication Theory, from 1995) they also noted that it needed development for a social media context:

This finding emphasises the importance of further development of SCCT in a social media context. (Roshan, et al., 2016, p. 358)

Their argument is that '*SCCT was developed when social media was not prevalent, it requires development for the social media context.*' (Roshan, et al., 2016, p. 358). SCCT is one of the leading theories within Crisis Communications, and this deficiency is one that needs *fixing* for the social media age. However, by the time it has been 'fixed' for one or multiple current social medias, another ten will have come along which appear to challenge our theories [and practices] all over again. As Erikson highlighting Grunig & Grunig points out:

'...that the tentative models presented in this study are simplified representations of reality. The study's viewpoint is in line with Grunig and Grunig (1992), who argue that "all models are 'false' in the sense that no representation can capture reality perfectly" (p. 286)' (Eriksson, "On-line Strategic Crisis Communication: In Search of a Descriptive Model Approach", 2012, p. 3122)

Whilst the models may not 'work' across the multitude of social medias and technologies, there are some predictions, as highlighted in Watson's article, which came true, such as Ploman's '*Information as a commodity [which] would impact the market economy and form new professions*' – that is the creation of information brokers etc; (Watson, "PR's early response to the "information superhighway": the IPRA narrative", 2015, p. 2). Ploman also warned of the risk to consumer/public data privacy (ibid., p. 2).

Whilst this is just one example, Watson's paper highlights how PR professionals and academics have struggled with ICT developments – from rejoicing at the arrival of new technology, '*We [Public Relations Professionals] are a creative, resourceful breed. We public relations professionals will capture the new communications technologies and make them our own.*' (Betsy Ann Plank quoted in *ibid.*, p. 2) – but also the same professionals and academics issuing stark warnings, '*Instant opinion feedback and polling, Plank wrote, would threaten "thoughtful time needed to nurture American genius for compromise and consensus"*' (featuring Betsy Ann Plank quote, *ibid.*, p. 2).

Watson further writes about White & Blamhin's Delphi Study (1995) which '*...indicated, again, that after more than...15 years of discussion in an international public relations body and its main publication that "sense making" of technological change was being sought, rather than guidance on best practice.*' (*ibid.*, p. 9; cf. also p. 10.)

It is without irony that we are again at the place of 'sense making' in a world 'overloaded with information' (cf. *ibid.*, p. 3, 5, 9f.), Social Media and the Internet, barely a shadow of what they would become back in 1996, have so confused and muddied the water of our society, that it is difficult to make sense of their full-impact. Eriksson notes that '*Skills are developing quickly, but theoretical knowledge is still lacking of how and why organizations practice their overall on-line crisis communication as they do.*' ("On-line Strategic Crisis Communication: In Search of a Descriptive Model Approach", 2012, p. 310). Whilst practitioners struggled with the technological understanding and how to apply this in Crisis Communications, and theorists with adaptive theories, the muddied water of our society encroached, as stakeholders and influencers, changed with technological adaptations.

Stakeholders & Influencers

Traditionally the Journalist was the main gate-keeper through which Public Relations messages were mediated, now we face the challenges of having a diasporic and diffused set of gatekeepers (Tench, et al., 2017, p. 27, 29, 36).

Some people call them influencers for short, but the name that Tench et al., ascribes is "*Social media influencers (SMIs)*" and defines "*...as a 'new type of third party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media.'*" (*ibid.*, p. 36). Whilst in-and-of-itself this is not a technological challenge, whilst these influencers exist *because* of the rise of social media (arguably *some* existed before) they pose a challenge as their importance to a brand is now paramount, yet few know how to communicate with them (*ibid.*, p. 36). They have not replaced journalists (*ibid.*, p. 36), yet, and journalists *still* remain important, for now.

These brand-ambassadors are not simply a challenge presented by modern technology, regarding, their interaction with organisations, but present the issue to organisations used to celebrity or dental endorsements of often being their consumers, also, and not just a one-type consumer, categorizable by age, gender, SEG, but defined by their *interest*. None of the literature quite dealt with this, but

there may be a difference between: a product-tester influencer, who tests the product; a product-unboxing influence, who unboxes your product; and a general-user influencer, who uses your product normally. These kinds of influences are on the rise in social media, but the literature of their influence and the differences between their audiences are not as highlighted. These are just examples. But during a crisis these SIMs may be the difference between severe reputational damage and reputation reparation. They may be *like* rats leaving the sinking ship, or they may show brand loyalty. van der Meer et al., notes '*Accordingly, many organizations make positive assumptions about their stakeholders only to find they were mistaken when hit by a crisis (Stephens et al., 2005). For example, key stakeholders might abandon the stricken organization in order to protect their personal reputation or avoid poor depiction by the media (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).*' (2017, p. 427-428).

Almost the largest and most-challenging gatekeeper in the social-media context, however, is employees. The risk is that an unhappy employee will spread malicious or organisational private information, or even information that's not sensitive but damaging to your brand reputation. But it is not all doom-and-gloom, a happy employee is a great gatekeeper to have, they have more positive things to say about your brand, the issue that social media presents is if your employee is unhappy about working for you (ibid., p. 36),³ in which case perhaps engaging more with employees may solve some of that issue? Though one assumes there will always be 'bad apples' and dealing with them requires careful handling on the part of the organisations PR department (or human resources?). It is however, not just employees who can be unhappy and disgruntled, it is also consumers – most often an employee will be a consumer too - but the non-employee consumer and the effect they can have on your brand is also immense. Both employee stake-holders and SIMs may actually be the cause of a crisis, by their behaviour or by their reaction to a perceived slight by the organisation/management.

Non-Employee consumers or stakeholders will now take-to social media, before, during and after a crisis. Before the age of Social Media they might write a letter, but now they will complain and criticise, either to their social-media friends, other organisations or direct to the organisation *in-crisis*. It is possible, to monitor ('environmental scanning') social media and online media, to *head-off* a crisis. Taekke frames this in terms of '*Paracrisis*' or '*a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior*' and notes that '*If the organizations can identify complaints that have the potential of becoming a communication crisis, they can act before it grows. With social media, the number of people with a voice is increased, and, according to Coombs, organizations must*

³ Quotation: '*The most important change however is the rise of the employee as gate-keeper for sharing information about the organisation with the outside world. Employees today can easily bypass the public relations department and blog, tweet or take part in online discussions about the organisation and its issues. This shows the blurring line between internal and external communication. Clear boundaries between the inside and the outside world no longer exist. The social media revolution has put employees in a new communicative role. Although most of them use this new role to share positive experiences about the organisation, organisations are worried about this. The development of social media governance structures gained momentum in 2011 when almost 40 per cent of the European organisations had implemented guidelines for communicating about the organisation on blogs and Twitter.*' (Tench, et al., 2017, p. 36)

monitor the number of messages linking to the paracrisis.' (Taekke, 2017, p. 190). Of course they could probably attempt to try and deal with as many if not all complaints as possible – and also use the described 'crisis thread' system of paracrisis to 'triage', enabling them to deal with the most likely cases first and then the next most likely in decreasing order.

If they organisation then keeps a 'record' of them, in a cross-referenced database scheme, they should effectively be able to head off 90+% of public & stakeholder related crisis' in advance of them actually be a problem. It should also assist the organisation to grow and develop, or reform, in a positive and 'sensitive to environment' manner. Of course such a scheme is unlikely to assist with your CEO or Board Members having affairs internally or externally, but you can't solve libido in the same way you can communications issues.

Roshan suggests that where an organisation '*had poor prior reputation, the findings suggest that prior organisational reputations may influence stakeholder perceptions when internalising information is issued in crises as highlighted by Coombs and Holladay (2002). Hence, this research stresses that organisations with unfavourable reputations should be very mindful about whether, when and how to issue internalising information on social media during a crisis.*' (Roshan, et al., 2016, p. 358)

Whilst this is good and sound advice, the first step is that an organisation should monitor its reputation, and be mindful of it, and work to improve it prior to a crisis, otherwise a crisis maybe it's last. The cynical stakeholder may believe that organisations only care about their reputation when 'things are tough' rather than caring about their customers and stakeholders all the time. The suggestion that any organisation needs mindfulness during a crisis is logical, however, they would not need this piece of mindfulness if they cared about their reputation all-year-round and not just in the rainy season.

Conclusion

In speaking of the Advancements of ICT we discussed how PR practitioners are generally keen to implement the new technology but at first aren't always able to understand, use or know how, it is logical to assume that if they can not do this in general praxis, that it would be more difficult to implement during disaster. Further to this it was noted that Crisis Communications interaction with ICT Advancements is again at a 'sense-making' stage.

In speaking of Stakeholders and Influencers we determined that stakeholders are now new gatekeepers to organisational reputation and are also influencers, and that each can affect positively or negatively upon the organisation, but that they can either create or diffuse a crisis.

There is much more to write on this subject, as a synthesis of the knowledge of the articles, papers and books read runs into many different areas of this, and space is a premium.

Words count above line: 2,129

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Appendix I.

Defining a Crisis

The problem with Crisis Communication is its wide-usage, and its not unusually to find academics describing two different things (even within the same paper) as crisis communications. As van der Meer ("Automated content analysis and crisis communication research", 2016, p. 952, fn. 1) writes:

Crisis is a broad term, frequently used by both academics and practitioners to refer to a wide variety of events and issues. In general, it refers to a breakdown in a system, creating shared stress (Perry, 2007). In the context of crisis management, Coombs (2015) divides crisis in disaster and organizational crisis. Disasters refer more to disrupting events that pose great societal danger, while organizational crisis mainly refers to the threatening effects of an unpredictable event on important expectations of stakeholders and the negative consequences for the organization.

Most of the studies tend to make no distinction, and whilst there clearly is one, it is difficult to do, because crisis' occur because of disasters too. van der Meer is honest when they write that their study makes no distinction, many ignore the issue, but it is an issue that actually does affect the way we communicate during a crisis with stakeholders.

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