

CRISIS CONSTRUCTION IN THE CONTEMPORARY COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT: A DYNAMIC, COMPLEX, AND MIS/DISINFORMATION-RICH PROCESSBoutheina Ben Ghozlen¹, University of Tunis El Manar, Tunisia<https://doi.org/10.46687/IXXR3433>

Abstract: *Digital technologies have revolutionized the current media and communication ecosystem, changing the dynamics of information exchange during disruptive events. These changes, combined with the range of global crises and challenges that the world has been recently facing, warrant allocating the process of crisis communication greater scholarly attention. Against this background, a review of the crisis communication literature is herein conducted to identify the key features and emerging trends characteristic of the contemporary communication landscape and thereby contribute to informing future decision-making. The literature review unveiled the dynamic, complex, and mis/disinformation-dominated nature of modern crisis communication channels. Equally important, drawing on these observations, this research outlined two key recommendations for practitioners to upgrade their crisis communication practices and keep abreast of the changing media and information paradigms. On a theoretical plane, the article recommends a more practice-oriented approach to be adopted by future crisis communication studies, thus following a more prescriptive research agenda.*

Keywords: *crisis communication, changing paradigms, complex dynamics, digital mis/disinformation; recommendations*

1. Introduction

There has been a growing academic interest in the study of crisis over the past two decades (Wolbers et al., 2021) from a wide spectrum of disciplines, including organizational crisis communication (e.g., Wang, Lu, 2010), political communication research (e.g., Gollust et al., 2020), critical discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough, Fairclough, 2011), and psychology (e.g., James, Gilliland, 2001). Undeniably, the intrinsically “seminal” (Seeger et al., 2005, p. 78), “complex, multi-faceted and variable” (Mohd Don, De Rycker, 2013, p. 44) nature of such events merits considerable scholarly attention. However, the range of wide-scale crises and challenges that the world has witnessed in recent times – terrorism, pandemic outbreaks, migration, climate change, etc. – may arguably be the major

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driver propelling the development of research in this direction (Wolbers et al., 2021).

Relatedly, the absence of a “universally accepted definition of crisis” (Coombs, 2010, p. 18) chiefly emanates from its multidisciplinary aspect. In fact, perceptions of a crisis tended to vary from one domain to another. Organizational crisis communication studies view crisis as “an event that is an unpredictable, major threat that can have a negative effect on the organization, industry, or stakeholders if handled improperly” (Coombs, 1999, p. 2). From a political communication perspective, crises are conceived of as “[c]hallenges to the status quo ... a threat to a prevailing order” (Raboy, Dagenais, 1992, p. 5). Discourse analysts’ approach to such phenomena is rather anchored in the assumption that “crisis avoidance, monitoring, management and resolution are not only a matter of material actions but crucially depend for their successful performance on language use, communication and discourse” (Mohd Don, De Rycker, 2013, p. 3). In the realm of psychology, a crisis is considered to be “a perception or experiencing of an event or situation as an intolerable difficulty that exceeds the person’s current resources and coping mechanisms” (James, Gilliland, 2001, pp. 26-27). It is worthy of note that despite such discipline-specific variations in crisis conceptualizations, these events share a number of inherent features such as uncertainty, suddenness, urgency, and destructiveness (Xie et al., 2022).

The abovementioned characteristics attest to the centrality of crisis communication to the overall process of crisis management and its ultimate resolution. In view of this, the present research provides a review of the existing literature on crisis communication with the aim of (i) delineating the prominent trends and patterns relative to the contemporary media and communication environment and (ii) correspondingly outlining the respective recommendations for practitioners. The concept of crisis, as used in the scope of this article, is a generic one, encompassing different types of crises – natural and human-made. The discussion draws primarily on examples and case studies from the fields of political communication and organizational crisis communication.

2. Crisis communication channels: dynamic and complex

Given the criticality of information exchange in disruptive situations (Huang et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2016), the process of crisis communication has been one of the central themes in the crisis literature (e.g., Benoit, Pang, 2008; Coombs, 2007; Gerken, van der Meer, 2019; Harjule et al., 2023; Wang, Dong, 2017). Crisis communication is, in the words of Coombs (2010), “the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation” (p. 20). Such events indeed generate a high demand for information on the part of citizens (Baraybar-Fernández et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2022), hence the importance of optimizing the effectiveness of communication mechanisms. Interestingly, crisis construction takes place through this communication process whereby people strive to make sense of the unfolding event. As Xie et al. (2022) put it, “[t]he main

purposes of framing and social construction of a crisis is to understand the nature and cause of the crisis, how it should be managed, and its consequences” (p. 3). The present review of crisis communication research documents the dynamic and complex nature of crisis-related information exchange channels.

2.1 Changing communication paradigms

A recurrent premise in crisis research (e.g., Huang et al., 2015; Mohd Don, De Rycker, 2013; Pang et al., 2014; Wang, Dong, 2017; Xie et al., 2022) is that the dynamics of crisis construction in the contemporary communication environment have recently changed. Accordingly, the digital revolution ushered in a new era in which traditional modes of information exchange in times of crisis faded into the background, while online media platforms gained widespread social momentum. Crisis researchers thus refer to “a hybrid system of communication” (Baraybar-Fernández et al., 2021, p. 2) wherein competing crisis construals co-exist and impact, to varying degrees, people’s attitudes and behaviors towards the emerging situation.

The proliferation of digital communication tools in modern societies has given birth to what is dubbed as citizen journalism, “[t]he act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information ... to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging ... information that a democracy requires” (Bowman, Willis, 2003, p. 9). In the context of crises, empowered by social media platforms, people emerged as a key actor in shaping public discourse around these events (Cheng et al., 2016; Xie et al., 2022). The bulk of crisis communication research has thereafter gravitated around the impact of social media on the communication apparatus in times of crisis (Wang, Dong, 2017).

A review of this literature unveiled two main reasons behind the burgeoning trend of public participation in information exchange in disruptive situations. First, the inherent characteristics of social media channels, such as speed, “user interactivity, multimedia capability and lack of gatekeeping” (Pang et al., 2014, p. 98), fostered the accessibility and rapid transmission of crisis-related information to the general public. By contrast, mainstream media were reported to be lagging behind. For instance, respondents in Huang et al.’s (2015) research on the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings confirmed that “traditional news outlets did not have the updated, real-time, and locally relevant news that they were looking for” (p. 972). Second, according to the reviewed studies (e.g., Innes, 2020; Zeng et al., 2017), online communications served as a means to counter the mystification strategies of state actors and media institutions and obtain credible accounts of the unfolding events. As Mohd Don and De Rycker (2013) succinctly put it, driven by political agendas and news values, news media coverage of crises displays “uniformity ... conservatism ... less variation in crisis construal, more predictable selection and increasingly rigid retention” (p. 35). For their part, political decision makers want to project the image of ability, being in control of the situation – even if this is not the case – in order not to jeopardize their political career (Eisele et al.,

2022). In a word, the changing media landscape has empowered citizens as never before, giving them a voice, an influential medium for public opinion expression.

Traditional intermediaries – mainstream media and powerful elites – constitute another component of today’s hybrid communication ecosystem (Huang et al., 2015; Xie et al., 2022). The argument that, notwithstanding the rise of social media as a competing platform of information, mainstream media can still set the agenda during crisis events is frequently reiterated across crisis communication studies. By way of illustration, Cottle (2009) posits that the rising trend of participatory journalism should not undermine the fact that information transmission mechanisms continue to be mainly dominated by Western corporate media in the case of global crises. In the same vein, Baraybar-Fernández et al. (2021) elucidate that “[b]eyond the discussions between utopian and skeptical positions on the technological capabilities to generate a new space for the construction of public opinion and social change, traditional media still produces most of the news that we consume” (p. 2). This continuing legacy can be partly attributable to mainstream media’s effective adaptation to the current digital communication environment. Ironically, traditional media outlets have become more influential than before in molding public discourses around current events through their respective online versions and smartphone applications, allowing interactivity and more dissemination of their content (Baraybar-Fernández et al., 2021; Ben Ghazlen, 2022). Crisis communication research, grounded in critical discourse analysis, also corroborates the contention that “consensus about a crisis tends to be ‘manufactured’ by the powerful elites” (Mohd Don, De Rycker, 2013, p. 21), obscuring alternative constructions.

The ongoing dialectic between traditional and new modes of information exchange needs to open up more avenues for critical reflection, among crisis communication researchers and practitioners, on how future practices can be tailored to the emerging communication patterns.

2.2 Complex communication dynamics

The review of crisis communication research undertaken in the scope of this study captured the complexity of the mechanisms underpinning information exchange during the time of crisis. It is herein thought that this partly emanates from the plurality of agents navigating the current communication landscape. Gerken and van der Meer (2019) ascertain that competing narratives tend to co-exist in the communication environment pertaining to crises. While the public attempts to influence political decision-making via social media platforms (Baraybar-Fernández et al., 2021), news media and political elites still shape the dominant crisis-related discourse (Eriksson, 2018; Lean et al., 2013; Mohd Don, De Rycker, 2013). The intricately competing – yet symbiotic – relationship between these different actors is believed to be another contributing factor in this complexity. This argument is premised on the mixed patterns of alignment and divergence between crisis narratives observed in the reviewed literature.

Frame alignment, a concept rooted in mass communication research (Entman, 1993), refers to “the similarity in presence of comparable frames in actors’ communication about a certain event” (Gerken, van der Meer, 2019, p. 157). Common reported patterns of alignment encompass the interaction between the frames attributed to mainstream media and state sources (Gerken, van der Meer, 2019; Xie et al., 2022) whose synergy produces the dominant crisis narrative. As elucidated in Mohd Don and De Rycker’s (2013) terms, “the journalistic and political fields would eventually collude in an unproductive *simplification* of the very complex processes that underlie successful crisis recovery” (p. 35, emphasis in original). Lean et al.’s (2013) research lends further empirical support to this line of reasoning as it showed how Malaysian press coverage of terrorist attacks was aligned with the preponderant hegemonic ideologies and the prevailing social order.

Mainstream and social media crisis accounts also mostly converged (Baraybar-Fernández et al., 2021). On the one hand, journalists started to incorporate some online crisis content into their news stories after filtering it through the news values lens (Pang et al., 2014). On the other hand, “[o]ften, the public’s meaning construction and actions [we]re based on information provided by news media” (Gerken, van der Meer, 2019, p. 153). Audience crisis frames thus proved to partly align with traditional media’s and indirectly formal actors’ versions of the emerging event (Gerken, van der Meer, 2019; Xie et al., 2022). Critically, these interactive alignment patterns can render both “traditional and new media ... implicated in the misrepresentation of critical events” (Mohd Don, De Rycker, 2013, p. 33). This observation interestingly uncovers the subtle ways in which social media can, in practice, depart from the true spirit of citizen journalism they were originally dedicated to promote.

Instances of “framing contests” (Boin et al., 2009, p. 81) were also identified in the literature. Traditional media, for instance, may adapt the frames originating from state sources (e.g., Gerken, van der Meer, 2019). Understandably, journalistic norms and/or political motives may lie behind this adjustment process. Additionally, public crisis framing can diverge from the accounts espoused by formal actors such as organizations in Gerken et al.’s (2016) study. Accordingly, “there was an absence of frame alignment between AirAsia’s response strategy and the public’s response. Compared to the organisation, the public’s reactions revealed more emotional aspects in their framing” (p. 879). In the context of organizational crisis communication, the major crisis response frames generated by official responders include apology, denial, diminishing, and ingratiation (Coombs 2007, 2018). On the whole, while competing crisis narratives give rise to such “issues like power and ideology” (Mohd Don, De Rycker, 2013, p. 4), the process of alignment is argued to play a significant role in crisis resolution as different stakeholders search for what Gerken and van der Meer (2019) label “collective sense making” (p. 156).

3. Digital mis/disinformation

The review of crisis communication literature also documented a prominent phenomenon typical of the contemporary communication landscape, notably digital mis/disinformation and its serious repercussions. At the outset, it is enlightening to distinguish between the terms misinformation and disinformation. According to Innes (2020), the former refers to “inadvertently misleading communications” (p. 286), whereas the latter constitutes “a deliberate attempt to deceive” (p. 286). Albeit denotationally distinct, these two concepts are bound by a causality relationship, with “misinformation creating an environment conducive to disinformation” (p. 293). Broadly speaking, the trend of mis/disinformation is to be situated within the current era of ‘post-truth’ (Compton et al., 2021). Borrowing McIntyre’s (2018) words, it designates “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (p. 5). These new realities thereby provided fertile ground for the propagation of fake news, through social networks, during disruptive emergencies. Alarming, mis/disinforming communications are increasingly becoming a “commonplace feature of the ordering of social reality in the information age” (Innes, 2020, p. 297).

The remarkable spread of inaccurate and misleading information online in the wake of crises is attributable to a number of factors. Firstly, mis/disinformation is a recurrent practice in the aftermath of disruptive situations (Baraybar-Fernández et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2015; Schmid et al., 2022). In their quest for urgent information to reduce uncertainties and make sense of the unfolding events, people can easily fall prey to fake news (Schmid et al., 2022). Social media platforms, Baraybar-Fernández et al. (2021) report, serve as “conducive channels to carry out misinformation practices taking advantage of social uncertainty” (p. 11) following a crisis. Secondly, the advantage of speed that social media have over traditional news outlets arguably accelerates this process. As advanced by Hong and Kim (2020), information overload – the act of being overwhelmed with massive amounts of information within a short period of time – may preclude logical and critical thinking on the part of citizens. Put simply, “social media ... moving too fast ... the constant influx of information contributed to the spread of misinformation” (Huang et al., 2015, p. 977). Thirdly, and most critically, deceptive online content can be used by certain actors as an empowerment tool to trigger unrest and destabilize the social and political order in the context of crisis. Disinformation, in this sense, becomes “the modern makeover of conspiracy theories” (Das, Ahmed, 2022, p. 148).

The above discussion has unraveled the dark side of social media platforms use amid an emerging crisis. Digital mis/disinformation is particularly critical during global pandemics, given the dramatic loss of human life it can cause (Das, Ahmed, 2022; Schmid et al., 2022). Importantly, digital communications “strongly influence not only the spread and patterns of crisis information, and

the responses of crisis management teams, but also ... the public's attitudes, behaviors, and responses" (Xie et al., 2022, p. 3). The amount of online fake news that accompanied the COVID-19 outbreak, for instance, was incredibly massive, spurring a vast array of crisis mis/disinformation research (e.g., Das, Ahmed, 2022; Hong, Kim, 2020; Islam et al., 2020; Schmid et al., 2022). Overall, when tackling social media, crisis communication researchers tend to perceive them as a double-edged weapon (Huang et al., 2015; Innes, 2020; Pang et al., 2014). They are a blessing by dint of the rapid and updated exchange of information they can offer, with its "potential to improve crisis response" (Huang et al., 2015, p. 969) and, at the same time, a curse due to their use as channels to circulate unverified and misleading news. Paradoxically, though the rise of online communications during crises has been partially driven by the attempt to counter elites' mystification strategies, social media platforms themselves have emerged as prime venues for the dissemination of fake news. This reality re-evokes the complex dynamics of the crisis communication process discussed earlier in this paper.

4. Recommendations for effective crisis communication

Predicated on the assumption that their studies need to contribute to "knowledge about effective practice" (Eriksson, 2018, p. 527), crisis communication researchers have recently allocated increasing attention to the notion of 'best practices'. In a similar vein, drawing on the major trends and patterns identified in the modern crisis communication environment, this review ends with two main recommendations for practitioners.

First, it is necessary for crisis managers to be part of the dynamics of digital crisis communication (Eriksson, 2018; Huang et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2016). Due to a number of reasons, formal crisis responders tend to refrain from using social media as a tool in crisis management and response (Huang et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2016). This practice has to be urgently re-considered because the lack of quick, locally relevant, and updated crisis-related information from formal crisis responders would potentially lead citizens to look for alternative sources, triggering fake news propagation (Eriksson, 2018). Instead, practitioners ought to harness social media technologies to be able to "engage in and help shape the online conversation during crisis events" (Huang et al., 2015, p. 978). Importantly, as Eriksson (2018) postulates, the development of efficient social media policies is the outcome of a whole process that should be initiated long before a crisis strikes. In short, social media can inform decision-making and boost the effectiveness of crisis management and response if used adequately by crisis communication practitioners (Lin et al., 2016).

Second, fighting digital mis/disinformation is essential to the success of the communication process between different stakeholders in times of crisis. In this respect, the gatekeeping function of traditional media is now more relevant than ever (Das, Ahmed, 2022; Nguyen, 2006; Perreault, Perreault, 2021). The role of journalists as critical gatekeepers of information flows should hence be

reinforced through more technical and legal measures. An urgent need also exists to enrich and upgrade the existing arsenal of fact-checking applications/websites, misinformation detection algorithms, regulatory bodies, and disinformation watchdogs. Together, these mechanisms can provide a solid base for crisis communication practitioners to transmit crucial information to the affected citizens and prevent fake news and rumors from acquiring traction.

Admittedly, successful communication during contemporary crises requires the joint efforts of a web of interconnected actors. News media, formal crisis managers, the public, fact-checking and regulatory bodies, amongst others, are all part of this dynamic, evolving, and complex process upon which crisis resolution partially depends. To keep improving the functioning of the crisis communication machinery, there needs to be a continuing search for the 'best practices' across a multiplicity of domains.

5. Conclusion

This paper has intended to advance the growing body of interdisciplinary research on crisis communication in the contemporary digital age by delineating the key features and emerging trends. It has specifically pinpointed the recent developments that the media and communication landscape has undergone during the last two decades, notably the rise of social media as a key actor in shaping public discourse around crisis and the related spread of digital mis/disinformation. In this respect, this research has touched upon mounting concerns about the current 'post-truth' societies (Compton et al., 2021), with scary scenarios likely to loom ahead. On a more practical plane, the work has offered two major research informed-recommendations for practitioners. In sum, the article has attempted to contribute both theoretically and practically to the ongoing debate on crisis communication in the era of digital technologies.

As for future research directions, the paper suggests further advancing the practice-oriented trajectory within the crisis communication scholarship. Going beyond the discussion of the impact of social media on people's understandings of and reactions to a disruptive event, an already over researched topic, to extensively theorize about the most efficient practices to better manage crisis situations seems more urgent than ever. In a word, this work recommends moving from a predominantly descriptive research agenda on crisis communication to a more prescriptive one, following in the footsteps of such studies as Eriksson (2018) and Lin et al. (2016). The dichotomous nature of social media use – a blessing and a curse – as well as the intricate status of mainstream media, oscillating between their watchdog role and long-established tradition of perpetuating the prevailing socio-political order and hegemonic discourses (van Dijk, 2013), also deserve renewed scholarly attention in the context of crisis and beyond.

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