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Conference Paper · March 2014

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Chapter 30

Crisis Communication in the Digital Era

Gita Bajaj, Anandan Pillai, and Rajen Gupta

Abstract In times of economic turmoil, companies may have to go through crisis more often than otherwise. Needless to say, PR practitioners have to manage communication during these crises. Communication among stakeholders has undergone paradigm change owing to fast-paced development of communication media technologies. Citizen-generated content is attaining prominence, and it has been observed that traditional media tends to capture news from the citizen-generated content. The high interactivity feature of new media has tremendously increased the participation of external stakeholders in the organizational conversations in public domain. This high interactivity may cause positive or negative consequences for the organization, and hence, public relations managers have to worry about the implications of this wider, faster and unmediated communication.

This research paper presents an exploratory study conducted to understand how practitioners have leveraged various digital media channels to combat crisis situations. An in-depth interview was conducted on ten senior-level corporate communication executives from varied industries. They were asked to rank 13 digital media channels in the order of their preference that they would choose to control a crisis situation. They were also asked to elaborate on advantages and disadvantages of findings and draws up guidelines for practitioners to manage crisis communication in the digital era and directions for future research in this domain for researchers to take up.

Keywords Crisis communication • New media • Digital communication

International conference on Global Conference on Managing in Recovering Markets (GCMRM)
Management Development Institute, Gurgaon March 5th–7th, 2014

Declaration: The authors do hereby declare that this paper is an original piece of research work and is not currently under review, accepted for publication, or published elsewhere.

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1 Introduction

In times of economic turmoil, companies may have to go through crisis more often than otherwise. Needless to say, PR practitioners have to manage communication during these crises. Crisis communication studies have been largely descriptive in nature with focus on post-crisis situations (Avery et al. 2010). A need for prescriptive research in crisis communication was established in literature (Avery et al. 2010). Due to the increasing penetration of Internet and digital media, organizations have started adopting these media to manage crisis situations irrespective of the organization size and the crisis type (Perry et al. 2003). The citizen-generated content is attaining prominence due to easily available new media technologies, and it has been observed that traditional media tends to capture news from the citizen-generated content (Wigley and Fontenot 2011). The high interactivity feature of new media has tremendously increased the participation of external stakeholders in the organizational conversations in public domain. This high interactivity may cause positive or negative consequences for the organization, and hence, public relations managers have to worry about the implications of this wider, faster and unmediated communication (Ann Mei et al. 2010). Considering that the rhetoric is of much importance for image safeguarding or restoration during and after crisis, it is important to study the impact of new media on crisis communication.

There exist two well-established streams of research: (1) new media technologies and (2) crisis communications. However, hardly any research exists that addresses how new media technologies are leveraged by organizations to communicate during crisis situations. Hence, we decided to address this void with the help of our contribution. In this research paper, we have attempted an exploratory study to understand how practitioners have leveraged various digital media channels to combat crisis situations. An in-depth interview was conducted on ten senior-level corporate communication executives from varied industries. They were asked to rank 13 digital media channels in the order of their preference that they would choose to control crisis situation, and secondly, they were asked to elaborate on advantages and disadvantages of each medium they chose. It was found that SMS (short messaging service) was a prominent choice among respondents followed by email, mobile telephony and corporate websites. New media channels were used by few of them; however, it did not emerge as a unanimous choice among all. This paper is an attempt to draw up guidelines for practitioners to manage crisis communication in the digital era and directions for future research in this domain for researchers to take up.

2 Literature Review

Crisis Management and Communication: Crisis is a natural part of an organization's lifecycle and development (Seeger et al. 2005; Ulmer and Sellnow 2002; Weick 1988). Some scholars (Stern 1997) highlight it as part of an organization's

learning process. Studies on crisis management delve on management of the various stages of crisis and the rhetoric that accompanies it.

Crisis Management Stages: Common models depicting life cycle of a crisis are Fink's (1986) four-staged model and Mitroff's (1994) five-staged model. However, the most common and regularly used model is the three-staged model, which divides a crisis into the precrisis, crisis and post-crisis stages. But, in real life, a crisis is like a process which cannot be divided into clear-cut stages, raising questions on the applicability of these theoretical models. However, their importance cannot be disregarded because to a certain extent these models have a pedagogical and analytical value. Scholars have traditionally focused on the last stage and viewed the crisis as an anomaly, but the biased interest in this stage is a rather reactive and defensive stance (Falkheimer and Heide 2009).

Rhetoric and Crisis Management: The other construct that has received extensive attention is the management of rhetoric. Image recreation discourse is influenced by context, media, genre and text (Johansen and Frandsen 2005) (see Fig. 30.1). According to agenda setting research (Scheberle 1994), media coverage is determined by factors such as causality, responsibility and blame. The amount of media coverage and the vividness of the information shape the perception of risk or damage (Walberg and Sjoberg 2000).

Traditionally rhetoric has been managed on a mass communication paradigm. Sender-oriented perspectives and rational message distribution through traditional media has been the practice. The authenticity was judged by the type of medium used (González-Herrero and Smith 2008).

The new media influencers are different. For instance, bloggers could be important influencers and blogs can be used for crisis communication (Valentini and Romenti 2011) to address varied audience – people who blog about organizations, influential bloggers, media that covers blogposts and people who follow blogs for information (Jin and Liu 2010).

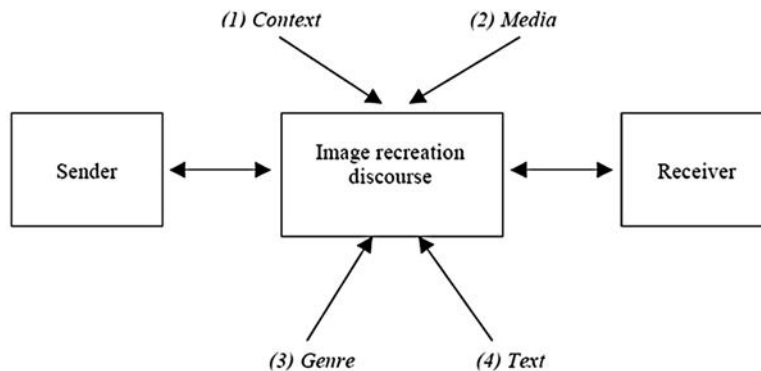


Fig. 30.1 Image recreation discourse (Source: Johansen and Frandsen 2005)

Message Strategy: Another crucial aspect of crisis communication research is the need for different **technical explanations to the diverse stakeholders**. An organization's choice of message strategy affects both how people perceive the crisis and the organization in crisis. There might be places where consistency actually decreases legitimacy if some stakeholders fail to understand the technical nature of crisis. Prior research suggests that the public wants more technical translation (Roger 2005), and the organizations are not providing those details. Augustine (2000) warns organizational leaders that during crisis, organization stakeholders often have a special need for information. They should not be abandoned by the organization and expected to get information elsewhere. The question here is if or how do organizations direct specific message strategies to different stakeholder groups during crisis.

Crisis Communication and Digital Medium: With increasing use of ICT, importance of relationship with community at large has increased substantially, communication has become a strategic element rather than just tactical message broadcast activity, media relations have become complex, Internet is not just a tool but a strategy which needs to be planned and executed carefully, communication speed has increased manifold and crisis might arise from any part of the digital economy (Goodman 2001). An effective crisis communication through a digital medium should be credible, committed, efficient, responsible and resolving in nature (Segars 2003). Organizations have understood the importance of digital medium, and irrespective of the size of the organization, they have started adopting them during crisis situations (Perry et al. 2003).

However, still very little is known about organizations' use of ICT in crises (Taylor and Perry 2005). And it still seems that organizations are generally missing the interactive potential of ICT (Taylor et al. 2001). Earlier research indicates that the need for an audience orientation to crisis communication has not been addressed properly.

The new media platforms are replacing traditional 'one-to-many' communication to 'many-to-many' model, which has brought dimensions of trust and transparency as key criteria of consideration (González-Herrero and Smith 2008) (see Fig. 30.2).

ts of new media over naïve one-way online communication through Internet are it allows organizations to include expertise in crisis response, allows interaction with varied stakeholders at same time, allows organization to track conversations and understand their stakeholder sentiments and provides organization an opportunity to uncover true perceptions (Fjeld and Molesworth 2006).

Thus, there exists a vast audience with the ability of multidirectional communication. Hence, the importance of sender-oriented perspective is not as vital in the new media (Falkheimer and Heide 2009). **Both the advices – sender-oriented and rational message distribution – may not work in the new paradigm.** Therefore, there is a need for greater theoretical and practical work in this new context.

Argenti (2006) argues that technology has fundamentally changed the dynamics among corporations. As insiders and outsiders disseminate and collect information about companies at will, there is new sense of entitlement. This medium is not limited to 'business-to-consumer' conversations but is increasingly used in 'consumer-to-consumer' conversations (Hearn et al. 2009, p. 49). The users are empowered to express their views, and this has created a 'new equality in communication'.

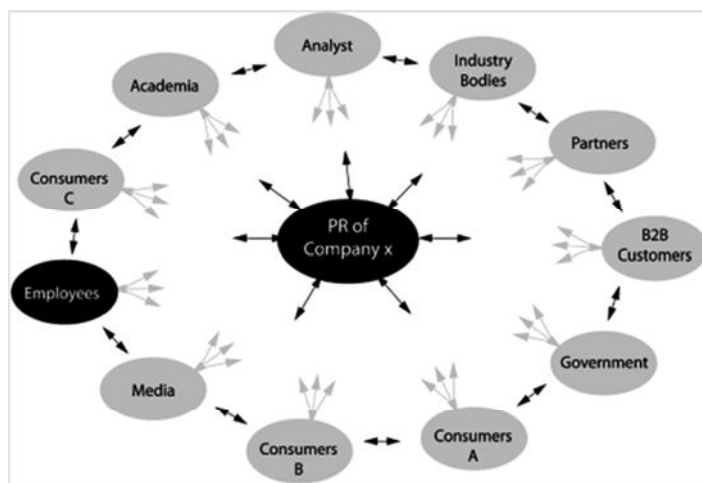


Fig. 30.2 Many-to-many model of public relations (Source: Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith 2008)

Further, the viral nature of new media platforms could be a boon or curse in crisis situations as they possess the capability to bring crisis situation under control, and alternatively the same viral capability might create a crisis situation with a just a small information. It is vital for the organizations that they understand the role of processing information and continuing interactivity in times of crisis.

The new media comprise three key layers of communication – social, content and technology (Hearn et al. 2009). These layers are evolving and in turn are continuously improving the richness of communication between stakeholders of a firm. Thus, there is a need to understand the new media technology for seamless communication among various stakeholders like employees, customer and suppliers (Hearn et al. 2009). Ann Mei et al. (2010) suggest New Media Communication Model (Fig. 30.3) to prescribe guidelines for managing crisis on new media. The focus of the recommendations is broad and the next level of understanding would require practitioners to distinguish between the nuances of the several technologies to have distinct approaches for each.

2.1 Will These Guidelines Work for New Media?

Martin and Boynton (2005) advised five practical guidelines for organizations in dealing with press: (1) prompt response, (2) truth/avoidance of absolutes, (3) constant flow of information, (4) concern for victims and their families and (5) choice of appropriate spokesperson(s). But these guidelines advise organizations in dealing with the press rather than communicating directly with the public (Taylor and Perry 2005). A recent trend is to use the Internet for unmediated and interactive communication with the public. As above guidelines were relevant mostly for the press, and

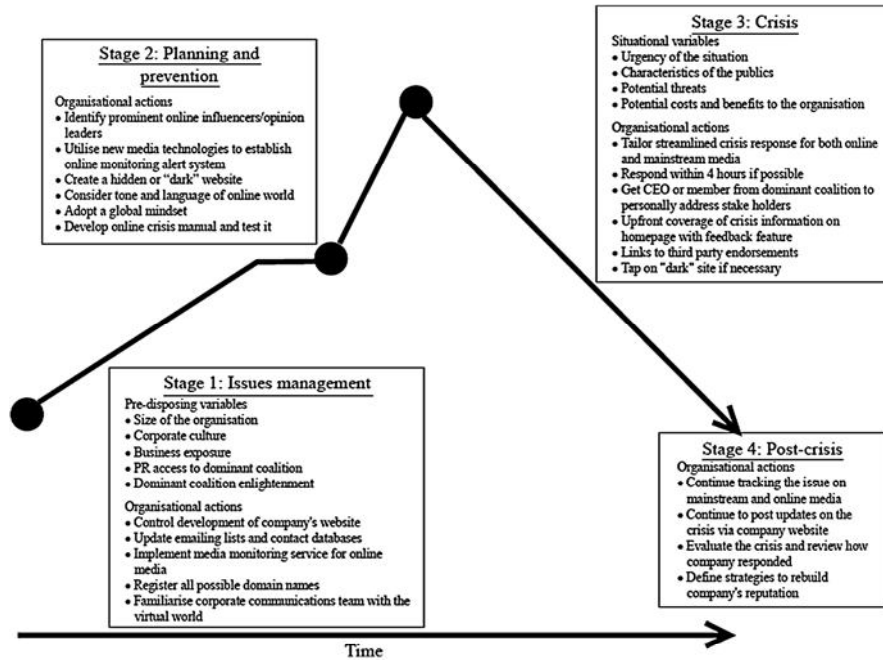


Fig. 30.3 New media crisis communication model (Source: Ann Mei et al. 2010)

not for the end user who, because of the Internet, are better informed, guidelines are needed to address the end user. Hence, this research paper attempts to understand how crisis communication could be managed with new media technologies especially from the perspective of the end user. The lack of adequate research as a background motivated us to attempt an exploratory design of research, where the focus was mainly to understand the phenomenon on a larger scale rather than build relationships or prove with any inferential statistics.

3 Research Gap

Previous crises communication literature has highlighted the importance of new communications technologies. However, rarely any research has developed a systematic method to identify which new media technologies are used or to assess their application across various crisis situations. Although, there are many relevant individual studies, there is no systematic body of research about crisis communication on new media.

4 Research Objectives

The prime objective of this research paper was to identify the new media technologies that were applied in practice by organizations to address crisis situations. Secondly, we intended to understand the differential advantage or disadvantage that one particular technology had over other available technologies. Thirdly, we tried to identify probable course of actions that practitioners could adopt in future while facing crisis situations, and finally, we attempted to identify some research areas that crisis communication researchers could target in future studies.

5 Research Methodology

Unit of Analysis and Data Collection: The unit of analysis for our research was an organization. Crisis communication decisions are made by senior-level corporate communication executives in an organization. Hence, we decided upon such senior-level executives as unit of data collection. The basic assumption was that these executives were aware of new media technologies that were prevalent in the media industry and had used some of them in past few years. The basic purpose of interviewing these respondents was threefold – (1) to understand their experience of new media technologies, (2) to understand the concerns and challenges that they faced while using new media technologies and (3) ways in which they have dealt with those challenges. Our objective was to capture live experiences of these respondents and present key learning which could be helpful for future practitioners. Our secondary objective was to identify research questions which could be of interest to future researchers.

Data Collection: Owing to the little literature that exists in this domain, a detailed understanding of the topic was essential. Hence, we adopted the interpretative approach. We attempted phenomenological interviewing method (Roulston 2010). This interviewing method enabled us to examine respondents' live experiences with the crisis situations and the response actions that they took in those situations. The major motivation of interviewing senior-level executives was to understand their feelings, perceptions and understandings in their own words. We conducted in-depth unstructured interviews of ten senior-level corporate communication heads of leading organizations. In order to have a broader understanding of the topic, we decided to have representatives from varied industry sectors (see Table 30.1).

Respondent Profile: As we were attempting an exploratory study, we focused on diversification of respondents to ensure we captured varied perspectives. The intention was not to aim for generalization of results, which is not an objective in exploratory studies (Yin 2011). Hence, we chose senior-level communication executives financial bodies, etc. (see Table 30.1 for details). Initially, these respondents were asked to rank the importance of impact of the 13 new media technologies/applications on

Table 30.1 le

Respondent identity	Designation	Industry
R1	Head, Corporate Affairs	Financial regulatory body
R2	CEO	Organized retail
R3	CEO	PR agency
R4	Head, Corporate Communication	Oil and gas
R5	Head, Corporate Communication	Banking
R6	Head, Corporate Communication	Conglomerate
R7	Head, Corporate Communication	Stock exchange
R8	Head, Corporate Communication	Automobiles
R9	Sr. Manager, Corporate Communication	Banking
R10	VP, Corporate Communication	Banking

crisis communication ([Appendix A1](#)). For communication applications that they ranked as the top 5, in-depth questions were asked to unravel what were the concerns of the practitioners, regarding these applications and what these practitioners were struggling to handle.

6 Findings

The rankings of all respondents are provided in [Appendix A1](#).

Ranking of New Media Technologies: The initial ranking data were subjected to descriptive analysis to understand which new media technologies scored importance among the corporate communication executives. As the number of respondents was less for an inferential statistics, we settled with just the descriptive analysis. Each new media technology that gained position in top 3 ranks for a respondent was calculated, and the most widely preferred technology was inferred. It was found that 70 % of respondents consider SMS to have major impact in crisis situations and ranked it in top 3 positions. Secondly, 60 % of respondents considered emails to be of importance. Thirdly, 40 % of respondents ranked mobile telephony as important medium in crisis situations. About 30 % of respondents voted for websites and blogs as relevant mediums during crisis situations.

Analysis of Interview Data: The recorded interviews were first converted into transcripts. Thereafter, interviews were read and analysed by two of the authors, and interpretations were matched with each other's to gain consistency. The thematic analysis (Roulston 2010) was performed on the interview transcripts, where the focus was to generate themes, which captured the description of events and actions taken by respondents in those situations.

SMS/Mobile Phone: From the practitioners' responses, SMS and calls through mobile phones have emerged as the prime and the third most critical IC applications, respectively. One of the prime concerns in their regard is that in case of a malevolent

SMS/MMS, it is difficult to trace who all have been informed and therefore difficult to reach the right audience. For obvious reasons, the two-pronged approach that any company adopts is (1) to reach out and respond to the relevant audience that has read the SMS/MMS and (2) to track where the SMS/MMS originated. The second activity requires communication practitioners to have links with mobile companies that are to finally track the originator. Also, considering the tight privacy regulations that mobile companies have to follow, the communication professionals have to go through the Cyber police to lodge an FIR and get the desired information. However, SMS had some benefits as respondent R2 mentioned:

SMS is most important because of following reasons, 1. Reach is very large, 2. Mind space occupation is high i.e. it definitely gets the personal attention and 3. The attention is received instantly

It requires special attention in addressing the information receiver's concerns. For instance, it would have been fairly easy for an organization to reach the same target audience with a common message to all through a newspaper or television. The SMS/MMS audience spread is however viral and uncontrolled, and therefore, it is difficult to find out who all have received the message. Thus, ensuring that the message traces the path of the original message seems undoable. What could a practitioner do in such circumstances?

One of the practitioners shared that reaching the target audiences is possible if the audience is known (e.g. the client database). One could send an SMS and have a call centre set up to respond to further queries. The challenge here is the training of the call centre executive 'who may end up parroting the response rather than responding'. Thus, one of the critical aspects is writing the SMS to be communicated and training/handling the client queries.

Another source of worry was the credibility and emotion that an SMS or mobile conversation from a known person evokes. Practitioners felt that when a person you know confirms the news, people associate with it better, they act on it and it gets propagated through a viral network. The respondent R7 emphasized relative importance of SMS vis-à-vis telephone call as he expressed:

During crisis, I stop taking telephone calls because it is impossible to respond to so many journalists who wish to reach out to me. So, I don't take anyone's calls and focus first on website and emails. This also ensures fast and correct dissemination of information. Then I respond to the SMSes. Thereafter I take calls of the media. This is because not everyone is in online at that moment and therefore all mediums have to be kept updated.

Online marketing professionals have been using this opinion to their advantage but during crisis when negative message spreads through this application, implications are opposite. Practitioners need to learn how they can use this association to their advantage during crisis. Also, practitioners need to keep track of cyber policies, telecom regulations and accordingly adapt themselves.

Email: ts of email as he mentioned:

Email has made it very convenient to share complex technical information. It has also ensured that more accurate information is made accessible to the journalists

With email as the channel of communication, a journalist's query along with the date and time lands in the mailbox of the communicator. It is therefore impossible for the latter to avoid a journalists' query which in yesteryears was on telephone and could be avoided. The communicator is thus bound to respond, and with responses over emails, it is not possible for a communicator to even deny a quote. The liberty is much less than when the questions were asked verbally.

Every country would have some or other information dissemination/transparency laws (for instance, Right To Information Act in India), to which an organization should abide and respect the laws. Corporate Communicators must now respond at a much faster pace, with accurate information, and therefore, the internal communication and approval mechanisms have to be extremely robust and nimble to respond effectively. *Practitioners must now review the organizational communication mechanism to enable smooth flow of correct information from varied channels and levels to make the response effective.*

Crisis situations always demand quick response. Researchers can study how much more paced up it is expected to be now and what implications it would have on organizational structure and communication in this context.

Key concern that relates to malevolent chain emails is same as that for viral SMS except for that mass SMS costs more to the sender than mass emails. For instance, respondent R1 who was associated with the Reserve Bank of India shared his experience of malevolent email and how RBI responded immediately to avoid future damage. He said:

Emails announcing non-existent lotteries have been able to cheat many people. In one of the fraud chain emails, an authentic looking letter from the RBI Governor substantiated a lottery. After sending the email, a lady called Kangana Kapoor who claimed to represent RBI called the recipients. When it came to RBI's notice, it uploaded announcements on its website and the announcement ticker was running all the time in 13 Indian languages to inform people of this cheating.

Thus, implications for practitioners and researchers are similar. One of the respondents felt that email chains are not credible, and therefore, their company does not bother to respond to malevolent chain emails. Yet, email emerged as the third highest concern among practitioners.

The other side of the argument is that with emails it is possible for anyone to reach any key influencer, say the authority, the stock exchange, the newspaper, etc. and thereby cause major implications for the target company which may be unaware of the same and therefore unable to respond.

Thus, three key concerns of communicators were (1) if a journalist sends an email posing a question, Corporate Communicators are bound to respond. This response is also bound by a deadline. (2) If there is a chain email spreading among stakeholders, it is difficult to trace the origin. (3) Consumers and offenders now have more access to authorities, regulatory bodies, grievance cells etc.

Websites: c regions depending on its circulation; a TV channel may be available in one region and not in another, again depending on the coverage rights. However, anything posted on the Internet is accessible across the globe. Be it a journalist, a stockbroker, a competitor, a consumer or any other

stakeholder, the access is instant. This could be a threat because all stakeholders have access to a medium that allows them to broadcast their views, opinions, grievances etc. On the other hand, companies now have a choice of voicing their response on their websites and thus reaching larger and wider audiences instantly. As respondent R7 mentioned:

Why we consider website first is because a lot of people log on and try to see the information. Communication has to be controlled during a crisis & website is a space where you do have control on what's being communicated

Thus, websites can be a great relief because there is universal access. So in times of crisis, one can post one's response on their own websites and on related websites that drive traffic to their websites. This may circumvent the need to respond to multiple perpetrators.

But, this too comes with a caveat. If a company responds on the website, it goes on record. Record is archived forever. Second, a company has to ensure legal compliance before responding. Third, if it also has to construct a response, for instance, a video, an audio, etc., and that takes time. This again has paced up race against time, once the exposure has happened. One of the practitioners shared experience of a server crashing due to traffic overload. This can be another challenge as a failing server can further pique or irritate the audience. Moreover, there could be other issues as respondent R1 mentioned:

The other side of the coin is the possibility of hacking the website which can have very damaging effects

and according to respondent R2:

The negative side is that this means is passive or one way communication only

Hence, some of the key issues that practitioners need to address are to understand and adapt to legal rules related to websites and to establish a seamless process within organization to collate information from various departments and disseminate it through website.

Social Networking Websites (SNWs): With most social media networks coming into existence towards the turn of the century (year 2000), SNW is a more recent development among all the IC applications and users, and researchers are exploring the huge and yet to be tapped potential of this medium. Still it has emerged as the fifth major concern among practitioners. The increasing popularity of Facebook, Orkut, LinkedIn and many others has created unprecedented connects among friends, professionals and strangers. Some have emerged as a network of friends and others as a network of professionals. Just like websites, here too the access is not regional; it is much wider, viral, but unlike a website it cannot be controlled. The personal touch or association attached with the source can possibly increase the credibility and readability of the information as respondent R8 emphasized:

There is absence of authority and everything is transparent there. One has to be present there. The modus is ask me or tell me. I am actively promoting this initiative but one needs
ine promotion.

Further, respondent R10 highlighted the network effect as she mentioned, '*SNWs have a force multiplier effect. Complete transparency is there and therefore cannot be ignored*'.

Online marketers are already employing these characteristics of SNWs to promote their cause. When the message spreading on this medium is negative, the implications are opposite. Crisis communicators have to deal with these implications and explore how they could use it to change the crisis into an opportunity. Moreover, communicating through SNWs requires adequate quantity of relevant content that could convey the message an organization intends to, which is a huge challenge as respondent R10 highlighted:

It requires rich media like audio, video etc. which takes time to produce and it is often a race against time to contain damage, once exposure occurs.

Hence, organizations need to understand the needs of target audience and accordingly match the social object. Also, its key to understand the privacy and regulations related to data sharing on social networking websites.

Consumer Forum Websites (CFWs): CFWs are focused and mostly domain centric as respondent R10 mentioned:

Its focused and domain centric to a particular class of product and business so requires a high level of technical, product awareness and knowledge.

They also have a force multiplier effect as the complaints may get picked by print, TV and/or radio, thereby increasing the criticality of the issue. But today consumer forums are an agenda on TV, print, radio, etc. also. However, TV and radio are one time access. Unless the TV and radio companies air the message again and again, access is not unlimited. Accessing archives requires money and effort. In case of CFWs however, the voices get archived and these archives are easily accessible to all. So gathering momentum when a crisis hits may be more feasible here than in any other space.

Podcasting: Audio and video have higher impact than text. With applications like YouTube, everyone has the option of uploading videos to broadcast. With option of podcasting available now, larger number of interested people can get relevant digital audio and video files with very little effort and time lag. Thus, the access to these files is increased but the screening of content broadcasted is missing. Thus, anyone can voice whatever they wish to, and whoever is ready to listen can join the group. In the absence of screening, the test of authenticity and credibility of information is missing, and it is difficult, and hence, there exists a challenge in using this medium as respondent R6 mentioned:

Create negative noise across the world, make an issue a larger issue than required.

Lack of this distinction can become important in times of crisis when the victims of crisis, competitors and media have access to the medium, but the reader is not aware of who is sharing the information and what could be the agendas behind the information.

Blogs: Blogs emerged as the fourth dreaded IC application among the practitioners. Anyone can start his/her blog. But only a persistent blogging with thought and

marketing capability has followers. There are debates on credibility of blogs, but a blog with large following/readership cannot be ignored, as respondent R2 highlighted:

They too are important because they are real time. They are becoming powerful as they have a wide audience and the message can be managed.

Some practitioners shared that bloggers pick up stuff from each other, and therefore, quotes around the world can damage reputation. The challenge for a practitioner starts from knowing what has been written when and where. Many companies have official blogs to communicate with people. However, not all companies are ready to invest into blogs, and many are anxious about the implications of the same, as respondent R5 shared her insight:

It is an unconventional communication; people are shrill; they use it as a last resort; customer complaints only when the case is extreme; during crisis tracking the source is cult.

Twitter has introduced the option of microblogging and increased by many folds the participation of people. Everyone is welcome to share what they are doing. Experiences of Shashi Tharoor, Chetan Bhagat and Amitabh Bachchan are examples of crisis that large fan following can throw on you. The larger the number of followers, the larger is your access to people. But not everyone has large number of followers.

Online Surveys and Newsletters: Online surveys and newsletters have surfaced as low concern areas of the practitioners. However, one may argue that surveys and many interactive newsletters engage the readers more than plain text news. Online surveys are extensively used by television and print medium and do seem to have an impact. However, considering the low concern of the practitioners, it may be worthwhile for researchers to study the impact of surveys and newsletters.

The insights shared by practitioners helped us understand uniqueness of using a particular new media technology in crisis situation. We have suggested a few guidelines for practitioners based on our interview data which would be helpful for them in preparing themselves for crisis situations ([Appendix A2](#)).

7 Summary

The literature review helped us understand that there is a need for a process-oriented theoretical as well as practical development rather than a stagelike explanation of crisis because in reality crisis cannot be segregated into stages. The review of literature also suggests that scholars have largely focused on the last stage of crisis, but in today's age of virally networked communication, it becomes very essential for practitioners and organizations to be prepared for any kind of crisis. Hence, it is important to study crisis as a process so that quick and effective communication strategies can be employed at any stage of the crisis. Secondly, in the past researchers have largely concentrated on dealing with the traditional media but have had less orientation towards the audience who possess the power of content creation in the new age media.

This research paper helps one understand (1) insights on practitioner experiences and perceptions and (2) guidelines for practitioners and research agenda for researchers.

8 Conclusion

This research paper establishes the need for awareness of the legalities associated with new media technologies. It is necessary to scan, monitor and manage communication on new media in a perpetual manner. These new media technologies have enhanced the scope of both coverage and vividness of information, and hence, it has become inevitable for organizations to develop an expertise to use these technologies and communicate effectively with their stakeholders during crisis situations. The critical part of new media technologies is to sustain the communication in a dialogic manner rather than one-sided information dissemination process. Organizations should plan accordingly to prepare and equip themselves in precrisis stage. Precrisis stage may assume greater importance in the new age as reactive strategies may be more difficult to implement on these new media technologies.

Finally, this paper suggests an agenda for researchers and guidelines for practitioners to better understand the new media technologies for effective use in crisis situations when conversation in real time becomes a necessity to save an organization from much harm.

9 Future Directions of Research

The potential of new media usage would increase on a larger scale in the future, and hence, end users would be better informed than they were in the era of traditional media. This research clearly establishes the necessity to leverage new media technologies during crisis situations. However, it is surprising to note very sparse literature exists in this intersection domain of new media technologies and crisis communications. We based on our interaction with the respondents have identified potential research areas that researchers could attempt in future with respect to each new media technology.

cient direct information available about the information-seeking behaviour of individuals during a crisis (Seaton 2005). This could be a potential domain of research, where researchers focus on understanding end users' information-sourcing behaviour from new media technologies during crisis situations.

Also, we have suggested few research arenas that future researchers could pursue in the integrated research domain of crisis communication and new media technologies (Appendix A3).

10 Limitations

This paper provides researchers an agenda for future research and practitioners learning from peer experiences. However, the conclusions may not be exhaustive findings are based on interviews of a small number of practitioners from India. But, we believe the insights presented in this research paper would be relevant to organizations based in developing countries and emerging economies. A larger set of interviewees could have revealed more areas of research and could have lent itself to quantitative inferences. Practitioner guidelines are also based on analysis of peer experiences. Interviews were conducted only of senior-level executives; however, communication decisions in an organization may get affected by thoughts from various team members. So, it would be advisable for future researchers to interview multiple members from each team to have a comprehensive perspective.

Appendices

Appendix A1: Ranking of New Media Technologies by Respondents

New media technologies	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10
SMS	3	1	7	1	3	1	2	–	2	9
Mobile telephony	1	–	10	1	2	9	–	–	3	13
Email	2	–	8	5	1	2	1	3	5	1
Websites	4	4	13	9	4	3	1	–	10	2
SNS	6	3	1	13	10	4	–	4	4	3
Microblogging	–	3	4	10	9	8	–	–	13	10
CFWs	–	–	6	8	6	10	–	13	6	4
Podcasting	–	–	3	5	11	5	–	–	12	6
Blogs	–	3	2	8	5	7	–	2	1	5
Online news channels	5	2	5	7	7	12	–	–	7	8
Online newsletters	–	–	11	7	8	13	–	1	9	12
Online surveys	–	–	12	13	12	11	–	–	8	7
MMS	–	–	9	3	13	6	–	–	11	11

Note: The ‘–’ indicates that a particular respondent did not use that new media for any purpose.

Appendix A2: Agenda for Practitioners

Medium	Agenda
SMS/mobile phone	Understand cyber policy and regulations
	Be updated about mobile service provider procedures
	Possess access to skilled and trained call centre executives
	Develop skills of appreciating and using messaging through this medium
Email	Scan each email as part of continuous process to avoid crisis at very early stage
	Be aware of cyber policy and regulations
	Have sufficient knowledge of Internet companies' procedures and people involved in tracking mechanisms
	Hone the skill of appropriate messaging through email
	Identify appropriate key influencers who could be leveraged as spokesperson during crisis situation
Website	Ensuring systems for quick legal vetting
	Expertise in constructing media-friendly messages such as video, audio etc.
	How do online news channels function?
	What is the organizational structure and method of collecting news in case of online channels?
Social networking websites (SNWs)	Match the social object that a particular SNW offers with that of the characteristics of target audience
	Understand the individual privacy and data sharing rules on these SNWs
	Execute relevant content strategy that ensures more positive engagement with the stakeholders
Consumer forum websites (CFWs)	Identify popular CFWs in respective domain
	What are the operating and success parameters of CFWs?
Podcasting	Continuously scan all pertinent/relevant podcasts
	Develop the skill of quickly making audio/digital footage
	Have clear understanding of the IC companies' policies of uploading, removing and podcasting. Have clear understanding of legal policies on the subject
	Identify influential bloggers in the respective domain
	Arrange for blogger meets and build long-term relationship with them
	Identify the widely discussed topics during crisis situation, address them and prepare to be ready with a response strategy for any explanations expected by blog readers
Online surveys and newsletters	Possess expertise in developing effective online surveys
	Should have capability to come up with relevant content in newsletters at regular intervals

Appendix A3: Agenda for Researchers

Medium	Agenda
SMS/mobile phone	Establish the differential advantage of using SMS compared to other traditional mediums like newspaper, TV etc.
	Compare the relevance of message content communicated by this medium to respective stakeholders and its effectiveness vis-a-vis if it was done by print or television
Email	Identify appropriate proactive/reactive strategies that can be applied to handle crisis situations through email
Websites	Establish relationship between hierarchy within organizations and readiness to follow an appropriate crisis communication process
	What attributes a company should consider before disclosing an official statement on third party websites?
	Establish impact of credit ratings of websites on information sharing decisions during crisis situations
Social networking websites (SNWs)	What would be the impact of reach and virality of a particular SNW on effectiveness of messaging?
	Establish SNW content characteristics that result in effective control of crisis situation
Consumer forum websites (CFWs)	Establish entry and exit barriers of users for CFWs
	What would be the implications of differences in the governing laws in different countries?
Podcasting	Establish impact of rich media communication such as podcasting platforms, in containing crisis situation
	How would the image of a person featured in the podcast influence the ability to control a crisis situation?
Blog	What blogging strategies should firms follow during crisis?
	What methods should be developed to verify credibility, tone and pitch, description and other evaluative detail of messages posted on blogs?
Online surveys and newsletters	Is it critical to monitor all surveys/newsletters/channels or should the follow-up be limited to the prominent ones in relevant domain? Is it critical to build relationships with online hosts? Does it matter?

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