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   Forthmann, Jörg, IMWF Institute for Management and Economic Research (Germany)
Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Welcome! Dobrodošli! Swagatam!

The fact that we were yet again forced to have the 28th edition of the International Public Relations Research Symposium (BledCom 2021) virtually rather than congregating in beautiful Bled as we had done for 26 years (until 2019) is proof enough of the impact of the current pandemic on every aspect of our lives. Perhaps now more than ever, risk and crisis communication have been thrust into the limelight. That prompted us to choose as this year’s theme: The role of public relations in risk and crisis communication. Since March 2020, individuals, organizations, and nations have all become the sources as well as recipients of information intended to alter their behavior to combat the highly infectious Covid-19 and its debilitating impact on everyday life globally. Some nations have been lauded for their ability to manage the spread of the virus through effective communication whereas others have been targeted for performing poorly. National performance has certainly hinged on the ability of the leaders of these nations to communicate effectively about the pandemic. In the past couple of month, second waves of the pandemic in some regions of the world have also shone light on the need for consistent risk and crisis communication.

As evidenced in the papers published in these proceedings, BledCom 2021 attracted papers on a range of topics from various parts of the world. We managed to develop a program that facilitated live presentations and discussions spread over both days of the conference – an improvement over BledCom 2020. We are pleased to bring this conference proceedings consisting of papers presented at BledCom 2021 and hope they will be useful to you and your research associates.

Thank you! Lep pozdrav! Namaste!
Dejan Verčič **University of Ljubljana and Herman & partners (Slovenia)**

Dejan Verčič is Professor, Head of Department of Communication and Head of Centre for Marketing and Public Relations at the University of Ljubljana, and Partner in strategic consulting and communication company Herman & partners Ltd. Slovenia. He received his PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science, UK. A Fulbright scholar, recipient of the Pathfinder Award, the highest academic honour bestowed by the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) in New York, and named a Distinguished Public Relations Scholar by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA). In 1991 he was the founding director of Slovenian national news agency (STA). Organizing the annual International Public Relations Research Symposium – BledCom since 1994.

Ana Tkalac Verčič **University of Zagreb (Croatia)**

Ana Tkalac Verčič, Ph.D., is a Full Professor of Marketing communications and Public Relations at the Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia. She is a former Fulbright scholar and a recipient of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations diploma. Ana Tkalac Verčič has authored, co-authored and edited numerous books including Public Relations Metrics: Research and Evaluation (with B. van Ruler and D. Verčič) and is the author of the first Croatian public relations textbook. She has published more than 100 papers in various academic journals and serves in various editorial boards such as International Journal of Strategic Communication, Journal of Public Relations Research and Public Relations Review. Throughout her career professor Tkalac Verčič has received numerous awards, most recently, GrandPRx, the award for the development of public relations as a profession. She is a former president of the Croatian Public Relations Association.

Krishnamurthy Sriramesh **University of Colorado (USA)**

Krishnamurthy Sriramesh, is Professor of Public Relations at the University of Colorado, USA. He is recognized for his scholarship on topics such as global public relations, culture and public relations, corporate social responsibility, and public relations for development. Over 30 years he has advocated the need to reduce ethnocentrism in the public relations body of knowledge and practice in 8 books, over 110 articles and book chapters, and over 120 conference presentations around the world. His rich teaching experience includes teaching at 10 universities on four continents while also delivering seminars/talks in over 40 countries. He has won several awards for teaching and research at different universities including the 2004 Pathfinder Award from the Institute for Public Relations (USA) for “original scholarly research contributing to the public relations body of knowledge” and the PRIDE Award from the National Communication Association (USA).
Adi, Ana  *Quadriga University of Applied Sciences (Germany)*  •  She ([www.anaadi.net](http://www.anaadi.net)) is a Professor of Public Relations and Corporate Communications at Quadriga University of Applied Sciences in Berlin, Chair of the Digital Communication Awards, and part of the core research team of the Asia-Pacific Communication Monitor. She is also part of the organising committee of MediAsia. She is the editor of the upcoming *Protest Public Relations: Communicating dissent and activism* (Taylor & Francis) and the co-editor of *#rezist – Romania’s 2017 anti-corruption protests: causes, development and implications* ([www.romanianprotests.info](http://www.romanianprotests.info) with Darren G. Lilleker) and *Corporate Social Responsibility in the Digital Age* (2015, Emerald with Georgiana G. Grigore and Alin Stancu). Originally from Romania, Dr. Adi obtained her PhD from the University of the West of Scotland. Prior to her studies in the UK, Dr. Adi has graduated from institutions in Romania and the United States, the latter as a Fulbright Scholar. Her research, teaching and consultancy focus on issues related to CSR and PR, looking in particular at storytelling and measurement.

Akçay, Ebru  *Ondokuz Mayıs University (Turkey)*  •  She is a research assistant in the Department of Public Relations and Publicity at Ondokuz Mayıs University, Turkey. In 2013, she graduated from the Department of American Culture and Literature at Hacettepe University. She received her master’s degree in Public Relations and Publicity from Ankara University in 2015. In 2020, she received her PhD degree in Public Relations and Publicity from Ankara University.

Almahraj, Yazeed  *Imam Mohammad ibn Saud Islamic University (Saudi Arabia)*  •  Dr Yazeed Almahraj is a Head of Public Relations department and a Public Relations Assistant Professor at Imam University in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia). In December 2014 he was a Guest Lecturer for Public Relations at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh (UK). He received his PhD in Public Relations at Queen Margaret University (UK).

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Ašanin Gole, Pedja  *Doba (Slovenia)*  •  Pedja Ašanin Gole is a Senior Lecturer of public relations at DOBA Business School Maribor, and Guest Lecturer at Institute of Communication Studies Skopje. He is an experienced professional in public relations practice in public sector with more than 25 years of experience. Among other things, he was the Director of Communication at the largest Slovene investment infrastructure project—accelerated motorway construction. He is a past president of Public Relations Society of Slovenia and IABC Slovenia, member of the EUPRERA and an honorary member of the Serbian Public Relations Association. His research interests include new institutional approach in public relations.
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Barlik, Jacek  
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- He is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Journalism, Information and Book Studies, the University of Warsaw, Poland (full-time since 2014, previously straddled business career and part-time teaching). He is also a seasoned public relations practitioner, with vast experience as an advisor to major Polish and international corporations, public institutions and NGOs. He has authored articles, chapters and a book on public relations, communication strategies, awareness campaigns, crisis communication, social media, PR theory, sales and persuasion (in Polish and English), and was a Fulbright scholar at the University of Maryland, College Park (USA).

Barnoy, Aviv  
**University of Haifa (Israel)**  
- Aviv Barnoy studies the spread of news through journalism and social media. He brings together social communication theories, and epistemic philosophy, to explore how misinformation disseminates throughout society. Barnoy employs a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods including survey-experiments, reconstructions case-studies, big data analysis etc. In his current study, under a joint affiliation of Zefat Academic College and The University of Haifa, he explores normative measures to reduce the spread of “epistemically toxic content” online. Based on his professional experience before joining academia, Barnoy also teaches courses in PR, crises management and social marketing and more.

Berger, Bruce K.  
**University of Alabama (USA)**  
- Bruce K. Berger, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus, Advertising & Public Relations, University of Alabama (UA), and founding director of the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations. Berger has received many teaching and research awards, including PRSA’s Educator of the Year Award (2006) and IPR’s Pathfinder Award (2012). He’s authored or edited five books and produced more than 120 scholarly and professional articles. Previously Berger was a PR practitioner for 20 years and worked on projects in more than 30 countries. He was the chief communication officer at Whirlpool Corporation, and prior to that he was director
of worldwide human health PR programs at The Upjohn Company (1975-1989).

**Bernardino, Paula** *Credibility Institute (Italy) •* Strategic Communication Management Professional (SCMP) with more than 15 years of experience working for large global corporations and not-for-profit organizations, Paula Bernardino is now a strategic consultant in communications and corporate social responsibility while also guest speaking at conferences and panels on sustainability, corporate social responsibility and strategic communications. She also collaborates with the Credibility Institute in Canada as their CSR Expert - Senior Strategist and Associate Research. She is also a course lecturer at McGill University in the Public Relations program and an instructor in the Professional Development Institute at the University of Ottawa. Her study “Engaging Employees through Corporate Social Responsibility Programs” won the “Best Paper – Practitioner” award at 2020 CCI Milan Conference on Corporate Communication on September 17, 2020.

**Bielenia, Małgorzata** *University of Gdańsk (Poland) •* Małgorzata Bielenia is a graduate from the Gdansk University of Technology. She completed studies in the field of Environmental Protection and Management at the Gdansk University of Technology. Moreover, she is also an MA in Economics since she finished the second studies at the Faculty of Management and Economics of Gdansk University of Technology in the field of Management, majoring in Small Business Economics and Management. What is more, she is also an MA in Law. In her diploma thesis in this field she discussed the problem of abuse of a dominant position by an entrepreneur. Being a PhD student she received a grant from the National Science Center. She finished doctoral studies at the Faculty of Management and Economics of Gdansk University of Technology where she received a PhD in economics. Currently she works at University of Gdansk, Division of Maritime Economy Department of Maritime Transport and Seaborn Trade. Her scientific interests include maritime industry, entrepreneurship, leadership, innovation, globalization, transformation, economic crisis, social and cultural issues in organizations.

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2021 PAPER ABSTRACTS
Defining Novels as Public Relations Tools: An Analysis of Ahmet Mithat Efendi’s Felâtun Bey ile Rakım Efendi

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Introduction and literature review

Apart from its being managerial practice, public relations has always been an ideological practice through which a specific worldview is indoctrinated and public opinion is shaped. Extant literature of public relations claims that public relations uses tools of mass communication such as television, newspaper, and radio to disseminate a specific worldview. However, the list does not include novel which is one of the oldest communication tools. In other words, public relations literature has been blind to see that novels are used as public relations tools to propagate political, cultural and religious ideas. In the same vein, in Turkey, public relations literature does not regard novels as public relations tools and the beginning of public relations practice is said to date back to the 1960s when public sector used public relations in a planned and professional way. However, there are also studies challenging the hegemonic historiography of public relations in Turkey claiming that public relations in Turkey dated back to the Ottoman Empire. Although these studies set forth that in Tanzimat Era (westernization era of the Ottoman Empire) newspapers were used to disseminate Tanzimat ideology, those studies do not consider Tanzimat novels as public relations tools, per se.

The Purpose of the study

In this framework, this study aims to conceptualize Tanzimat novels, through which Tanzimat writers and intellectuals convey their ideas about westernization and disseminate the ideology of the Tanzimat Era, as public relations tools. In line with the aim of the study, the study also seeks to conceptualize public relations as an ideological practice. In this respect, the research questions of the study are as follows:

RQ1: Can novel be regarded as one of the communication tools public relations use?

RQ2: Can Tanzimat novels be described as public relations tool for Tanzimat Era?

RQ3: If so, how do the novels serve such a function?

Methodology

In order to achieve that aim, the study analyzes Ahmet Mithat Efendi’s novel titled Felâtun Bey ile Rakım Efendi (1875). Written during the Tanzimat Era, Felâtun Bey ile Rakım Efendi is one of the Tanzimat novels whose characters were created to present the writer’s worldview. The novel is analyzed through textual analysis. Textual analysis is chosen as a research methodology because of its potential to reveal the text’s main themes and characteristics.
Results and conclusions

The study concludes that *Felâtun Bey ile Rakım Efendi* can be positioned as a public relations tool used in the Tanzimat Era because the writer not only publicizes the ideology of the Tanzimat Era through the novel but also he disseminates his views about how the public should become westernized through the characters. Although the scope of the study is limited to only one Tanzimat novel, *Felâtun Bey ile Rakım Efendi*, the results can be applied to other Tanzimat novels whose aims were to promote the writer’s ideology about westernation of the Ottoman Empire. In this respect, such position can offer an insight into future studies which include the practices ignored by corporate-centric views of public relations.

**Keywords:** public relations, public relations history, ideology, Tanzimat Era, Tanzimat novels
Managing internal communication during the COVID -19 epidemic: a study on private organisations in Saudi Arabia

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Introduction and purpose of the study

The Covid19 pandemic has caused economic and social disruptions and has forced companies and people across the world to rely on technology in order to communicate. This has happened due to the fact that companies have had to introduce new ways of working such as remote working. This change in communication has made companies rethink their internal communication strategies as communication has become vital not only in transmitting information, but also in maintaining an efficient work environment by keeping employees updated and connected within the business. This study investigates how private organisations in Saudi Arabia have communicated internally with their publics during the COVID 19 pandemic by examining the level of information transparency and effectiveness in communication.

Literature review

The research uses the internal communication theory framework and stakeholder approach developed by Jackson and Welch (2007) that was designed with the purpose of improving the internal communication within organisations by focusing on employee engagement and examining the receiver’s point of view rather than the sender of the information. The goal of an internal communication strategy is to develop a sense of community and loyalty within the organisation while making employees aware of their organisations’ decisions to their work environment.

In order to maintain an efficient internal communication, there is a need for transparency in communication. Research on transparency reveals that clear organisational transparency must contain positive and negative information that needs to be accurate, complete and relevant to decisions that organisations have made (Men, 2014, Stirton and Lodge, 2011). In addition, organisations have to be actively open for their employees to search and ask for information (Cotterrell, 2000, Rawlins, 2009), an act that will determine trust and credibility in the organisation. Studies show that overall transparent communication leads to a more active workforce, increased employee satisfaction and improved relationships between the organisation and its employees (Rawlins, 2009, Men and Stacks, 2014, Lee et al, 2018, Walden et al 2017).

Methodology

The study has used a quantitative methodological approach because this has been viewed as a suitable method of collecting data from a larger population and because quantitative research is considered a good foundation for producing generalizability. The data was collected from 111 respondents through an online survey from em-
employees working in different positions at several Saudi private companies. The questions were structured in two themes in order to find out if the public relations departments at Saudi private companies communicated in a transparent way and if the public relations departments at Saudi companies communicate effectively with their employees during the pandemic.

Results and conclusions

The results reveal that in terms of transparency in communication, the mean score is high which means the PR departments at Saudi private companies were transparent when communicating with the internal public. In regards to the effectiveness in communication, the results have revealed that the mean score is average which means that the PR departments did not succeed in communicating internally in an effective way probably due to a weak communication strategy or lack of professionalism.

Practical and social implications

The practical and social implications of the results are that by providing transparency, a high level of trust is established between the stakeholders, the general public and the organisation. This contributes to employee loyalty, higher levels of productivity, higher employee engagement, and a positive public image. However, a weak communication strategy might affect the organisation’s overall effectiveness and future productivity.

A limitation of this study is that it has only focused on employees of private companies and it has only investigated the receivers’ point of view. The study suggests that future research should also examine employees in governmental institutions and to also investigate the public relations ‘views on this subject.

Keywords: transparency, effectiveness, COVID-19, internal communication
The virus and its images - Metaphorical genealogy of the risk society

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Introduction and purpose of the study

The challenge of this study is to create a genealogy of images that represent the Covid-19 virus as a risk. From that goal, we ask. How can the possible relationships between the concept of risk and the studies of the imaginary provide an instrumental support for the growing field of risk communication?

Literature review

The notion of risk will be observed from authors like Ulrich Beck (2010), Anthony Giddens (1996) and Mary Douglas (1996), among others, and the studies of the imaginary, from the perspective of authors like Gilbert Durand (1997).

Methodology

In our study, we will take a tour of images made to represent the invisible. The images will be described and analyzed using metaphors identified in their content for the construction of truths. The virus is visible only with the help of mediating devices between the eye and the conscience. It is interesting to analyze here not only the image that the virus produces in the body, its terminal object, but also what it produces in the spaces for creating subject forms. Thinking of subjectivity as a historical construction, the methodology, from a theoretical point of view, refers us to the Foucaultian genealogical view that considers the senses as mutants and dependent on the power relations for their formation in the processes of collective construction of the subject’s forms. One of our hypotheses is that the image of the virus and the resounding speeches in the imagination optimize the visibility of the multiplicity of correlations of forces, solidarity, resistance, interests, intolerances, afflictions and weaknesses of each system. Power, that is, risk is everywhere, as Foucault (2001) says, and the virus and its images are the extremes of power relations that support discourses that also produce reactions contrary to the discourses themselves. The images analyzed are selections of significant visual metaphors for each stage of the pandemic and which in a way represent the spirit of the time of each moment lived broadcast on social networks or in the mass media from January 2020 until the moment of the announcement of the first vaccine in the end of the same year. We will look for images broadcast in the press, vehicles for scientific dissemination, governments and social networks (broadcast by a lay public) to reflect on the construction of perceptions.

Results and conclusions

From them, we will make descriptions, interpretations and inferences of the images to produce a kind of tension with the proposed theory and also with matrix narratives from the past that we can find in the representations of virus images that still concern and challenge communities such as HIV, Sars, H1N1 and Ebola.
Practical and social implications

Our hypothesis is that the power relations that influenced the production of images can be described from the study of these moments of risk perception. In this process, we will verify how it is possible to analyze the relationship between the imaginary and the risk to increase strategies, health prevention policies, practices and providing elements to think theories, methods and specific techniques for the research in risk communication.

Keywords: Imaginary, risk, subjectivity, visibility, health

References:


The Communicative Constitution of Organization and Internal Communication in the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Introduction and purpose

The aim of this paper is to analyze and explain internal communication in pandemic times, based on the theory of the communicative constitution of organization (CCO). We haven’t had a pandemic like the coronavirus in over a century - ever since the Spanish flu, and therefore no experience of internal communication in such times. During the pandemic physical distance, many organizations were forced to organize remote work, others were forced to send some employees “on hold”, and still others, otherwise rare, tried to reorganize work differently, adapt production and employment to the situation. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the communicative constitution of organizations, especially in terms of internal communication with employees and how organizations connect employees between different forms of “remote work” even in the conditions of this pandemic physical distance.

Literature review

Historically, the worst crises have been earthquakes and infectious disease pandemics. The 1918–1919 influenza, or Spanish flu, pandemic is estimated to have infected 500 million people worldwide and may have resulted in more than 20 million deaths (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, str. 2). Other pandemics, such as HIV / AIDS, SARS, or even N1H1, did not have the dispersion caused by the coronavirus in early 2020 virtually worldwide. In order to slow down the spread of the coronavirus, the governments of virtually all countries have taken various more or less severe measures to protect the population in order to reduce the physical social distance between people. Such government measures meant, among other things, the cessation of public life, the cessation of production and the provision of services.

The literature in the field of public relations is rich in examples, advice and theories of crisis communication of organizations, but in the vast majority, if not all researched organizations, the organizations were either the cause of the crisis or the victim of a (more or less) direct attack, mostly individually. The coronavirus crisis, however, is not one that would “attack” individual organizations, nor did individual organizations cause this pandemic crisis. Thus, the coronavirus pandemic has caused a whole new situation in virtually all organizations around the world: how should organizations that exist only through and through communication respond to it?
People use social interaction to understand the things we experience and by communicating as a fundamental tool of social interaction we give meaning to things and the world around us. For this reason alone, the term “social distance” is by no means appropriate. The greatest punishment for man as a social being is namely social (and communication) isolation. Communication, as a fundamental expression of social interaction, is the way in which we establish and maintain the existence of the organization itself, because people organize themselves through communication and only through communication do we act collectively. Organizations also make up the processes of interaction between its members, and communication establishes, maintains, develops and, unfortunately, also buries organizations. Namely, organizations are not just static objects, but fluid communication activities, they are a ‘social fact’ that is actively and constantly constituted through communication processes. Communication thus constitutes organizations thus keeping organizations in a constant, endless process of interactions. Without communication there are no organizations, they cannot exist (cf. Heath idr., 2018; Putnam & Nicotera, 2010; Sandhu, 2017; Schoeneborn idr., 2018; Wenzel & Will, 2019)

Internal communication is a systematic way of influencing the behavior, knowledge and attitudes of employees, and its basic purpose is to give instructions for work and obtain feedback on the course of work (cf. Karanges idr., 2015; Šinčić Corić idr., 2020; Thornton, 2019; Tkalac Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020)

**Methodology**

This article will present a qualitative research conducted within the focus group of internal communicators of twelve large companies from four countries - Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Turkey. These organizations have a total of more than 50,000 employees, all operate regionally or as a part of an international network. As part of the focus group, semi-structured interviews were conducted, with twelve respondents answering each question in turn.

**Results and conclusions**

In general, respondents agreed with the findings of research by Edelman (Edelman, 2020a, 2020b) and the Institute of Public Relations (Institute for Public Relations & Peppercom, 2020a, 2020b) regarding internal communication during a coronavirus pandemic. Of course, there are differences in the use of communication channels and communication tools, depending on whether it is a production or service organization and whether their employees continued to work on the premises of organizations (salespeople, airport staff, etc.), or worked “from home” or they were “on hold”.

**Practical and social implications**

Internal communicators and top managers met for the first time in more than a hundred years with a pandemic that forced people into physical distance. Most used crisis communication approaches and good internal communication practices. That is why examples of good practice collected within the focus group of twelve organizations are welcome to understand the current coronavirus pandemic situation.

**Research limitations/implications**

The survey was conducted on the model of twelve organizations from four countries with a total of more than 50,000 employees, their examples of good practice are welcome, but the results of this survey cannot be generalized to the entire population.

**Keywords:** CCO, internal communication, pandemic, crisis communication
References


Online comments versus news media framing of a crisis: The case of the “Corona Cruise Ship”

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Introduction, purpose and literature review

Framing theory holds that the media report on a particular topic through frames of reference, shaping public issues for the audience and influencing the way they understand the topic covered and formulate their opinions about it (Entman, 1993). News frames shape audience reactions to news messages through online comments, sometimes resulting in alternative framing or counter-framing of the topic discussed (Liu & McLeod, 2019). Framing a topic is especially important in times of crisis when the parties involved in the crisis use crisis communication to shape “dialogue between the organization and its public prior to, during and after the negative occurrence” (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 2). The present study explores how Israeli individuals used online comments during the “Corona Cruise Ship” crisis to counteract the dominant media framing of the crisis, influence public opinion and the government’s actions.

In February 2020, The Diamond Princess, a cruise ship was isolated by the Japanese authorities in a Japanese harbor, after finding that several passengers were infected with the COVID-19 disease. It was soon discovered that fifteen Israelis were also on the ship, initiating a daily Israeli media update of their experiences on the isolated ship, later known as “The Corona Cruise Ship”. During the coverage, contradictory voices among the Israeli public arose and thus began an online media controversy regarding the story’s framing between two opposing groups. On the one hand, the passengers’ families advocated the return home of their relatives and for the Israeli government to take responsibility. On the other hand, various Israeli individuals urged the Israeli government to leave the passengers aboard the ship and avoid “importing” the virus into Israel. This study explores how Israeli individuals used online comments to news articles to suggest an alternative frame of the “Corona Cruise Ship” crisis.

Method

The study was conducted using two qualitative content analyses. The first content analysis included all (N=47) the news articles published regarding the “Corona Cruise Ship” on the two most popular Israeli news sites: The News 12 Company Website (N = 24) and the YNET News website (N = 23). All articles were collected from the first day of coverage until its completion upon the return of passengers to Israel (5 Feb.2020 - 5.March 2020). The second qualitative content analysis included 342 randomly sampled, individual comments from the comments section of the news articles published in the News12 Company Website (n=112), and Ynet News (N=230). Both articles and the comments were analyzed qualitatively using a the-
matic inductive analysis, exploring main themes, subjects, expressions, and characters (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings and conclusions

Online news articles embraced the families’ perspective, framing the crisis as a “life-or-death” situation that calls for immediate action by the Israeli government to return the passengers back home. The news articles described the daily life of the Israeli passengers aboard the cruise ship and their difficulties during isolation, emphasizing their fear of COVID-19 contagion. Some of the news articles referred to the passengers as “besieged” and to the “Corona Cruise Ship” as a virus spreading “hatchery”.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that the dominant frame used by the passengers’ families and the Israeli media was “Social Solidarity” -- a fundamental Israeli ethos calling for ‘brotherhood’ and mutual support. Here the Israeli public was called upon to support the safe return of the passengers.

Alternative voices appeared on the comment section of the news article. These comments served as a “backchannel” to present other perspectives and frames. Interestingly, these individuals also used the Israeli ethos of “solidarity”, but instead of referring to Social Solidarity and advocating the passengers’ safe return, they referred to Health Solidarity, asking the passengers to stay on the ship and demonstrate their solidarity with the Israeli public by not “importing” the virus into Israel.

In other words, this frame turned “solidarity” upside down; instead of asking many to save the lives of a few, the few were asked to save the lives of many. Some comments referred to the passengers as “pleasure hunters” (Ynet News, February 5, 2020) arguing that “this is the price that hedonists have to pay for their pursuit of pleasure” (Ynet News, February 5, 2020). In addition, the violent discourse prevailing on social media and online comments in recent years (Sheleg, 2014) was also present with rough language and harsh accusations towards the passengers, their families and politicians.

To summarize, this case study demonstrates how individuals can use online comments in times of crisis as a ‘backchannel’ to reject mainstream media frames while suggesting alternative frames. That strategy directly addresses the public and decision makers with harsh language that cannot be used in the news-articles themselves.

Keywords: Solidarity; Comments; Framing theory

References


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Desperately seeking respect: public relations education during the pandemic crisis

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Introduction and purpose of the study

Public relations studies are still in high demand among young people who look for promising careers and decent salaries upon graduation. Since spring 2020, a vast majority of PR students in developed countries have shifted to online classes. Some PR scholars, consultants, and industry leaders have already expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the fully online PR studies (as opposed to in-person instruction), since now it has got even harder to show ethical and professional standards, set role models for aspiring PR specialists, and help them cope with reputational issues that PR profession has been experiencing since its inception.

On the other hand, PR students can now experience how communication is applied to curb the pandemic, influence behaviors, and educate about the vaccines. These factors should strengthen the PR industry’s reputation and convince students that it is still worthwhile to study PR.

Research questions

Therefore, it is worth asking how PR students are prepared to work in the PR industry, especially during the pandemic, and whether their careers are affected by the PR field’s public perception. Based on these assumptions, the following research questions can be posed:

RQ1 – How do PR students perceive the PR industry, and what do they expect from their careers when beginning their education?

RQ2 – Are the PR industry’s reputational problems addressed in the PR schools’ curricula at all (and how, if yes)?

RQ3 – What are the specific challenges that PR students and education face during the pandemic, mostly related to the online instruction methods?

Literature review

The PR function’s recent visibility has not invalidated many critical opinions concerning the industry and its often-questionable practices. Staying in the limelight during the pandemic offers the PR industry an opportunity to show its key role in modern societies and PR contribution to open, democratic, and factual debates and to the promotion of responsible, empathetic, and healthy behaviors.

This situation makes it easier for scholars, practitioners, and professional associations to present the PR function’s positive input to cope with the pandemic and bridge the gaps between perceptions of the industry among the general public, opinion leaders, and students. They especially deserve the solid curricula and commitment
from their teachers and instructors, whom they now meet online, and the industry's strong support to get ready for their careers.

It requires an ongoing dialogue among the industry, practitioners, and educators to develop a PR curriculum relevant to clients' contemporary challenges and needs, also in times of the pandemic. Many academic and professional experts have repeatedly called for PR studies' updated programs in scholarly literature and industry reports. Their recommendations addressed many aspects of PR education, including a list of courses, a required mix of theory and practice, teachers' skills and competencies, and organizational, technological, social, or international issues related to communication.

However, they do not show how PR students should prepare for their prospective occupation, especially during the pandemic. Therefore, PR students' opinions on their future careers need to be examined further and juxtaposed with the previous research on the subject.

Methodology

To better understand how PR students perceive their field and foresee their career prospects during the pandemic, we plan to conduct an online survey among undergraduate and graduate students. Respondents will be recruited by their instructors at several universities teaching PR.

The questionnaire will be internet-based, self-administered, and possibly short. Before the quantitative research, we will conduct interviews with PR students and educators to determine specific reputational industry issues to be measured, especially during the COVID-19 crisis.

Results and conclusions

The research will determine how PR students perceive their future occupation and their level of preparedness to work in the field, especially by the instruction received mostly online during the pandemic. It will also show whether PR schools and industry have made sufficient effort to teach effectively using online methods.

Practical and social implications

The research will shed light on how to prepare PR students (mostly online) for their careers, explain PR roles to different publics, clear misconceptions about the PR industry, and show the PR contribution to informing and educating the publics during the pandemic.

Keywords: crisis, pandemic, PR education, PR students, reputation, trust in PR

Literature


An Island of Reliability in a Sea of Misinformation? Understanding PR-journalists relations in times of epistemic crisis.

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**Introduction and purpose of the study**

With technologies making sources more accessible than ever before, Journalists’ prime concern is no longer obtaining data, rather sorting information out – potentially undermining the traditional role of information subsidies. The purpose of this paper is to explore the unique epistemic characteristics of journalists-PR relations, and test whether they can explain the relationship’s paradoxical nature in our current age. Four specific objectives were set: to provide up-to-date empirical evidence that will either support or disprove previous studies’ findings about the paradoxical relation (journalists’ heavy reliance on PR, who are evaluated by them as non-credible); to juxtapose journalists’ interactions with PR and non-PR sources, exploring the epistemic characteristics of these interactions; To test which factors can predict reliance on PR; and to explore journalists’ own explanations for their decisions regarding reliance on PR.

**Literature review**

Amongst the numerous studies investigating the relationship between Public Relation and journalists, none seemed to have focused the epistemic nature of their interactions, although as knowledge professionals one of journalists’ prime objectives is establishing knowledge about the stories they report. Epistemic challenges started mounting with the introduction of new technologies, which allow easier forgeries and digital manipulations and scholars’ concerns regarding the quality of journalists’ knowledge recently peaked with the spread of Fake-news and post-truth politics, accumulating to an “epistemic crisis”.

At the same time a traditional challenge that journalists used to face, obtaining data, seemed to almost dissipate in the age of information overload. Instead, they struggle to sort the reliable, credible newsworthy information from the rest. Information subsidies may no longer explain by themselves the paradoxical relations between journalists and PR, manifested in journalists’ willingness to rely on PR, though they evaluate them as inferior, non-credible source.

**Methodology**

To overcome popular methods’ shortcomings this study relies on a mix of quantitative and qualitative reconstructions, a method uniquely designed to study newsmaking and sourcing. The study includes interviews with a represen-
tative sample of news reporters (N=70) from national news organizations, who were asked to recreate the newsmaking process behind specific sample of items they published in the days preceding the interviews (N=480) – accounting for all their sources – PR and non-PR (N=1,147). The second stage included qualitative follow-up interviews: 25 of the interviewees that underwent the quantitative reconstructions were chosen to reconstruct another 50 items, this time with open-end questionnaire.

Since this is not an exploratory study, the quantitative analysis takes the lead, with comparable data that can support or refute findings from previous studies. Correlations between reliance on PR and different factors were tested with Pearson’s 2-tailed analysis, and logistical regressions model were built, including all the factors that the previous analysis found significant.

Results and conclusions

Findings show that: (1) journalists continue to rely very often on PR sources, which they evaluate as less credible than other sources – confirming that the PR paradox remains; (2) correlations show that messages delivered from PR sources are communicated in reliable and accountable manner, more than from non-PR sources – so journalists can rely on them with very little risk of publishing false information; and (3) a binary regression models demonstrates that it is the characteristic of the interactions with source, and not the type of story, that predicts reliance on PR.

Finding shed light on the PR paradox, suggesting the relationship is based on reliability rather than trust. Rather than deciding whether information is indeed true, journalists result to examining whether they can defend their decision to rely on it. These findings contextualize the common claim that trustworthiness a prime predictor of source selection, and calls to questions whether trust is the correct term to use, and not reliability. It reopens a normative debate about the implication of reliance on PR, as the paper shows that such reliance reduces the chances of false publications, but does not defend journalists from misleading messages, and can potentially strengthen elite sources’ dominance, according to epistemic injustice theory.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The study main shortcoming is that it relies on self-testimonies. Reconstructions do reduce self-reporting biases dramatically, yet they are not fully neutralized. This is especially true when we consider that reliance on PR is often perceived as shameful. Future studies could validate reporters’ accounts with either a content analysis of the published items, or interviews with professionals.

Practical and social implications

Rather than suggesting each side use these findings to better their position in the power struggle between journalists and PR, we encourage a different symbiotic path. A dialogue between the professionals, in which they openly discuss their epistemic challenges and needs on the one hand, and tools of the other, could eventually lead to a more justifiably trusting relations.

Keywords: Journalism; epistemology; mix methods
Enriching Self-Reflection in Public Relations Education to deal with Pandemic Challenges

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Introduction and purpose of the study
Numerous studies have documented the benefits and positive power of self-reflection (SR) for professional and leadership development. Drawing from interviews with PR leaders and teachers and a review of some online educational resources, this paper argues for the need to enrich SR among PR teachers and students as a way to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic challenges.

By focusing on the primary pipeline for the profession (PR students and teachers), this paper argues for the need to enrich SR among them to better deal with the pandemic challenges, among others. SR is a primary way we examine ourselves and how others see us to increase self-awareness. Greek philosophers believed self-knowledge was the highest form of knowledge, and John Dewey, American thinker and educational reformer, claimed SR was the only form of thinking that leads to learning. Studies in communication, psychology and education confirm these and other benefits of SR, e.g., richer relationships and emotional IQ, enhanced leadership skills, and more engaged work teams. Overall, both teachers and students will benefit from developing and applying reflective skills to cope with pandemic challenges. Yet, as Mules (2018) found, SR is largely absent in PR research, textbooks, and the classroom. This paper addresses that deficiency and identifies specific approaches and exercises to advance the development of SR in the classroom.

Methodology, Results and Conclusions
This paper draws heavily from the researchers’ SR study previously presented at a conference and recently published in a leading PR journal. That study explored SR in depth in interviews with 30 PR leaders in two countries to learn about the role, process, practice, and benefits in the workplace. It included a brief section regarding approaches that might be used to enrich SR in education, specifically during the pandemic.

With this research foundation, and new insights gained through informal conversations with PR teachers and a review of online educational resources, the researchers developed a model consisting of 10 building blocks and more than 50 practical exercises to enrich student and teacher SR. For example, take 10 minutes at the end of a/an (online) class to have students evaluate their performance in class, or their biggest learning. Then, prepare a tweet to describe it.

The researchers suggest building SR moments into most sessions, rather than a single class topic. This paper is rich in practical suggestions and tactics grounded in published research and serious researcher reflection.
Practical and social implications

During the current pandemic, the importance of SR multiplies. This paper offers a model that serves as practical guidance to develop and/or enrich self-reflection. PR students and teachers can mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning through self-reflection. For example, instructors can reflect on the ways to prioritize students’ mental and emotional health and help the students do same. Teachers can also encourage learners to reflect on changes in class modalities (moving online partially or completely) and study routines such as maintaining motivation, dealing with distractions, and replacing normal activities like face-to-face participation in student organizations and intramural sports.

Numerous studies have documented the benefits and positive power of SR. Building this capability in students, our future professionals and leaders, will enrich the profession and infuse it with power, especially during these trying times. The sooner one begins meaningful SR, the better for them and their organizations.

Keywords: Self-reflection, the COVID-19 pandemic, public relations

References

Engaging Employees through Corporate Social Responsibility Programs: Aligning Corporate Social Responsibility and Employee Engagement

Bernardino, Paula, Credibility Institute (Canada)

Introduction

The message is clear: people want to work for organizations where they feel they are engaged and learning. Recently, the organization Benevity in Canada stated that “Today’s employees are expecting a greater sense of purpose in the workplace. In fact, 83% of Millennials say they would be more loyal to their employer when they feel they can make a difference on social and environmental issues at work,” (Benevity, 2018). Companies that engage in social and environmental stewardship also benefit from employees who are more aware and involved.

Purpose

There is a strong case for corporate sustainability and better employee engagement. Knowing this, communication teams need to keep it in mind when creating and implementing their communications plans for corporate social responsibility programs to ensure appealing to employees with the right messages while also showing alignment to the business.

Research Problem and Questions

Studies have showed that corporate social responsibility has become an essential tool in captivating, recruiting and retaining top talent. “Employees and candidates want to work for a company that they feel is giving back to society. In fact, they expect their employer to not only be socially responsible, but to also provide them with tools to engage with the causes they care about,” (Troup & Simon, 2018). This research study aimed to explore if this was true with employees in Canada and to answer the following three questions:

(1) Why should Corporate Social Responsibility programs take into account and include an employee engagement component?

(2) What are some examples of good Corporate Social Responsibility programs that include employee engagement?

(3) What are some of the measures used to determine Corporate Social Responsibility programs are engaging employees?

Literature Review

Why engage employees through corporate social responsibility?

According to an article from Dr. Hua Jiang, associate professor in S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and published by the Institute for Public Relations (2020), "employee engagement through CSR
contributes to employees’ perception of their organizations’ reputation of ‘doing good,’” (Ali, Rehman, Ali, Yousaf, & Zia, 2010). Furthermore, “employees can voluntarily share CSR information on social media, which will eventually help enhance their employer’s reputation in the marketplace,” (Kim & Rhee, 2011).

Methodology

An online survey was conducted between July 2 and July 24, 2020. Anyone in Canada working for a company, either in the private, public or non-profit sectors, and whether part time or full time, was asked to complete the short 10-question 5-minute survey on the platform Survey Monkey. The investigator approached friends and acquaintances through social media to complete the online survey and encouraged them to share it with their friends and acquaintances creating a snowball sampling. A recruitment message was also posted on the investigator’s following social media accounts: Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. A total of 100 responses were collected.

Results

Online survey

Question 4, *Think back to when you applied to your current position; did you search the organization’s corporate social responsibility strategy?* showed 2/3 of respondents answered yes. Respondents offered many interesting comments to justify their answer. “It was important to me to align myself with an organization that had strong values and a history of CSR,” indicated one respondent.

It is interesting to note the discrepancy for 30% of respondents at their current organization for more than 9 years which indicated not having thought about searching for information about CSR. Years ago, CSR was not part of an applicant’s mindset.

Conclusions

3 key learning points

1) Why should corporate responsibility programs take into account and include an employee engagement component?

- Increased motivation
- Creation of ambassadors/champions internally & externally
- Opportunity to develop skills (i.e. coordination, leadership) and/or educate (i.e. environmental issues)

2) Examples of good corporate social responsibility programs that include employee engagement:

- Let employees choose causes to support.
- Make it easy by giving them time to get involved (i.e. volunteer days).
- Get leaders buy in (i.e. turning CSR actions into team building activities).
- Partner with non-profits for excitement and credibility.

3) Measures to determine Corporate Social Responsibility programs are engaging employees:

- Participation rate
- Increased participation rate
- Repeated participation
- Post event comments and testimonials

Limitations

The generalization of this study is also limited as it involved only 100 respondents and no responses from Atlantic Canada.
Further Research

Repeat the online survey but with a larger sample size and target equally representation from every geographical region.

Another angle to consider is to survey employees at companies seen as leaders in CSR programs and initiatives and compare with companies not benefitting from such visibility, awareness and/or opinion.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility, CSR, employee engagement, corporate reputation, purpose
Responsible CSR communications: Avoid “washing” your Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports and messages

Bernardino, Paula, Credibility Institute (Canada)

Introduction
With the rise of Corporate Social Reporting (CSR) reporting, questions have emerged regarding its true utility; CSR reports may more closely resemble marketing materials than financial statements as much of the data companies provide can be cherry picked. For example in 2011, only 20% of S&P 500 companies published CSR reports vs 85% in 2017 and 90% in 2019 (Governance & Accountability Institute, Inc., 2020). These reports are also sometimes titled as corporate responsibility, citizenship, or ESG reports (Environmental, Social, Governance), adding to the existing confusion and lack of coherence.

Purpose
Why is this relevant for communicators? Because the responsibility of producing and promoting CSR reports very often falls under the responsibility of the corporate communications team.

Research Problem and Questions
1. What is “washing” the CSR space?
2. How can you be a responsible CSR communicator?
3. What are examples of best practices?

Literature Review

Opportunity for communication practitioners

Are communication professionals ready and equipped to communicate CSR and sustainability content in a responsible way? A recent article in the Canadian Institute of Mining (CIM) Magazine (Rolfe, February 2020) had an insightful title: “Has sustainability reporting become unsustainable?” “Environmental, social and corporate governance rating is a burgeoning industry, and not without its growing pains,” states the article. The pain point is all the different acronyms and standards involved in CSR and sustainability reporting: ESG, GRI principles, SASB, TCFD, SDGs... and these are not only related to the mining industry but to any industry and organization producing CSR or sustainability reports.

Methodology
To further the reflection on “what is responsi-
ble CSR communications” and if communication practitioners are grasping what it means, 15 in-depth 30-minute interviews with senior communication practitioners in Canada with at least 15 years of experience in the field were conducted between July 3 and 24 2020 via telephone or videoconference with Zoom.

Results

In-depth interviews

Answers to Question 6 When you communicate and promote your organization’s CSR and sustainability efforts, do you worry about “washing” any aspect and are you concerned of being accused of “greenwashing” or any other type of “washing”? How do you avoid it? demonstrated communication practitioners understand the meaning of “washing” CSR communications and clearly expressed how to avoid it. Answered included “be attentive to authenticity and justifiable messages. Show humility and be humble,” and “what is important is to be transparent instead of putting a marketing spin to it; not be afraid to mention the issues,” as well as “a balance between acknowledging current aspects vs sounding authentic,” and “use data that is accurate and comparable to previous years or other benchmarks”. Hence, they key answers to Question 6 were: facts, transparency and authenticity.

Participants were then asked Question 7 When thinking about your CSR and sustainability communications, what does a “responsible communication” mean to you? and again main answers heard were: authenticity, transparency and facts.

Overall, the responses demonstrate communication practitioners grasping the crucial role the communication function can play in delivering “responsible CSR communications” and how to do it, and understanding there are many different stakeholders interested by a company’s CSR and sustainability initiatives and programs.

Conclusions

Answers to the three research questions helped determine what is “responsible communications” and how communications practitioners can avoid the trap of “washing” their CSR reports and/or messages:

(RQ1) What is “washing” is the CSR space?

Interviews with senior communication practitioners helped identify how to avoid the trap if “washing” CSR reports and/or messages: facts, transparency and authenticity. Breaking it down, this means: use and include facts, be transparent by not only communicating the positive actions but also discussing risks and misses, and show authenticity by showing the alignment with the business mission and values.

(RQ2) How can you be a responsible CSR communicator?

Same as for RQ1: show authenticity, transparency and facts.

(RQ3) What are examples of best practices?

What makes good CSR communications for reports: show authenticity, discuss progression, demonstrate transparency, don’t omit relevant information and don’t lie.

What makes good CSR communications for messages: show alignment & coherence with the business mission, show transparency & humbleness and show authenticity with “walk the talk”.

Limitations

The generalization of this study is limited as it involved only 15 communication practitioners.
Further Research

Explore more from private sector, non-profit and education and healthcare to draw stronger patterns. And look separately at industries whose DNA is a social purpose and how it affects their mindset when thinking about their organization’s corporate social responsibility.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, CSR, greenwashing, authenticity, credibility
Entrepreneurial leadership in crisis situations. Communicative implications

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Introduction and purpose of the study

At the beginning of the work I will define the term entrepreneurial leadership in order to bring clarity to the investigated phenomena (Nahavandi, Malekzadeh, 1998). However, would like to stress that integration of entrepreneurship and leadership is not an easy task and requires from the owner of the enterprise a huge dose of cleverness especially in crisis situations (Bolton, Thompson, 2004). What is more, I will present the various issues of entrepreneurship such as trait approach, social-psychological approach and behavioral approach that enhance communication. As my research involves the leadership aspect, I will show also the most important approaches to leadership that relates to communicative implications such as: trait approach, behavior approach, contingency approaches, the continuum of leadership behavior, leadership alternatives, strategic leadership etc.

Literature review

In the literature different perspective to the study of leadership were presented Flippo (1980), Dawson, Garvin-Kester, Vollmuth and Waglund (2001), Luthaus, Adrien, Anderson and Carden (1999). There is no doubt that entrepreneurial leader in order to achieve firm’s objective needs to motivate virtual team members- achievement motivation theory was discussed by Winter (2004) and Koestner (2007). What is more, I will present the various issues of entrepreneurship such as trait approach, social-psychological approach and behavioral approach that enhance communication. As my research involves the leadership aspect, I will show also the most important approaches to leadership that relates to communicative implications such as: trait approach, behavior approach, contingency approaches, the continuum of leadership behavior, leadership alternatives, strategic leadership etc.

Methodology

The main aim of empirical part of my work is to show the researches related to the topic of entrepreneurial leadership in small and medium sized enterprise. In order to narrow the scope of the investigated phenomena, I have chosen one survey carried out on the regional scale and the second one conducted on the national level. Moreover, I have chosen the Asian region due to the fact that I wanted to stress the similarity with Polish enterprises and to prove that the small and medium sized enterprise in Taiwan can also benefit from introducing the strategic leadership into practice.

Results and conclusions

The entrepreneur is able to build successful organization thanks to leading by example (D.A.

The main research question was to indicate if entrepreneurial leadership positively influences firm’s growth, conducts successful business and achieves firm’s goal and performance. In relation to that I wanted to prove if presented variable measurements attributed to leadership influence achieving the success. Moreover, I wanted to identify the most influencing team leader’s competencies. My target group consisted of the owners of small and medium sized enterprises. The target respondents were involved in different sectors.

To sum up, according to my own research framework and results and results of three former studies I identified the most influencing leader’s competencies for crisis situation.

Practical and social implications
For the purpose of communicative implications and from a praxeological perspective, the functioning of an organization depends on the effective operation of the leader. Especially very important at the development phase of a firm are leading and controlling features (Lowden 1998, p. 7). Through my work, I would like to show that entrepreneurial leadership is of great importance in gaining competitive advantage, success and prosperity of organizations in globalized team management. I will begin my reflection on the issue of leadership by presenting the profile of the effective leader.

Keywords: entrepreneurial, leader, crisis, communication

References
Gossiping as a tool of functional and dysfunctional leadership: negative and positive sides of an organizational grapevine in crisis situations

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Introduction and purpose of the study

Taking the postmodern perspective into consideration, the companies of our times are not fixed entities since they exist in a fluid environment (Bauman, 2003) and their performance is shaped by media images, techno-images, finance-images and idea-images (Appadurai, 2005). Dynamics belongs to the key issues studied in management (Czakon, 2010). Moreover, since organizations are an important part of complex reality (Mruk, 2004) they must continuously react to changes, creating new behaviors and attitudes (Nogalski, 2008), being places of contradictions and paradoxes themselves (Pocztowski, 2007). The above-mentioned multidimensionality and diversity of stimuli the organizations are exposed to have both advantages and disadvantages. As far as the positive sides are concerned, the multifactoral aspect of modern entrepreneurship allows diversified workers and stakeholders to benefit from various resources, products and services that are available in the corporate reality. However, the multidimensional nature of modern organization makes it simultaneously more prone to potential difficulties and dangers. Taking the issue of stakeholders into account, an organization of our times is a theatre of interest conflicts (Ferrari, 2003), an entity often torn between contradictory rights and demands. As far as the diversity of internal and external factors is concerned, companies have to adapt to new and dynamic conditions on a daily basis.

Thus, the leader of the twenty-first century who performs in a changeable environment should pay attention simultaneously to hard issues, such as structure, system and technology, as well as to soft notions, such as people and culture (e.g., Kets de Vries, 2011b; Koźmiński, Jemielniak & Latusek-Jurczak, 2014). However, not always are both hard and soft elements treated in the proper way. Consequently, potential dysfunctional behaviors may concern both the misuse of structural, systemic or technological systems as well as the improper management of people and culture. However, it is difficult to highlight some sets of features representative of dysfunctional behaviors. The reasons for such a state are as follows. First of all, there are no strict criteria determining a pathological organization since the boundaries between abnormal and normal states are subjective (Gabriel, 2008). Secondly, the types of dysfunctional behaviors are varied, depending on remarkable individual and group features. Thirdly, there are diversified terms denoting this type of organizational behavior that differ in terms of semantic fields and cognitive impact. For example, apart from the term dysfunctional leadership, there are other names to
denote the negative side of leadership, such as destructive, exploitive, abusive, tyrannical, bulling or toxic leadership (Pelletier, 2010; Walton, 2008). Although they all focus on the darker side of managing organizations, the scope and types of unacceptable behaviors differ.

Literature review

Both gossip and rumors belong to the most popular channels of informal communication (Sias, 2009), to the oldest forms of human interactions (Livolsi and Volli, 2005).

Moreover, since an important part of communication, including the organizational one, is related to the diffusion of information among individuals, especially the data related to their reputation (Ferrari, 2003), attention will be concentrated on gossip.

Taking into account the definition of gossiping, gossip can be understood as “idle talk to disseminate information” (Coskun, Ok and Ozdenizci, 2012, p. 141), of a factual or fabricated type (Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997). Moreover, gossiping involves some verbal exchange about other people (Kimmel, 2004), with the ones being gossiped about not knowing actually how many individuals take part in gossiping (Grote and McGeeney, 1997). It should be stressed, however, that most definitions of gossip stress its negative aspect, defining gossip as “a particular kind of communicative activity that typically involves the sharing of unfortunate, savory, or unflattering information about the private affairs of others not present” (Robinson, 2007, p. 252).

In the latter part of this paper, this perspective is enriched with a discussion on the functional dimension of gossiping.

Moreover, attention is paid to the relation between crisis and gossip, stressing how the latter shapes communication and relation when difficult situations take place.

Methodology

As far as methodology is concerned, one way of looking at the darker side of leadership is by concentrating on either a personal or a group level. Starting from the individual dimension, personal destructiveness is related to all the negative actions that leaders do to themselves, such as reprimands, criminal records or bad reputations. Organizational destructiveness, on the other hand, is related to the situation in which leaders cause misfortune among their workers and stakeholders (Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser, 2007). As far as other organizational phenomena are concerned, organizational toxicity can be observed at different levels, taking into account toxic leaders, toxic managers, toxic culture and toxic organization (Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007). In other words, toxic leaders can be described as the ones who, by performing destructive actions and possessing dysfunctional personalities, exert a negative effect on their subordinates and the professional environment (Goldman, 2006; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Since people are not likely to admit that they gossip, the methodology mainly focuses on desktop studies. To exemplify the phenomenon, different examples of grapevine in crisis situations are presented.

Results and conclusions

The discussion on gossip in organizations has focused on the concepts of relations and communication. It has been shown that various factors underlying organizational relations and communications determine whether gossiping has a functional or dysfunctional character. Thus, such organizational facets as trust, attitude to different communication channels, type of information, information sharing, community cohesion and hierarchy issues determine relations and communication that consequently influence gossiping. The mentioned factors can be grouped into information—related factors (e.g. channel, type of information) and community-related factors
(e.g. trust, community characteristics, hierarchy notions) and they influence both relations and communication in organizations. It should be stated, however, that the relation between all the mentioned concepts is dynamic and the possibility of feedback appears. Thus, gossiping is not only shaped by the already mentioned organizational factors and the notions of relations and communication but its dysfunctional or functional character influences the notions that have shaped its character.

**Practical and social implications**

The paper highlights the role of gossip in organizations. It stresses how organizational grapevine functions in different types of social groupings and stresses how it shapes organizational communication and relation especially in crisis situations.

Offer the potential implications both for practice and society

Apart from the organizational dimension, the characteristic features of gossip are also important for the society as such. Such papers facilitate understanding about the way gossip determines communication and relation in different types of settings.

**Keywords:** leadership crisis gossip
Importance of closer collaboration between emergency risk and crisis communication professionals to prepare for the “next one”

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We all understand that the present COVID-19 pandemic demands for effective crisis management to decrease the spread of disease, reducing fatality rates. We need sustainable behavioural changes to mitigate the impact of the virus through three simple rules; good hand hygiene methods, physical distancing and wearing a face mask.

However, a phenomenon which came up parallel with this pandemic is that emergency risk communication and crisis communication did not happen collaboratively.

Crisis communication, which is activated by the private sector to handle a crisis in which they are an active player, did not show competency in emergency risk communication on a health topic with widespread public interest.

Emergency risk communication which is real time exchange of available information was rolled out by public authorities with a lack of coordination among themselves and new complex stakeholder environments.

To achieve a high success rate in curbing a pandemic, it is important that both emergency risk communicators and crisis communication professionals collaborate, learn from each other, and integrate best practices.

The social and cultural aspects of managing communication should be considered by the private sector too, showing a willingness to improvise crisis strategies, like reaching out to communities via their respected leaders. This step helps to pass the right message to a clearly defined audience with a high impact during a pandemic.

The lack of emergency risk communication and crisis communication specialists working together was, and is, a missed opportunity to deliver comprehensible strategies and tactics in safeguarding the multitude of audiences and stakeholders.

Aim: The aim of this study is to show how professionals from emergency risk communication and crisis communication management could collaborate in order to optimise the control of a pandemic situation. The research question studied is “How risk communication professionals and crisis communication professionals can reduce COVID-19 positive cases during the pandemic by optimising strategies while working in collaboration”.

Method: During desk research, I qualitatively analysed the content available globally from journals, web content and newspapers on how different communities have responded to the
pandemic based on emergency risk communication and crisis communication strategies.

The study - informed by on the ground experiences as an Emergency Risk Communication professional fighting this COVID-19 in West Africa and Asia and, as an ex-corporate crisis communications manager, shows how collaboration between emergency risk communication professionals and crisis communication professionals can increase the long-term effectiveness of communication during an emergency and crisis. Although the roles of these two professions vary, there is much similarity, and it is important to pool knowledge, experiences and methods together.

**Expected Results:** COVID-19 has shown how shortcomings in communication can lead to higher positive cases and even deaths. What I would expect to see from this study is how information dissemination can be made more effective during a pandemic when both risk communication specialists and crisis communication specialists work hand in hand. As there is a gap in current research on the professions of emergency risk and crisis communicators, I hope to organise a public platform to bring these two diverse yet similar professions together with the aim to share information, learn from each other and create sustainable collaboration and capacity building.

**Keywords:** Emergency Risk Communication, Crisis Communication, Similarities, Differences, Collaboration

**References**


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Crisis Response with Ethical Advantages: Flexibility, Adaptation, & Resilience

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Introduction/Purpose
The public relations function should perform an ethical role in organizations, and can provide a competitive advantage through ethical crisis management. Yet, very little research to date has framed the ethical role of crisis management or the moral responsibilities during crisis, especially in axiology, or academic terms based on theory and empirical research (e.g., Jin, Pang & Smith, 2018). The global pandemic offers an unprecedented look into how organizations responded to the crisis, how they managed employee relations and external stakeholder relationships, as well as the role ethics played in pandemic response.

Literature
What has been published is anecdotal or largely pragmatic rather than based on moral philosophy. This study seeks to offer a framework to fill a lacuna in the body of knowledge for guiding ethical crisis planning, response, management, and communication, even on a global level. An ethical framework is needed for crises because the moral nature of the commonly-discussed crisis response strategies resides in how they are implemented, and the duty and intention of their use, rather than in the implicit nature of the SCCT crisis response strategies themselves (e.g., Coombs, 2007).

Another lacuna in the literature exists in the failure to explore a priori theory in applying moral philosophy to crisis management. Much of crisis management is case study based and a posteriori, based on experience, rather than based on predictive problem solving (Coombs, 2020). Therefore, we apply deontological ethics for a sound a prioristic, analytic, moral-philosophical perspective; as an added benefit, this will offer a strong lexicon with which to understand the ethics of crises.

Our literature to support a conceptualization of ethics in crisis communication is based on public relations theory, situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), ethics and moral philosophy, attribution theory, excellence theory, research in public relations ethics, and deontological ethics.

Method/Rationale
Our research is based on two qualitative methods: virtual focus groups with public relations industry leaders who had the title of Chief Communication Officer (or equivalent) and were members of the Arthur W. Page Society (industry-leading, billion-US dollar-plus organizations generally understood as “Fortune® 1000” companies). One focus group has been conducted and others are planned. A second approach is to conduct a Delphi study with public relations industry leaders to ask them about the findings from the focus groups (flexibility, adaptation, and resilience) and hone in on ethical beliefs, crisis
strategies during the pandemic, and other issues related to enhancing ethical crisis response.

Results/Discussion/Conclusions

We discuss ways to enhance organizational effectiveness in crisis response through using ethical theory emphasizing moral approaches to flexibility, adaptation, and resilience in the face of crisis. Deontology and the SCCT are used in understanding crisis situations, the strain of a global pandemic and workplace changes, stakeholder relationship stresses, and the ethics of adaptive response. We make normative recommendations for ethical planning and response for future crises of a large-scale magnitude, and we offer suggestions for practical implementation.

Keywords: crisis; ethics; risk

References


Reversible or irreversible user engagement behavior changes during COVID-19 pandemic: a case study of a top restaurant brand in Taiwan

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**Introduction and purpose of the study**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people tend to spend more time on social media than normal time due to work from home and lockdown policy (Kaya, 2020). Given the situation, Donthu and Gustafsson (2020) argued user engagement behavior on social media would be changed. To verify these observations, this study aims to quantitatively examine user engagement behavior on social media platforms during the pandemic and track media usage change.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, Taiwan has maintained less than 1,000 positive cases in Year 2020 and no local cases from late April to Dec 2020. Hence, using Taiwan as an example to investigate the pre-, during, and post-pandemic impacts on user social media behavior change would be appropriate. The social media penetration rate in Taiwan is 88%, while Facebook is one of the major social media platforms used. A top premium restaurant chain brand in Taiwan was selected as the case study.

**Literature review**

Engagement behavior is composited of four categories (the number of views, likes, comments, and shares a post) with equal weight (Facebook, 2019); however, the amount of views and likes is usually larger than the number of shares and comments (He, Zha, & Li, 2013). Ángeles Oviedo-García (2014) indicated different engagement categories are supposed to have different efforts; it implies that the pandemic impact on the four categories is different. Considering the data limitation, the engagement category in this study focuses on posts and comments to quantify the user engagement behavior changes in the different stages of the pandemic.

**Methodology**

Web crawler was utilized. We reviewed all engagement categories of Facebook fan pages from the premium restaurant chain, including the posts and comments from Jan 1, 2019 to Dec 31, 2020, in order to observe the engagement variation before, during and post the pandemic. The engagement includes posts (numbers of...
likes, comments, and shares within a post) and comments (numbers of likes, replies within a comment, and the daily number of comments) respectively.

Border control (Feb 6, 2020) and no local positive Covid-19 case (April 13, 2020) are the two key dates to differentiate pre, during and post pandemic period. Wilcoxon rank-sum test was used to calculate the engagement changes between the Year 2019 and Year 2020. A total of 168 posts and 17,950 comments were collected.

**Results and Conclusion**

Before the pandemic period, the engagement level of posts and comments in the Year 2020 were similar to the Year 2019. During the pandemic period, the results indicated that the engagement to comments significantly declined, but notably increased after the pandemic. In the post pandemic period, the overall comment engagement (numbers of likes, replies within a comment, and the daily number of comments) went back to the similar status as the pre-pandemic period. As a result, we found that the engagement of comment is much more sensitive in terms of user behavior changes.

**Practical implications**

According to our finding, the engagement behavior changes mainly occurred from the Restaurant’s Facebook fan page, particular in the comment level. It shows “comment” plays an important role in social media conversation and sustains the engagement behavior. Hence, the Restaurants may consider creating posts (i.e. food delivery service, food tips, longer incentive, etc.) that can stimulate more comments during and after the pandemic periods. Another critical point is that the engagement behavior is reversible after the pandemic but the engagement level is not reached back to the pre-pandemic period.

Our study focused on the Facebook posts and comments and excluded other types of engagement, such as like and share, that can be explored in the future.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, user engagement behavior, Facebook

**References**


Relationship Cultivation, Social Capital, and Breaking Through Barriers: Exploring the Use of Social Media by Female Transnational Entrepreneurs in the Silicon Valley

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Introduction and Purpose of Study
This study explores how female transnational entrepreneurs (FTEs) use social media to cultivate relationships with their publics, build and strengthen social capital, and consequently break through barriers to grow their businesses. Drawing on interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks including relationship management in public relations, social capital in social psychology, and transnational entrepreneurship in business, this study proposes the following research questions: (1) Who are the key publics for self-employed FTEs? (2) How do self-employed FTEs use social media to cultivate relationships with their key publics? (2) What social media strategies do FTEs use to build and strengthen social capital? And (3) How does the use of social media help FTEs break through barriers? This study defined FTEs as female-identified transnational immigrant entrepreneurs whose public identities are associated with more than one country (Lee & Lee, 2020).

Literature Review
This study fills several prominent research gaps in the extant public relations and business management literature regarding startup and entrepreneurial communication. First, although public relations research in recent years have given more attention to the instrumental role of social media for startups and small-to-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), most focused on message-based strategies, rather than relationship-based public relations strategies (e.g., Chen et al., 2017). Second, while research on startup and entrepreneurship have been growing in public relations research, most focused on the high-tech and high-growth sectors and largely ignored self-employed entrepreneurship for SMEs. Given the large scale of SMEs and the limited resource they have, it is even more critical for them to develop effective public relations practices. Third, historically, female immigrant entrepreneurs possess neither networks nor resources and face challenges and barriers to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities (Wang, 2019). As such, they must find creative ways to integrate their multiple social and cultural identities in their entrepreneurship.
Methodology

We conducted 20 in-depth interviews with Korean FTEs in the San Francisco Bay Area and Silicon Valley in the United States, one of the most well-recognized entrepreneurship eco-systems in the world. The participants are SME owners and regard social media as the basis of a business model to create and deliver values for their businesses.

Results and Conclusion

Data from the in-depth interviews have revealed some major themes. First, FTEs identify their key publics based on the strengths of network ties they have with them (e.g., customers and prospects in the Korean community and Asian American immigrants in the region, other related businesses/vendors, investors). Second, FTEs largely use personal relationships, authentic communication, and networking strategies to cultivate their relationships with the key publics, and such strategies are also intertwined with their strategies to build and enhance social capital. Third, FTEs not only use social media to enhance bonding social capital with their primary publics such as customers and prospects via posting and direct communication, but also use them to create bridging social capital by engaging potential strategic partners via tagging and outreach. Importantly, our findings also revealed that FTEs’ unique, multi-dimensioned identity played a key role in influencing their social media use, which in turn lowered their barriers to entry and helped them overcome cultural and social biases.

Practical and Social Implications

Practically, by exploring the use of social media from the perspective of relationship-based public relations efforts, this study casts insights on the use of social media for FTEs and SMEs not only from a messaging perspective, but also relationship cultivation perspective through the lens of social capital and transnationalism. At the societal level, this study illuminates the roles of public relations and relationship cultivation not only as means to make organizations’ communication management more effective, but also as tools to empower a traditionally overlooked population in our field—self-employed FTEs who own small-to-medium sized businesses. Such unique context is especially important to the globalized society where businesses and communication activities are practiced transnationally.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial public relations, relationship cultivation, social capital, female transnational entrepreneurs, social media

References


Boris vs. Corbz #GetBrexitDone: An analysis of Labour and Conservative tweets on the 2019 General Election campaign

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Introduction and purpose of the study

Today’s hyperconnected societies with ubiquitous digital media have altered the political landscape so that campaigning encompasses the use of social media, which in turn contributes to how we view and share information about political ideologies.

This study explores the intersect of UK politics, democracy, and social media: specifically Twitter.

Literature Review

Politicians themselves have become like celebrities (Davis, 2010) therefore, their elevation to power through votes depends on their ability to promote a positive brand on social media, or perhaps damage the credibility of their opposition. The nature of social media has amplified the move of the focus from the political party to the politician as an individual, opening a wider arena for debate and personalised campaigning (Gunn and Skogerbo, 2013). Thus, a politician’s autonomous and dialogical use of social media may controvert the strategy of the political party, yet the need to communicate a personal – and perhaps approachable, or not least voteable – image as a politician pervades.

A goal of any campaign is to strengthen relationships with target publics. This is not possible if political public relations do not operate in a completely ethical and open environment; communication that does not appear organic or engaging will not yield results (Strömbäck and Kiousis, 2011). Reputation is critical as a strategic objective of a company (Cornelissen, 2014) and how a political candidate is presented can affect this.

Methodology

This paper analyses how the Conservatives and Labour Party used Twitter in the campaign period prior to the General Election of 2019. Using inductive methods to explore qualitative data and thematic and discourse analyses across a corpus of 4402 tweets and four accounts (@BorisJohnson, @JeremyCorbyn, @Conservatives, @UKLabour), it reviews the political brand and ideology embedded within lexis. It considers the political brand communicated by each party as well as the personal brand of leaders Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn and posits that using party promotion, negative portrayal of the opposition, grassroots movements and calendar events, Johnson was able to secure a win by engaging and persuading key publics.
Results and Conclusions

With just over 2000 tweets from the @UKLabour and @JeremyCorbyn accounts, and slightly more from @Conservatives and @BorisJohnson over the 41 days of campaigning, at an average of 48 tweets a day, clearly it is a channel that is seen to have value in British politics.

The Conservatives simple, often triplicated phrases in their tweets, were easy to turn into a hashtag and therefore shareable, allowing virality. Their views capitalised on the anti-immigrant sentiment - borne of years of austerity for which they are responsible – by promoting a United Kingdom that invokes an ‘us and them’ narrative. Jeremy Corbyn was represented as the impalpable outsider and enemy with an intangible socialist manifesto that will destroy society. Whilst the Conservatives perpetuate a divisive rhetoric, with financial growth at its heart, Labour celebrates diversity and roots its manifesto in the growth of society and human rights. Labour’s focus on empathy and caring was not enough to compete with the personal brand of Boris Johnson - as humorous and affable – and the political brand of the Conservatives, who were the party to #GetBrexitDone.

Practical and Social Implications

Discourse does not exist in a vacuum, with analysis designed to reveal the intersections of language, power and ideology (Waring, 2018) and as such, to appreciate a full overview of communication via social media, an analysis of external factors, such as contexts and other channels, would have been pertinent.

An opportunity does arise however, to analyse the communication between the government/ the Conservatives and their stakeholders, mitigated by the threats of both Covid and their chances of re-election.

Additionally a number of reports have highlighted the inequalities in society experienced by people of colour (Khunti et al., 2020). This raises the question: How was right-wing populism used in campaigning and has the narrative damaged race relations in the UK?

Keywords: political communication; Twitter politics; political brand; political social media; UK politics

References


Silent dialogue: Problematizing open dialogue as a precursor to relationship building in conflict contexts in the Middle East

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Introduction

Most theorizing and empirical work in public relations scholarship has been centered in Euro-American worldviews and elides the nuances of various concepts in public relations such as dialogue that can take on varied hues depending on cultural, political, economic and social contexts of practice. One such divergent context is offered by the Middle East wherein assorted cultural, political and social milieus challenge traditional notions of dialogic relationship building between organizations and their publics. Significant political, economic, social, and cultural similarities and differences among countries in the region imply the need to examine specific contextual factors that could impact the practice of public relations in the region. Situated within the global public relations framework (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2019), this conceptual paper discusses the dialectic influence of local cultures as well as strategic interests on public relations theorizing, particularly on the dialogic approach to relationship building (Kent & Taylor, 2002). It problematizes the broadly accepted idea of open, transparent dialogue that engenders relationships between organizations and their publics and proposes the notion of silent dialogue, particularly reflecting the influence of local cultures in conflict situations in the Middle East.

Literature Review

The review of literature will (1) review research on public relations in the Middle East using the global public relations framework (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2019) (2) highlight the influence of culture and diversity in the Middle East on public relations practice (e.g., Magen & Avidar, 2019), and (3) discuss mainstream understandings of dialogue as a precursor to relationship building and highlight its major tenets and critiques (Chen et al., 2020; Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Main proposition

This paper argues that due to various cultural, political and social factors, amongst them a lack of formal diplomatic relations between various countries in conflict, dialogue may not be equated with the classical idea of dialogue wherein interactants engage in open and transparent give-and-take discussions that are integrative or represent dual concern strategies of building relationships through collaborative advocacy. Instead of foregrounding antecedents of OPR such as openness, access and networking, we argue that organizations caught in conflict situations engage in silent dialogue, leveraging existing per-
sonal networks of *wasta* and social connections encapsulated in the personal influence model (Sriramesh et al., 1997), and promote informal dialogue and interaction out of strategic and/or economic motives. These silent dialogues help to maintain transparent traces of relationships in the absence of formalized relationships. Silent dialogue is essential to formalizing relationships. Silent dialogue is used mostly in situations of conflict/change. The paper will offer specific examples of contexts where silent dialogue might occur.

Theoretically, this paper enhances public relations scholarship by exploring the role of culture in shaping the critical public relations practice of building relationships through varied hues of dialogue. It problematizes mainstream understandings of open and transparent communication as a precursor to building relationships and offers the concept of silent dialogue to build OPRs in contexts of conflict.

**Practical and social implications**

Offering the concept of silent dialogue broadens practitioners’ understanding of dialogue, particularly for those working in situations of conflict. It offers them a conceptual tool to produce traces of relationships when more formalized relationships cannot be established due to conflict.

**Keywords:** Dialogue, Organization-public-relationships, Middle East, Global Public Relations Framework, Culture

**References**


Role of internal communication in enhancing employee engagement during remote work in times of crisis - Remote internal crisis communication (RICC) framework

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Introduction
When the pandemic disrupted face-to-face work in 2020, companies such as Facebook and Google announced work-from-home programmes. Although research has examined drivers of virtual/tele/digital employee engagement, and internal crisis communication, little is known about keeping employees engaged when organizations face a global crisis and employees are abruptly thrown into remote work. Public relations research with its focus on internal relations can contribute much to this issue. Connecting literatures on employee engagement, remote employee engagement, and internal crisis communication, this study created a conceptual framework, the Remote Internal Crisis Communication (RICC) framework, and conducted an empirical study to examine how two-way symmetrical communication, internal crisis communication (ICC), and new ways of working (NWW) predicted three dimensions of employee engagement and how social connection mediated the relationship between NWW and employee engagement. Findings have strong theoretical and practical implications.

Literature Review
This study conducted an extensive and thorough review of literature on (1) drivers of employee engagement from applied psychology, organizational behavior, human resource management and public relations (Ruck et al., 2017; Vercic & Vokic, 2017) (2) drivers of remote work engagement from business and human resources management literatures (Larson et al., 2020; ter Hoeven & van Zoonen, 2020), and (3) internal crisis communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015). The substantial research on these topics exist in silos with limited work on the interplay of variables, which could enhance understanding of the role of internal communication in engaging employees working remotely during a crisis. Accordingly, connecting these literatures, we proposed the Remote Internal Crisis Communication (RICC) framework (See Figure 1). Further, as a starting point to test the framework we empirically tested the effects of two-way symmetrical communication, ICC content and objectives and NWW on three dimensions of employee engagement, as per the following hypotheses and RQ:
H1: Two-way symmetrical communication will predict employee engagement when working remotely during a crisis

H2: NWW, particularly control over (a) time and content of work and (b) use of communication media will predict employee engagement when working remotely during a crisis

H3: Social connection will mediate the relationship between NWW and employee engagement when working remotely during a crisis

H4: ICC content (informative, identification, factual) will be positively related to employee engagement while working remotely during a crisis

H5: ICC objectives (security, belonging, activating behavior) will be positively related to employee engagement while working remotely during a crisis

RQ: Which among these factors -- two-way symmetrical communication, NWW, and ICC - contributes the most to remote employee engagement during a crisis?

Methodology

We conducted a quantitative online survey because a survey can generate large amounts of quantifiable data that can be analyzed for patterns of association. The target population were fulltime employees, over the age of 18, working remotely due to the pandemic. An international market research company YouGov recruited the sample (N=304) from its research panel of employees from the United Arab Emirates. The survey was offered in English and Arabic. Simple and hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted to examine relationships and Baron and Kenny’s (1986) steps for mediation were followed to test mediation.
Results and Conclusions

The three dimensions of employee engagement (cognitive, affective, social) showed significant and positive relationships with the independent variables (two-way symmetrical communication, NWW, ICC content and objectives) and social connection mediated the relationship between NWW and employee engagement. However, after controlling for demographic variables, two-way symmetrical communication was the only statistically significant predictor of employee engagement, when considered in conjunction with the other factors.

Theoretically, the paper has added to literature on employee engagement by proposing a conceptual framework for remote ICC, and by offering empirical evidence for the role of communication in engendering remote engagement during a crisis. A limitation of the study was that we tested only a few variables in the conceptual framework, to ensure a parsimonious survey instrument. Future research could test other variables such as horizontal vs. vertical communication or moderators such as open-mindedness, and cultural background.

Practical and Social Implications

Practitioners could provide opportunities for two-way symmetrical communication that will allow employees to share their concerns, particularly when they are away from their physical workplaces during crises. Practitioners should also ensure that communication media include technological affordances that can bolster social connection and provide opportunities for employees to connect with each other remotely. Most importantly, practitioners can use these findings not just during the coronavirus pandemic but can apply these findings in similar situations, such as when organizations have to move into remote work during say, a natural disaster.

**Keywords:** Employee engagement, internal communication, remote work, crisis, internal crisis communication
Social interaction and the customer service

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Introduction and purpose of the study

The Public Relations literature on the importance of knowing the customer in order to adapt the communication to him and offer an excellent service is vast. However, the analysis of interactions seems to be being neglected by organizations. This research seeks to show how interactions with the customer can teach about their needs and the best way to approach them to make sales. To this end, it uses data from a doctoral research carried out at a popular fair in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which focused on the analysis of interactions with customers established by a merchant who has worked on the site for over 30 years and developed a series of strategies to keep his business alive and healthy.

Literature review

The work has as theoretical references the contributions of Waldyr Fortes (2003), who highlights that the service is a process of relationship with the public, making the diagnosis of audiences essential for the elaboration of specific and efficient actions in the approximation between public and organization. Fábio França (2008), who explains that the communication planned and developed by public relations professionals will only be efficient if it is directed to their specific audiences, meeting their demands and needs. Nanci Pilares (1989), who defends conquest and loyalty as ways of dealing with a market full of similar offers, emphasizing that the way services are provided will be decisive for the organization’s success. Roberto Corrêa (2006), who suggests that the professionals involved in the service have a global view of the organization and good knowledge of marketing to be successful in satisfying the customer and boosting the company. Finally, Margarida Kunsch and her contributions about the relational aspect of communication, which results in a variety of interferences and conditionings within a complexity difficult to diagnose, given to the volume and the different types of existing communications, which operate in different social contexts.

Methodology

The data were obtained through site visits, participant observation, conversations in different environments and with different interlocutors, analysis of digital environments, photographic records, notes in a field diary and audio and video recordings, these analyzed according to the Conversation Analysis, proposed by Harvey Sacks (1972). The study was guided by ethnomethodology, a perspective that defends the knowledge of social configurations through the understandings expressed by the members themselves, which was developed by Harold Garfinkel, 1967.
Results and conclusions

The analysis of the interactions established by the merchant shows the appropriateness of the approach to the customer, defined in a matter of seconds, which includes the use of common sense knowledge; the valorisation of products; storytelling to make the sale; the justification regarding less favourable aspects. In short, they show the importance of interactions for making a correct diagnosis and the consequent adequacy of communication with the clients.

Practical and social implications

The study highlights the importance of analyzing interactions with customers to obtain better results by organizations and, on a broader scale, highlights the relevance of accessing the knowledge developed by people on a daily basis to deal with everyday situations.

Keywords: Public Relations; popular commerce; social interaction; ethnomethodology
An exploratory perspective on mental readiness as a requirement for crisis leadership

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Introduction and purpose of the study

Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay and Johansen (2010:343) acknowledge that there are profound gaps in the knowledge and any type of further investigation will not only add to the body of knowledge, but also allow for different perspectives to be examined.

Garcia (2017a:23) proposes that the mental readiness of crisis leaders is an essential requirement for effective crisis communication. The purpose of this paper is to report the findings of an exploratory investigation into the mental readiness of crisis leaders in the South African context.

Literature review

Communication goes a long way in crisis leadership as often the communication from the leader eliminates fear and worry which are often felt during a crisis. Fener and Cevikb (2015:698) explain that a leader is not merely a manager which often focuses on a continuation of the present, whereas a leader is focused on the harmony and creativity of an organisation.

Garcia (2017b) defines mental readiness as “the persistent ability to remain calm, to think clearly and to understand other people’s concerns even as conditions deteriorate and as panic begins to strike all around the leader”. Each of the three elements of mental readiness stand alone, but all three are needed simultaneously in order to harness mental readiness effectively.

The first element is deep knowledge, which refers to “having a significant understanding of the patterns that drive effective and ineffective crisis response” (Garcia, 2017a:31).

The second element is emotional discipline, which has four main characteristics (Garcia, 2017a:27-31). This encompasses being forthright, calm, assertive and bold. A leader should acknowledge the realities of a crisis and name it correctly to enhance the organisation’s ability to manage the crisis. Remaining calm is critical for clear thinking and sound decision-making. Assertiveness allows a leader to act quickly rather than shutting down during a crisis. Boldness improved a leader’s ability to make the best decisions based on what is most productive rather than what is most appealing (Garcia, 2017a:27-31).

The final element is intellectual rigor, which is associated with “strictness in judgement or conduct” (Collins Dictionaries, 2020). Garcia (2017a:41) argues that it “begins with clarity of thinking”. Leaders should not suddenly throw
rigor out the window once a crisis occurs.

Methodology

A generic qualitative research design, as described by (Plano, Clark & Creswell, 2015:4), guided this exploratory study. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. Purposeful sampling was used to select the thirteen interviewees in a variety of South African organisations. The sample size was limited both due to the exploratory nature of the study and the struggle to recruit participants amidst the national lockdown.

The discussion guide encompassed five topics, including Garcia’s (2017a) three elements of mental readiness and key questions pertaining to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Data analysis was accomplished through the use of Atlas.ti 8 software for thematic analysis. Guba and Lincoln’s (1985:289-331) four criteria for trustworthiness of qualitative research governed the study. This study was approved by the University of Pretoria and all stipulations regarding informed consent were observed.

Results and conclusions

Industry knowledge was confirmed to be a critical requirement for crisis leaders. Without it, a crisis leader will be overwhelmed. Experience was regarded as the best source of professional learning. Real-world situations teach crisis leaders to anticipate and respond to situations. This experience affects organisational culture, organisational learning and the use of good judgement during crises.

Crisis leaders cannot afford to let their emotions trigger secondary crises. Logical thinking and planning are needed to ensure a professional organisational reaction. Destructive emotional behaviour during a crisis often cause rifts between leaders and followers at a time when an organisation can least afford it. Greater self-awareness is required of crisis leaders to employ forthrightness, fierceness, boldness and humility appropriately.

Crisis leaders must face crises head-on and avoid focusing on superficial symptoms and they should act in a manner which instils trust between them and other role players. Clear thinking and honesty are key requirements for guiding organisations prior to, during and after crises. Intellectual rigor further enables helps organisations foresee and avoid crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how organisations can improve communication and adapt operations to changing circumstances. Crisis leaders should have the ability to help organisations respond effectively to both of these key areas.

The most important conclusion of the study is that both formal and informal education /training should focus even more explicitly on developing the mental readiness of crisis leaders. Garcia’s (2017a) framework can be the basis for such programmes.

The limitations of the study include the small sample size and that qualitative research cannot be generalised. Further research should include a larger sample and other research designs like focus groups and surveys in order to investigate dimensions of mental readiness in crisis leadership in greater depth.

Keywords: Crises leadership, crisis communication, mental readiness, Covid-19 pandemic, South Africa
References


Strategic Role of Public Relations in Crisis Management in Ethiopia: The case of Burayu City Displacement Crisis

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In recent times, Ethiopia has experienced different crisis situations. But, it seems that little attempts have been made by different stakeholders including the government in using scientific and strategic crisis communication efforts to avert crisis and work on reputation and good relationship with publics. The study aims at exploring a crisis scenario occurred at Burayu town particularly, in the displacement crisis in September 2018. The main objective of this study was to examine the relevance of crisis public relations practices at all phases of crisis. In this study, the crisis event was assessed through scientific approach and best practices on crisis communication. Qualitative research approach was employed to collect and analyze data generated through in-depth interview with key informants selected through purposive and snow ball sampling techniques. Relevant data collected through qualitative contents analysis method and FGDs were analyzed accordingly. The study describes in detail about the concepts of Public relations, Crisis management to demonstrate the strategic role of public relations in crisis management. According to the research finding, people were displaced for three reasons from Burayu City in September 2018. The first one was the clash between youth of different ethnic groups; the second one was due to the disseminating wrong information; and the third one was the prevalence of fear. Consequently, Public relations practitioners should be work to manage such kind of crisis to protect the relationship between organization (Government) and publics. But, the findings of the study show that there was poor understanding on public relations profession and a huge gap in using strategic public relations to manage such crisis. In short, Crisis is often a result of poor communication between organizations and its publics, and consequently more focus should be put on the pre-crisis phase and on building and maintaining long-lasting relationships

Keywords: crisis, crisis management, public relations, crisis communication.

Reference

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A research on the effectiveness and factors in Government refuting rumors on social media - examining the rumor refutal texts on Sina Weibo in the early stage of COVID-19 in China

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Introduction and purpose

With the superiorities in fast transmission speed, extensive transmission scope and high user coverage, social media play a key role in public health emergencies. Many medical institutions and public health administrations have recognized the importance of social media that they actively use social media to release information, monitor disease trends and communicate with the public when emergencies occurred. After the outbreak of COVID-19, the Chinese government and public health administration like Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention released information through diverse social media platforms when the whole country is locked down. Social media allow them to respond to the public concerns in time and save the communication cost.

However, rumors are easily triggered and distributed online, so that social media have become one of the most important tools for the government and the public administration to dispel rumors. Sina Weibo finally became the dominant platform where local governments and public health administration (e.g. Chinese CDC) refuting rumors due to the wide use, timeliness and interactivity of Weibo as well as the authoritativeness of these official accounts. Government administrations actively debunk rumors through their official Weibo accounts with the formation of matrix propagation and harmonic resonance to some extent. From the perspective of the dissemination effect, whether the matrix propagation contributed by local governments produce positive results and what factors influence the final dissemination effectiveness will be the main topics of this study.

Research question and hypotheses

We proposed one research question and three hypotheses in this study:

**RQ** What was the effect of government refuting rumors on Sina Weibo during the outbreak of COVID-19 in China?
• H1: Fact-checking included in the government rumor refutal posts has positive associations with the effect of refuting rumors.

• H2: The narrative mode of the government rumor refutal posts has positive associations with the effect of refuting rumors.

• H3: The presentation form of the government rumor refutal posts has positive associations with the effect of refuting rumors.

Literature review

Different from other disasters, the epidemic disaster is directly related to people's life safety, and the demand for the related information has also explored correspondingly. Social media has become a gathering place for rumors worldwide after the outbreak of the COVID-19 (Ali, 2020). It is reported that social media accounts verified by government entities in emergencies have 34 times advantages than other sources of information in refuting rumors (Guo & Zhang, 2020). Rumor refutal from governments and other authorities have positive impact on changing people's cognition of the event, transferring negative emotions (Zeng and Zhu, 2019).

As to rumors circulating on social media platforms during the outbreak of COVID-19, scholars from overseas focus more on the source of disease transmission, the means of prevention and treatment of disease, disease awareness, and the means of specific management in response to the epidemic (Islam, et al, 2020).

Methodology

This research positions 80 government accounts on Sina Weibo as the research object, examining 501 effective rumor refutal posts of these accounts via data mining which posted during the first stage of the outbreak of the COVID-19 in China (from 18th Jan. 2020 to 29th Feb. 2020). This research investigated the effect of disproving rumors by conducting attitude evaluation on the comments of these posts, and examined the associations with the effect of refuting rumors from three factors: content elements, narrative mode and presentation form.

Results and conclusions

From the perspective of the attitude evaluation towards the rumor refutal Weibo posts, people who shared neutral and negative attitudes account more, which indicates that the posts against rumors released by governments have not been accepted by Weibo users from the emotional dimension and have not played a positive effect during the early time.

Form the texts of comments, users’ negative expressions are not only about the information generated by these government accounts, but also about the one who generated these information— the government administrations and their staff.

In terms of disproving strategies, it shows that information related to fact-checking directly affect the results of rumor retutal posts.

Research limitations

This research focused only on the early outbreak of COVID-19 in China, new data deserves to be examined over the development of the epidemic. Other dimension of evaluation except the user attitudes evaluation can be applied and some other factors would be dig in related research.

Practical and social implications

Suggestions for the government and public administration effectively refute rumors during public emergencies.

Keywords: rumors, social media, COVID-19, government, China
References


Introduction and purpose of the study

Although crises are considered as normal in the lives of organizations, they can pose a significant risk to the profitability and even to the survival of organizations (Barkley, 2020, p. 244). Undoubtedly, CEOs play a critical role in managing crises in an effective way, establishing good relations with the publics, and overcoming the crisis with little damage to the organization. CEOs are in front of the media during the crisis and every word spoken by the CEO, every act they make, every message they share are paid attention to by all the public groups. What they say are spread rapidly, determining the public’s trust in the organization, or making them act against the organization. The stress and the uncertainty environment created by the crisis make the overall communication process more difficult to handle as well as how the CEO communicates. Therefore, it is a necessity for the entire organization to be prepared for the crisis, and this also includes the preparedness of the CEO: the CEO should be a good crisis communicator.

The purpose of this study is to analyze quantitatively and qualitatively CEO statements made during the crisis. The analysis of the statements will be done by looking at the use of language of CEOs, the crisis strategies mentioned and the tone of the messages. At the same time, the study will investigate whether the statements of CEOs differ from sector to sector and with different types of crises.

Literature review

Crisis is a decisive moment for an organization: it is a turning point where the institutions need to take important steps to protect their good image and reputation in the eyes of their public (Murray and Shohen, 1992). Crisis management professionals often focus on techniques to minimize the damage and help management overcome the crisis as quickly as possible (Turk et al. 2012, p. 574). Leadership communication, establishing and maintaining crisis networks of rescue operations and officials who coordinate and communicate information to protect the publics are important during crises (Johansson and Bäck, 2017, p. 324). A crisis provides an opportunity to assess the role of the communication and reputation management both during and after the crisis (Turk et al. 2012, p. 575).

Methodology

In this study, a content analysis will be made on CEO statements of Turkish companies that had been hit by a crisis. The content analysis will be done both by qualitatively and quantitatively. Three industries are selected to study. These are aviation, e-commerce and food industries. All these industries have recent crises that
they faced with and will be easily studied. In the analysis; type of the crisis, the response strategy, words, length, and the tone of the statements will be done. The study will be important in the sense that it will highlight the role and leadership of CEO in crisis management literature as well.

Results and conclusions

A detailed analysis will be made regarding the crisis statements of Turkish CEOs. The data obtained will be useful in understanding the current situation and also will be helpful to further understand the role of CEO in dealing with crises. The study has some limitations of which one is that it takes into consideration a specific time frame, and secondly it examines the CEO statements in three sectors only.

Practical and social implications

As stated earlier, the CEO statements made in crisis situations affect the entire society. Therefore, CEOs should carefully work on every word they choose and the sentences they make in their statements and these texts should be prepared with great care. Statements should be prepared more carefully in crisis situations where human beings lost their lives or there is a big risk. The data obtained from the study will present a picture regarding the subject matter and help us to come up with recommendations.

Keywords: CEO statements, crisis communication, content analysis, crisis response strategies

References


Presentation of current research / social media guidelines for risk and crisis management

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Introduction and purpose of the study

The new, countless possibilities on the social web create numerous advantages for companies and organizations of all kinds, but also some disadvantages. One of the biggest risk factors is the behavior of employees. If they express themselves in social media in the context of their own company, they inevitably become company spokespersons and representatives. In order to protect the company’s reputation from damage from within and to train employees, social media guidelines are created by companies as part of social media governance. In addition to protection, an important aspect of reputation management is reputation enhancement. Although social media guidelines are among the important success factors in the context of reputation management, reputation expansion is rarely associated with them in scientific literature.

This is the point at which this paper starts and deals with the question of the extent to which social media guidelines are used by companies as a reputation management tool. Specifically, the two research questions are:

1. What differences and similarities can be identified in social media guidelines?
2. To what extent are social media guidelines used by organizations as a strategic instrument for reputation management?

Literature review

There are only a few scientific studies that deal in depth with the topic of social media governance and social media guidelines. Important works are the survey studies by Zerfaß et al., 2012 and Linke & Zerfaß, 2013 as well as Rauschnabel, Mrkwicka, Koch & Ivens (2013). More recent work comes from Mellinghoff (2019) and Kruse & Kordyaka (2020).

However, no study has yet explicitly addressed the link between social media guidelines and reputation management, although reputation is considered the intangible asset of a company most worthy of protection according to Ivens (2018) and Schaarschmidt et al. (2019).

Theoretical approach

Social media guidelines can be considered as one of three components of the social media governance model (Babka, 2016, p.20). In addition, they are one of the four most important success factors in higher-level online reputation management (Kinter & Ott, 2014, p.20).

Methodology
In order to examine whether organizations use social media guidelines exclusively as a preventive, regulatory tool or also for reputation building, a specific three-part research framework was developed based on Kraus & Kordyaka (2020) (see Table 1).

Quantitative content analysis was used to collect the data. Only social media guidelines published as of 2017 or confirmed as still current in 2020 in the event of an earlier publication date were analyzed. Only social media guidelines from organizations operating in Germany that were available in text form were considered. A total of 208 companies (30 DAX, 50 MDAX, 50 SDAX and 78 family-owned companies) were asked by mail to send their social media guidelines. Others were researched online. As a result, 63 social media guidelines were examined. In addition to six formal criteria, the codebook contained 41 content-related criteria for recording significant text elements (see Table 1).

Results and conclusions

The various organizations could be assigned to eight different industries. The commonalities predominate in terms of a formal approach to employees, a low level of communicated commitment and a length of over 800 words.

The results clearly show that the social media guidelines are primarily preventive in nature. Not only in practice, but also in the literature, social media guidelines are almost exclusively assigned this role, although it would be obvious to use such a document for an additional purpose, reputation building. In public relations, employees are an important means of conveying credible information about the company to the relevant stakeholders. People place more trust in others at eye level than in the organization itself. Employee testimonials can thus make an important contribution to building a positive reputation among stakeholders. This added value could be generated without much extra effort by adding to the already existing social media guidelines.

Figure 1: Overview of the functional areas of social media guidelines (Own representation, 2020, based on Babka, 2016, p.20).

Figure 2: Frequency distribution of the elements Strategy & Goals, Reputation Protection and Reputation Enhancement of the coded social media guidelines (SPSS analysis, 2020).
Table 1: Categories of the reputation framework (Own representation, 2020).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy &amp; Goals</th>
<th>Reputation protection</th>
<th>Reputation enhancement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explanation of social media</td>
<td>• Discretion</td>
<td>• Encouraging the use of social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of social media</td>
<td>• Restrictions in the workplace</td>
<td>• Encouragement to express positive opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation of strategy</td>
<td>• Transparency of the author</td>
<td>• Encouraging disclosure of employer in private profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation of goals</td>
<td>• Longevity of content on the web</td>
<td>• Encouragement to follow, like, comment on and share content created by the company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of the social media channels relevant to the organization</td>
<td>• Respect for privacy</td>
<td>• Encouragement to use specific hashtags</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Professional communication (adherence to business etiquette)</td>
<td>• Encouragement to engage in dialogue with stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No public criticism</td>
<td>• Encouragement to recommend the company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Observance of ethical &amp; moral values</td>
<td>• Encouragement to provide positive reviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Consequences of violations</td>
<td>• Attention to the culture &amp; values of the company</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Reporting of violations &amp; content relevant to the organization</td>
<td>• Responding quickly</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Data protection</td>
<td>• Correcting errors</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Copyright law</td>
<td>• Handling complaints, criticism &amp; discussions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Code of Conduct</td>
<td>• Credible &amp; authentic communication</td>
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<td>• Employment contract</td>
<td>• Dealing with the competition</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Responsibility/Liability Committee</td>
<td>• Corporate design guidelines</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Contact Person</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Practical and social implications

The social media guidelines should not stand alone, but should be integrated into the governance structures of the respective company. It is recommended that employees be given specific activities that can lead to an expansion of the company’s reputation. In this way, the employee knows exactly what actions he or she can take to support the employer.

Limitations of the study

With a size of n=63, the sample is not very large. However, since social media guidelines are mostly internal documents, the public availability of these documents was severely limited.

Suggestions for future research

Expert interviews could be used to find out whether controllable, visible changes in corporate communications can be observed as a result of the strategic alignment of social media guidelines.

A survey could also be used to investigate how employees perceive social media guidelines. It would be relevant, for example, whether employees adhere to the recommendations of the social media guidelines and whether these motivate them to become active as brand ambassadors.

Keywords: corporate communication, reputation management, social media, social media guidelines, content analysis, brand ambassador
The Role of Employer Branding in Stimulating Employer Attractiveness

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Introduction and purpose

Public relation practitioners seem to agree that various stakeholders make decisions with the reputation of the organization in mind (Maden et al., 2012; Verčič, and Ćorić, 2018). Employer Branding (EB) plays an important role in understanding employees as a key stakeholder for organizations (Chhabra and Sharma, 2014).

The focus in EB literature lies on the process of building an identifiable and unique identity (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004) and the development of organization’s unique and attractive image and reputation as an employer (Silvertzen et al., 2013).

We explore the relationship between employer branding and employer attractiveness as reflected in employee perceptions of organizational characteristics. We focus on the regional companies in the North of the Netherlands. Recruitment communication will reveal the image companies want to portray to potential employees in order to influence their perception of the organizational characteristics. We address the following research question:

To what extent does employer branding contribute to employer attractiveness of the regional companies in the North of the Netherlands?

Literature review

The body of literature shows that EB increases affinity with an employer because it has a positive effect on the corporate brand associations and therefore on perception of the employer brand (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Ewing et al., 2019). In this work the concept of employer attractiveness is defined as the intention to work for an employer. It is dependent on the employee perceptions of the organization, which is defined as envisioned picture of benefits of corporate image that an employee sees in working for a specific organization. Using corporate brand communication, organizations communicate their corporate identity and image (Cornelissen, 2008).

Several studies have suggested that information provided by the organization on core values, CSR and organizational characteristics will directly affect individual employee perceptions and affect employer attractiveness (Berthon et al., 2005; Elving et al., 2013). We propose a direct effect of information support (message) in recruitment on individual components of employee perceptions, while we expect employee’s use of information during employer branding to influence employer attractiveness via their enhanced employee perceptions. See figure 1 for our conceptual model.
Methodology

All three concepts are investigated among last year students at Hanze University of Applied Sciences, and University of Groningen, the Netherlands. Since the purpose of the research is to explore the extent to which EB contributes to the attractiveness of regional companies, we use an online survey and an experiment. Students are randomly assigned to one branded and one non-branded (regular) version of a vacancy. We measure employer attractiveness on a 7-point Likert scale developed by Highhouse et al. (2003) and for employee perceptions of an organization as an employer, we use a 25-items measurement of Berthon et al. (2005). The estimate of P-O fit is developed using work-value items by Cable and Edwards (2004).

Results and conclusions

Given this research is still in progress, the results are still to be determined. However, some limitations do exist. A clear limitation is the sample which represents students studying in the North of the Netherlands. This can skew the replicability results. Another limitation is the fact that data is collected via an online platform, which means that there is no way to be sure that the respondents are honest in their answers.

Practical and social implications

The practical and social implications of this study give a direction for communication practitioners and society. The results have potential in changing the practice of EB as a tool to influence employer attractiveness. The practical intent is to provide managers with a guide on how to influence employer attractiveness through EB.

Keywords: employer branding, employer attractiveness, corporate image, employer image.
From „Best in Covid“ to „Worst in Covid“: Underestimating the role of Public Relations in Government Communication during Covid-19 Crisis in the Czech Republic

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Introduction and Purpose of the Study

On 31 August 2020, the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic Andrej Babiš attended a discussion on the 15th Bled Strategic Forum in Slovenia. During his speech, he stated that the Czech Republic is „best in Covid“, because of his profession as a businessman and crisis manager (Bled Strategic Forum, 2020). This narrative, representing an example of “technocratic populism”, was shared among more politicians in other Central and Eastern European countries, such as Slovakia and Hungary (Buštíková and Baboš, 2020).

However, the situation has changed rather quickly after such proclamations with the rise of Covid-19 cases during the early autumn months (also called “second wave”). The Czech government was hesitating to employ more strict governmental measures in the fight against Covid-19, because: “the public demanded that we loosen up” (Echo24.cz, September 13, 2020). On October 13th, 2020, the Minister of Health has stated that the Czech government will employ three strategic pillars in fighting the pandemic: 1) extending the capacity of hospitals to deal with an influx of patients, 2) blanket testing of the population, and 3) a change of communication strategy to better explain to the public how much was at stake and secure their cooperation (Radio Prague International, October 13, 2020).

This article will focus on the analysis of government steps to fulfil the goal of change in communication strategy during the height of the “second wave crisis” since October 2020 in the Czech Republic. Government communication in the Czech Republic has undergone a major transition from the post-communist propaganda system (Soukeník, 2018b). Despite the aim of a new stakeholder model of government communication (Soukenik, 2018a), the strategies and processes still reflect the formal structure of communication departments embedded in ministries and government offices, which was developed under the Communist propaganda communication model. Theoretically, this structure represents the public information model proposed by James Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984). This article aims to answer the following questions: 1) Which strategies and tools did the Czech government implement during the Second wave of the Covid-19 crisis? 2) Were these strategies and tools effective (did they reach audiences, increased information or change behaviours? 3)
Which external factors influenced negatively the aim of the communication to secure the cooperation of the citizens, such as following the government measures, trust towards the government officials etc.?

Methodology

We will use the systems theory framework to analyse the principles of government communication (von Bertalanffy, 2010) and the institutional theory of communication (Fredriksson, Pallas and Wehnmeier, 2013). For the analysis of effectiveness, we will use the WHO strategic communication framework, which defines six principles of effective communications, based on Scott Cutlip’s pioneer work Effective Public Relations (1962).

The analysis of government communication, the role of communication strategies, and stakeholder management is crucial for understanding the role of public communication. Due to different cultural background, media and political system, which affect the nature and credibility of political public relations, we believe it’s necessary to build case studies, which represent the country specifics (van Dyke and Verčič, 2009; Sriramesh and Verčič, 2012).

Results and conclusions

Contrary to the optimist prime minister’s speech in August 2020, the Czech Republic has been ranked among the worst in world for Covid-19 response (Bloomberg, November 16, 2020). The role of government communication in crises, such as the pandemic, is crucial for responding in a timely and effective manner and for building the resilience of citizens. The results of this analysis will detect potential crisis nodes, internal and external factors, which influenced the government communication on the example of the Czech Republic. The results can serve as a basis for further international comparative perspective, especially in CEE countries. The managerial implications will serve for future implementation of strategic communication in crises on the government level.

Keywords: public relations; government communication; Covid-19; crisis communication; strategic communication

Selected references


Citizens and politicians in Spain: How strategic communication could build confidence or distrust in the covid-19 pandemic?

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Introduction and purpose of the study
On 14th March 2020, Spain decreed its first state of alarm, which substantially paralysed all economic and social activity, leading to the confinement of all people, with some exceptions. After three waves of contagion, with an ever-increasing incidence, citizens seem to prioritise social and personal contacts, the source of transmission, over prudence in the face of the risk of infection.

The increasing number of infections and deaths over the three waves raises questions about the reasons why messages have not been sufficiently persuasive; when communication ceased to be strategic and may have led to pandemic fatigue (WHO, 2020) and increased distrust of governments, the virus and vaccination.

The causes may be varied, but in this paper, we will focus on the possible lack of political and communicative leadership of both national and regional governments; on the quality and effectiveness of the messages sent to the population. And we will focus on finding out whether there is a correlation between the communication strategy of political leaders, with unclear and contradictory messages, the behavior and growing distrust of citizens and the consequences of three waves of contagion, each one more serious and lethal.

Literature review
In order to carry out the paper we started from different studies on social trust and strategic communication. On the one hand, during the COVID-19 pandemic, regions with higher confidence in the health care system are more likely to reduce mobility once the government mandates that its citizens are not to leave home except for essential trips, compared to those with lower health care system confidence (Chan et al., 2020). And also, regions characterized by a low social trust witnessed a higher excess mortality during the first wave and mass polarization also played a significant role (Charro, Lapuente & Rodríguez-Pose, 2020). On the other hand, covid-19 crisis has elements in common with risk communication (Glik, 2007) and crisis communication in organizations (Millar & Heath, 2004), but many aspects bring it closer to public relations and strategic communication management where messages and audiences are key to success.
Methodology

This research analyses the key messages pronounced by the national government, the spokesperson of the ministry and the autonomous governments for one year taking the 14th March 2020 as first benchmark. It will also be analyzed the evolution of Spanish public opinion during this time on the perception of the pandemic, vaccination and the behaviour that has led to three waves of contagion. Special emphasis will be placed on the analysis in those territories where infections have been diametrically opposed to each other to see whether communication has been a consequence of the increase or containment of the virus.

Results and Conclusions

The expected results and conclusions will allow us to reaffirm some of the theories that highlight communication strategy as a key aspect in dealing with a situation of risk or prolonged crisis, such as the covid-19 pandemic.

Practical and Social Implications

It is hoped to discover how proper use of communication with citizens can be a key tool for saving lives and using resources efficiently.

Keywords: Covid-19, risk communication, social trust, crisis communication

References


Rejecting communication. When facts are “manipulated” and “manufactured”

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In recent times, the reputation of the communications sector has come under the spotlight as a consequence of Brexit, global politics and the pandemic. Trust in the sector has been compromised as a result of the actions and inaction of major institutions who, in theory, should know better. Society has experienced first-hand the consequences of leadership, decisionmaking, communication and ethical standards in organisations. Some experiences have been positive, others negative – and for communicators, negative incidents are remembered by peers and stakeholders.

Communication, some say, boils down to “getting people to do what you want them to do” (Tolley, 1988, p. 4) and involves the creation of arguments based on “the interpretation and communication of scientific evidence in relation to concepts of the truth” (L’Etang, 2001, p. 158). Arguments can be strong or weak. Strong arguments are logical, truth-based and robust, in other words flawed reasoning is absent. Weak arguments on the other hand use logical fallacies and flawed logic to appear stronger than they actually are. (Sesonske, 1968, p. 217 to 231). Critics point out that logical fallacy based communication fractured US politics, influenced the outcome of the UK’s Brexit referendum and has enabled the rise of conspiracy movements for decades demonstrating that the selective use of information divides and polarises stakeholder groups (Rose, 2017, p. 556).

The normalisation of logical fallacies (intentional or not) casts doubt on the motivation and credibility of those involved in the design and dissemination of information because communication which contradicts and lacks clarity creates confusion (Blake, 2018). Fake news hiding under a veneer of authenticity is commonplace (Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2018, pp. 137–153) and the blurred lines between trust, fact, evidence and fallacy has been experienced by at global and grass-roots level in political dialogue and during the pandemic. The resulting confusion undermines trust in the communications profession and the integrity of information circulated.

When communication works well, it is invisible and often taken for granted by internal and external stakeholders. However, on occasions when things to go wrong, the problem is often fault-based and framed as inept or clumsy communication, a job ‘anyone’ can do.

So what happens when organisations communicate messages which contradict and confuse stakeholders and what needs to be in place to move all parties along the path of change. Democratisation of media and technology platforms and citizen as communicator has created a paradigm where information sharing takes place in real time and not necessarily authenticated. What is said, is not necessarily true creating a situation where citizens do not know what to believe and abusers of information leverage information gaps to manipulate beliefs.
This paper shares examples of communication best practise and questionable with vulnerable groups and proposes a path forward to thwart the normalisation of logical fallacies in the sector and builds on calls for communicators to be positioned intermediaries managing mistrust and the balance of power (Bourne, 2013, p. 72) because communication is “anything but harmonious” (Hoffmann, 2019, p. 301). Although communicators are well placed to address this issue, trust is compromised because some high profile communicators have been identified as enablers of disinformation. It asks the sector to work together and take on board President Biden’s call to “reject the culture in which facts themselves are manipulated and even manufactured” (Biden, 2021, p. 2).

**Keywords:** trust, mistrust, communication, public relations, power dynamics
Remote working during the COVID-19 crisis: The impact of communication and support on employees’ perception of social isolation, their perceived productivity and their work satisfaction

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and consequential restrictions to social and economic life brought a sharp rise in the number of employees working from home in 2020/21. Remote working has been steadily gaining popularity in the past decades, but was delimited to a certain group of employees (teleworkers), who at least to some degree had deliberately chosen this working mode. Remote working brings about various advantages such as increased autonomy and flexibility, but can also result in a feeling of social isolation for some workers. The risk of social isolation should become more severe, when employees are forced into remote working, as it was and still is the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. Toscuta and Zappalá (2020) give first evidence for feelings of isolation and negative work-related outcomes among Italian employees working from home during the lockdown in spring 2020. In the light of these downsides of remote working, this study is interested in possible remedies by answering the following research question:

RQ: What effects do communication and support by co-workers and supervisors have on employees’ perception of social isolation, their remote working productivity and their work satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Literature review

Prior research defined workplace social isolation as “a psychological construct that describes employees’ perceptions of isolation from the organization and from co-workers” (Marshall, Michaels, & Mulki, 2007: 198) and demonstrated its negative effects on job performance and satisfaction (e.g., Orhan, Rijssman, & van Dijk, 2016). Workplace relations and exchanges are regularly examined within the framework of social exchange theory. High-quality social exchanges have been shown to generate various positive outcomes (e.g., higher productivity, commitment, work satisfaction) in the organizational context. Such succeeding interactions stem from reciprocal exchanges of resources (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). While providing employees with economic resources is generally important,
for employees working from home symbolic resources that are typically mediated through verbal or paralinguistic behaviors should be specifically meaningful. In this study, we consider two categories of symbolic resources that an employee can receive in interactions with supervisors and co-workers: (1) communication quality, which is reflected in a well-flowing exchange of relevant information, both formal and informal, and (2) support, which comprises aspects like care, appreciation and encouragement. It is hypothesized that the provision of these resources reduces the perception of social isolation and its negative effects on work-related outcomes. Furthermore, positive direct effects on productivity and satisfaction are expected.

Methodology

To test the assumed relationships, data were collected from employees in the United Kingdom (UK) through an online survey. Respondents (N=304) were recruited via Clickworker between November 12 and 15, 2020, one week after a second nation-wide lockdown was imposed. The sample was nearly gender-balanced, and respondents came from various sectors and different-sized organizations.

Results & Conclusion

Data were analyzed with a structural equation modeling approach. As control variables, we included age, gender, household size, working hours, pre-existing experience with remote working, and organizational tenure. Both, the measurement model (CFI = .954; RMSEA = .053; SRMR = .054) and the structural model (CFI = .959; RMSEA = .042; SRMR = .044) reached a good fit to the data.

First of all, the results indicate that remote working increased employees’ perception of social isolation (β = .20, p <.01). In line with previous research, this perception of isolation negatively affected perceived productivity (β = -.23, p <.001) and work satisfaction (β = -.24, p <.001). Concerning possible remedies, two significant effects emerged: Co-worker communication quality reduced the perception of isolation (β = -.35, p <.01), thereby indirectly affecting the outcome variables positively. Supervisor support had a direct positive effect on employees’ satisfaction (β = .23, p <.001).

Based on the data, it was high-quality communication from co-workers and not the more emotional resource support that could prevent an employee from feeling isolated. An explanation could be that keeping track helps employees to continue feeling integrated in the organization and to sustain productivity and satisfaction. Support from supervisors, however, could directly enhance satisfaction during remote working.

Implications

Remote working can result in employees’ perceptions of isolation from an organization and colleagues. Maintaining physical offices, where employees can routinely and, even more important, spontaneously interact and exchange relevant resources, is not to underestimate. Any post-pandemic changes towards more remote working need to establish measures and platforms that compensate for spatial and temporal distance and ensure well-flowing horizontal communication. Experiences from the pandemic need to be thoroughly evaluated with that concern.

The cross-sectional design of the study is a limitation, as it does not allow to account for longitudinal effects due to learning or adaption during remote working.

Keywords: Remote working, social isolation, communication quality, support
40 Years of Public Relations with MLB’s Chicago White Sox – 1981-2021

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Introduction

Jerry Reinsdorf took over as owner of Major League Baseball’s Chicago White Sox in 1981 and he has endured to become the longest tenured owner in the league. With an acute understanding of the value of public relations, Reinsdorf’s time with the White Sox has been marked by success on and off the field. Starting from modern times and working backwards, the team is emerging from a tear-down rebuild – one that received significant support from White Sox communications and PR (Isaacson, 2018) – to become a World Series contender heading into the 2021 season in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. The team’s rebuilding period, which took place between 2016-2019, followed an 8-year period when the team had the most famous fan in the country, then President Barack Obama (Berkow, 2010). In 2005, the team won its first World Series title since 1917. Since MLB started a “final man vote” that allowed fans to determine the final member of the All-Star team in each league, the White Sox have won the contest four times, more than any other team. Each voting opportunity has been supported by a flash promotional campaign, and the team’s 2005 work was profiled by PR Week (Frank, 2005). In 1988 the team was deeply involved in a political controversy when it threatened to move to Tampa/St. Petersburg, Fla., unless it was supported with public financing to replace aging Comiskey Park. The PR and political campaign was successful when a last second vote in the Illinois legislature secured the team’s future in Chicago (Hart, 2018).

What role has the senior PR staff played in supporting and advising the Chicago White Sox during this 40-year period? Scott Reifert, the team’s current senior VP of communications, has been with the Sox since the early-1990s and is credited with reorganizing and expanding staff capacities, developing a direct link between PR and top management, and, most recently, developing communication strategy during Covid-19. In the late 1980s, Paul Jensen helped support communication efforts surrounding the new Comiskey Park vote. Chuck Shriver, who began his PR work with the Chicago Cubs in the 1960s and worked for legendary White Sox owner Bill Veeck, managed the initial PR efforts when Reinsdorf’s ownership group took over.

Methodology

This case analysis will combine a review of existing media coverage and team publications (e.g., media guides) with six already completed depth interviews among current and former PR staff. The six interviews cover 40 years of PR work by the team. The case method and supporting interviews permit a thorough review of primary source material that is typically hard to access. The primary goal of the project is to explore the strategic and tactical changes to PR efforts across a broad time period. Due to the profound impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic during the last year – the team played without fans in 2020 and negotiations are currently underway concerning
procedures for 2021 – a particular focus will be on communication with key stakeholders during that timeframe.

Results/Conclusions

Initial results of the research indicate a team that has been progressive with its PR efforts during the past 15-20 years. It has reacted to social media opportunities and the declining influence of traditional media and print journalism by developing its own in-house media team. While navigating the recent team re-build, the PR staff took a proactive approach with a focus on transparency that positively influenced the media and fan narrative. Many of the team’s most successful creative efforts were a result of careful planning to maximize media exposure. Additional research will be completed related to team reactions to Covid-19 heading into the 2021 season.

Practical Implications

Professional sport organizations are understudied in the field of public relations. Oftentimes, academic researchers struggle to gain access to the organizations, and the professional PR/communication staff members rarely participate in industry trade or academic associations. A case method with proper access provides insights into the PR efforts of a professional sport organization that would otherwise be difficult to obtain, and an understanding of how a popular organization reacts to trends in the PR field has value inside and outside of the classroom.

Keywords: Sports Public Relations
Antecedents and Consequences of Dialogic Communication on Social Media. Findings from a Survey among Communication Professionals

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Introduction and Purpose
Platforms such as Facebook or Instagram have enriched the ways how companies manage relationships with relevant publics. Hence, corporate relationship management is facing a new dynamic on social media, which is based on the daily dialogic communication between users and individual PR professionals on behalf of the company. Such direct forms of interaction require “a bottom-up and top-down capacity in order to cultivate a dialogic culture” (Ihlen & Levenshus, 2017, p. 227). For this reason, this study aims to explore the antecedents and consequences of company-public dialogic communication on social media with special regard to often neglected aspects of organizational culture.

Literature Review and Hypotheses
Numerous studies on external communication have found that dialogic communication is a precondition for sustainable organization-public relationships. However, this research—which is mainly based on content analyses—often neglects antecedents of dialogic communication. In contrast, research from internal communication emphasizes the relevance of supportive organizational culture for the quality of employee relationships and symmetrical employee communication. Although surveys are more established in internal communication research, effects on external communication and external relationships are under-examined.

As the idea of mutual support is anchored in both supportive organizational culture and dialogic communication, it is aimed to bridge the gap between internal and external communication research. Specifically, this study examines positive effects of internal supportive organizational culture on companies’ symmetrical (H1) and dialogic communication (H2) as well as on the state of company-public relationships on social media (H3). Additionally, effects of dialogic communication on company-public relationships (H4) and effects of symmetrical communication on dialogic communication (H5) are tested.

Method
To test the hypotheses, we conducted an online survey among corporate social media communication professionals in Germany (October 2020 – February 2021; n = 151). The items for measuring supportive organizational culture (Sarros et al., 2005), symmetrical communication (Kang & Park, 2017), dialogic communication (Yang et al., 2015), and company-public relationships (Jo, 2006) were derived from the literature and adapted for the context of this study.
Results and Conclusions

Structural equation modeling is used to examine the hypothesized effects. The model supports all five hypotheses ($\chi^2(1, n = 151) = .054, p = .816, \text{CFI} = 1.000, \text{RMSEA} = .000, \text{SRMR} = .004$) (see Figure 1). Moreover, the analysis reveals emphasizes the mediating role of dialogic company-public communication between supportive organizational culture and the state of company-public relationships. Based on these results, the importance of an internal and external culture of mutual support must be highlighted. Its direct and indirect significance for the relationships between companies and their external publics on social media indicates that an internal culture of support is reflected externally, which has strategic potential for a successful relationship management.

Practical Implications

This study points out the need for a more integrative perspective when studying dialogic communication on social media. From a practical point of view, it is recommended that companies carefully recruit and train their social media professionals when it is aimed to foster sustainable relationships on social media.

Although the study contributes to close the gap between internal and external communication research, the results are mainly limited by the self-report character of this study. Hence, future research should validate these findings by triangulation approaches combining content-analytical and survey-based data.

Keywords: Dialogic Communication, Company-Public Relationships, Organizational Culture, Symmetrical Communication, Social Media

References


Figure 1. Path model for the antecedents and consequences of dialogic communication


The Science Of Risk Mitigation For Strategic Integrated Communications

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**Introduction and Purpose**

This proposal is to present a years-long research project that answers critical outstanding questions that are existential threats to the continued prosperity of the industry. It seeks to challenge existing assumptions and test academic theory and operationalized practice across the full spectrum of communications disciplines to research whether there is a way to mitigate and remove the risks associated with a communications strategy.

The research project sought to investigate whether it was possible to create a systematically organized body of knowledge for forming testable hypotheses and strategic predictions, that would allow both seasoned practitioners and entrepreneurs to improve the effectiveness of public relations and marketing strategies. It also sought to explore how closer cooperation between communications disciplines could deliver mutual benefit.

In addition, it sought to address key barriers to adoption: primarily affordability and accessibility and sought to make the work that public relations and marketing practitioners undertake more transparent. It was the purpose of the research to investigate current metrics and seek a measurement system that enable communications strategies to be measured both in terms of progress towards the desired outcome as well as business impact.

**Methodology**

The research was conducted via a combination of desk research, studying existing academic research, combined with conducting hundreds of scientifically-designed experiments to test hypotheses and learn from their outcomes.

As part of the research discipline models were created along with a series of visual tools for enabling data to be collected, collated and applied in a scientific way. It was also considered whether the development of a new communications ontology that organized key data points in a strategic hierarchy could help reduce the risks of strategic communications failing to deliver specific goals and outcomes and whether it would be possible to create repeatable patterns in order to reduce unnecessary risks.

**Results and Conclusions**

The research concluded that the primary causes of risk for strategic communications effectiveness are unvalidated strategic assumptions, a singular focus on disciplines (rather than on as part of an integrated approach) and the fact that communications is often disconnected from other business functions and, as a result, is not seen as a strategic management function by non-practitioners.

This presentation will showcase how practitioners can reduce strategic risk from integrated communications by addressing these three risks, and present a new scientific methodology that
allows assumptions to be identified, tested in or-
der that they can be mitigated or removed as an
integral part of strategy development and imple-
mentation.

It will explain the risks associated with each dis-
cipline and the compound risks that result from
un-mitigated risks in interrelated disciplines -
and a system for identifying risky strategic as-
sumptions and mitigating these risks, present
a new scientific approach and a new strategic
communications ontology.

The presentation will also present a new fully-in-
tegrated risk mitigation toolkit that can be used
to implement new risk mitigation strategies, in-
cluding risk-mitigation matrices that allow key
data points to be collected, organized and tested.
At the heart of each decision matrix is the 'build,
measure, learn' process first applied to product
development as part of Lean Startup® Method-
ology that enables practitioners to validate or
disprove each of the strategic communications
assumptions in order that risk can be minimized
and the chances of building an effective strategy
for achieving a defined business outcome to be
increased.

A summary of the research can be found at thinkdif-
ferently.ca/thescienceofcomms
Robinhood on Reddit: A Case Study of Triangular Dynamics of Internal and External Publics

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Introduction & Purpose of Study

Historically, an organization’s relationships with its external publics have been described and understood as two-way interactions between it and its customers or its activist publics. In networked digital media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Reddit, which has been recently featured in the media, employees or investors (internal publics) have for some time now had the ability, to simultaneously engage in communicative interactions directly with external stakeholders and with their own organization. This study explores the disposition of three-way communicative actions unfolding on networked digital platforms and their affect on the practice of public relations. The purpose of this study is to further develop burgeoning theory in the exploration of three-way symmetric communication as a public relations concept.

Literature Review

Employees of companies with which they have poor relationships may express their discontent online. They may blow whistles, leak information, exaggerate problems or the severity of their consequences, or otherwise collaborate with external publics against their companies’ management. This phenomenon has been described in previous research as megaphonning (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Two-way symmetric communications have been identified through previous research to be the preferred evolutionary state of public relations practice (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 2013). The triangular model (Kaufman & Kim, 2020) used in this research separates the organization, previously viewed somewhat monolithically, into its constituent management and internal publics and then assesses communicative actions between the three nodes of the triangle (including external publics) across different time periods, as opposed to viewing those actions as occurring strictly between organization and external publics directly.

Methodology

Recent events have offered an organization—Robinhood—and crisis unfolding on the social media app Reddit, on which to apply and test our model. Robinhood, is a stock trading mobile application used to quickly trade stocks, securities and cryptocurrencies from mobile phones. The crisis we study began on January 28, 2021, when Robinhood suspended its users’ access to buying stock in GameStop, a company that is experiencing a bizarre tug-of-war between hedge fund investors and an organized group of activist traders who have gathered on the Reddit WallStreetBets thread. Robinhood’s move was widely seen externally as a kind of underhanded, and perhaps even illegal, method of propping up the hedge funds who experienced sizable losses due
To the artificial inflation of the stocks they have shorted. This prompted a new thread on Reddit, populated by self-declared Robinhood employees. They spoke out about what they agreed was a decision by their organization to unfairly tip the scales against its own customers.

We document this case and investigate Robinhood’s internal publics through a narrative of their adversarial communicative actions on Reddit. The reaction to those megaphone actions will be assessed through a survey of Robinhood customers. We will use Amazon MTurk to obtain a sample of 300 customers. Their relationship to, and opinion of, the organization will be measured at the outset. We will then expose the subjects to some actual megaphoning examples from the Robinhood employees, and then we will measure again the quality of their relationship to Robinhood, to gauge the megaphoning effects in the eyes of external publics, as well as how they see the response from the organization.

Results and Conclusions

This research is ongoing, and will be completed in the spring. We expect our research questions to yield important confirmational data on the existence and use of triangular models to describe the relationships and implications that exist between organizations, their internal and external publics.

Practical and Social Implications

Using the lens of the triangular model presented in this study, we test the theoretical concept of three-way symmetric communication, as well as its moderating effect on the crisis and on the issues unfolding in a networked digital platform. In addition to ongoing research to investigate the potential of the triangular models, this case study will provide valuable foundational knowledge that will help to expand the theory of three-way symmetrical communications. This descriptive theory will through future research develop into a prescriptive one that public relations professionals might use to navigate complex multi-actor scenarios, which appear to be the future of networked communications.

**Keywords:** communicative action, megaphoning, relationships, triangular model, symmetric communications, ambassadorial, adversarial

**References**


Triangular Model for Multi-Actor Dynamics

Organization

Employees

External Publics

T-1 Past

T0 Present

T+1 Future

ADVERSARIAL COMMUNICATIVE ACTIONS
By ANTAGONISTIC INTERNAL PUBLICS
When the HOD becomes the trusted Public Relations face in a pandemic: Case of Malaysian Director-General of Health during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic

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Malaysians depended heavily on the Director General (DG) of Health to not only manage the coronavirus pandemic, but also as the trusted source to provide credible information on the extent of the pandemic and all health related issues surrounding it, including where were the danger zones, what was being done to contain the spread, how individuals could protect themselves, and where to go for medical assistance were among the myriad demands of a society affected by a pandemic. In the early stages of the pandemic in Malaysia in 2020, the world saw Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, the Health DG, as a “hero” who had contained the crisis by taking all the correct steps while local audiences were mesmerized by his daily TV appearance and “open” communication about the situation and the strategies taken to curb the spread. Likes and shares of his personal facebook posts on the situation spiked by the thousands while his FB followers avidly looking for trustworthy information amidst the trending plethora of misinformation reached over a million in a short space of time. He was the local star of the Covid 19 show who effectively managed the communication about the situation, not unlike Fauci as the global face. Unfortunately, in the fourth quarter of the year the local coronavirus situation took a turn for the worse. Hisham was now forced to address the situation within the context of the rising national economic and political challenges. How does a popular figure sustain his influence as the able and trusted spokesperson to communicate and manage the risks posed by the virus and the crises arising from it in the face of growing socio-economic and political crises in the nation?

This paper will address the positive contributions of the director-general’s and the national health department’s public relations as well as the gaps in their communications strategies since the beginning of the pandemic. Concepts of risk and crisis communication (Coombs, 2020; Zhang, Li, & Chen, 2020), and health communication (Dutta, 2008; Elers, et al, 2021; Mheidly & Fares, 2020; Servaes & Malikhaio, 2010) within the body of knowledge of public relations will guide the discussion on the communication experiences during this pandemic to evaluate the contributions, gaps and impact on the trust held by the masses. The case study will employ a mixed method of qualitative interviews with the heads of public relations in the Ministry of Health as well as the Department of Health; and a qualitative content analysis of organizational
media releases, news reports and the Facebook postings of the Director General to provide a comprehensive understanding of the efficacy of the communication strategies employed in the face of the pandemic. The results will provide a cultural perspective of the impact of trusted individuals in a health crisis and the implications of communication strategies employed to sustain the trust of the head of the health department. The limitation of this study for risk and crisis communication theory is that as a single case study the findings will only provide the experiences in a specific context. However, it will add to the body of knowledge by providing an example of a cultural perspective to how communication was leveraged during a global pandemic health crisis, which can offer potential implications for practice.

**Keywords:** Health crisis communication, pandemic, Malaysian Director General of Health

**References**


Communicating crisis and managing reputation: Early government communication during the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia

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Introduction and purpose of the study

When the first instances of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 were registered in China and Europe, the immediate response of the Serbian government was dismissal of risk. Following first case of infection, registered on 6th March 2020, the government started introducing various measures, among which was a decision to postpone the parliamentary, regional and local elections. Within this context, the purpose of this paper is to analyze government communication in the first month of pandemic in Serbia. The focus is on the daily press briefings held by the President, Primer Minister, government members and health officials, and the way briefings were utilized to manage reputation in the face of coming elections.

Literature review

The role of government communication is accentuated in the previous studies of public health risk communication (Glick, 2007). Risk communication is related to the entire set of actions undertaken as part of risk management aimed at minimizing the impact of the risk. When the risk pertains to the public health, the primary actors of communication are government structures and officials that should act in coordination with health agencies and their leadership. Studies about the COVID-19 pandemic have already identified inconsistent and incongruent messages coming from different agencies and stakeholders as the main obstacles in effective communication with the wider public (Chang, 2020). A part of the explanation of the inconsistency can be attributed to the reputation management efforts of each of the actors involved (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020). Informed by the body of literature on public health risk communication and reputation management, our study aims to analyze how the government and health actors communicated public health risk messages and reputation messages in the early stage of pandemic in Serbia.

Methodology

We employ critical discourse analysis on the census of press briefings held by the President and the Government between 15 March and 8 April 2020 (N=25). During this period the briefings were primary channel for communicating the official response to the pandemic, as they were broadcasted live on public service television and key commercial TV channels. Critical discourse analysis allowed us to develop an instrument for linking 1) macro-themes of press briefings with 2) actors and 3) functions of messages (Van...
Leeuwen, 2008). Macro-themes (e.g. economic measures, health advice, health measures) are formed deductively through iterative coding of the material using NVivo software. We identify two groups of actors: speakers – those present at the briefings (e.g. chief epidemiologist, President, hospital directors, but also journalists asking questions), and addressees – those discursively constructed by speakers (medical personnel, elderly, youth). In terms of functions, we discriminate between experiential/ideational (Halliday, 1985) – pertaining to the question how is pandemic represented during the briefings, interpersonal – pertaining to the question how speakers enact their relation with others, and textual function – related to the question how are macro-themes organized by each speaker at the briefing.

Results and conclusions

Our preliminary results indicate that in terms of health risk messages and the ways the pandemic is represented there was little incongruence between different actors. Analysis of interpersonal functions shows a wide range of messages from highly cohesive to highly divisive ones. The consequent analysis of actor representation reveals that divisive interpersonal messages co-occur predominantly with the positive self-representation of the government and President, i.e. their attempt to manage reputation. While these results reflect the context of a pre-election period, future research is needed to assess to what extent such patterns continue after the elections. Furthermore, subsequent studies should analyze how the briefings were transferred in shorter news items, and what was the public perception of the briefings.

Keywords: COVID-19, press briefing, health risk communication, reputation management

References


Symmetry, Inclusion, and Workplace Conflicts: Conflict Management Effects of Two Managerial Strategies on Employee Advocacy and Departure

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Introduction

Workplace conflict bogs down in organizational processes. It increases divisive culture and psychological distancing and dampens morale and collaboration among employees. Organizations may fail in the absence of managerial strategies for internal conflict. In the present study, we identified two strategies for safeguarding and moderating risks in workplace conflict: communication strategy (symmetrical communication) and behavioral management strategy (inclusive management). We examined the effectiveness of the strategies on two employee behaviors: job turnover and employee advocacy.

Literature Review

Symmetrical communication is one of the key components of internal employee communication (Men, 2014). Organizations that implement symmetrical communication in employee communication programs are decentralized and give employees autonomy within the organization. In addition, organizations with organic structures, participative culture, and inclusivity are more likely to practice symmetrical communication with their employees (J. E. Grunig, 1992, L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

Inclusive management is a way of enacting shared value systems when an organization faces uncertainty in decisional situations. Inclusive management seeks to account for and be accountable for all those affected by organizational choices and actions. In employee relations, it is critical to creating an organizational culture and internal procedures so that employee voices are heard and employee needs and wants are incorporated. The IABC Excellence study (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002) found that in the most effective of over 300 organizations, CEOs and leaders create and embrace an organic structure and participative culture that involve public relations in the decision-making process.

Research Questions and Method

Given a wide range of company size, we first examined if workplace conflict is a general phenomenon across companies of all size. Therefore, the following hypothesis that investigates of a universality of workplace conflict is put forth. If the hypothesis is not supported, it is necessary to
investigate factors affecting organizational success in the face of workplace conflict.

- **H1.** Top companies and non-top companies have a difference in terms of frequency or likelihood of workplace conflicts.

- We further established four hypotheses about how symmetry and inclusion affect employees’ behaviors if the workplace conflict prevails at any company.

- **H2.** The more symmetrical communication in the workplace, the less likely the employee job turnover intent.

- **H3.** The more symmetrical communication in the workplace, the more likely the employee pro-organizational megaphoning.

- **H4.** The more inclusive management in the workplace, the less likely the employee job turnover intent.

- **H5.** The more inclusive management in the workplace, the more likely the employee pro-organizational megaphoning.

To examine the hypotheses, an online survey was conducted. Employees from the five largest corporations (Hyundai, LG, Lotte, Samsung, and SK – top companies) and other Korean companies (non-top companies), respectively, were recruited for the survey. A total of 600 responses were collected: 300 participants from each company group (i.e., TOP5 corporations vs. others) using an online panel.

**Results**

The results showed that workplace conflicts did not vary by company types (t-test): top companies ($M = 2.31$, $SD = .82$) vs. non-top companies ($M = 2.31$, $SD = .91$; $p > .05$). Therefore, H1 was not supported. Results from a series of multiple regression demonstrated that the higher level of the symmetrical communication ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .01$) and the inclusive management ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .01$) in workplace led to employees’ lower intention to leave their current jobs. In addition, the symmetrical communication ($\beta = .23$, $p < .01$) and the inclusive management ($\beta = .13$, $p < .01$) were found to strengthen employees’ positive advocacy toward the company. Hence, all H2, H3, H4, and H5 were supported.

**Conclusion**

We explored management strategies based on symmetry and inclusion that could decrease or moderate unavoidable workplace conflict. The findings are encouraging. Symmetrical communication and inclusive management had effects on lowering employee retention and increasing their voluntary advocacy when organizations experience trouble. Furthermore, these effects on employees were shown salient regardless of the level of workplace conflicts. Therefore, organizations are recommended to aim their communication and decision cultures toward symmetry and inclusivity when it comes to corporate communication with employees.

**Keywords:** Conflict management, Employee, Inclusion, Symmetrical communication, Workplace conflict
‘Super-wicked’ challenges and political communication in crisis

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Introduction, purpose and rationale (implications for academy, practice and society)

The global pandemic has put governmental and other leadership functions under unprecedented pressures. COVID-19 is a “complex problem in a complex system”, as a comment in the British Medical Journal put it. In management and leadership science, such problems (from global warming to modern healthcare systems) have long been known as wicked, or even super wicked problems (Wexler and Oberlander 2020). In the late 1980s, scholars at the US Army War College coined the term VUCA for the increased volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity triggered by geopolitical disruptions. Some countries and leaders have dealt more effectively than others with the manifold, interrelated and largely unpredictable impacts of COVID-19.

This paper explores the UK Government’s response to, and management of, the interconnected crises (public health, social care, education, economy, employment, to name a few) caused during the pandemic. It does so from the perspective of risk and crisis communication, as well as political communication, on the basis that the pandemic doesn’t just put leadership and leadership theory to the test, but also established frameworks and theories of how to effectively communicate in an evolving crisis.

Lit review

We discuss the field of risk and crisis communication as it pertains to the present global crises. We find that established frameworks and models are not fully equipped to deal with the new class of super wicked problems, not least because of a lack of understanding of ‘radical uncertainty’. We argue that existing frameworks focus on manageable (if complex) problems, whereas radically uncertain problems are fundamentally equivocal and indeterminate.

We discuss political communication and health communication as related public communication issues. In ‘normal’ times, public health agencies and their communication specialists operate independently of political communication, following different norms and purposes. Increasingly, at least in the UK, political communication takes the form of permanent campaigning, prioritizing image management over information provision (Joathan and Lilleker 2020).

At a time when a severe global health crisis requires expert-led governance and information-based public health communication aiming to change behaviour on a large scale, the permanent campaigning principle of political communication is unfit for purpose.

Methodology

Based on our grounding in risk and crisis com-
munication, as well as public health and political communication, we review in depth the chronology of the UK Government’s reaction to the evolving crises. We look at public announcements, information campaigns and policy decisions, and consider motivations and drivers of decision-making. Specifically, we look at the persona and role of the leader, Prime Minister Boris Johnson. We posit that his public persona, as well as the composition of his government, were suited and geared to ‘making Brexit happen’, but then struggled to adjust to the requirements of a global pandemic.

Where meaningfully possible, we compare the UK’s response – decision-making and impact – to that of countries which appear to have dealt more successfully with COVID-19, such as Germany and New Zealand.

Results and conclusions

Working from the analogy of close-minded ideological hedgehogs and open-minded empirical foxes, we conclude – with Philip Tetlock and Nate Silver, who both introduced the analogy in the context of data-based prediction – that a fox mindset and framework is better suited for the super wicked problems of our unpredictable VUCA world. This corresponds with an ability to adapt leadership and communication styles to problem styles along the tame – wicked – critical continuum. (Grint 2020)

In contrast, our analysis shows two sets of narrow-minded hedgehogs – a government focused on protecting their brand and projecting certainty working with advisors solely focused on the health crisis aspect of the pandemic. This approach led to confusion as soon as the complexities caused by the pandemic came into focus and the failure to meet targets became evident led to a sharp and persistent decline in support for and satisfaction with the UK’s official handling of the pandemic.

Leaders and communication specialists alike increasingly need ‘foxy’ skills to operate between, rather than within, core functions such as risk and crisis communication, public health communication and political communication.

Keywords: crisis communication, leadership theory, permanent campaigning, radical uncertainty, wicked problems

References


Pandemic risk and crisis communication from an IGO: A case study of NATO’s Public Diplomacy

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Introduction

It is no secret that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of life, including communication activities of the whole world. NATO, traditionally a military-oriented security alliance, is no exception. In March 2020, this Inter-Governmental Organization’s (IGO) vibrant public diplomacy programs, its press tours, and visitor programs all came to a sudden halt. The public outreach travels of high ranking NATO officials to destinations around the globe, including to Colombia and Japan, were either cancelled or postponed while new invitations were not entertained.

Two immediate tasks rose up in front of NATO’s communicators – how to shift all of its programs to a digital online mode and how to negotiate its role and communication about NATO in the midst of a global pandemic. The first task was done in a relatively fast manner. Just as many other organizations – be they national or international, private or governmental, discovered the online platforms, so did NATO’s Public Diplomacy Division, NATO’s main communication body. The second task was more pertinent and difficult – what is the role of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a collective defense organization whose objective is to provide for security of its 30 members states, in face of a health crisis?

NATO leadership quickly understood that NATO needs to be proactive and demonstrate both to its citizens but also adversaries that it continues to deliver on its primary role such as military operations, military exercises and other security related tasks in time of a pandemic. It should also assist its member and partners in a time of crisis. As a military Alliance, NATO owns important airlift capabilities, it has logistical and planning procedures and its members have trained military medical staff and hospitals. All of these tools were put in use immediately.

Since time was of essence, it was important to timely communicate about all of NATO’s efforts in the fight against the pandemic. NATO has adopted a dual track approach to NATO’s communication posture during the pandemic – proactive communication of what NATO does and of understanding the information environment in which its communication is competing with other narratives. Two strategies were adopted across all NATO’s bodies - Communications Plan on NATO’s Response to COVID 19 and NATO’s Response to COVID19 disinformation. Both plans had clearly defined communication objectives and audiences, communication tools and techniques and evaluation and assessment to review its effectiveness at the end of the campaign. The final review is still in making but partial assessment indicates relative success of...
NATO’s fast and proactive communication approach in a time of an unprecedented crisis.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss NATO’s strategy and public diplomacy tactics during a pandemic and analyze these based on communication theories.

**Literature Review**

Dhanesh and Sriramesh (2018) critiqued existing approaches to crisis communication -- particularly SCCT and the Benoit approaches -- for not at all paying attention to the impact of culture on crisis communication (including risk communication). Defining culture broadly going beyond the concept studied by anthropologists to include political, economic, media, and activist cultures (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2020), the authors critiqued the crisis that Nestle India faced with regard to a food contamination crisis in India. This paper follows that approach and seeks to explore how these five cultural variables played a role in the way NATO conducted its public diplomacy activities during this pandemic. As an IGO, NATO is immensely influenced by the political, economic, and cultural environments of member nations, which all play a role in how it can manage its relationship with member nations and also the rest of the world.

**Methodology**

This paper uses the case study approach. The first author is a key member of the public diplomacy activities of NATO being stationed in Brussels. This paper will only use the unclassified documents for the purpose of this paper. As needed, we may also use personal interviews for data going beyond the documents that will be reviewed. First, the paper will focus on the communication strategies that this IGO had to establish at the outset of the pandemic that upset all its established communication program. Next, the focus will be on the techniques (tactics) that NATO devised to put this communication strategy into action. Third, the paper will address the challenges that NATO faced in implementing these strategies and techniques. For instance, it is well known that at least one member of the alliance, the US, did not seem to walk the same path as most NATO nations with regard to the science behind the pandemic. Finally, what lessons can we learn from the experiences of this IGO when confronted with such a global pandemic with many risk and crisis communication implications?

**Practical Implications**

This paper, while remaining conceptually grounded, is very much oriented to practical applications given that the first author is immersed in practice for NATO. The methodology section has outlined four key areas that this paper will address and each of these has enormous practical applications not just for NATO but for any IGO. It is hoped that the analysis emanating from this paper will inform how NATO’s Public Diplomacy Division and other IGOs can learn from its activities during 2020 as it pertains to this pandemic.

**Keywords:** NATO public diplomacy, Pandemic communication by IGO, Culture and Communication, Culture and Public Diplomacy
The role of internal communication during the Covid-19 pandemic and its intertwining with public risk communication. A study on Italian companies

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Introduction and purpose of the study

Internal communication plays a relevant role during crises, since employees have a special bond with the organization and their contribution is pivotal to overcome the crisis itself. The specific nature of the Covid-19 pandemic, enforcing social distancing among employees and posing high risk to their health, has made the role of internal communication even more important. This study was aimed at outlining the role of internal communication strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic to sustain the relationship with employees. Moreover, it explored the role of internal communication strategies in its intertwining with public risk communication to support employees’ understanding of the health risks associated with Covid-19 and to motivate them to adopt appropriate preventive behaviors.

Literature review

Crisis communication strategies adopted by organizations can vary along a continuum, from pure defensive strategies to pure accommodative strategies, devoted to meeting varied stakeholders’ expectations (Coombs, 1998; Pang et al., 2010). A set of contingency factors can affect the adoption of these strategies (Pang et al., 2010). Organizations should also consider that employees have more intense emotional reactions to a crisis compared to external stakeholders, due to the specific nature of the relationship (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Based on this assumption, the objectives of internal crisis communication can be targeted towards creating a sense of security, sustaining a sense of belonging and activating employees as allies of the organization (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015). Taking all this into consideration, this study argues that pure accommodative communication strategies are in principle the most desirable in internal crisis communication.

Methodology

This study was conducted among Italian organizations and included: a preliminary qualitative
phase through two focus groups and ten individual interviews with internal communication managers; and a quantitative phase through a survey on a sample of 116 internal communication managers recruited through a snow-ball sampling technique.

**Results and conclusions**

Results show that Italian companies tended to adopt accommodative strategies of corrective action and cooperation aimed at creating a sense of security among employees, at sustaining their sense of belonging towards the organization, and at activating employees as allies of the organization. In particular, organizations took into consideration the high relevance of the stake of employee health and safety to make their decisions about internal communication strategies, and this factor led organizations towards employing an accommodative approach. Specifically, creating a sense of security among employees implied clarifying the measures undertaken by authorities to reduce Covid-19 infections and adapting such measures to the organizational context, as well as informing employees about preventive behaviors to adopt at work. In this way, while internal communication managers had to face the challenges of communicating in an uncertain information framework and of transferring complex and ever-changing content, internal communication helped employees deal with the external infodemic and better understand how to behave correctly to reduce health risks. The study has some limitations: it was based on a non-probabilistic sample and collected data only in Italy. Future research could help overcome such limitations and reinforce these study findings by employing probabilistic sampling and replicating the study in different national contexts.

**Practical and social implications**

Considering the particular relationship with employees and the contribution that internal communication can give to sustain employee engagement, managers should always consider an accommodative approach when managing internal crisis communication, especially when a relevant stake such as employee health and safety is at risk. At the societal level, it is worth considering the role that organizations can play to complement and reinforce public risk communication: through their internal communication, organizations can contribute to make their employees more aware of public health risks and help them understand the importance of adopting preventive behaviors both at work and in their private sphere.

**Keywords:** Internal Crisis Communication, Accommodative Strategies, Covid-19 Pandemic

**References**


#adidasgate and Crisis Award

Winners: Excellence within Corporate Communication during the Covid-19 Crisis

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Introduction and purpose of the study

“These recent months have seen corporate reputations made. And corporate reputations wrecked,” says Francis Ingham, Director General of the Public Relations and Communications Association. It is without question that the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic poses significant challenges for the corporate communication sector. Depending on whether these challenges were met successfully, the pandemic crisis has strained or strengthened relations with stakeholders. However, more than one year into the crisis, there is still little data available on how affected companies communicated throughout the crisis. This paper therefore explores corporate crisis communication strategies in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. It will also investigate the role of excellence in Public Relations with regard to crisis outcomes.

Literature review

Companies across the globe have been affected by the pandemic economically and/or epidemiologically, causing countless organizational crises as well. So far, one mostly relies on anecdotal evidence with regard to corporate crisis responses and their effect on reputation, often stressing the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (e.g. He & Harris, 2020).

To achieve a more differentiated understanding of an effective corporate communication throughout the crisis, one first has to understand how an organization is affected. The paper therefore draws from Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to distinguish victim, accidental, and preventable crisis clusters (Coombs, 2007, p. 168). Depending on the cluster, communication professionals can choose from a variety of response strategies that predict the best possible outcome for the organization.

In combination with analyzing corporate crisis response strategies, the paper will use excellence theory in public relations and communication management (Grunig & Dozier, 2002) to understand in how far empowerment of public relations function, communicator roles, organization of communication function and understanding of PR models are relevant for successful communication management during a crisis.

Methodology

The study entails three steps: 1) selection of contrasting case studies based on some of the most prominently discussed positive and negative examples of Corporate Crisis Communi-
tion; for Germany, UK and the U.S., one positive and one negative case will be defined (N= 6). 2) Qualitative content analysis of all related press releases and selected social media posts between March and December 2020 to reconstruct the narratives according to SCCT implemented by affected companies. 3) Analysis of indicators based on excellence theory in press releases and/or additional publicly available sources.

Results and conclusions

Preliminary findings from two German cases show that different crisis response strategies indeed led to different outcomes and were closely linked to excellence aspects. For instance, the first Covid-19 cases in Germany were detected at the automotive supplier Webasto, resulting in a victim crisis. Thanks to a strong empowerment of the PR function and a quick and transparent communication, the company was able to protect and enhance its reputation – and even won awards with this approach. Contrastingly, the sporting goods manufacturer Adidas created a preventable crisis by deferring the rent for its European stores, which was widely criticized. Judging from the company’s communication history, it seems that initially a lower management level was involved in the communication and only in the end the CEO got involved and decided to continue the payment and issue an apology.

To conclude, our analysis illustrates that for affected companies, the pandemic crisis can be both a chance to build and extend a positive reputation, but also poses a significant reputational threat.

Limitations

A limitation lies in the fact that the study focuses only on six case studies. In addition, all observations concerning the excellence perspective will be only external and will need to validated with internal interviews in the future.

Practical and social implications

The analysis show that 1) the main factors for a successful crisis communication are defined a long time ahead of the crisis and 2) the combination of SCCT and excellence theory provides a powerful tool to improve crisis preparedness and response.

Keywords: crisis communication, pandemic, communication management, excellence theory

References


Communication leadership in extraordinary times: exploring the role and work of female communications leaders during the coronavirus pandemic

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Introduction: a pandemic tale

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic has been a global phenomenon with at the time of writing over 100 million cases of coronavirus and over 2 million reported deaths worldwide [WHO]. Here the USA heads the grim league table of coronavirus attributed deaths with over 400,000 deaths, followed by Brazil [219,000], India [154,000], Mexico [152,000] and then the UK [103,000]. The worry around the world has been the arrival of a second wave of an even more contagious strain of coronavirus which has threaten to overwhelm the health-care systems in many countries. The discovery and approval of a number of coronavirus vaccines has offered some light at the end of a very dark tunnel but production and distribution issues have left most countries playing ‘catch up’ in a race to try to get ahead of and stem the growing tide of infections.

While governments around the world have committed resources on an unprecedented scale in an attempt to combat the coronavirus and treat those infected; most governments have also recognised the huge economic damage and cost of these measures, which threaten to bring about one of the worst economic recessions across the world since the Seventeenth Century. The UK government [mirrored by similar measures in the USA and other countries] has introduced a wide range of measures to address the sharp economic decline and prop-up failing sectors of business, ranging from a hugely expensive furlough scheme, and loan guaranteed scheme to support large swathes of business at risk of permanent closure. The total cost of these measures has been forecast to increase public debt to around £2.63 trillion by 2024 (Office for Budget Responsibility, OBR)

The lockdown and other restrictive measures have had a profound effect on many business sectors notably, travel and tourism and hospitality, leisure and professional services have suffered devastating losses and closures, others such as online retailing and gaming have boomed. One of the most profound changes enforced by the pandemic has been in the way many businesses have been forced to fundamentally change how they organise and manage their operations as well as their interaction with their stakeholders. Remote working has become almost the norm, with virtual team meetings, online conferencing often supported by the extensive use of social media.
Research Purpose

It is against the backdrop of this radically changed business environment that this study seeks to examines the role of female communications leaders and how they have responded to the challenges and opportunities that they have faced during the coronavirus pandemic. Indeed one interesting question explored is whether female leaders are inherently more effective at the type ambidextrous virtual team management required during the pandemic than their male counterparts. The study focuses on leadership within communications / public relations teams that often provided the vital ‘glue’ in the form of communication support for their organisation’s management strategies during the pandemic.

Literature review

One consequence of the impact of the pandemic on business has been a widescale move to remote working, which involves motivating and organising virtual teams, which arguably, demands specific leadership capabilities and skills- namely the ability to respond quickly and decisively to change, while at the same time maintaining stability and continuity within the team. This type of virtual team leadership demands the ability work in a highly flexible, adaptive manner – what has been termed an ‘ambidextrous approach’ to management and leadership (e.g. Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008). Indeed, the notion of ambidextrous management (e.g. Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008; Simsek, 2009) alongside that of transformational leadership, which refer to approaches that it has been argued are well suited to turbulent environments (Bass, 1990; Bass 1985; 1997; Aldoory and Toth, 2004). The latter, in particular, has been found to be more closely associated with and delivered by female leaders as they have been found to display more enabling behaviours (Powell et al, 2004; Aldoory and Toth, 2004; Brandt and Laiho, 2013). Moreover, the transformational approach is not only seen as the preferred leadership style (Aldoory, 1998; Aldoory and Toth, 2004; Werder and Holtzhausen, 2009; Jin, 2010; Wu, 2010) but is also strongly associated with effective PR leadership (Yang, 2012; Berger and Meng, 2014).

Methodology

This paper draws on the data collected from extended in-depth interviews with eight highly experienced female Directors of Communication each of whom had more than ten years’ experience in a senior role. This qualitative approach which used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012; Miles and Huberman, 1994) to tease out the dominant patterns within the data enabled the researcher to probe the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of their lived experience as Directors of Communication exploring their response to and experience of leadership during the current coronavirus pandemic.

Findings and Conclusions

Because the sample of senior female communications leaders were drawn from a quite diverse sectors it was not surprising that individual leader experienced exhibited marked differences particularly in terms of the issues faced, the support provided and the freedom and scope of the actions enacted. However there were also a number of common threads uncovered notably the resilience, flexibility and sheer determination exhibited by female leaders, as well as in virtually all cases, the fierce loyalty the female leaders commanded from their teams.

Keywords: Pandemic communications; ambidexterity; female leadership capabilities

Key References


Crisis Communication in Public Relations Courses: What has been changing with the pandemic COVID-19?

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Introduction and Purpose of the Study

It is known that the public relations profession often involves a position of media relations. In this context, this type of expert must obtain skills in the critical and active use of media. Afterwards it arises the need to understand what kind of investment in crisis communication has been done by Portuguese Public Universities. In the past we analyzed the curricula of undergraduate and public relations master of the 15 existing Portuguese public universities to understand in what sense there is an investment of media literacy in public relations courses in Portuguese public universities. Currently and considering the context we are living we want to know what has changed and how public relations courses were prepared for crisis communication. This is because the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) significantly changed everyday practices and this is the first pandemic to be almost “livestreamed” on social media and digital platforms.

Literature Review

The literacy has been seen as a dimension of the new civilization, after the industrial revolution. In this context, this ability to work with words and images is relevant for the transmission of information and knowledge, being as a form of social hegemony. It is known that, today, 90% of the population belonging to developed countries is literate. This is because, as a rule, individuals develop their basic skills in reading, writing and calculation since the primary school (Perez-Tornero and Varis, 2010). However, new skills have begun to be required, mainly regarding aspects related to media coverage of the image and audiovisual language. It this context we must acquire the understanding of what is currently considered to be referred to media literacy (Perez-Tornero and Varis, 2010).

There are some careers in which it is important to have media literacy, particularly those that are inserted in the area of communication sciences. The public relations function is one of them, because these types of professionals must purchase a set of critical analysis skills related to the media. In this sense, there is an urgent need to make related decisions to choosing the right channel to reach the audience; understand how multiple channels (email, brochures) reinforce the message (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009).

Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation of social alarm corresponded to a situation of communication crisis for which the organi-
izations did not have response plans (Ortuño, Rincón & Ferreira, 2021). A study carried out recently in Portugal showed that in times of pandemic, the individuals consumed information from all available sources (television, social networks, digital newspapers and the Internet), but attributed greater credibility to conventional media - television and newspapers (Ferreira, 2021; Serrano, 2021). Social networks, although regularly consulted, were trusted by a minority. These data show the need to consider people capable of disseminating information, especially in times of crisis (Ferreira, 2021). Thereby, it becomes increasingly important to understand what is the investment that has been made, in academic terms, in the Public Relations Degrees, to realize, too, the long-term impact this has for public relations professionals.

Methodology

In the present research, a mixed methodology was used. In this way, we conducted interviews with university professors and questionnaires with public relations students. These interviews and questionnaires were complementary to try to understand if there has been any change in the study plans of these courses, in the sense of a greater investment in crisis communication. This research had a total of 110 individuals: 10 university professors and 100 students. The interviews had a semi structured character and we conducted a content analysis, in order to divide the speech into different categories. The questionnaires were analyzed using the SPSS statistical program and with descriptive statistics.

Results and Conclusions

It was possible to perceive that the students and the professors report that there have been some changes in the sense of a greater concern in talking about issues related to crisis communication. Although there has not yet been a reformulation of the study plans, as we are still experiencing a pandemic context. However, there is a growing concern to take crisis communication into account. These conclusions will be stronger when the pandemic ends, in which we can verify if there was indeed a reformulation of the study plans at this level.

Practical and Social Implications

Considering the investment that is being made by universities with regard to crisis communication, may be important to act more efficiently and effectively in the future. Current public relations students are the professionals of the future. In this sense, it is essential that they develop the skills to know how to act in times of crisis. It is known that many of the risk behaviors that have been identified at this level are due to misinformation by people. In this case, the public relations professionals playing a fundamental role, because they may help policy makers to disseminate more coherent and less confusing information to citizens.

Keywords: Public Relations; Crisis Communication; COVID-19; Universities
Personality Traits and Value of Corporate Apology: An Experimental Study in the Aviation Industry

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Introduction and purpose of the study

Crises are processes where everything that organizations say and do are carefully monitored by stakeholders and society. Therefore, this situation requires organizations to act much more carefully and with care in their crisis communication processes. Explanations and statements that are misunderstood can cause further crises. This can have further negative effects than the original crisis itself. The destructive effects of crisis can be reduced by effective crisis management processes. The organizations should be prepared for crises and they should manage it by implementing the appropriate strategy, taking into consideration the impact of different types of crises and public attribution. That is to say that each crisis requires different management in terms of its features and scope. In this context, which strategy will be more effective in which crisis situation constitutes the problematic. In addition to this, the socio-cultural characteristics of the country where the crisis takes place are also among the other determinants of the reactions to the crises. We can include personality traits as another factor. The purpose of this study is to understand the reactions of publics to different corporate apology strategies of the aviation industry. Which type of corporate apology works well with which type of crisis? In addition to this, another purpose of the study is to understand if different personality types react differently to the corporate apologies, in other words, is there a link between personality of the individual and their preferred corporate apology?

Literature Review

Crises can be categorized as internal or external depending on whether the crisis is initiated through inside or outside actions. They can be also classified as intentional or unintentional (Marsen, 2020). Chung and Lee (2021) have studied how corporate apologies influence cognitive and affective public responses during an aviation crisis, examining responsibility and sympathy-oriented apologies with internal and external crisis situations. In our study, we will replicate their study for aviation crisis in our home country with slight modifications and include personality types and preferred corporate apology.

Methodology

The research will be an experimental one where we will be writing different scripts for different crisis types. Coombs and Holladay (2009) stated that experimental method is being used increasingly to investigate crisis communication. In our study, different crisis types will be matched with
different corporate apology strategies. Through the scenarios, and the survey conducted with participants, the aim is to understand the cognitive and affective responses of the publics to these situations. The impacts of two types corporate apology which are responsibility and sympathy will be tested with two types of causal attribution which are internal and external. In the study of Chung and Lee (2020) for the internal/controllable crisis, an inexperienced pilot scenario has been created. In our study, for the internal/controllable crisis, it will be a technical malfunction. As external/uncontrollable crisis, it was bad weather, and in our scenario, this will be bad weather as well. News articles will be around these themes, and then the participants will read the corporate apology by the X Airlines. The personality characteristics will be measured by the Big Five Inventory (BFI) developed by John, Donahue and Kentle (1991). The dimensions of (BFI) are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness.

**Results and conclusions**

The results of the study cannot be generalized; this study may not apply to all crises contexts. The aviation industry is prone to crisis and the study will be useful for crisis communication and corporate managers. Also by examining the link between personality characteristics and the preferred corporate apology, new data will be generated on this aspect as well.

**Practical and social implications**

There are not many studies in our home country that use experimental methodology to study different crisis situations and corporate apology.

**Keywords:** personality traits, crisis communication, corporate apology, aviation industry

**References**


Media Portrayal of Corona Pandemic Press Briefings by Public Health Officials: A Public Relations Approach

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Introduction and purpose of the study

Few corporate communication scholars would dispute the widespread interest in crisis and crisis-related communication in terms of the massive public and media attention crises situations generate. Arguing that covid-19 was the dominant global crisis in 2020, this study investigates how government health authorities in Kenya and Turkey responded to the pandemic by analyzing media coverage and portrayal of press briefings during the first and second waves of the pandemic early in 2020 and at the end of 2020 and early 2021, respectively. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How did the two countries’ health officials give information about the pandemic to the public with regard to; a). Specifics about the virus and risks posed to the public? b). Factual information about the status of spread of the virus in the country, and c). Safety precautions recommended to the public? (2) From what level of government were officials who gave information on coronavirus drawn and how frequently was information given to the public? (3) How were the coronavirus briefings framed by Kenya’s Daily Nation and Turkey’s Hurriyet Daily News newspapers? (4) Were there significant differences in the way information on the pandemic was communicated to the public in Kenya and in Turkey?

Literature

The simpler conceptual goal of this study is to attempt a comparative investigation of how the media in two countries covered and portrayed the same global crisis. Perhaps a more important goal is an attempt a response to one of the research concerns increasingly gaining occurrence about crisis communication research’s seeming over reliance on organization-centric model of inquiry; with some scholars increasingly arguing that while this approach may be good it would not sufficiently or adequately explain plurality of voices that typically accompany many crises situations (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Luoma-aho, Tirkkonen, & Vos, 2013, Raupp, J., 2019). Rowley (1997) developed the rather influential network theory of stakeholders as a preferable way of holistically understanding organizational behavior in times of crisis. The stakeholder theory argues that crisis communication may be better understood if viewed as a stakeholders’ relationship network – no longer focusing on one organization’s crisis response strategies but on “patterns of interactions” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017 p. 148) of various voices. Main downside of the approach, however, is that not enough empirical studies have been done and data gathered (Coombs, 2014; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). It is to this small but growing body of literature
that the present study is intended to contribute. We also use two media conceptual traditions of media framing and agenda setting on the one hand, and excellence theory and rhetorical arena theory in public relations, on the other, to investigate and analyze how the two leading newspapers in Kenya and Turkey covered and portrayed the dissemination of crisis information on coronavirus by the two countries’ government health officials to their respective publics.

**Method**

Content analysis of two leading English language newspapers was chosen to collect data for the research. Content of the 2 selected publications would be analyzed during the 2 months peaks of the first and second wave of the corona pandemic (March/April 2020) and (December 2020 /January 2021) to investigate the media discourse on the corona pandemic as well as undertake a comparative analysis of how the selected media organizations framed the pandemic in terms of risk and seriousness of the disease, prevalence and threat(s) posed to the public and country and/or the world, and who the key government actors and stakeholders involved were. A two-step sampling procedure would be used to both identify relevant news articles about the pandemic and analyze statements within the selected articles attributed to key actors. Unit of analysis would be the headline and intro of pandemic-related stories attributed to health officials at press briefings.

**Keywords:** Media framing and bias, crisis communication, excellence theory, public relations, coronavirus pandemic, rhetorical arena theory.

**References**


Heath (2010)


Public Relations in risk communication: a critical asset

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Introduction and purpose

The contours of the current VUCA global reality, with free circulation of individuals, information, goods and services and where digital has revolutionized interpersonal relationships and the notion of distance, democratizing access to knowledge and improved the quality of life, launched society into a normal state of uncertainty, but also of emergency and catastrophe, jeopardizing its survival. As a result we today live in what is known by risk society.

In these paradoxes lies the pertinence of studying the risk communication mechanisms and strategies carried out by a local authority to face the possible risks that citizens may be subject to. The purpose of the study is then to observe the place assigned to public relations professionals in the institutional structure and evaluate the efforts made in communicating risk by a local governmental institution. Thus the research question is: what contribution is reserved to public relations in communicating risk to citizens in the context of local government?

Believing communication is a cornerstone able to establish such favourable conditions for the relationship between institutions and their public, it is noted that there are few investigations in the area of strategic risk communication, even less in local / municipal contexts. Hence the increased interest in studying a particular case of a local government.

Literature review

It is known for a fact that the perception of risk does not generate consensus, either between the scientific community in different fields, nor between technicians and decision makers, and even not forgetting the public in the matter. There is an urgent need to share the notion of risk, bringing together the perceptions and contents of experts and normal people without knowledge in this matter. This consensus between multiple levels of expertise through an informed understanding of risk and the quality in which communication generates cooperation and social relationships is what it is called risk communication (Leiss, 1996; Kruk, 1999; Covello & Sandman, 2001; Bostrom, 2003). The practice of integrated risk communication, strategically aimed at audiences with different levels of awareness / information, constitutes an effective means for population training in understanding, assessing and acting on the risks to which it may, unfortunately, be subject. This communication is close to the ideal of risk governance characterized by bilateral communication, as a channel for the exchange of (info)training and opinions among stakeholders so that, in the end, they converge in decision making regarding the behaviours to be implemented.

Methodology

A case study will be carried out using qualitative research tools such as an audit of the commu-
nication office; SWOT analysis; content analysis to the municipality website and also its Facebook; interviews with elements involved in decision-making, governance and risk communication.

Results

In the case of the municipality studied the arrangement of responsibilities and competencies, seems to safeguard a sharing of knowledge and communication skills that end up insuring and confirming the fundamental role that public relations play not only alerting citizens about risks but, above all, educating and empowering them through a logic of openness to dialogue and joint participation in risk governance.

Limitations

Some of the difficulties inherent to the present study include the restricted access to local government institutions; as well as the difficulty in obtaining the desired answers since the risk constitutes a controversial subject wrapped in a certain secrecy, or at least tends to provoke silences, which denote little opening to explore this matter in the local public sector.

Practical and social implications

As this is a reality that has been little studied and unfortunately still little valued in the decision-making and risk management processes, we hope to draw attention to the advantages and gains that public relations can bring to an integrated risk governance process. With the results and reflection on the role of public relations in risk communication in a local community, it is also expected to contribute to the establishment of a fluid strategic communication between the City Council and the surrounding community, corroborating the great responsibility that justifies the existence of a shared and empowering communication, capable of acting not only in a preventive way in face of risks but also guaranteeing the reduction of dangers and victims in situations of crisis and real danger.

Keywords: Public Relations; Risk Society; Risk Communication; Local Government
Algorithmic Profiteering and Corporate Social Activism of Video Platforms: The Effect on Social Change

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Introduction

With the rise of civil rights protests, pandemic hysteria, and a tumultuous election year in the United States, there is a climate for corporate social activism. Organizations are increasingly choosing to engage in controversial issues, diverging from the traditional business model that operates within the authority of institutional stakeholders. Video platform companies are unique in that they participate in activism with mixed motivation: providing a combination of algorithmically curated content that works in tandem with corporate activism to spark user engagement. The impact on issue progression and social change of such targeted content curation are explored through the change in attitudes and behavior of users on the controversial issues such as Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ rights.

Literature Review

Scholars identify the unconscious relationships corporations have with publics as part of an organizations’ corporate social range, or CSR3 (e.g., Vercic & Grunig, 2000). In this lens, corporate social activism (CSA) is the outcome of social reasoning by management and reflects the values and ethics of the organization. Video platform companies engage in CSR3 with mixed motives, encouraging user engagement by tapping into current social issues and trends. Similar to strategic philanthropy, the focus is profiteering of the video platforms and the participation in social justice issues. By highlighting content that potentially facilitates controversial issue discussion, video platform companies may shift user perceptions on these issues.

Recent studies observe the effects of selective exposure or selective information approach on strongly held beliefs and attitudes (e.g., Kim & Grunig, 2021). Content of stories have the potential to drive action, or to increase behavioral effects, while attachment to characters can compensate for the absence of real-life contact with disadvantaged groups, reducing support for restrictive policies (e.g., Rosenthal et al., 2020). However, persuasive communication can pose a potential threat to perceived freedom, leading to the strengthening of pre-existing attitudes (e.g., Grandpre, 2003). It is plausible that while CSA messages may be intended by companies to usher in societal change, they can also be contributing to a greater divide in issue resolution.

Research Questions and Methodology

The literature on the effects of CSA messaging on users in video platforms is limited, therefore, two research questions are examined: 1) Do corporate activist messages, delivered through genre suggestions on video platforms, influence audience viewing choices on controversial societal issues? 2) Does exposure to algorithmic and corporate activism promoted content shift audi-
ence attitudes or cause behavioral outcomes on controversial societal issues? This study will use data from the top 3 video streaming platforms in the United States. Two groups will be identified such that current subscribers of the three platforms (N=250) as well as non-subscribers (N=250) from M-turk panel. To establish the link of content consumed to activist messaging, user surveys will assess participant’s contents use patterns on the streaming service, their issue stance on a variety of divisive social issues, (i.e., BLM/LGBTQ movements), and their opinion extremity and communicative actions on those issues. Controlling demographics factors and subscription history, frequency, and content inclination will be examined for their correlations with issues-stance, close-mindedness, and communicative actions on issues. Further, the two groups (subscribers with heavier selective exposure/approach to the issues versus non-subscribers) will be compared for their opinion extremity and motivated issues communicative actions.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of CSA messaging has been steadily increasing and occurs in many forms. Some would consider this type of CSA as strategic corporation social reasoning (CSR3) of Vercic (1997) and Vercic and Grunig (2000), comparable to strategic philanthropy (e.g., donation for charities). This study uses M-turk samples to focus on the consequences of CSA and algorithmic content curations (CSR3) would have for users’ direction and motivation of participation to sociopolitical issues. Future research can investigate CSR3’s managerial dynamics and mixed-motives (i.e., profits by preferred content curations and user gratification). There a need for a sound framework to measure the amount and type of CSA a company engages in, and this study explores and further conceptualizes the different types and impacts that CSA can have on stakeholders.

This investigation provides a novel perspective into the phenomenon of CSA messaging and its infusion into companies that use algorithms to stoke user engagement.

This study adds to the knowledge of the impact of different forms of CSA companies can engage in and the effects on the attitudes and behaviors in society on controversial issues.

This paper identifies new research problems in CSA communications in management motivations to participate in controversial issue messaging, risks involved, and impact on the organization and society.
Confessions from a Cliff Over the Abyss: Developing a Workshop in Public Relations Entrepreneurship During a Pandemic

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This first-person essay advocates for opening an aperture in the curtain surrounding public relations pedagogy as I reflect on developing a Workshop in Public Relations Entrepreneurship designed to prepare senior-level undergraduate students for pandemic workplace realities. Offering young professionals options is consistent with Postmodern Theory values. Paired with practical application tools, this dynamic could go a long way in helping students to navigate risk associated with graduation with no job waiting. Scans of the public relations literature suggest very little formal research about how to teach entrepreneurship and support students transitioning from classroom to business ownership. In-depth interviews with professional public relations consultants in the form of advice provided the foundation for creating content and tone for a five-week (half-term) course. The essay concludes with advice for instructors who value opportunities to coach future entrepreneurs interested in launching their own consultancy now, in the near-term future, as a side gig, later in their public relations career, or after retirement from a full-time public relations job.

Introduction

College faculty cannot ignore the socio-economic-political environment in which we teach. I pondered exactly how to support senior-level students with as many options as possible while they fretted alone in quarantine about their future. The purpose of this essay is to explain how I responded to this context and developed a Workshop in Public Relations Entrepreneurship so that I may offer advice to faculty colleagues.

• RQ1: How shall “public relations entrepreneurship” be defined?
• RQ2: How does one develop a new course in public relations entrepreneurship in unprecedented times, amidst uncertainty and fear?

Literature review

A cursory view of the public relations pedagogy body of knowledge offers little advice on how to define or teach entrepreneurship. Henderson (2001) hinted at the value consultants bring to public relations work as ad hoc “on an as-needed basis” support (p. 542) and Hindrichsen (2001) contextualized consulting work in terms of senior executives “setting up shop after losing” corporate jobs (p. 455).

The journalism pedagogy literature offers clues about the importance of teaching entrepreneurship to college students. For example, U.S.-based universities have responded to recent decades’ negative journalism industry trends by creating
media entrepreneurship programs that respond to a decline of traditional journalism models and in the process have operationalized media entrepreneurship as “the creation and ownership of an enterprise whose activity adds an independent voice to the media marketplace” (Hoag, 2008, p. 74). In this context, Sindik and Graybeal (2017) advocated for collecting “international wisdom” by tapping global networks and pooling pedagogical tools to offer students the best course content on entrepreneurship (p. 163).

**Method**

This exploratory study is rooted in qualitative in-depth interviews conducted among a convenience sample of six female public relations consultants who offered advice on “hot skills” in demand during 2001 as organizations seek the best means for maintaining and establishing relationships with key stakeholder groups during a pandemic. Given the scarcity of information and direction available on the PRSA website or among the public relations pedagogy literature, this method afforded a valuable quick take steeped in research participants’ lived experiences as professional public relations consultants.

**Results and conclusions**

In response to RQ1, *public relations entrepreneurship* is defined.

In response to RQ2, five themes emerged among research participants’ advice that was translated into specific theme-topics used to develop content for five weeks (half-term) of an undergraduate Workshop in Public Relations Entrepreneurship. In addition, conversations with research participants yielded tips for setting a tone of optimism amidst so much uncertainty and high risk – which took the form of cheerleading, underscoring young professionals’ talents (especially proficiency in use of social media channels), and entrepreneurship’s maximum flexibility for launching a small new business now, in a few years, after starting a family, as a side gig, or upon retirement far into the future.

Advice on how to structure course content, reduce anxiety, and solicit videos from practicing consultants is provided.

Study limitations are offered, as well as suggestions for future research with implications for practice and society.

**Keywords:** Pedagogy, Entrepreneurship, Consulting, Pandemic

**References**


The challenges of ‘neo-intermediation’

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Introduction and purpose of the study

This essay focuses on the role of the “representative bodies,” which have declined through what many defined as “disintermediation age.”

Covid-19 pandemic only accelerated the pace in this “permanent crisis scenario.” Paradoxically, despite the crucial role of public communication, it is less clear and in need of a rethink the contribution of Public Relations to intermediation as a whole.

In September 2020, CNEL, the constitutional home of the country’s intermediate organisms, commissioned Storyfly to a signature Study on the current dynamics of corporate intermediation: integrating its upcoming findings, this study will compare various benchmarks to define a possible new model of “neo-intermediation.”

Literature review

This investigation ideally started at the 2019 BledCom Symposium, within the Panel led by Toni Muzi Falconi focused on the “Social Weaver.” Many scholars, such as Martino, Beck, Field, underlined how the disintermediation process moved from being a transactional or a financial model to a whole-scale phenomenon, nowadays affecting every part of the ‘social body.’

This process could even support Grunig’s Fourth Model. The key elements in this frame are competence and responsibility: representative organizations should be able to “listen” and provide valuable information and communication, and also to embody ethical behaviour. Where these elements are missing, an erosion of trust (and reputation) is inevitable.

As clearly shown by the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer, in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, none of the four societal institutions measured—government, business, NGOs, and media—is trusted anymore. Some commentators such as Nilsson or Naveen already noted that it would be all too easy to shift the blame for this situation entirely on the shoulders of a “dumb citizenship” or the unstoppable impact of technology. We can therefore infer that the representative bodies themselves have also been responsible for losing trust throughout disintermediation. Covid-19, therefore, sped up change through an already flawed scenario.

To address the functional differences of the proposed models, we will tap on a multidisciplinary approach, also inspired by the Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman’s fundamental distinction between textual and grammatical orientations, as taken up later on by Umberto Eco, who applied this framework to cultures and societies as whole structures.

Methodology

Research is based on a sample of approximately 500+ organizations, ranging from Parties, Trade Unions, Embassies, Associations, Confederations, Chambers of Commerce, and other top-tier Italian organizations from the vast ‘intermediation landscape.’
First, an online Questionnaire with closed-responses is going to be e-mailed to these organizations, to report on various statistics concerning topics such as integrated reporting (before/after Covid-19), communication tools, stakeholder relationships systems, organizational concerns, and policies.

Second, the Leaders of a selection from these organizations will be interviewed in-person. They will also be asked about the challenges they had to face before and during the pandemic; the changes they had to introduce to structure, policies, organization, reporting, resource allocation; how they managed adaptation to the new scenario, and their forecasting regarding the future of intermediation as a whole.

Finally, the descriptive article will integrate and re-analyse the research findings as qualitative and quantitative benchmarks to build on a new hypothesis of “-mediation landscape” (see the Scheme below).

**Results and conclusions**

In the light of the research results, whose first findings will be available by June, the initial hypothesis of this essay will be challenged and therefore updated to provide a 'minimum viable definition' of a constructive concept of “neo-intermediation” as a vital factor for the proper functioning of organizations into a disintermediated world.

A world in which Governments and in general complex organizations reached an all-time low in terms of trust: instead of vainly trying to regain their lost status, the representative bodies should aim to achieve a new role, moving towards an alternative 'horizontal/circular/grammatical' paradigm: that of neo-intermediation.

The last part of the essay will investigate further if and where the Public Relator is still perceived as the best candidate to support the “intermediate organizations.” With their implied capability to improve the quality of stakeholder relationships for private, public, and social organizations, public relations can create measurable social capital within-and-amongst them and their respective territories and stakeholders. This process is based mainly on listening, instead of adding just more “propaganda” to an already over-exerted context.

As such, the Public Relator could lead the representative bodies through the difficult transition from being “dispensers of truth,” as they pretended to be at the end of the “intermediation-era,” to “enablers of meaning,” as players able to guide the citizenship in an over-complex world effectively. In this scenario, authoritarianness will come from the capability to represent complexity and ambiguity, leading to a new "representativeness" model for the ‘neointermediated’ organization.

**Keywords:** Neo-intermediation, Representative Bodies, Trust, Reputation, Relationship Governance Models.
A female communication trailblazer by any standard: South Africa’s Prof. Ronèl Rensburg

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Prof Ronèl Rensburg, former Head of the Division of Communication Management at the University of Pretoria, had a profound impact on the development and recognition of communication management as a discipline in South Africa. Her influence however, was also acknowledged globally.

Ronèl led research that informed the King Reports of Corporate Governance in South Africa and that was taken up into corporate reporting regulations. She was the 8th female president of PRISA (Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa), and received PRISA Fellowship in 2015 in acknowledgement of her work in public relations and communication management education and practice regionally, nationally and internationally.

Globally she also made an impact and was a Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA) board member, and regularly contributed as evaluator to the International Association for Business Communication’s (IABC) Blue Ribbon Gold Quill Evaluation Panels, amongst others.

In an academic world dominated by males and a profession that relegates females to technical roles, Prof Ronèl Rensburg, stood out as an anomaly. This study aims to celebrate the achievements and investigate the factors that led to Ronèl’s success as a corporate communication professional and academic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Being an academic requires a person to excel in research, teaching and academic citizenship. Academic citizenship can be defined as: “the service behaviors carried out within and outside organizational boundaries, are in fact cornerstones of university functioning...” (Tagliaventi et al 2019:1057).

However, maintaining a balance between the tripart sets of tasks, can be very challenging for academics. Some academics orientate towards a specific aspect of these tasks, to the detriment of the other tasks. While others, try to “do it all”, without great achievements as seen from an international perspective (Tagliaventi et al 2019).

In addition, it is argued that female professors place more importance on the specific tasks of mentoring than their male counterparts, which can be argued to hold back the careers of female academics (Macfarlane & Burg, 2019). A certain combination of the “right personality” traits is also argued to determine the person’s success (Islam et al 2018).
Furthermore, South Africa faced great social and political challenges in the time that Ronèl worked on establishing recognition for a profession, typically relegated to secretaries as a technical function.

Given all the above, the odds seemed stacked against a South African female academic, trying to promote the communication discipline.

RESEARCH AIM AND METHOD

The aim of this paper will be to (i) discuss Ronel’s scientific contribution to the public relations and communication management disciplines, (ii) her contribution to the profession through liaison with professional bodies, (iii) leadership roles she took in academia, and (iv) her contribution to the wider communication community through education and mentorship. Furthermore, (v) the factors that led to her success as professional and academic will be explored.

The data will be gathered through a fact and event-oriented approach to historiography by analysing historical and academic archives, conducting interviews and through personal recollections (Raaz & Wehmeier, 2011:261).

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The research aims to show how a dual focus on national and international commitment, provided a pathway to superior academic citizenship for Ronèl, while considering the challenges she had to overcome in her career. We conclude that not all academics can hope to have such an impact and that a combination of the right personality in terms of having a proactive personality and conscientiousness (Islam et al 2018), passion, available time, intellectual ability, and so forth, need to be harnessed to truly achieve the coveted successful tri-part sets of tasks outlined for academics.

PRACTICAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the lived experience of Ronèl seems to move closer to the placeful university concept discussed by Nørgård and Bengtsen (2016). Placefulness supports a university that engages and collaborates with others through dialogue, openness, democracy, care and joint responsibility, in essence where the academic, on behalf of the university, takes the lead in collaboration with others. Thereby not only living by the outputs of research products (Dean & Forray, 2018), or students being delivered, but becoming part of the societal discussion and development.

The researchers propose that Ronèl’s personality of determination, endless energy and a passion for the discipline, were crucial in propelling her impact to such a wide audience. However, in the end, her drive to make a societal contribution, set her apart.

Keywords: Ronèl Rensburg, academic citizenship, public relations, communication management, placefulness, historiography
Communicating reliable Covid-19 information: WhatsApp lessons to be learned

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Introduction and purpose of the study

South Africa’s president, Cyril Ramaphosa, acted swiftly when the threat of Coronavirus was identified. To manage the situation the Disaster Management Act of 2002 was activated, lockdown instituted from 27 March 2020 and a National Command Council put in place to give guidance to government. At this point it was recognised that the South African economy was already struggling and would be crippled by the lockdown, and similar to other countries, that a lockdown would escalate political and social tensions.

In reply to the recognition that misinformation would be the “other” pandemic to manage, as was also seen in other African countries (Kazeem, 2020), South Africa’s National Department of Health swiftly set up an automated WhatsApp service, Covid-19 Connect, where citizens could get up to date information on the pandemic. It was deemed important for the government to have a direct line to the public to give accurate information quickly. The app gave the latest statistics on cases, but also guidelines for isolating, travel advice, information on symptoms, and information to dismiss myths and misconceptions. The app was used together with government briefings and advertisements on various channels. In addition, WhatsApp is accessible and used by 89% of the population in South Africa (Kemp 2020), and the usage is spread evenly across all generations (Iqbal 2021). In the first 7 weeks the app had reached 6.2 million users (Preakelt.org, 2020c).

The success of this app was hailed in South Africa, and the WhatsApp application was adopted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Kazeem 2020). The WHO application of the WhatsApp application has reached 50 million people globally (Matiashe 2020).

Although the need and usefulness of the app is agreed, only a small percentage (6.2 million) of the South African population of 60 million, accessed the app. In addition, mistruths were still circulating, and behaviour change was slow to adapted in some instances.

This raises the question as to what the impact of the WhatsApp app was, especially considering the aim of risk communication is to influence citizen behaviour to become less risky by providing scientific information. This paper aims to understand the success criteria for the app, as well as lessons learned from its implementation as viewed by the app managers.
Literature review

When reacting to a disaster, communities make use of the information available to them to guide their actions. Especially given the availability of information, and the ease for people to create messages on electronic channels like WhatsApp, truth-management becomes challenging. Strategic communication management advocates an approach where stakeholder-created communication is not limited or disregarded, but where a proactive approach to guide the conversation is encouraged.

The Sendai Framework for disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (UNISDR, 2015) highlights a strong focus on pre-disaster cooperation between government and citizens, to enhance in-disaster collaboration. In addition, by implication, the government stay responsible for accurate communication during the pandemic. Most importantly, communication from governments should be deemed trustworthy in order to result in behavioural change.

Methodology

This paper delivers information on the first phase of a larger project to understand the value and management implications of the WhatsApp app used during the pandemic in South Africa. Semi-structured interviews with the main players managing the app are ongoing and will inform the findings of the first phase. Five key players from government and the app developing company, were identified for the interviews. The second phase of the research, reported at a later stage, will understand the view from the citizens on the app.

Results and conclusions

The creation of a WhatsApp information sharing channel was a quick win for the South African government in securing up to date and true information reaching their citizens. It provided a foundation for other integrated communication strategies to follow and build upon.

It is expected that the respondents will report some challenges in the upkeep of information, and impact on citizen behaviour. It is also expected that the pre-Covid trust relationship between the government and citizens might have influenced the impact of the app on behavioural change.

The results from the first phase of the study are limited, as the view from those that developed and implemented the app may be more favourable towards its success. However, this information may also provide valuable insight on the management aspects related to the app. Adding the view from the citizens on the success of the app in phase two, would provide further insight into the use of an app during a pandemic.

Practical and social implications

Lessons learnt from this case could strengthen future applications of WhatsApp use for information sharing during times of crisis.

Keywords: WhatsApp; Risk communication; Covid-19; Pandemic
Character Assassination as Crisis Producer: The Cocreational Perspective

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Introduction and purpose of the study

This presentation will examine the causes and effects of character assassination campaigns as main producers of reputational crises in the age of social media. Character assassination (CA) refers to the strategic effort to discredit an individual or group target via subversive communication. Traditional research on CA sees subversive communication mainly from the functional perspective – as a means to an end, a tool in the hands of a powerful attacker. This presentation introduces the cocreational perspective of CA in the epoch of social media which highlights the key role of various publics in the production of CA campaigns. It permits us to make sense of the relational complexity of reputational crises that are jointly produced by interdependent publics. Importantly, it is a commonly accepted fact that social media have changed the perception of CA as a tool in the hands of power structures. How do social media enable subversive actors to create reputational crises targeting government officials in authoritarian political systems?

This presentation discusses the use of kompromat, or compromising materials, against the Russian political establishment in subversive campaigns produced by political activist Alexei Navalny.

Literature review

The cocreational perspective sees SC as planned campaigns that are based on studying and understanding the needs and wants of various publics rather than simply focusing on message production (Botan, 2018). The importance of being publics-centered is therefore fundamental to the cocreational model. This meta-theoretic view of SC will be elaborated upon next. Under the cocreational model, a public is understood to be an “interpretative community engaged in an ongoing process of developing a shared understanding of its relationship with a group or organization that can differ substantially from that of the organization” (Botan, 2018, p. 59).

Strategic subversive campaigns appeal to invested and motivated stakeholders that have a legitimate interest in a particular public figure or organization. This is particularly evident in crisis situations when the targets of attacks are surrounded by active investors who capitalize on the collapse of the target’s reputation. These invested stakeholders (the media, bloggers, activists, competitors, etc.) also seek to develop CA events that often cause strong public reactions. As noted by Coombs and Holladay (2020), stakeholders can even push management to change problematic behavior by threatening to harm the corporate image of their company.

Social networking sites provide strategic actors with resources to realize subversive campaigns in both liberal democracies and authoritarian societies. In authoritarian political systems, governments no longer have a monopoly on CA.
is now available as a power resource to non-systemic actors.

**Methodology**

This presentation utilizes the case study approach. The case of Russian political activist Alexei Navalny demonstrates the power of subversive campaigns in authoritarian societies with a developed internet ecosystem.

**Results and conclusions**

The participatory culture of internet media has translated cocreational theory into practice. Internet technologies streamline the production and implementation of cocreated subversive campaigns even in authoritarian contexts. Activist and social movement campaigns represent popular forms of online subversion. Subversive campaigns that produce CA events now develop almost instantaneously and in an unpredictable manner due to high connectivity and a greater number of individual and collective contributors. This reality reduces the effectiveness of traditional crisis management strategies and prevents organizations from controlling for multiple risks.

**Practical and social implications**

This discussion of CA through the lens of cocreational theory illuminates multiple directions for further scholarly investigations of this surprisingly overlooked topic. More research is needed to explain whether the effects of subversive campaigns by political activist Alexey Navalny will persist in the face of ongoing state efforts to shape and control the development of the public sphere. These state activities include tightening censorship of internet media, suppressing inconvenient narratives with pro-government propaganda, and normalizing peer pressure on dissent through fake-grassroots campaigns. More empirical research is required to measure the effects of authoritarian manipulation of the internet by countries like China and Russia.

**Keywords:** character assassination, crisis communication, reputational crisis, political communication, reputation
Covid-19 vaccine effectiveness: regional differences in online reporting of media outlets from vaccine-manufacturing countries

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Introduction and purpose of the study

The research aims to compare the reporting of web portals of mainstream media outlets on the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines in the four vaccine-manufacturing countries - USA, United Kingdom, Russian Federation, and China. The present study intends to examine the presence of false or misleading information in reporting on vaccines produced in other countries compared to the vaccines produced at the origin of the media outlet. Furthermore, the study explores whether vaccine-related reporting is used as supporting tool for health diplomacy beyond the borders of the countries of origin of the mainstream media.

Literature review

Sanders and Jones (2018) identified six categories of fake news, including false connection, misleading content, false context, imposter content, manipulated content and fabricated content. In any of the described forms, fake news is having significant agenda setting power, affecting the audience across various mainstream and online media outlets. Body of literature contains description of the agenda-setting role of fake news in four vaccine-manufacturing countries. Various sources describe the emergence of fake news during COVID-19 pandemic, including numerous misleading content articles related to COVID-19 vaccine. Given the fact that COVID-19 vaccine is recognized by literature as diplomatic tool of health diplomacy, it is critically important to understand if mainstream media outlets from four countries that produce COVID-19 vaccine engage in creation and distribution of false context, misleading content, manipulated content or fabricated content related to COVID-19 vaccines that originate from the other countries. Following the findings that media can engage to support the diplomatic efforts, it is important to understand if mainstream media outlets from four countries that produce COVID-19 vaccines have engaged as supporters and advocates of health diplomacy of their countries.

Methodology

Comparative content analysis of the web portals of mainstream media outlets in English language from the USA, UK, Russia, and China for the period November 2020 – January 2021 has been undertaken to identify the news published about COVID-19 vaccines. In order to identify possi-
ble discrepancies between media reporting and reality, content of the news has been compared with COVID-19 vaccine specification provided by producers (Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Sputnik V, Sinopharm) and with the announcements provided on the government and governmental entities’ websites.

Results and conclusions

The study confirmed engagement of mainstream media outlets from the USA, UK, Russia and China in creation of fake news and negative reports about COVID-19 vaccines whose producers do not originate from the same country as mainstream media outlet. In total, 23 examples of false context and misleading content news related to the vaccines of other producers, originating from mainstream media outlets, had been identified across all four countries. Majority of the identified examples can be classified as false content fake news, with high level of facticity, high intention to deceive the audience and indirect motivation for sharing. Unfavorable reporting and spreading false content about Sinopharm vaccine has been especially noticeable from the end of US-based media outlets, while unfavorable reporting and spreading false content about Pfizer vaccine has been especially noticeable from the end of Russia-based mainstream media outlets. Further, spillovers of negative articles about Sinopharm and Sputnik V vaccines have been noticed in the countries that have adopted Pfizer and Astra Zeneca vaccine, and vice versa. Spreading false information about Astra Zeneca vaccine has not been noticed in US-based media outlets, while spreading false information about Pfizer vaccine has not been noticed in UK-based media outlets. Chinese media outlets in English language are not reporting negatively or falsely about Sputnik V vaccine, while Russian media outlets do not report negatively about Sinopharm vaccine. Mainstream media outlets analyzed within this research are using examples across the world to create false context news and support unfavorable reporting about vaccines produced in other countries. None of the media outlets reported negatively about the vaccines produced in their countries. Reporting of media outlets clearly demonstrates the existence of two blocs of media engaged to support health diplomacy – one consisting of United States and United Kingdom, and another, consisting of Russian Federation and China. Limited number of mainstream media sources in English language from Russian Federation and China, and relatively short time span for inclusion of the news published by the portals of mainstream media outlets are the main limitations of this research.

Practical and social implications

The study provides insights to communication professionals and society about mechanisms of creation and spread of fake news in the context of agenda-setting for favorable acceptance of the vaccines originating from certain countries.

Keywords: COVID-19, online communication, fake news, media studies, health diplomacy

References

Social Media Guidelines in the Workplace: Stimulating or Restricting Employee Social Media Use?

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Introduction and purpose of the study

Employees are increasingly using social media at work, for work and about work. Therefore, many organizations implement social media guidelines to minimize the risks (e.g., the spread of criticism) and maximize the opportunities associated with employee social media use (e.g., ambassadorship). Prior research on social media guidelines is predominantly descriptive and focused on the organizational perspective. We thus have little or no idea about the actual impact of social media guidelines on employees. The purpose of this study is to investigate how these guidelines affect employees’ social media-related behaviors on the one hand and attitudes toward their employer on the other hand.

Literature review

Although research has not examined the impact of social media guidelines on employees, some advice has been formulated on how these guidelines can be drafted and communicated. First, communication scholars generally recommend to formulate social media guidelines in an incentive way, focusing on opportunities and stimulating employee social media use (e.g., Stohl et al., 2017). Legal scholars, by contrast, advise organizations to protect themselves by means of unambiguous and strict guidelines (e.g., O’Connor et al., 2016). This aligns with a rather restrictive formulation, focusing on avoiding risks and limiting work-related social media use. Two experimental studies examine the effectiveness of these types of guidelines in terms of employee branding behavior and guideline recall, as well as their impact on the organization-employee relationship.

Second, research indicates that most organizations write their social media guidelines in a conversational style as opposed to a more traditional, corporate style (Johnston, 2015). Such conversational style can help organizations to adopt a conversational human voice, which has already proven to generate benefits (e.g., positive word-of-mouth) when communicating with external publics. The first study, therefore, examines guideline style as a potential moderator in the impact of guideline content. Third, some organizations demand employees to sign the social media policy (O’Connor et al., 2016). This is believed to enhance their guideline recall and understanding. As such, the second study investigates the potential moderating effect of how the guidelines are imposed on employees.

Lastly, the approach employers take regarding their social media policy can determine whether employees feel as if their freedom has been limited. According to reactance theory (Brehm & Brehm, 1981), people who feel that their freedom is threatened, can experience reactance.
This reactance can cause employees to resent their employer and display the exact behavior that the policy aimed to prevent. As such, the second study also explores the role of reactance as a potential mediator.

Methodology

To examine the causal impact of social media guidelines on employees’ attitudes and behavior, two online experiments were conducted among Belgian men and women who worked for an organization consisting of at least 20 (N = 212; Study 1) or 50 employees (N = 222; Study 2). Participants read a fictitious social media policy that was manipulated in terms of focus (i.e. restrictive vs. incentive) and style (i.e. conversational vs. corporate; Study 1) or enforcement (signature requested vs. not requested; Study 2).

Results and conclusions

Results indicate that restrictive guidelines succeed best at enhancing guideline recall. Incentive guidelines, by contrast, are most beneficial for stimulating employee branding behavior on social media, while safeguarding the organization-employee relationship at the same time. The guidelines’ style and manner of enforcement did not seem to matter. A key recommendation for employers that want to draft social media guidelines is, therefore, to do so in an incentive rather than a restrictive way. However, the findings also show that solid social media guidelines will not make up for an organization’s initial bad reputation among employees. The organizational reputation among employees affected their social media behavior and relationship with the employer more strongly than the focus and formulation of social media guidelines.

Finally, our research does not indicate that distinct types of social media guidelines affect reactance differently. However, results show that reactance can negatively influence employees’ attitudes and social media behavior. Future research should examine the overall impact of having a formal social media policy on reactance. To do so, a control condition can be included in which participants receive no guideline at all.

Practical and social implications

An organization’s reputation is increasingly shaped by what employees say and do on social media. Communication and public relations executives are, therefore, in need of best practices on how to appropriately guide employees’ social media behavior. Our findings can help executives to draft social media guidelines in a way that increases the opportunities (e.g., ambassadorship) and reduces the risks (e.g., criticism) associated with employee social media use, while also safeguarding the organization-employee relationship.

Keywords: Social Media, Guidelines, Employee Communication, Ambassadorship, Organization-Employee Relationship
Social Media as a Gift and Curse in Crisis Communication: A Study on Turkish Public Relations Practitioners

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Introduction and Purpose

As social media has been causing a redefinition of communication function in general, its effects on crisis communication are quite remarkable. The ongoing change of social media has made the crisis environment much more complicated (Lee, 2020) that has led to the evolution of crisis communication practice and understanding.

The purpose of this study was to examine how Turkish public relations (PR) practitioners evaluate social media in terms of its threats and opportunities for crisis communication, and its effects on crisis consulting process. It also aimed to take recommendations to use social media more effectively during crisis communication.

Literature Review

In crisis communication field, social media is generally considered as both a gift and curse (Cheng, 2016) since it can trigger or inflame crises (Pang et al., 2014) and can help organizations to prevent them, respond better or learn from crises (Lin et al., 2016). In digital age, it plays a crucial role to know how social media should be used and managed before, during or after a crisis.

The impact of social media on crisis communication has been seriously debated all around the world. However, studies that include recommendations for use of social media in crisis communication are mostly disorganized (Lachlan, Spence and Eith, 2014) and research on how PR practitioners in Turkey approach social media in terms of crisis communication is extremely limited. This study aims to explore views of PR practitioners related to the role of social media in crisis communication in Turkey.

Methodology

The present study followed an exploratory approach and utilized qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviewing method with 20 senior PR practitioners who work in agencies that are members of Turkish Public Relations Association (TUHID) and Communication Consultancies Association of Turkey (IDA). The participants were chosen through purposive sampling technique. All interviews were conducted online via between June and August 2020. After data collection process, interviews were subjected to a thematic analysis which indicated 14 themes based on the research questions.
Results and Conclusions

The findings showed that Turkish PR practitioners mostly regard social media as a curse rather than a gift due to number of threats they asserted about social media. This study revealed two significant risks which are relatively less mentioned in the crisis communication literature. The first one was the inexperience of the digital content agencies in sensing the risks that may cause a crisis. Another serious risk was related to context of Turkey discussing opposing parties on social media created by the polarization in Turkey which are likely to put organizations in a dangerous position any moment.

When it comes to crisis consulting practice, all participants agreed upon the view that crisis communication consultancy has risen to the top among the services most demanded from them. In addition, it was a common view that it has become very difficult to develop scenarios due to the increasing difficulty of making predictions in this new world. The majority of the participants recommended an emphasis on relationship building and two-way communication opportunities with key stakeholders on social media in proactive crisis communication phase which is underutilized due to workload in agencies.

There were two main limitations in this study. Firstly, only PR agencies that are members of TUHID and IDA were included in the study. Future studies could include other PR agencies to widen the scope of the research. Secondly, it only discussed consulting services; further studies could examine the organizational part of the crisis communication to compare both sides.

Practical and Social Implications

This paper presents a comprehensive and up-to-date crisis communications guide to communication professionals that includes practical recommendations and emphasizes risks and opportunities that social media brings along. The results are also insightful for highlighting dynamics of Turkish context.

Keywords: crisis management, Turkish PR industry, crisis consulting, digital crisis communication

References


Public Health Crises: Communicating Risk and Lessons Learned from the Early Days of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created new and unprecedented challenges for public sector risk communicators. The wildfire spread of the virus together with people’s perceived low susceptibility to the risk of contracting the virus created new concerns for risk and crisis communication, but in particular for public health officials. This paper aims to investigate the communicative response to COVID-19 of various public sector organizations in the U.S. Local public health organizations are often overlooked as crisis communicators, which in turn negatively affects the quality and efficacy of their risk communication efforts (Coombs, 2020).

Studying unique and challenging crisis cases like this one is a way of learning about crisis management and communication while simultaneously providing information for designing health interventions.

Literature Review

COVID-19 created specific communication demands which also have implications for future risk and crisis communication efforts. Coombs (2020) proposes six major areas explored through the lens of the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) which could be applied to COVID-19 communication efforts. These demands are (1) anxiety, (2) empathy, (3) efficacy, and (4) fatigue, (5) reach and (6) threat. Additionally, the Health Belief Model (HBM) is a theoretical framework in health communication used to explain health behaviors (Becker, 1974). Furthermore, it is often applied to guide health promotion and improve disease prevention programs. This study utilizes Coombs’ propositions together with the HBM in order to examine how various public health organizations across the United States communicated about the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020.

Methodology

This pilot study employs a content analysis to examine various communication efforts of several local health organizations across the United States, with the sample including the East Coast (i.e., New York), West Coast (i.e., California), and Central (i.e., Texas) areas. These areas are chosen specifically because of their later infamy of being COVID-19 hotspots within the United States.

Specifically, we will examine communication disseminated via traditional and social media for the first two weeks of March 2020. This time frame is appropriate for the purposes of the study because this is the time when the spread of the virus was still in its infancy and federal, state and local authorities were eager to slow it down.
The second half of March 2020 was marked by nation-wide lockdowns and mandatory stay-at-home orders which were guided by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recommendation. The most obvious limitation of the study is the fact that it is based in the U.S. context. However, since the United States has had the highest reported death and infection rates in response to the pandemic, it is also important to understand why the crisis response has failed, particularly from a communication standpoint.

**Results**

This is a pilot exploratory study and thus generalizing the results would be challenging. However, this opens the door for future research. Specifically, examining Coombs’ (2020) extension of the EPPM applied for crisis communication on the COVID-19 pandemic along with the HBM (Becker, 1974) will allow for future experimental research to determine the options that health and governmental organizations have regarding message content for future health crises.

**Practical Implications**

The purpose of this study is to identify how public health organizations across the United States approached the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemics are especially serious threats to public health organizations and to society because of world travel and globalization (Morens & Fauci, 2013). It is therefore important to study and understand how risk messages are constructed. Examining the content of public health announcements will enable researchers to improve risk and crisis communication. This would be beneficial for both constituents who receive such information and agencies who are responsible for creating it. Moreover, the idea is to study this type of public health risk communication in order to be able to identify gaps and address possible issues hindering the effectiveness of the messages. Although COVID-19 is unique in many ways, the underlying threat of pandemics and sudden health crises is there. Public sector organizations must continue to be ready to manage such outbreaks for both this and future pandemics. More research on the communicative aspect of health-related messages for the public are needed to improve health and governmental organizations’ communication efforts in attempts to ultimately meet the needs of the public.

**Keywords:** risk communication, public health crises, crisis management
How crises affect internal communication channel preference

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Introduction and purpose of the study

In late 2019 we explored how the choice of internal communication media influences internal communication satisfaction. In order to test this relationship, we started with an analysis of the most commonly used internal communication channels in large companies. We completed empirical work in twelve large corporations and linked the results to employees’ satisfaction and media choice. In March 2020 SARS-CoV-2 pandemic interfered and temporarily stopped our work in the field. In October 2020 we resumed our fieldwork and completed auditing twelve more companies. This real-life experiment with pre- and during/post-crisis condition enable us to expanded the analysis by testing how the same relationship after the pandemic changed the importance of individual internal communication channels.

Literature review

Organizational choice of communication channels depends on a series of factors such as an organization’s size, profile, culture, environmental culture, as well as employees’ qualifications or the level of technical development (Dévényi, 2016). Each medium means a different kind of engagement and defines the scale and speed of communication. When discussing effectiveness of various channels for communicating with employees one of the most common theories used is media richness theory (Daft and Lengel, 1986). The theory combines the richness of a medium and the equivocality of a task to determine the effectiveness of a communication medium. In internal communication using rich media, such as face-to-face communication, adds to organizations’ effective and symmetrical communication since it allows feedback and internal dialogues (Men, 2014). Technological development is significantly changing the rules of all communication, including internal communication. Various social media, that range from blogs to social networks, bring with them interactivity, the possibility of two-way communication and employee engagement (Crescenzo, 2011). Social media can be a powerful dialogue creating channels that can have an indirect influence on traditional media (Berger, 2008; Lee, 2018). New media channels could prove to be helpful in fostering listening skills and high-quality face-to-face communication (Rhee, 2004).

Methodology

In order to answer the research question, we applied three predesigned measurement instruments, as a part of a larger communication survey, among 3037 employees from 24 large companies. The communication survey was a part of a four-year Croatian national scientific project to map out internal communication. The choice of organizations that were approached within the project was based on the typical unit crite-
ria. In selecting the organizations for the sample, the project team reached a consensus on what is considered typical and which criteria should be typical. Number of employees range from 30 up to 10 000. Within each company, significant effort was made to include representative samples of employees.

Results and conclusion

Results for the original twelve companies showed that modality of communication is connected with communication satisfaction. We are in the process of data analysis of additional fourteen companies and the comparison between the two data sets. We will complete our research before July 2021.

Practical and social implications

Organizational environment is turbulent and management has to prepare and plan for crises. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is an example of external crises that can affect internal dynamics of organizations. Knowing how satisfaction with different internal communication channels changes in crises can be a valuable input for crisis preparedness.

Keywords: Internal communication, internal communication channels, crisis internal communication.

References


Office Culture and the Communications Industry in England: The Role of Social Interactions and Banter on Career Progression for Women in Public Relations, Advertising and Journalism

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Introduction and Purpose of the Study

The study explores the office culture in the communications industry in England (journalism, advertising, public relations) with a particular emphasis on the position of women and women's perceptions of the office culture, including an emphasis on social interactions and banter. The study is conceptually grounded in exploring cultural masculinities in the public relations industry in England and its impact on life opportunities for women practitioners.

Literature Review

Studies on women in journalism have been showing for a while that women have to merge to masculine newsrooms and become blokish to succeed (Mills, 2014; 2017; Topić, 2018). While some women can embrace masculine identities and merge into man’s way of doing things, including engaging in masculine banter and doing things the way the men do, many women are unable to do this and thus fall off the ladder and end up leaving the profession. While blokishness is mentioned in papers on journalism, studies do not usually conceptualise this term, which is what this paper tackles using journalism, advertising and public relations industries as a case study. Whilst there are lots of papers analysing the position of women, papers usually do not analyse cultural masculinities and structural and everyday barriers to career progression and experiences in the industry. The research using sociological theory and approaches is even more scarce.

Methodology and Framework

Through the study of early socialisation experiences and using works from organisational studies analysing cultural masculinities in organisations, I have conceptualised the concept of blokishness as encompassing communication and behaviour that comes naturally to men rather than women due to the socialisation process. I am using Bourdieu’s (2007) habitus theory and the Difference Approach in feminism (Tannen, 1995; 1990; 1986; Yule, 2006) to argue that organisations are masculine habitus where women who want to succeed have to embrace characteristics usually ascribed to men such as directness, boldness, lack of empathy, competitiveness, toughness, etc. These characteristics naturally come to men due to socialisation process (Bourdieu, 2007), however, my research shows that there are women who succeed in the masculine world due to having these character-
istics, and the link between their behaviour and communication comes from early socialisation process where these women have been socialised with boys rather than girls, and thus they embraced masculine characteristics.

To that end, I have conducted 41 interviews with women from advertising, 24 interviews with women from public relations and 20 interviews with women from journalism. Saturation has been reached in all three samples, and samples also have a geographical diversity and thus women from both north and south of England have been interviewed. Thematic analysis has been used for the analysis of data.

While this paper derives from the programme of three different projects I have designed, led and implemented since 2018, and the projects have analysed lived experiences, office culture and leadership, in this paper, I am focusing on the office culture and masculine habitus across three industries to show how women in three industries negotiate and manage their feminine identities and what structural barriers women in communications industries face. The research particularly looks at the role of early socialisation in being able to interact in offices and the impact of office culture on career progression. I am particularly focusing on social interactions and banter in offices and its link with exclusions and career barriers.

Findings

Findings show that across three industries women face masculinities and the so-called ‘boys clubs’, which result in exclusion from business decisions and career barriers. This is in large part perpetuated with gendered social interactions, which often results in segregation in offices and banter. However, there are differences between industries. For example, whilst women have to merge and become blokish in journalism to succeed (and if they succeed, they are usually as successful as men), this is not always the case in public relations (where women are called ‘comms girls’ and PR labelled as ‘fluffy’) or advertising (where women face open sexism, sexual harassment and are often openly told they cannot do certain aspects of job because they are not good enough as women), however, the data indicates that even in these two industries women who embrace masculinities fare and succeed better and that communications industry in England functions as a masculine habitus (albeit with some differences across industries).

Practical and Social Implications

Organisations should design policies on the office culture to ensure equality and respectful work environment for everyone. Consciousness-raising is needed across industries because many women do not recognise oppression in the form of social interactions and its effect on the position of women nor many women recognise what constitutes sexism and masculine practice, which prevents meaningful activism.

Keywords: women, public relations, advertising, journalism, blokishness, cultural masculinities, England

References


Frames, Rationalities, and Image Repair

Responses of Public Officials in the 2018 wildfire disaster of Mati in Greece

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Introduction and Purpose of Study

This paper attempts to investigate the Greek government’s communication on the natural fire disaster of Mati, a seaside residential area in the Attica region in July 2018. The disaster killed 102 people, uprooted families, left psychological scars on victim’s relatives and friends and destroyed many properties. These wildfires were the deadliest in Europe since 1900. A number of regional and local politicians as well as fire and police officials were accused of mismanagement and faced charges for negligent manslaughter, arson and grievous bodily harm.

Literature Review

We will approach the natural disaster through a social constructivist lens (Schultz, and Raupp, 2010) concentrating on the framing and sense-giving of the disaster by the major actors and public authorities. The social constructivist perspective pays particular attention to the socio-cultural context underscores the symbolic meaning of disaster communication. Vetternranta (2015), drawing upon the Heidegger’s existential phenomenology, applies the distinction between technical-instrumental rationality and rationality of caring to the ways Norwegian government authorities responded in two crises situations. Technical-instrumental rationality is short term, applies scientific norms and relies on quantifiable information. The rationality of caring is long term, appeals to tradition and political culture and underlines the care for the welfare of the community. Because the two rationalities are not mutually exclusive, we also include in-between positions along the spectrum offering variable mixes of technical-instrumental and rationality of caring. Obviously, the rationalities expounded produce different framings of the disaster.

Methodology

We will explore whether technical rationality or rationality of caring or even a combined rationality permeates the communication patterns of politicians, administrative officials, experts and the public. In addition, we posit the following research questions: What are the different frames that various actors adopt? Do the frames adopted depend on to the position of the actors within the state (central and local government, public agencies) apparatus? Which attributions of responsibility are related to the micro-level, meso-level, and macro-level respectively? What are the image repair strategies used by main actors? To address the questions, we will analyze material produced by politicians, government officials, local government authorities (press releases, social media posts, media interviews, press conferences), testimonies and/or comments of concerned citizens as well as expert technical re-
ports. Then, the relevant material will be content analyzed based on the types of frame, rationality, response strategy, and blame attribution using the typologies of Vetternranta (2015), Benoit (1997), and Schultz and Raupp (2010). The results will be compared based on the position of the official and stage of the catastrophe. The effectiveness of disaster communication will be assessed based on the valence of media reports, articles, citizens’ comments as well as reactions of users on social media.

Results and Conclusions

We expect that reports emanating from experts will follow a technical rationality logic, the texts of the politicians will adopt a combined rationality depending on the context and the audience addressed, and the comments of the public will mainly ascribe to a rationality of caring. As time progresses and we are moving further away from the occurrence of the disaster, the technical rationality is expected to overshadow the rationality of caring.

We also expect all actors to engage in blame avoidance public communication stances, trying to evade responsibility. In this respect, politicians and officials of public authorities will shift attributions of responsibility to one another.

Theoretical, Practical, and Social Implications

This study contributes to the literatures of disaster communication as well as image repair discourse. To our knowledge only few studies have examined how public officials respond during natural disasters. Hence, this study is expected to increase our knowledge about the different frames, rationalities, and response strategies employed by the main actors as well as their flow and evolution from the initial stage of the crisis all the way through the post-crisis stage. By applying the framework that was initially used in the analysis of the Norwegian context to the Greek disaster case, we will offer a cross-cultural comparative focus. Examining other cases could help us better understand why some public officials communicate more effectively than others. The study will provide fruitful insights on the responses that public officials could employ or avoid during and after the course of a natural disaster.

Keywords: technical-instrumental rationality, rationality of care, framing, qualitative methodology, image repair discourse

References


COVID-19 Internal Crisis Communication: Perspectives from Internal Communicators

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Introduction and purpose of the study

The purpose of this paper is to understand how internal communicators adapted to the COVID19 crisis and adopted strategies to engage and help organizations manage the evolving situation. Globally, black swan events are becoming the norm and unlike other crises, are unprecedented (Lagadec & Topper, 2012; Coombs, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, one such crisis, has had profound impact on organizations and people. Due to the low chances of such crises occurring and the inability to interpret how they unfold; organizations can get lulled into a false sense of security resulting in catastrophic consequences. Therefore, making sense of the situation demands focused attention and engaging stakeholders early and meaningfully (Weick, 1988). This study assesses the interventions made by internal communicators and offers approaches that practitioners can leverage for such crises.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on organizational order and employee experience is profound. Reduction in force, cost saving measures and uncertainty has led to anxiety, distractions and financial concerns come in the way of employees’ attention and productivity. Employee well-being is negatively impacted, and uncertainty prevails on the future of organizations (Gartner, 2020; Willis Tower Watson, 2020).

During crises, organizations rely on internal communications to engage and involve employees to receive and send messages (Frandsen and Johansen 2011). Internal communications influence employee experience (Bersin, 2020a) although connecting and engaging employees remotely is a challenge (Bersin, 2020b). Fatigue among staff, (Gandhi, 2020), increased online meetings, (Spataro, 2020) and limited listening abilities (Institute for Public Relations, 2020) presented unique challenges for internal communicators.

During crises, employees attribute the responsibility of the issue to the individual in the situation or the situation itself. Attribution theory argues that people try to explain what caused the event in ways that makes sense for themselves (Coombs, 2007). How employees, a key constituent of crisis communications, perceive responses, can impact their behaviors and actions. If involved, employees can pick up signals early and help mitigate the crisis alongside organizational constituents (Heide and Simonsson, 2015). Given this context and the call for evidence-based research to further understanding practice and theory, there is a need to understand the role of internal communications in mitigating crises, especially events like the pandemic.

The role of internal communications in helping manage crises and rebuilding order, although recognized in literature, is understudied.
(Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). Employees prefer a combination of sources for their information needs and internal communications enables employee comprehension and rationale behind company decisions (O’Neil, 2008). Prior research demonstrates that internal communicators focus on online and media (intranet and web publishing) during crises although their impact is limited.

**Research Questions**

Therefore, to fill this research gap, the paper will explore how internal communicators communicated with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the internal communications approaches and strategies adopted to help employees cope with the evolving crisis. Lastly, the paper will review how internal communication practitioners evaluated the effectiveness of their response to the crisis and the measures used.

**Methodology**

The exploratory mixed method study will gauge these research questions by collecting data through an online survey among internal communicators, a case study of an organization’s approach and document analysis of messages shared to triangulate the understanding of internal crisis communication during COVID-19 (Jick, 1979; Rosenberg and Yates, 2007). In addition, it will probe internal communication principles adopted, the role of internal communicators, channels used, the involvement of internal communicators before and during the crisis.

**Results and conclusions**

This study aims to offer unique perspectives on how internal communicators supports sense making efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, will provide valuable insights on the ability of organizations and communicators to listen to staff and respond to their concerns and interests. Finally, the implications of involving employees in crisis communication and organizational decision-making approaches that can contribute to mitigating crises.

**Practical and social implications**

As a theoretical implication, the results of this study will broaden the understanding of internal crisis communication and contribute to situational crisis communication and sense making theories that highlight the strategic role of internal communications in organizational productivity and reputation.

**Keywords:** Internal communication, sense making, COVID-19, black swan, internal crisis communication
The Ides of March: Agenda Setting Effects of Coronavirus Task Force Briefings

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Introduction and Purpose

With more Americans at home compared to any other time in modern history, the coronavirus pandemic served as a significant contributing factor to a twenty percent rise in television news ratings from February to March 2020. As individuals sought information about the pandemic, network news viewership soared to record levels. Upon declaration of a national emergency, the Coronavirus Task Force conducted twenty-six separate press conferences in the subsequent thirty-one-day period, becoming one of the most watched programs in the United States over the same period. How did the repeated interplay, on the national stage, between the U.S. president and the press play into follow-on media coverage? More specifically, who was setting the agenda – the leader or the media? The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of type (pre-planned vs. reactive), sentiment (positive, neutral, negative), topic (economy, public health, behavior, trust in federal government), and duration of messages delivered by the Coronavirus Task Force to assess any trends or correlations in subsequent media coverage for record-breaking viewership.

Literature Review

Lasswell (1948) reinforced his famous construct, “Who, said what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect” as a conceptual tool still employed by communication and public relations scholars today. Despite rapid advancements in communication through mass media and technology, there is significant utility in the conceptual applicability of Lasswell’s construct – especially in how it remains “inherently flexible enough to meet the theoretical needs of today…” (Sapienza et al., 2015, p. 617). Governing from “center stage”, or a central, highly prominent position, causes the public to consume messages focused on select topics as determined by the prominent official. There is substantial agenda setting research addressing the President as the ultimate agenda setter (McCombs, 2014) and influencer for what the public thinks about (Cohen, 1963). Yet, in the digital age amid a pandemic, is that still the case? Is there a difference in how the media covers specific issues based on pre-planned and reactive communication? Previous work linking press conferences and agenda setting highlights the importance of this research. When a viewer receives information, they consider whether to accept, deny, or remain ambivalent about it (Zaller, 1992).

Methodology

The primary method employed was a content analysis of compiled transcripts and videos of every U.S. Coronavirus Task Force briefing that occurred over the selected timeframe of March 13, 2020 to April 13, 2020. In total, this sample consisted of twenty-six briefings, 1,046 pages of
official transcripts, and 2,243 minutes of briefing content – all of which received qualitative and quantitative analysis. The second portion of the study compiled and analyzed coverage and headlines of follow-on media reporting from follow-on mainstream U.S. news programs and prominent national newspapers during the same timeframe. This method provides empirical findings to justify the its conclusions.

**Initial Results and Conclusions**

While the data is still being finalized, initial results show a disparity in sentiment between prepared and reactive communication with subsequent media coverage. Additionally, scripted communication is more likely to achieve desired effects with regard to agenda building; whereas unscripted communication is less likely to achieve the inverse effect.

**Limitations**

Subsequent media coverage does not account for any condition setting or confounds that may have occurred prior to this timeframe, which could have impacted the trajectory of reporting. There is also a potential confound in government communication when the media is faced with contradicting information as they consider Task Force communication from the federal level (President) versus the state-level (i.e. Governor/Mayor, etc). Future studies would be well served to include the presence of misinformation and disinformation as an additional factor to this current research.

**Implications**

Ten days upon closing this data set, the Task Force delivered prepared remarks on Friday, April 24, 2020 and for the first time since the press briefings began, they did not take any questions. Additionally, the administration subsequently recommended and took actions that directly support the findings and recommendations for government communication (Acosta et al., April 24, 2020). Ultimately, these findings build on previous theoretical work which suggests that Bernard Cohen’s (1963) dictum of the media telling the public what to think is as dependent on timing and tone, as it is in competence and credibility.

**Keywords:** agenda setting, strategic communication, press conference, coronavirus

**References:**


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The Hiccup Paradox of Corporate Communication in the Pandemic

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Introduction and purpose of the study

Hiccups are a phenomenon that cannot be suppressed – not life-threatening, but omnipresent. Perceptions focus on getting rid of them, while other events fade into the background. This applies to corporate communication in the Corona crisis. It is not necessarily the decisive issue, but it becomes the pivotal point in corporate communication. A study that examined crisis communication for DAX 30 companies six months before and after the first lockdown in Germany shows that the attribution of causes for corporate crises has changed by the pandemic.

Literature review

Coombs defines corporate crises as a “perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectations of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcome (Coombs 2013, p. 19). The triggers are manifold: the causes can be attributed to human error or self-inflicted misconduct, but can also be based on external circumstances such as natural disasters (e.g. Hurricane Irene in 2011) or threats to public health (e.g. SARS 2003) (Cheng, 2018). An unambiguous classification is often not possible – exogenous factors can be a catalyst for already existing structural problems, but they can also have a disruptive character that harms previously successful companies.

Accordingly stakeholders seeing the threat to their own interests usually start searching a clearly identifiable scapegoat – there is often no room for a differentiated view with shades of grey. Standing in the limelight, companies are forced to engage in damage limitation for the protection of their reputation and licence to operate. At this moment, it is crucial to present the crisis to the outside world in the form of a credible story (Möhrle, 2016).

From a theoretical point of view, this opens up a triad consisting of attributing blame and image repair under the influence of classic and social media (Cheng, 2018). In order to provide companies with a guideline for appropriate crisis communication, Coombs (2007) developed the Situative Crisis Communication Theory based on Benoit’s (1995) Image Repair Theory under the assumption that stakeholders are looking for a responsible party (Cheng, 2018). Following Kelley’s covariation principle, it is possible to attribute crises to internal or external causes.
Methodology
To check whether the share of crises that were considered exogenous increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, using an automated content analysis we first looked at the time series of counts of text fragments of the 30 largest German companies listed in the DAX30. For each company, we defined any day that had a number of fragments greater than the third quartile plus 1.5 times the interquartile range as an outlier. For each outlier, we looked for publications (news, social media posts, etc.) describing what was going on in that company on that particular day. In a next step, we collected data on how the companies dealt with the crisis of the respective outlier day by analyzing those publications. Specifically, we examined whether the crisis was communicated as an endogenous or exogenous crisis. In a final step, we tested whether the proportion of crises that were classified as exogenous differed significantly between the Pre-COVID-19-era and during the COVID-19-pandemic. We have done this for all crises as well as for specific types of crises (e.g. staff layoffs).

Results and conclusions
The results show that the share of exogenous triggers in crisis communication increased significantly. While crises before the lockdown tended to be attributed to endogenous causes, afterwards there was almost only one answer for the eternal question of blame for any kind of problem: the Corona pandemic. The results of this study are limited to the DAX-30 companies and to corporate communication in the context of Covid-19. Further research looking at other crisis situations, cultural influences and the reaction of other stakeholders to this attribution of causes would be desirable.

Practical and social implications
In the shadow of a global crisis, managers are able to avert attention from their own misconduct or to communicate endogenous corporate decisions to the outside world in a credible way without risking any reputation damage. While the pandemic as the main protagonist covers everyday life like a veil, reflection, critical questioning and a differentiated view are among the main tasks and responsibilities of the media and society.

Keywords: Crisis communication, social listening, attribution, Covid-19, SSCT

References


Debating the Importance of Professional Communication and Working Media Experience as a Prerequisite for Public Relations Faculty Positions in the US and Canada

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Introduction and Purpose of the Study

The debate about the importance of various credentials for full-time public relations educators has a long history in North America dating back to as far as the late 1940s when many universities – in the US at least – saw an increased enrollment interest in subjects such as journalism and public relations. An issue in many of programs at that time involved the importance of academic vis-à-vis practical experience for those applying for full-time public relations faculty positions at universities. At that time the “ideal” full-time public relations faculty member possessed a master’s degree plus five-to-ten years full-time working experience in some aspect of journalism or public relations.

Even the emergence of public relations scholars with Ph.D. degrees in the 1970s and 1980s didn’t diminish the importance of professional working experience. During those years the “ideal” public relations faculty member possessed a Ph.D. degree plus three-to-five years working experience in the field. While there was a time when it was nearly impossible to secure a public relations university-level teaching position, much less receive tenure and/or promotion, without significant professional experience, most of the current faculty hires focus much more on academic credentials and scholarly potential than on professional working experience. This has led a number of universities to hire “professors of the practice” who teach and conduct service activities without any research expectations.

Brief Literature Review

Although the literature contains a number of articles examining faculty composition, most of these focus on curriculum and other organizational issues. Few, explore the need for public relations educators to have had recent working experience in the field. One exception to this is the work of Black, et al (1980) that makes recommendations on an international scale. Two extremely thorough reports (Stacks, et al, 1999 & Distaso, et al, 2006) thoroughly examined the state of public relations education in the US, but dealt more with matters of curriculum and teaching than with faculty credentials. The work of Kelleher (2001) plus Krishna, et al (2020) point out how public relations practice has changed over the years thus making it even more necessary to make sure those who teach and those who practice know what each other are doing.
Methodology

This paper’s methodology consisted of a thorough literature review plus a variety of in-depth interviews with senior-level public relations educators, some with academic credentials and others with professional working experience.

Conclusions

Although all interviews have not yet been completed, it appears the paper’s main finding will support what has become the “professor of the practice model” where a number of highly successful public relations executives can be found teaching both undergraduate and graduate level public relations courses at various American and Canadian Universities. This finding appears to be more prevalent in the US than it is in Canada.

Keywords: Professional Experience, Public Relations Education, Professional Relevance

References


Serving whom? Examining the motives and types of corporate social responsibility actions “during” a public health crises

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Introduction and purpose of the study

To fight against the Covid-19 public health crisis and its debilitating impact, corporations took various social responsible actions to contribute to the society, community and vulnerable groups, such as personal protective equipment or monetary donation. Internet companies in China also made various donations in combating the pandemic, i.e. Tencent (173 million U.S. dollars) and Alibaba (144.2 million U.S. dollars) (Statista, 2020), and CSR related information was announced in the companies’ Weibo accounts.

Previous studies have shown the firm’s motivation to undertake corporate social responsibility actions, including economic, legislative, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities (Carroll, 1996). Under the pandemic condition, how do corporations decide what CSR actions to be initiated during the emergency situation? What are the discernible differences in CSR actions among the corporations? This paper aims to fill out the lacunae of CSR motives and types “during a public crisis,” compared to a normal situation.

Literature review

According to Halme and Laurila (2009), an action-oriented framework for evaluating corporate responsibility (CR) action type includes: philanthropy (i.e. charity, voluntary works), CR Integration (based on existing core competence with additional responsibilities), and CR Innovation (creating new business models for tackling external issues).

Publics may perceive the CSR actions as intrinsic or extrinsic motives. Intrinsic motive emphasizes the CSR initiatives are society-motivated while the extrinsic refers to those profit-driven CSR activities (Kim & Choi, 2018).

CSR fit or congruence refers to “the perceived congruence between a social issue and company’s business” (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010, p. 12). Three types of CSR fit are identified based on whether the CSR undertakings are related to the business practices, i.e. external consistency, internal consistency, and coherence (Yuan, Bao, & Verbeke, 2011).
Methodology

Content analysis has been utilized to examine the internet companies executed CSR-based activities during the public health crisis period. Prior and during-crisis CSR actions are examined to understand companies’ motives and CSR types. According to the top 100 Chinese Internet Companies in 2019 report from the Internet Society of China and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, top three internet companies, Alibaba, Tencent, Baidu, were chosen as examples. Total 422 Weibo posts were reviewed during the pandemic period, from Jan 1, 2020 (after first Covid-19 confirmed case on Dec 31, 2019) to April 8, 2020 (Wuhan lifted lockdown), and the same period in 2019.

The CSR-related posts were collected and coded from the official Weibo accounts of the three companies based on the coding scheme, including variables from the literature.

Results and conclusion

Internet companies displayed different CSR practices during the pandemic crisis in year 2020 with that in the regular period in 2019. Companies were more out of Intrinsic motivation to address public issues in pandemic (M=0.946, SD=0.227) than in normal times (M=0.755, SD=0.431, p<0.01). Moreover, companies tended to adopt CR Innovation approach more during the crisis (M=0.223, SD=0.417) than in the normal period (M=0.063, SD=0.244, p<0.01). And less actions based on CR Integration were found during crisis (M=0.375, SD=0.485) than during usual times (M=0.561, SD=0.497, p<0.01). In terms of CSR Initiative Fit, companies emphasized less on Coherence when facing unexpected crises (M=0.027, SD=0.163) than on usual days (M=0.114, SD=0.318, p<0.01). The result also indicated that Philanthropy is positively related to External Consistency in both 2020 (r=0.872, p<0.01) and 2019 (r=0.775, p<0.01). While amid public crisis, internet firms can leverage their core advantages to tackle problems, as Technology is positively correlated to Innovation (r= 0.482, p<0.01).

Practical and theoretical implications

From the results, philanthropy could be seen as the basic and immediate CSR action to respond to the public crisis that echoes Carroll’s pyramid model of corporate social responsibility (Carroll, 1991). When facing a sudden crisis, i.e. pandemic, internet companies have the tendency to demonstrate their responsibilities in philanthropic type and connect to society-motivated motives.

Internet companies have paid more attention to the CR innovation type to address external issues during the public health crisis. Hence, problem-solving oriented CSR seems to be an important strategic approach that goes beyond the classical economic, legislative, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities. (word count: 702)

Keywords: corporate social responsibility (CSR), motive, public health crisis, internet company

References


What drives perceived internal reputation? Empirical evidence from Chile

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Introduction and purpose of the study

Despite the debate surrounding whether reputation can be managed directly, scholars have nonetheless regarded reputation management as a critical public relations function (Doorley & Garcia, 2007). Organizational reputation resides in the eyes of both internal and external stakeholders (Fombrun et al., 2000). As a result of their distinct set of experiences, employees may perceive their organizations’ reputation differently than external stakeholders. Hence, employees’ intimate and direct experience with their organization, along with their ability to promote or sabotage their employers, impacts how external stakeholders perceive the organization (White et al., 2010). Therefore, employees are often the ultimate reputation makers or breakers of an organization.

The employee-centered, ‘inside-out’ approach to organizational reputation deserves as much investigation as the ‘outside-in,’ externally oriented approach. Nevertheless, public relations research has rarely focused on perceived internal reputation and its organizational antecedents. Drawing from literature in internal public relations, leadership, and reputation management, the purpose of the current study is to explore the driving factors of a positive internal reputation by emphasizing organizational- and individual-level enablers.

Literature Review

While leadership has been widely investigated in public relations and communication management, its impact on perceived corporate reputation, especially from the employees’ perspective, has not been extensively studied (Meng & Berger, 2013). To partially fill this void and expand the application of leadership research in the context of public relations, we proposed and tested a model that links servant leadership and perceived internal reputation through two employee-centered mediators: employee psychological empowerment (i.e., an intrinsic task motivation reflecting employees’ sense of control and an active orientation to their work) (Spreitzer, 1995) and employee thriving (i.e., a positive psychological state in which employees feel a sense of vitality and learning) (Spreitzer et al., 2005).

Many modern organizations implement servant leadership practices to foster employee thriving and well-being. Companies such as Southwest Airlines, Starbucks, Zappos, and Marriott, are all proponents of servant leadership. The need to serve is the core ethos of servant leadership. More than any other leadership theory, servant leadership highlights leaders’ willingness to foster their subordinates’ personal growth and success (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Servant leaders order their priorities to ensure that followers come first, organizations second, and themselves last (Sendjaya, 2015). Considering
the crucial role of leaders in projecting a desired organizational image to employees (Scott & Lane, 2000), it is reasonable to argue that servant leaders’ favorable traits and behaviors, particularly their people-centered behavioral approach, should elicit followers’ positive assessment of their organizations.

Employees’ cognitive assessment of their organizations is derived mainly from their direct, personal interactions with key organizational actors. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on employees’ internal psychological activities and experiences to illustrate how servant leadership leads to perceived organizational reputation. We proposed that the relationship between servant leadership and perceived organizational reputation is serially mediated by psychological empowerment and employee thriving.

Methodology

An online survey was conducted on Qualtrics in February 2020. A total of 357 working adults from Chile across a wide range of organizations and business communities were recruited through Dynata, the world’s largest first-party data and insights platform. The questionnaire was translated from English to Spanish by a bilingual member of the research team and later back-translated to English by two independent translators who are also bilingual. Structural equation modeling was utilized for data analysis.

Results and conclusions

We found that servant leadership’s pathway to reputation was serially mediated by psychological empowerment and employee thriving. To elaborate, servant leaders enhance their followers’ sense of empowerment by involving them in decision making and meaning-making and passing on knowledge and problem-solving skills. Empowered employees will, in turn, obtain a sense of vitality at work and engage in continuous learning. Ultimately, feelings of thriving would propel employees to form a positive evaluation of their organization. In addition to the sequential mediation, we also found a direct and positive association between servant leadership and perceived organizational reputation.

Practical and social implications

This study provides strategic insights to organizational leaders, public relations, and human resources professionals. First, organizations must implement training programs and provide resources and tools to encourage the adoption of servant behaviors across different management levels. In addition, this study provides one of the first pieces of empirical evidence on servant leadership practice in Chile. Servant leadership has been studied in many cultures, but evidence from Latin America is mostly missing. The finding of this study lends itself particularly well to organizations and practitioners that operate in Chile. Finally, we suggest public relations professionals monitor and assess employees’ level of energy and learning at work and mobilize organizational resources to maintain thriving within the organization.

Keywords: servant leadership, internal reputation, empowerment, employee thriving
Leadership Going Social: How U.S. Nonprofit Executives Engage Publics on Twitter

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**Introduction and purpose of the study**

Nonprofit organizations play a significant role in the social and economic well-being of our society. The nonprofit sector in the United States continues to expand, contributing to 5.6 percent of the country’s GDP in 2016 (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2016). With the development of digital technology, the function of public relations in nonprofit organizations has evolved and extended beyond traditional printed media to encompass computer-mediated communication (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Saxton & Waters, 2014). In the past few years, a sizable body of literature has begun to examine how various types of nonprofits utilize websites and social media to communicate and build relationships with their stakeholders (Patel & McKeever, 2014; Xu & Saxton, 2019).

Despite the burgeoning body of knowledge on social media use by nonprofits, how leaders in the nonprofit sector directly engage with publics via social media is rarely mentioned. Nonprofit executives play a vital part in connecting organizations with external stakeholders (Carlson & Donohoe, 2010). Through personal branding and engagement potential, leadership communication typically functions as the human-side of organizational communication to authenticate or personalize the otherwise mundane, impersonal organizational-level communication (e.g., Tsai & Men, 2017). Given the immense potential of nonprofit executives as relationship builders and the paucity of research examining their communication styles and impacts, this study explored how nonprofit executives in the U.S. engage with the online publics by applying various communication strategies.

**Literature Review**

Drawing literature from dialogic communication, social presence, and the information-communication-action (ICA) framework, we investigated the extent to which nonprofit executives leveraged 1) digital dialogic principles, 2) social presence strategies, and 3) message tactics (i.e., message functions, message appeals, media vividness).

Public relations scholars have adapted the five dialogic principles in a vast amount of studies across different organizational social media platforms (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018). However, traditional operationalization of dialogic com-
munication is mainly functional and not reflecting the interpersonal and relational nature of dialogue initiated by organizations. This study explored dialogic communication from both a functional and relational perspective by incorporating social presence into the operationalization of digital dialogic communication. Specifically, we examined nonprofit leaders’ employment of three social presence strategies—affective, interactive, and cohesive strategies (Rourke et al., 1999).

Second, we applied Lovejoy and Saxton’s (2012) ICA framework to provide unique insights into the communication needs, interests, and focus of nonprofit leaders. We examined how nonprofit executives leveraged informational messages (i.e., serve to inform), community messages (i.e., serve to build and strengthen ties to the online community), and action messages (i.e., focus on promotion and mobilization) on Twitter.

To understand different message appeals used by nonprofit leaders, we applied the rational/emotional framework. We also explored message vividness, given that a richer sensory perception yields more robust social media engagement and message persuasiveness (Ji et al., 2019). Finally, we investigated how dialogic communication and message tactics can contribute to public engagement with nonprofit executives in terms of likes, retweets, comments.

**Methodology**

This study adopted a content analysis approach. We identified 35 leaders from the renowned Nonprofit Times 100 list published in 2019. In total, 14,039 tweets published between February 1, 2018 and February 1, 2020 as well as their top comments were collected through the Twitter Public API and our customized Python script. We randomly drew 20 posts from each executive, resulting in 700 qualified posts and 195 comments attached to these posts. The intercoder reliability was satisfactory.

**Results and conclusions**

The results showed that nonprofit executives employed all four dialogic principles to some extent. Specifically, the most used principle was information of interest to stakeholders followed by dialogic loop. Regarding the use of social presence strategies, executives leveraged affective, interactive, and cohesive strategies. Notably, they embraced emotional expressions and often disclosed personal opinions. Furthermore, they were most active in disseminating information and creating an online community. Their messages, however, were less concerned with promotion, mobilization, or calling for action. We revealed mixed findings on how dialogic communication and various message tactics affected public engagement. Findings of this study were based on correlations rather than causality. Future researchers should test the proposed relationships in experimental settings.

**Practical and social implications**

This study provided strategic value to executive leaders and their public relations teams in the nonprofit sector. In the age of digital communication, the role of communication practitioners entails aiding top leaders in building relationships and engagement with online publics. Knowing how to select relevant topics, design effective messages, and evaluate key outcomes and outcomes is essential for creating value for organizations. This study also suggests nonprofit executives seize the opportunity to represent their organization, engage with publics, and amplify the impact of the organization’s digital presence.

**Keywords:** nonprofit communication, leadership communication, social media, dialogic communication, social presence
Communicating Corporate LGBTQ Advocacy: A Computational Comparison of the Global CSR Discourse

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Introduction and Purpose of the Study

Targeting the intersection of LGBTQ advocacy and CSR communication and filling the knowledge gap in the nascent scholarship on corporate activism, this study answers three research questions: 1. How is the CSR discourse around LGBTQ issues constructed by major global corporations? 2. How does the global LGBTQ CSR discourse compare with non-profit LGBTQ organizations’ guidelines? 3. How and why do these global organizations communicate their LGBTQ advocacy differently?

Literature Review

Existing literature on LGBTQ communities in corporate and organizational settings heavily focuses on business marketing and activist strategic communication (Ciszek, 2017; Mundy, 2013; Tindall & Waters, 2013). In contrast, corporate LGBTQ advocacy, where socially conscious companies take active roles to advance internal and external LGBTQ stakeholders’ interests through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, received way less scholarly attention, despite the prominence of corporate efforts in recent events.

Although these companies’ actions are prone to CSR skepticism and their motivations remain suspicious to some, referred to as pinkwashing by scholars, it remains a fact that corporations are increasingly engaging in political and social issues through CSR, and public relations scholars know very little about how they are getting involved in the process, how they are constructing discourses around these contentious topics, and why they might communicate their CSR efforts differently.

Methodology

Large-scale cross-national studies on CSR communication are challenging to conduct, and comparative studies in this domain are still relatively rare (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009). In this study, we take advantage of the huge potential of computational methods for comparative communication research (e.g., van der Meer, 2016). We collected and examined the annual CSR reports of companies on the 2018 Fortune Global 500 list. These documents were then manually searched for thirteen search terms concerning LGBTQ issues: LGBT, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, homosexual, sex, orientation, preference, gender, identity, and pride. We used the textual data of the context in which these terms were used. In most cases, the context was the paragraphs under the same subheading. In total, we collected 406 documents from these sampled companies, among which 236 mentioned at least one LGBTQ-related word in their CSR reporting. Our corpus thus contains 236 documents, 136,820 words, and 8,287 unigrams.
We consulted advocacy LGBTQ organizations to construct the non-profit guideline for corporate LGBTQ advocacy. Consulted organizations include Catalyst, Lambda Legal, GLAAD, Human Rights Campaign (HRC), International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE), National LGBT Health Education Center, Pride At Work, The Stonewall, The Trevor Project, The United Nation Human Rights Council, and Workplace Pride.

The combination of semantic network analysis and structural topic modeling was used to present and compare the global CSR discourse on LGBTQ advocacy. Semantic network analysis, by revealing relations among concepts, helps demonstrate the meaning creation in corpora-tions’ discourse on a certain issue. Structural topic modeling (STM), an unsupervised machine learning method, was used to investigate topical patterns in our corpus. We use the variances in topic proportions in the STM model to test our hypotheses on why and how companies across the global might communicate their LGBTQ efforts differently.

Covariates that might affect how companies (N = 236) constructed their LGBTQ CSR discourses include: Industry, ranking, country, and continent of the Fortune 500 company; Each country’s democracy level; Each country’s civil liberty index; Each country’s level of legal protection for LGBTQ individuals; Each country’s LGBTQ social acceptance. These metadata come from the Fortune website, the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) and Industry Classification Benchmark (ICB), Polity Project’s Polity score, the annual Global State of Democracy Indices by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, the state-sponsored homophobia report by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), and the Social Acceptance of LGBT People in 174 Countries report published by the William Institute.

Results and Conclusions

Results indicate 6 corporate topics and 9 non-profit topics on corporate LGBTQ advocacy. We explicate those topics with more details in the full paper by referencing organizations’ original writing. We further show that stakeholder expectations and institutional factors not only affect whether organizations report LGBTQ efforts, but also affect what topics these companies highlight in their CSR communication. Companies in democratic countries with substantial stakeholder expectations emphasize areas that need high investment and exceed legal obligations.

Practical and Social Implications

The results provide an overview of the global corporate discourse on LGBTQ advocacy for practical inquiries, and extend the institutional theory and the stakeholder theory. The study also highlights corporations’ role in the contemporary society as active change agents.
2021 PAPERS
Managing internal communication during the COVID-19 epidemic: a study on private organisations in Saudi Arabia

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The role of internal communication within organizations has been viewed as vital by both organizations and practitioners and it has contributed to the wellbeing of organizations, to employee satisfaction, commitment to organizations and an efficient work environment (Cotterrell, 2000; Stirton & Lodge, 2001; Rawlins, 2009). If employees work in an environment where they are able and encouraged to search for information and the information is transparent and easy to find, this will lead to organization effectiveness (Lee et al., 2018).

In public relations (PR) internal communication has been studied in various contexts by looking at how organizations communicate with their stakeholders. Particularly, researchers have looked at the tools used in communication, transparency in communication, internal public engagement, and efficiency in communication (Cotterrell, 1999; Jackson & Welch, 2007; Walden et al., 2017).

The Covid 19 pandemic which has caused worldwide disruptions has forced companies to rethink and focus more on their internal communication as a result of remote working. Saudi Arabia was amongst the first countries to efficiently apply immediate measures to prevent the spread of the virus before the first cases were reported in March 2020 (Algaissi et al., 2020). These measures have been suspending travel, social gatherings, and events, introducing remote work, remote teaching and learning in schools. The Saudi authorities have increased communication during the pandemic, bringing awareness about the virus through campaigns online, text messages and media (Algaissi et al., 2020). Studies on the effects of the pandemic on communication have been undertaken, however no research has been done on how private organizations in Saudi Arabia have communicated internally with their publics during the pandemic by examining the level of information transparency and effectiveness in communication.

Literature review

Internal communication theory and the stakeholder approach

The research uses the internal communication theory framework and the stakeholder approach developed by Jackson and Welch (2007) that was designed to improve internal communication within organizations by focusing on employee engagement as a result and putting emphasis on considering the receiver’s point of view rather than the sender of the information.

The theory on internal communication was developed as a response to the outdated internal communication theories that are used today by PR practitioners. Jackson and Welch (2007) argued that present definitions such as Frank and Brownell’s (1989) widely used definition are
incomplete, vague and outdated because they ignore the stakeholder approach and consider the audience as a single entity. Frank and Brownell (1989) defines internal communication as “the communications transactions between individuals and/or groups at various levels and in different areas of specialization that are intended to design and redesign organizations, to implement designs, and to co-ordinate day-to-day activities” (Frank & Brownell 1989, p. 5–6). The definition fails to state if organizational communication is synonym to internal communication and if the definition can be applied to internal communication today.

Welch and Jackson (2007) have created a new theory, where different stakeholder groups were identified such as: work teams, supervisors, managers, team leaders, project teams and all employees. Taking this into consideration, internal communication was redefined as “the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders within organizations across several interrelated dimensions including, internal line manager communication, internal team peer communication, internal project peer communication and internal corporate communication” (Welch & Jackson, 2007, p.183).

Internal communication management includes the content that is created, the direction it goes (to employees or management), and participation in communication. Welch and Jackson (2007) stated that the goals of internal corporate communications are to develop a sense of belonging and commitment amongst the employees, to create awareness of their work environment and the organization’s decisions towards the changes in the work environment. To be able to create and maintain such an efficient work environment, there is a need for transparency in communication.

Organizational transparency

Organizational transparency is an organization’s communication that makes all negative and positive information available to employees in an accurate and timely manner (Men, 2014). Its purpose is to hold organizations accountable for their actions and decisions towards their employees (Stirton and Lodge 2011) and “for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of employees” (Men 2014, p. 260). Transparency means that organizations will reveal accurate, complete, and relevant information about their decision and they will actively be open to employees searching for information (Stirton & Lodge, 2001, Cotterrell, 2000; Rawlins, 2009).

Employees appreciate transparent information even if it is not relevant to their position in their company because they become aware of the work environment and can develop a sense of belonging (Argenti, 1998; Dolphin, 2005; Welch & Jackson, 2007).

Transparency has consistently been connected with trust and ethics. For example, the Public Relations Coalition from 2003 recommended that organizations set up ethical principles and as a consequence they would build a process for transparency within all the organization’s areas (Rawlins, 2009).

There are three dimensions in transparency in PR literature: accountable, participative, and informational transparency (Men & Stacks, 2014). The concept of accountable transparency is defined as the information that a company reveals that is both negative, positive, and including risky information. By using accountable transparency, employees are less likely to misinterpret information or the organization’s decisions which can often lead to rumors and negative consequences (Argenti, 1998; Dolphin, 2005; Welch & Jackson, 2007; Men & Yue, 2019).
Participative transparency translates in the organizations’ openness to employees actively searching and distributing information. This benefits companies as they can recognize the most important and useful information for their employees (Cotterrell, 1999). Informational transparency was explained as the type of information that the organizations are sending out. For example, the information needs to be accurate and useful to avoid any confusion (Men & Yue, 2019).

Transparent communication is considered positive because it is connected with internal audience’s trust in the organization, the way communication flows within the company between employees, and it has an influence on the organization’s internal reputation. Transparent communication means that employees are more active in searching for information and they have a more active role in the decisions that are taken in the company. Studies show that this has led to increased employee satisfaction, it has had a positive impact on their job, their organization’s engagement and the organization-employee relations (Rawlins, 2009; Men & Stacks, 2014; Men, 2014).

This relationship must be built and maintained by the organization who needs to provide an environment of trust and job satisfaction and great empowered leaders. To allow or to create an environment for engagement, organizations need to remove any obstacles in the internal communication and offer constant feedback to employees about any changes or issues (Walden et al., 2017).

Yates (2006) and Cornelissen (2011) noted that effective communication consists in providing employees with a space to communicate their opinions, communicating the organizations’ culture to its internal audience, sharing all their new changes in policies to their employees, offering transparent financial information, and showing leadership when needed. This type of communication will create higher employee engagement and satisfaction and therefore lower turnover which leads to a more efficient organization. Men and Stacks (2014) noted that today’s public expectations are for companies to be open and show transparency which means companies need to develop communication strategies that focus on transparency and symmetrical communication.

Grunig and Huang (2000) have identified two types of strategies in communication: asymmetrical and symmetrical. Symmetrical strategies were viewed as more effective than asymmetrical ones when considering relationship management and maintenance. Symmetrical strategies that included openness, legitimacy, negotiation, win-win or no deal, collaboration and participation in mutual networks were seen as benefiting both the organization and the employees. Asymmetrical strategies included distribute negotiation, avoiding, compromising and accommodation and they were seen as benefiting only the organization.

Shen (2011) has criticized the win-win or no deal strategy which focuses on the organization’s and public’s work to find a solution that is beneficial to both parties. The end solution is that either they both find common ground, or they agree to disagree and they find no deal. Shen (2011) has argued that Grunig and Huang (2000) have not considered the fact that an organization might refuse to disclose information to employees that they need to reach a compromise and that a “no deal” strategy is a way of avoiding; and therefore it is an asymmetrical communication.

In response to this, Shen (2011) has developed three symmetrical relationship maintenance strategies: openness, networking, assurances of legitimacy. Openness consists in the organization’s openness to receiving information such as
complaints, suggestions and inquiries but also being open to reveal any information that can be discussed with employees. Networking was explained as the organizations’ efforts in maintaining and building networks with their employees and allowing employees to join any networks or communities that the company belongs to. Finally, assurances of legitimacy mean organizations’ efforts to assure their internal publics that their needs and problems are cared for.

Hon and Grunig (1999) have also looked at asymmetrical relationship maintenance strategies. The first strategy called distributive negotiation refers to a strategy where the company utilizes certain behaviors to dictate their demands to the other party such as bringing arguments and threats. Through this, the organization tries to “maximize gains and minimize losses while in a conflict with employees” (Shen 2011, p. 402). The next asymmetrical strategy is avoiding, which translates to avoiding communication or ignoring the internal public’s messages, opinions, and conflicts.

Another strategy is compromising which was viewed as the moment when the organization and the public communicate their needs, however none of them find satisfactory outcomes and the organization gives way to the internal public’s demands. Shen (2011) criticized this strategy because it is not purely symmetrical or asymmetrical as compromising might be seen as finding a mutual agreement between the two parties (Shen, 2011). On the other hand, Yue et al. (2020) research has shown that a symmetrical internal communication system and the usage of motivating language by the management contribute to a positive emotional culture.

PR researchers have looked at the management of the internal relationship by considering four components of the organization-public relationship: trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality (Hon & Grunig, 1999). The components refer to the level to which an organization and their internal public are willing to open to each other, are committed to maintaining a relationship and find it useful to maintain it, trust each other and agree on which party has the power to influence the other (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Men & Stacks, 2014). The employee-organization relationship has been viewed as having positive effects when using the four components and it has resulted in employee engagement, sharing of information and employee satisfaction which leads to a positive reputation and a more efficient organization (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kang & Sung, 2017).

Shen (2011) has developed an instrument that measures the organization-employee relationship strategies and researches how organizations create and maintain relationships with their internal audience. The research has looked in particular at relationship maintenance strategies and found that organizations used a strategy of assuring legitimacy, being open to networking and compromising with their employees. Shen (2011) noted that organizations need to work on maintaining a satisfactory relationship with their employees and use strategies to prevent the relationship from becoming one sided.

Employees will develop higher trust in their leaders and colleagues if an efficient internal communication strategy is in place, they will contribute positively to their relationship with the company, and this will develop loyalty to the organization’s brand (Dolphin, 2005; Welch, 2012). However, a lack of communication can be disruptive to internal relationships.

Welch (2012) found that an efficient communication strategy can help employees understand how their organizations works, the changes that take part and what opportunities they are offered. Effective communication depends on the type of messages that are sent to employees, such as choosing a useful format and looking into
how they prefer their messages to be communicated (Welch, 2012).

**Internal communication channels**

Whitworth (2006) noted that an internal communication program includes three blocks: the hierarchical communication which includes the organization’s management, the media communications (emails and blogs) and the non-formal networks of communication.

Research shows that a sense of community is developed when communication is done face to face rather than electronically (email and chat) or via social media (Stein, 2006; White et al., 2010; Friedl & Vercic, 2011). Face to face communication is preferred by employees for team communications while electronic messages were preferred for project communication (White et al., 2010). A study undertaken in 2009 by Mulki et al. (2009) on remote workers noted that real life office work included social experience and face to face communication. Remote companies on the other hand are using alternative methods of communication such as instant messaging and social networking. As a result, remote workers suffer from isolation due to lack of informal communication that an office would offer and this influences the sense of community and connection they would have with the company in a real office (Mulki et al., 2009).

Karlsson and Klingstedt (2019) state that when complex information is sent out via social media channels, the messages lack employee engagement. This is because social media channels are not able to convey the complexity of messages, so the information is simplified, it lacks clarity and details. As a result, messages are not understood, and employees are not aware what actions to take.

In the remote work field employees have more difficulty with developing relationships and trust with other colleagues because remote communication lacks social presence, there is need of further communication on their part to explain messages which leads to frustration (Mulki et al., 2009). In conclusion, electronic communication is less efficient than face to face communication. As organizations have moved from face-to-face communication to other forms of communication with their remote employees during the Covid 19 pandemic, this study has looked at how private organizations in Saudi Arabia have communicated internally with their publics during the COVID 19 pandemic by examining the level of information transparency and effectiveness in communication.

**Quantitative methodology**

The research has used a quantitative survey method which is an efficient method of collecting data from a larger population (Stacks, 2010). Quantitative research highlights the importance of generalizability which is a vital criteria in evaluating the quality of study and the purpose is to apply the findings to the general population (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000; Henn et al., 2006; Karasar, 1999 cited in Delice, 2010). Due to this reason, it is vital to select a representative sample of the population.

This research has used statistical generalization, also named nomothetic generalization by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which means the research has identified the population to which they want to generalize the results. Borg and Gall (1979) noted that the criteria for determining a sample size for survey research is for 100 samples to be sent out for each major subgroup and 20-50 surveys to be sent for minor subgroups. Cohen et al. (2000) stated that for survey conducted research, at least 30 surveys need to be sent out to the smallest group of the population if the smallest group is 5% of the population. The sample selected was employees from a Saudi private company working in different positions.
111 participants responded to an online survey with 28 questions. Participants that answered the questions are of different age groups, and various education levels. The data was collected via survey in October, 2020.

The survey included several questions related to demographics (such as age, position in the company) and it continued with closed-ended questions where 5-point Likert scales were used for responses. The questions were originally developed in English language and then there were translated into Arabic language.

The study is based on Welch and Jackson’s (2007) framework which takes into consideration the receiver’s point of view rather than the sender of the information. For this reason, the questions examined the audience’s perceptions and views on how the information was sent out and how it was perceived by them (e.g., The organization has sent you complete information and clear explanation about the new rules and the new situation in regards to working remotely).

Findings and Discussion

The questionnaires were completed by 111 employees at Saudi private companies. The sample of study were middle and large size private companies such as: banks, airline companies, retail, healthcare, petrochemical, communication, and telecom companies.

The results of the survey show that 56.8 percent respondents identified as managers and 43.2 percent as officers. One goal of the study was to identify the transparency of the information sent out by PR departments to their stakeholders and how this was perceived by the audience. For this reason, it was necessary to identify the participants’ degree of education. For the current study, 72.1 percent of participants had bachelor’s degrees, 18 percent had a postgraduate certification and 9.9 percent graduated from high school. Out of the total respondents, the majority (96.4 percent) were of Saudi nationality.

The goal of the study was to look at how effective the information sent out was. This was done by asking respondents if they felt connected with the company if they engaged in discussion voluntarily or if they were encouraged by the company to do so. With this purpose, the study has looked at the relationship between the company and the employees by looking at the type of contractual work and work experience in the company. The study has found that 58.6 percent had a permanent contract while 41.4 percent had an annual contract. 27 percent of respondents had 1-5 years of work experience in their field while 20.7 percent had between 11-15 years of experience.

The questionnaires were structured in two themes: the first part included questions regarding the Saudi private companies’ transparency in communication and the second part included questions that referred to the effectiveness of communication of PR departments. As one focus of the study was to identify if the communication during the Covid-19 pandemic was transparent, respondents were asked if the information sent out to them was trustworthy, if they felt connected to the company due to the constant communication, if the information sent out was credible, complete, clear, and transparent. Respondents were asked to rate each of the answers as: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree.

The second set of survey questions were focused on how effective the information was sent out. These questions included information type of elements, such as channels of communication (email, website, video chat, social media, phone), frequency of information sent out and the respondents’ preferences to these channels of communication. The next set included questions regarding how comprehensive the information
sent out was, so correspondents were asked if they found it easy to understand, useful and effective, if the information sent out was relevant to them, if they were encouraged to engage in communication and if they have engaged in communication. Survey participants were also asked to rate if they have read all the information that was sent out to them and if the company has communicated personally with them to understand if they have read and understood all the information that was sent out to them during the pandemic.

Discussion

The following section examines the research questions and provides insights into the findings of this study. The first research question addresses the transparency in communication provided by PR departments at private companies during the COVID 19 pandemic. Respondents were asked if the PR departments updated them about COVID 19 new regulations that affected the company and 78.3 percent of employees agreed and strongly agreed that they were informed. This indicates that PR departments have offered complete and relevant information which according to Stirton and Lodge (2001) are features of the concept of transparency in an organization.

Survey participants were also asked to rate their level of agreement concerning the level of trust and truthfulness in the information that was sent out. The survey revealed that 83.7 percent trusted the information given and 90 percent agreed and strongly agreed that the information was honest.

It may be deduced that most respondents have a high degree of trust in how their company is handling the lockdown and how they are being updated. One possible explanation is that PR departments’ communication was considered trustworthy and truthful which means PR practitioners have built a relationship based on trust and continued to distribute the information the same way they have done before the pandemic. As Stirton and Lodge (2001) and Rawlins (2009) noted, an organization’s credibility and trust is established through the organization’s actions, such as offering accurate and complete information about their decisions.

Within the transparency theme, 63.7 percent of respondents answered that they felt it was relevant and beneficial to receive information about other departments and other employees during the pandemic. Research indicates that employees appreciate when they receive information that is not relevant to their role in the company because they are aware of their workplace environment, and they develop a sense of loyalty (Argenti, 1998).

Considering that employees worked remotely during the pandemic, the study investigated if the information sent out was not only beneficial but if it helped employees feel connected and loyal. The research has found that 67.5 percent strongly agreed and agreed that they felt connected and loyal thanks to PR departments communication. The reasons might have been due to the way the information was written (in a more personal way rather than sending out impersonal information) and the frequency that the information was sent out which made employees feel that they were cared for, involved, and connected within the activities of the companies. As Welch and Jackson (2007) stated internal communication consists of strategic relationships between stakeholders within the organization and it is not reduced to simply transmitting information but creating a relationship between employees.

The study looked at the information attributes that were sent out to employees to understand if the information was transparent and if employees understood what was transmitted. The research has found that 81.9 percent considered
that the information was clear, 76.5 percent found it credible, and 64.8 percent agreed that PR departments have sent complete and clear explanations about the new rules. As pointed out by Welch and Jackson (2007) one of the goals of internal corporate communications is to create an awareness of the work environment and of the organization’s decisions towards any changes that affect employees. To create such an awareness the information that is sent out needs to be complete, clear, relevant, and credible (Stirton & Lodge, 2001).

To examine the level of transparency in communication, the survey also included questions regarding the type of information that was sent out. Yates (2006) and Argenti (1998) noted that effective communication includes also sharing transparent information that might not be personally relevant to the employee, but it is relevant to the company as a whole. Several questions that were asked in the survey were related to how COVID19 affected the way the company worked. The study has found that the 77.5 of respondents were made aware about work guidelines during the pandemic, however results show that 36 percent of employees stated that they were included in post pandemic plans while 32.4 percent fully disagreed with this statement.

The second research question addressed the effectiveness of communication during the pandemic. The study has examined the channels of communication used to understand which channel was considered more effective. The results found that 73.9 percent of respondents received frequently information by email (38.7 percent), and this explains why 69.4 percent of PR departments at Saudi companies use email as a main channel of communication. A lower percent, 36 percent of them were notified about the new policies by phone while 19 percent were informed by social media platforms, the company’s website, and video chat. Although a smaller percentage have used these alternative ways of communication, 26 percent of them considered that information sent out via these social media channels is easier to absorb. This might be because information that is shared via social media is usually summarized and more digestible.

The study has examined the type of information that was sent out and an analysis of the answers shows that the majority believed that the information was easy to understand (65.7 percent) and useful (63 percent). The majority considered that the information was effective (51.3 percent), credible (50.1 percent), important, helpful (57.6 percent), sufficient (56.7 percent) and updated (55.8 percent). Although previous research (Stein, 2006; Friedly & Vercic, 2011) suggested that face to face communication is preferred and it is more efficient than electronic communication, the results of the survey show that the information sent out via alternative methods of communication was considered easy to comprehend, useful and sufficient for their needs.

Previous prepandemic research suggested that face to face communication was the most preferred method of communication to electronic messages (White et al., 2010). However, due to coronavirus restrictions respondents were restricted to remote communication and had to rely on channels of communications which are normally used by remote companies (Mulki et al., 2009). Although information was sent out via different channels of communication, the results show that 43.2 percent of respondents have read only a part of the information and only 19.9 percent read it in full. The reason for this might have been because employees received information that was not related to their job or due to the channels of communication used. A study by Mulki et al. (2009) suggests that remote workers lack the sense of community and connection that they would have working in a physical office in a company. This might explain why some workers would not be interested in
reading information that is relevant to other departments that they are not able to connect with in real life.

The lack of sense of belonging might have been determined by the style of communication and the way the information was written which might have lacked appeal and engagement. For this reason, respondents were asked if they found the content format as attractive. The results show that 32.4 percentage of respondents were neutral in seeing the information format as attractive. This might be because the most used channel of communication was email instead of social media and because of the increased volume and rate of relevant and irrelevant information that was sent out to employees during COVID 19 which might have been overwhelming. Research shows that channels of communication such as social media might not be able to convey the complexity of the messages because information is usually simplified, and they lack clarity (Karlsson & Klingstedt, 2019). Due to these factors, the message might not be understood completely by employees and not considered engaging and attractive. Karlsson and Klingstedt (2019) state that an engaging thus appealing message is easy to understand, it is relevant and the actions that need to be taken as a result of it are clear.

The next research question concerns the effectiveness of communication which would have determined employee’s reactiveness or involvement in communication. The respondents were asked if they engaged actively in communication and if they were encouraged by their own companies to do so. Shen (2011) stressed on the importance of companies maintaining symmetrical relationship strategies such as openness, networking, and assurances of legitimacy. Cotterrell (2000) and Rawlins (2009) stated for a company to be transparent and effective they will be open to employees to search and ask for information to instate trust and credibility.

The survey has found that 45.9 percent of respondents considered that they were encouraged by their companies to express their opinion on the work system and 44.1 percent believed they were able to interact with the company’s PR department in an open electronic dialogue, a small percentage (10.8 percent) disagreed with this statement. Moreover, 44.1 percent of employees actively engaged with the company’s PR messages during COVID 19 by showing support on social media while only 5.4 percent did not engage at all with these public messages online.

It can be assumed that because the information sent out was considered transparent, this has led to an increased employee satisfaction and employees felt more encouraged to search for information (Rawlins, 2009; Men & Stacks, 2014; Lee et al., 2018). As stated previously, when organizations are transparent and employees are encouraged to communicate, this leads to a stronger relationship and a more effective organization (Walden et al., 2017). If companies want to maintain this effectiveness, they need to continue to maintain a clear transparent and effective communication. As pointed about by the results of the study, 40.5 percent were satisfied with how the PR departments have communicated with them and 32.4 percent agreed that were somewhat satisfied.

**Conclusion**

The results reveal that in terms of transparency in communication, the mean score is high which means the PR departments at Saudi private companies were transparent when communicating with the internal public. This shows that the PR departments have communicated in a transparent way which means they have taken into account the public relations code of ethics.

In regards to the effectiveness in communication, the results have revealed that the mean score is average which means that PR departments failed
in communicating internally in an effective way probably due to a weak communication strategy or lack of professionalism. The findings from this study have revealed that some respondents did not read all the information that was sent out and they did not find it attractive, and the reason might have been due to constant communication of relevant and irrelevant information which might have overwhelmed them.

The consequence is that employees might ignore important information that the company sends out. The solution might be an improvement of the internal communication strategy, such as usage of diverse channels of communication apart from emailing. In addition, PR departments would need to adapt the information to their audience, to ensure that there is a right flow of information, personalize messages and arrange a system of notifications and finally, to ensure that all the information is available to them.

The results of the surveys indicate that most employees felt connected with their company which means the information sent out was personalized enough and employees felt supported by their organization. This shows that the organization has worked towards creating a community and maintaining employee loyalty by communicating constantly with their employees.

**Practical and social implications**

The practical and social implications of the results are that by providing transparency, a high level of trust is established between the stakeholders, the general public and the organization. The practical implication is that PR departments have respected the public relations code of ethics by revealing transparent information to their employees. This contributes to employee loyalty, higher levels of productivity, higher employee engagement, and a positive public image. However, a weak communication strategy might affect the organization’s overall effectiveness and future productivity.

A limitation of this study is that it has only focused on employees of private companies, and it has only investigated the receivers’ point of view. The study suggests that future research should also examine employees in governmental institutions and to also investigate the PR officers’ views on this subject. In future research, PR practitioners should be surveyed on how they create their messages, why they chose certain strategies and a look on the obstacles they had during the Covid-19 crisis.

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Enriching Self-Reflection in Public Relations Education to deal with Pandemic Challenges

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Numerous studies document the benefits and positive power of self-reflection (SR) for personal, professional, and leadership development. Drawing from our previous research on this topic (Berger & Erzikova, 2019), and incorporating additional insights from PR teachers and a review of online educational resources, this paper argues for enriching SR among PR teachers and students to increase their understanding and performance. SR also may help deal with the COVID-19 global pandemic and other major life challenges. In this regard, we identify dozens of specific exercises and activities to spur SR development in education and to build SR power to deal with the pandemic and other threatening issues or environments.

Self-reflection is a primary way we examine ourselves and how others see us to increase self-awareness (Eurich, 2017). Greek philosophers believed self-knowledge was the highest form of knowledge, and John Dewey, American thinker and educational reformer, claimed SR was the only form of thinking that leads to learning: we don’t learn from doing but rather by reflecting on the doing. Studies in communication, psychology, and education confirm these and other benefits of SR, e.g., richer relationships and emotional IQ, enhanced leadership skills, and more engaged and productive work teams (Goleman, 1995; Kail, 2012; Miller, 2013).

Overall, PR teachers and students will benefit from developing and applying reflective skills to cope with workplace challenges, improve self-performance, and deal with difficult environments like the pandemic. Yet, as Mules (2018) found, self-reflection is largely absent in PR research, textbooks, and the classroom. This paper addresses that deficiency and identifies specific approaches and exercises to advance development of SR in PR education.

Key Findings in the 2019 Study of Self-Reflection

To learn more about SR perceptions and practices among PR leaders, our earlier study (Berger & Erzikova, 2019) examined self-reflection in diverse Russian (N=15) and North American (N=15) PR leaders via depth interviews averaging 45 minutes in length. The leaders represented diverse organizational types, possessed more than 10 years of experience, and lead or have led communication teams, functions, and agencies. The interviews probed for insights to help answer five research questions: 1) how and to what extent the leaders practiced SR, 3) the barriers to productive SR, 4) the practical benefits of SR in their work role, and 5) the extent to which mentoring might contribute to the development of SR and leadership capabilities.
Overall, the study found all PR leaders in both countries believed SR is an important leadership capability, though practiced and valued somewhat differently in the two systems. The leaders shared similar views about the role, process, practice, and benefits of SR. They:

- Recognized the value and importance of SR in thinking, decision-making, and increasing overall self-awareness.
- Practiced SR virtually every day, though their approaches varied.
- Identified three similar barriers to productive SR: 1) ego or excessive self-criticism, 2) constant time pressures, and 3) lack of supervisory or organizational support for SR.
- Named similar SR influences on their leadership roles, e.g., stronger relationships, better decision-making, richer communications, and a healthier balance and outlook.
- Used SR to deal with shared issues in the workplace, such as managing difficult relationships, resolving client disputes, building teams, and managing crises.
- Confirmed the value of mentors and the ways in which they can influence leadership development, as well as job preparation and performance.

The PR leaders also expressed some differences, by country, in SR perceptions and processes, though most were more/less, not either/or differences. Four were more meaningful:

- The Russians used the me-reflection approach (a nearly total focus on the self), while North Americans used a we-reflection approach (incorporating others in their SR).
- The Russians raised far more concerns about “dangerous” SR, or excessive self-criticism that can slow down a decision-making process, while North Americans saw the SR journey as a positive step, an accelerating trip that leads to an ever-brighter horizon in their work and social lives.
- The Americans strongly valued the role and influence of mentors, whom they suggested were the “best” SR teachers, while Russians emphasized more the role of classical and educational literature in their SR development.
- North American leaders tended to approach SR holistically by using multiple methods (e.g., self-talk, reading, seeking feedback), while Russians tended to use an atomistic approach by focusing on a single method (self-talk).

In short, North American and Russian leaders share similar ideas about the concept, practice, and value of SR. However, as the differences above suggest, SR is one concept that operates somewhat differently in the two systems: the texture and scope of SR provides varying levels of value and meaningfulness to leaders in the two countries.

The study’s richest contributions may be its practical, actionable implications for improving SR capabilities and practices. For example, one contribution is a six-step strategic SR process growing out of the interviews that describes how to prepare mentally for SR, and then plan and carry out insights from the introspection. Another implication for mentors is a “questioning approach,” a Socratic-type approach that teaches meaningful self-inquiry: mentors ask thoughtful questions to help mentees reach answers, rather than simply answering their questions about job opportunities, best areas of practice, technical skills, and so forth.

Study participants also suggested some “building blocks” (our term) for stimulating and improving student SR in the classroom. This paper
highlights seven building blocks and provides dozens of corresponding practical, actionable exercises and projects for educators to use with students and themselves. The pandemic has created an environment wherein student and teacher self-reflection and shared virtual interactions are more crucial than ever. SR may be especially important during times when normal activities and programs are disrupted, and in-person activities and gatherings are sharply curtailed or prohibited.

Methods

The self-reflection study with 30 public relations leaders provided ideas and suggestions for enriching SR in public relations education, a largely unexplored issue in the field (Mules, 2018). Drawing from this framework study and leaders’ responses to questions regarding how students could develop their SR capabilities in education and mentoring sessions, we identified seven building blocks (Figure 1) for enriching SR education.

In addition, we held informal discussions with 10 PR educators in the U.S. to learn the extent to which they used SR in their classrooms, as well as the specific types of SR approaches and tactics they used. We also conducted a comprehensive online review to learn more about specific SR tactics and approaches teachers use in the classroom. This review examined more than 40 websites and blogs produced by educators across several disciplines. The educator discussions and online resources provided specific approaches reflected in this paper.

Seven Building Blocks for Increasing Self-Reflection in PR Education

With the research findings gained in the leadership study (Berger & Erzikova), and new insights gained through informal conversations with PR teachers and a review of online educational resources, we developed a model reflecting these seven building blocks (Figure X). They are: 1) commitment, 2) Socratic teaching, 3) artistic stimulation, 4) deep debriefs, 5) self-assessments, 6) recurring workplace questions, and 7) the calendar approach. Associated with each block are specific exercises and projects for teachers to use in the real or virtual classroom to develop self-reflection power among students and themselves.

In addition, during the current pandemic or future dramatic changes in the world, the importance of SR multiplies. The building blocks and corresponding teaching tactics herein provide a framework of practical guidance to develop and/or enrich self-reflection about the effects of COVID-19. For example, instructors can reflect on the ways to prioritize students’ mental and emotional health and help students do the same. Teachers also can encourage learners to reflect on changes in class modalities (moving online) and study routines such as maintaining motivation, dealing with distractions, and replacing normal activities like face-to-face participation in student organizations and intramural sports.

Numerous studies have documented the benefits and positive power of SR. Building this capability in students—our future professionals and leaders—will enrich the profession and infuse it with power, especially during these trying times. The sooner one begins meaningful SR, the better for them and their organizations. Examining the seven building blocks (Figure 1) in greater depth is a good starting point.

Block #1: Commitment

The foundation block is a firm commitment by educators to develop students’ SR capabilities, along with improving their own SR knowledge and practice. An overall strategy in this regard is to structure courses to include SR moments and practices into most class sessions, rather than highlighting SR in a single class session.

Here are five exercises among many that might be used:

1. Hold five-minute reflection sessions at the end of each class (or on a weekly basis) and ask purposeful questions such as:
   - What one, most valuable thing did you learn today (this week)?
   - What made you curious today, or wanting to learn more?
   - What could have been done differently to enrich our session today?
   - What did you contribute in class today? Something to add right now?
   - What activities, readings, or discussion in the class most engaged you?

2. Write a one-minute paper describing your biggest learning (or question) today.

3. Write for 60 seconds in a class journal dedicated to SR about how you contributed to class today, or why you didn’t. What more could you have offered? What held you back?

4. Write a 150-word blog after a guest speaker, or case study, or event/issue discussed in class. Describe your biggest learning, or the value of the experience for you.

5. Video a class session, speaker presentation, or team presentation. Then review the video and engage students in discussing its strengths, areas for improvement, what else might have been included, and so forth.

Teachers’ own SR practices and enrichment efforts are also crucial to strengthening students’ SR capabilities. One approach for teachers is to consistently examine and question their own teaching approaches, capabilities, and outcomes. As John Dewey famously argued, we don’t learn from experience, but rather we learn from reflecting on experience. Here are some questions teachers may regularly ask themselves, then listen closely to their answers:

- How do I create a positive climate for learning in the classroom?
- What can I do to engage and involve all students in assignments and class sessions?
- What types of students do I tend to ignore, or need to spend more time with?
- What skills do students struggle with the most? Why, and what can I do about it?
- Where have I failed and succeeded as a teacher in the past?
- Do I still enjoy teaching, and, if not, what can I do to gain more joy?
- What is my next, most important step to enrich my teaching?


Some of the most common and successful SR approaches used by teachers include:

A personal SR journal to record thoughts, observations, learnings, and next steps.
Video recordings of a class (even on their own phone) to examine their teaching performance.

Student observations and feelings about aspects of the class.

Peer observations (fellow teachers) of teaching and class performance.

Engagement in online communities where SR and teaching performance are discussed.


**Block #2: Socratic Teaching**

Use Socratic teaching more often—less lecturing/less teacher talking—and more listening and questioning to stimulate critical thinking and draw out ideas and underlying assumptions. Erick Willberding’s *Socratic Methods in the Classroom* (2019) is an excellent resource.

Six types of basic Socratic questions concern: 1) clarifying thinking by using basic “tell me more” questions to drive deeper thinking, 2) challenging or probing assumptions to identify presuppositions, 3) probing evidence or reasoning in arguments to assess strength and weight, 4) exploring alternative viewpoints or perspectives on the topic or issue, 5) examining implications and consequences to assess relevance and desirability, and 6) questioning the question(s) itself.

This approach challenges the accuracy and completeness of thinking in ways that help people move forward and promote higher order thinking skills and capabilities. The more such questions are used, the more critical thinking is strengthened, and a wide-lens perspective is adopted.

**Block #3: Artistic Stimulation**

Use poetry, great literature, films, art, and music to trigger journal writing, creative thinking, and reflection and discussions about the self, dreams, hopes, values, and behaviors. Art often stimulates self-reflection because it often is a product of SR. Here are some SR approaches that can be used for poetry, for example:

2. Have students share their initial impressions about the poem—how it touches them, their emotions, the kind of person represented in the poem. Then break them into small groups and share their emotions and discuss the title, “Still I Rise.” Is this a good title? Why or why not?
3. Have teams consider the question: If poetry has the power to reach and touch our emotions and feelings, and invoke powerful and memorable images, can it be utilized in PR and advertising campaigns? If so, how? (Note: *Still I Rise* was used in an ad campaign by the United Negro College Fund in the U.S. And Kristina Monllos notes in an *Adweek* column (February 26, 2018) that major Brands like Coca Cola, Microsoft, Under Armour, and A+E Networks have used poetry to draw people in and create a more personal connection to their brands. (https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/why-brands-are-using-poetry-to-cut-through-the-noise-and-grab-viewers-attention/)
4. Have students read and discuss a poem or short story, listen to music, or view a painting, and then discuss what it means to them, or what it feels like to them. Challenge them to create a *tweet* to capture the essence of their feeling about the work. Then consider
how the tweet might frame a PR campaign.

Block #4: Deep Debriefs

Lead students through depth debriefs of in-class team projects, or review case studies, which build analytical and reflective thinking and deepen understanding—opening the door for improved planning and execution in future projects.

Box of Crayons (2017), a creative leadership development consultancy, underscores the importance of debriefing questions to build self-reflection and improve performance, as well as to learn from the event or experience (https://boxofcrayons.com/2017/11/the-5-most-powerful-debrief-questions-and-why-theyre-important/). They argue that we learn more about our project or activity after it’s completed than when we are planning or executing it. They recommend asking five crucial questions post-event to focus on learning and community building, rather than on measuring success or finger-pointing failures:

1. **What were we trying to do?**

Here you might repeat the goals of the project and reiterate what you were trying to achieve.

2. **What happened?**

Use this question to find out what actually happened—gather the facts and opinions and then initiate a moment of reflection.

3. **What can we learn from this?**

Some learning moments will be obvious, e.g., “The registration process took too long,” while others will be less specific and require more exploration, e.g., “Why did we take on this project when it’s not central to our mission?” It’s easy to point to the flaws of a project or event, but it’s more worthwhile to start with what’s been working and go forward from there. Knowing what works and then looking for answers about the aspects that are still puzzling will lead to moments of discovery—learned insights—and help you come up with solutions.

4. **What should we do differently next time?**

This question is important because it makes the learned insights stick. It puts a thought in your mind that you’ll remember as you embark on the next project and think toward the next debrief.

5. **Now what?**

Now for the practical stuff. A debrief might lead to actions that need to be taken, and this is where you can decide who should do what. Set up accountability — decide on actions, set up tasks and determine deadlines.

Case study evaluation takes a similar questioning approach to learn and develop self-reflection.

Questions focus on identifying the most important facts in a case and the key issue(s), then specifying alternative courses of action, assessing each course, and finally recommending the “best” course of action.

Block #5: Self-Assessment Tools

Sharpen student self-insights and team-insights with assessment tools available online or in booklet form. These self-assessments can drive self-reflection and awareness and help students or professionals better understand themselves and others/different types. Self-awareness can help improve performance, relationships, team building, and trust. Here are four such self-assessments, among others:

- **Myer-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI):** Reveals personality type (16 types) and helps individuals better understand and accept themselves (and others) and who they are.

- **Conflict Dynamics Profile (CDP):** Measures conflict behaviors, increases self-awareness and helps develop conflict
management skills. Focuses on behavior, not styles or preferences.

- **Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory (KAI)**: reveals one’s style of problem-solving and increases self-awareness and teamwork. Useful especially for building teams and carrying out change management.

- **StrengthsFinders (SF)**: helps individuals identify their top strengths (from a list of talent themes) and become more engaged and improve performance. This positive approach is a good first step in team building and leadership development.

Exercises for the classroom with self-assessments (MBTI used here) might include:

1. Students complete the assessment as homework or in class.
2. Each student shares their personality type and then responds to such questions as: Any surprises for you? Any examples from the past that highlight your type or style? What’s your most important self-insight? Is there some area of concern to address?
3. Group students into teams to learn, discuss, reflect on their differences in type, and what the implications are for how they work with each other.
4. Provide a mini case for the teams to discuss and present. For example: You are the new supervisor of an agency account team (5 people). How might you use the MBTI with, or apply it to your team? What are some practical steps you could take, based on the MBTI, to enrich self-insights and understand differences in your team?

**Block #6: Recurring Workplace Questions**

Lead students to create a list of the kinds of recurring SR questions they are likely to deal with in their professional work world as individuals or team member. Consider how you might answer them, **and** the relevant behaviors needed to convince others you mean what you say. Here are seven sample questions:

- Do my words and actions on the job reflect my core values?
- How do I contribute to my work team’s or organization’s culture?
- How can I develop a better work relationship with my boss?
- How do others likely see my actions and behaviors?
- What’s the best positive surprise I could bring to my team?
- How can I determine whether I have a good future and opportunities with my organization?
- Do my colleagues consider me a change agent?

Educators may ask similar questions of themselves and their own performance. For example, considering the issue of culture in number two above, teachers may ask themselves the following questions during a workday:

- When I came by the main (department) office, did I stop for a minute to speak to a work study student? Or did I storm through the office without noticing the student?
- While talking at a departmental meeting today, did I make eye contact with only those faculty whom I consider decision-makers? Was I dismissive of adjunct faculty input?
- Did I praise a new faculty member for her research (or say encouraging words) before I reminded her service report was due tomorrow?
- Did I privately meet with a colleague and explain it is rude to “roll eyes” while listening to a foreign-born colleague who speaks with an accent, even if the colleague didn’t
see such a reaction?

**Block #7: Calendar Approach**

Use a “calendar approach” to help students reflect on and rehearse important, upcoming events or challenges in their current educational world. This might include such activities as leading a team session or study group, applying for a job, delivering a speech, being a social host at some event, participating in a club or team meeting, a call with mentor, and so forth. This forces students to consider such events before they take place and then consider their words and actions, behaviors, what to look for, and so forth.

Here’s an example of this calendaring approach: Let’s say a senior PR major near graduation is preparing to present to other students who have just decided and signed to become PR majors. To prepare for this talk, the student might reflect on the following aspects:

- Why is this presentation important for me? Why will it be important for the new majors?
- What will make my presentation impactful and memorable? A key image or story?
- What expectations might they have about my talk?
- What did I wish I knew when I became a new PR major?
- Do I see these students as my future colleagues?

**Self-Reflection in Pandemic Times**

Career and work challenges related to infectious disease outbreaks (e.g., preserving subjective well-being, dealing with an uncertain labor market, and balancing family and work responsibilities) were well documented before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the planet in 2019 (Restubog, Ocampo, & Wang, 2020). Overall, such studies reveal that disease outbreaks can have a long-term impact on the workforce’s mental health and well-being (Restubog et al., 2020; Sibley et al., 2020).

As with almost any crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented both challenges and opportunities for such areas of organizational practice as “occupational health and safety, work-family issues, telecommuting, virtual teamwork, job insecurity, precarious work, leadership, human resources policy, the aging workforce, and careers” (Rudolph et al., 2020, p. 48). For example, for the occupational health and safety category, a challenge might be associated with identifying approaches to teach personnel coping strategies. Or given a virtual teamwork situation, one challenge might be how to build team spirit and vital trust and relationships online.

A related opportunity might be developing intervention programs to prevent (or reduce) post-traumatic stress symptoms (Rudolph et al., 2020). Part of these programs might be teaching employees to maintain mental wellbeing and resilience by encouraging them to take “time out to ‘check in’ with oneself” (Restubog et al., 2020, p. 3), or to talk more strategically with yourself. In other words, self-reflection can be a coping strategy during a pandemic.

To deal with pandemic-related challenges, individuals can reflect on many topics, some of which are described in the seven building blocks discussed above. Many of these approaches can be applied specifically to the pandemic environment, e.g., holding brief reflection sessions at the end of ZOOM classes, using artistic stimulation to trigger reflection, and creating and discussing recurring workplace questions. Depth team debriefings and case study analyses also would be valuable in this regard. Other specific types of questions oriented toward the pandemic environment include:
Impact. In what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted my daily routine? Which of these forced changes have been positive for myself and my family? For my career? How can I replace some of the missing pieces in my routine?

Flexibility. How flexible have I been in adjusting to the pandemic in terms of my work? What was most difficult decision I made? What was a biggest compromise I made?

Motivation. How do I stay motivated to continue working effectively? How successful have I been in assisting my colleagues/students in their effort to stay focused?

Balance. How effective have I been in finding a work-life balance while working from home? Have I encouraged my colleagues/students to find a work/study-life balance?

Coping with Stress. Have I been actively using various approaches (e.g., digital detox, going to a park, exercising) to cope with stress? What approaches helped me most? What other tactics should I try? Can I work with students to develop a creative list of practical stress-coping approaches?

Empathy. How empathetic have I been toward my colleagues and family? What are the ways to emotionally support my subordinates/students who might feel lonely during the pandemic?

Advantages. What new skills/expertise have I developed during the current pandemic? Will any of them be useful in the post-pandemic time? What have I learned about time management in these difficult times? How specifically can I enrich my time?

Discussion

Overall, this study, along with our previous work on this topic (Berger & Erzikova, 2019), underscores the potentially positive power of SR in enriching leadership, building relationships, and making sound strategic decisions that is highlighted in many previous studies. It also sheds light on the practice among some senior PR leaders in two countries.

This growing body of research begs the question: Is SR the big difference maker between good and great leadership—the tipping point? We don’t know for sure, but it certainly carries some weight in that regard, even though SR is nearly invisible in our research, professional development programs, and classroom activities (Mules, 2018). In extensive research, Eurich (2017) found only 10-15 percent of leaders were highly self-aware, though most declare they are, and most over value their skills and performance. The very real problem of ego remains a potential blocking agent for meaningful and strategic self-reflection.

We believe it’s time to shine a brighter light on self-reflection in public relations practice, research, and education. This paper begins to address that need. Our seven building blocks provide a strategic foundation for SR education and development in the classroom, along with more than 50 specific exercises or applications for use. SR may be a valuable practice at all times, but it is especially helpful, even more necessary in difficult pandemic times.

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An exploratory perspective on mental readiness as a requirement for crisis leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Crisis communication is a well-studied topic throughout multiple disciplines (Heath, 2012:31). Communication during a crisis is of the utmost importance as it allows for understanding, acceptance and trustworthiness between organisations, stakeholders, and the public to take place (Coombs & Holladay, 2010:1).

Garcia (2017a:23) proposes that in order for communication during a crisis to happen effectively, the three aspects which make up mental readiness are needed.-Mental readiness is comprised of emotional discipline, intellectual rigor and deep knowledge. These three elements are necessary in order to adequately process information and act swiftly during a crisis.

Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay and Johansen (2010:343) acknowledge that whilst there is a lot of information regarding crisis communication and crisis management, there are profound gaps in the knowledge and any type of further investigation will not only add to the body of knowledge, but also allow for different perspectives to be examined.

As such, this study aims to contribute to the overall understanding of crisis management and investigated the following research questions:

• RQ 1: How relevant is mental readiness for crisis leadership?
• RQ 2: How relevant is deep knowledge for crisis leadership?
• RQ 3: How relevant is emotional discipline for crisis leadership?
• RQ 4: How relevant is intellectual rigour for crisis leadership?
• RQ 5: How relevant is previous and current crises for crisis leadership?

LITERATURE REVIEW

CRISIS LEADERSHIP

Klann (2003:11) suggests that crisis leadership can at times be extremely difficult and trying with many leaders explaining that crisis leadership has no end point but rather that it is a continuing process throughout one’s career in leadership. The Centre for Creative Leadership (CCL) has defined leadership as “a process of influence in which managers interact with direct reports and others in the organisation in collective pursuit of a common goal” (Klann, 2003:11).

Communication goes a long way in crisis leadership as often the communication from the leader
eliminates fear and worry which are often felt during a crisis. Fener and Cevikb (2015:698) explain that a leader is not merely a manager which often focuses on a continuation of the present, whereas a leader is focused on the harmony and creativity of an organisation.

Garcia (2017a) uses the term ‘mental readiness’ in order to delve deeper into what is needed from a leader to aid an organisation during times of crisis. He also defines mental readiness as “the persistent ability to remain calm, to think clearly and to understand other people's concerns even as conditions deteriorate and as panic begins to strike all around the leader. But mental readiness requires preparation, as well as clear thinking and both self-awareness and situational awareness”. Garcia suggests that whilst separate there are three dimensions of mental readiness that together help one understand mental readiness in an in-depth way (Garcia, 2017a).

THREE DIMENSIONS OF MENTAL READINESS

According to Fener and Cevikb (2015:698), there are countless characteristics which make a leader great. During times of crisis it is necessary for organisations to have leaders that are self-confident and approachable. Fener and Cevikb (2015:698) suggest that a leader should have the ability to identify the signals of a crisis before they occur which will allow them to adequately prepare and thus protect an organisation.

Dierickx (2018:27) believes that there are three components to what makes a good leader; these are courage, judgement and fortitude. Courage is described as when a leader is able to make decisions regardless of whether they are easy or not, as well as whether or not the consequence of such decisions is positive or negative. Courage is finding the best decision and pursuing it with determination and purpose.

Judgement is defined as using reason in order to test and propose ideas. Dierickx (2018:83) suggests that without judgement the element of courage can be harmful as it allows no space for the reviewing of ideas. Judgement also involves recognising patterns which allows for decision making regardless of whether the information is available to a full extent.

Fortitude is explained by Dierickx (2018:129) as the amplifier for the previous elements and allows good ideas to be executed through hardship and encourages members of an organisation to align their beliefs and values with those of the leader. Ultimately all three are needed equally in order to form a strong leader in crisis.

Garcia (2017a:23-61) argues that in order to lead efficiently during a crisis, leaders must be mentally ready. Mental readiness is comprised of emotional discipline, intellectual rigor and deep knowledge.

Emotional discipline

Garcia (2017a:27) suggests that emotional discipline has four main characteristics needed in a leader who can handle a crisis in a productive way. First, a leader must be forthright, this means that the person is able to make a clear assessment of what is happening, what can be expected and what the possibilities are. The initial step is being able to acknowledge that the problem exists. A leader that cannot acknowledge a crisis can limit an organisation's ability to prepare and coordinate in a timely manner, thus inhibiting the organisations ability to handle the crisis.

Second, an effective leader must be calm in order to process and think in a clear way that enables efficient decision making. No matter how dire the situation, remaining calm is of paramount importance. Like with many jobs that put people in crisis situations - such as being a police officer - there is a forced calm whereby the person
knows the situation is dire and they must fight all their instincts to react in a way that could make the situation worse. A forced calm still allows for clear thinking once it has been practiced enough, thus permitting preparation and the ability to think ahead (Garcia, 2017a:28).

Third, an effective leader is assertive, this allows a leader to act quickly rather than shutting down when a crisis ensues. Panic can often take hold during a crisis and leave a person paralyzed with no ability to think or act accordingly (Heyden & Nathanial, 2020), being a fierce leader allows for quick action, thinking clearly and the ability to act decisively (Garcia, 2017a:29). Last, an effective leader is bold, this means that a leader can make the best decisions based on what is most productive rather than what is most appealing (Garcia, 2017a:29).

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is thought to be of higher importance over intellect quotient (IQ) in terms of what is needed in an executive leadership role (Landry, 2019). EQ is defined as “the set of emotional abilities specific to dealing with other people” (Friedman & Schustack, 2014:242).

EQ has a set of five components; being self-aware, being persistent, being empathetic, interacting smoothly with others and controlling anger and anxieties (Friedman & Schustack, 2014:242). It is clear that much of the emotional discipline theorised by Garcia (2017a:28) is based on the components which comprise emotional intelligence.

Both theorists emphasise the concept “self-awareness”. This is defined as the “ability to not only understand your strengths and weaknesses, but to recognise your emotions and the effect they have on you and your team’s performance” (Landry, 2019). It is thus particularly important for a leader to possess a high self-awareness as this is also considered the “core” of effective leadership (Landry, 2019).

Deep knowledge

The second dimension of mental readiness is deep knowledge which is defined as “having a significant understanding of the patterns that drive effective and ineffective crisis response and in particular the reasons certain things work, and certain things don’t work- and never will” (Garcia, 2017a:31).

Understanding why certain things work and others do not will allow leaders to gain valuable insight into whether a particular course of action is worth taking. If the course of action is known to have failed in the past it is of little use for a leader to even attempt it. Leaders are then able to focus their attention onto what is likely to work (Garcia, 2017b). Deep knowledge also allows leaders to learn by example by learning from previous missteps of other organisations and leaders (Garcia, 2017a:32).

Intellectual rigour

Intellectual rigor within crisis management is similar to rigor found within other business processes. Leaders who exude rigor in their work often throw rigor out the window when a crisis strikes. “Rigor begins with clarity of thinking” (Garcia, 2017a:41).

A leader is one who directs an organisation in times of crisis and can make decisions based on what is best for the organisation even if it is unpleasant (Garcia 2017a:41). The biggest mistake taking place during a response to crisis, is denial. If a leader fails to see the patterns of behaviour leading an organisation to crisis or is simply choosing to ignore the problem then what started as a small crisis that could be fixed in a small amount of time could turn an entire organisation on its head.

Garcia (2017a:61) further suggests that intel-
lectual rigour is also about understanding consequences - a leader knows if the outcome is going to be unpleasant and “taking the pain” early on in order to have somewhat of a positive outcome, rather than waiting and having a negative outcome all together.

Rather than waiting, leaders should identify the problem, apologise fully and quickly rather than waiting for public outcry (Garcia, 2017a:61). This relates back to Coombs and Holladay’s (2010:40) strategic response strategies of acknowledging that a crisis exists and attempting to rebuild the organisation’s reputation.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study is exploratory in nature and a generic qualitative research design was followed. The focus was on participants’ thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs on things that are outside of themselves which is ultimately what a generic qualitative research design allows for (Plano, Clark & Creswell, 2015:4).

**Sampling**

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 13 organisations from a variety of. Table 1 represents property development, engineering, sports, pharmaceuticals, retail, IT, film production, medical aids and project management. Organisations had to have at least 50 employees and an upper-level communication manager/related individual who acts as the designated crisis leader.

**Data collection**

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for the flexibility it allows (Maree, 2016:93). Interviews were conducted using Zoom and Google Meets during September 2020. Interviews were all approximately one hour long and were recorded digitally. An online transcription service was used and transcriptions were then reviewed (compared to the recordings).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant ID</th>
<th>Job title</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Firm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Communications and PR specialist</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>CO1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Health and safety manager</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>CO2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Strategy planning manager</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>CO3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>CO4</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>HR manager</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>CO5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>IT service delivery manager</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Managing director</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Director and CEO</td>
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<td>Logistics manager</td>
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<td>CO9</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Chief operations officer</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>CO12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Head of marketing and communication</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>CO13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted in order to identify, analyse, organise, describe and report topics identified within a set of data (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017).

Trustworthiness

According to Maree (2016:123) credibility requires (i) the usage of well-established research methods, (ii) obtaining as much background information as possible, (iii) data triangulation, (iv) consultation with an experienced researcher and (v) member checks. All of the above were done for this study.

According to Korstjens and Moser (2018:121) transferability requires the use of lengthy descriptions in order to provide as much detail as possible. This should allow a reader of the article to make connections within their own experiences. All of the above were also done for this study.

Dependability has been ensured by establishing descriptions of the research design and how it has been implemented. Finally, confirmability was ensured by listening actively during interviews, asking open ended questions, transcribing interviews accurately (precisely), allowing the codes to develop inductively, and reviewing the codes (Milne & Oberle, 2005:415-416; Shenton, 2004:72). Again, all of the above were done for this study.

FINDINGS

RQ1: MENTAL READINESS

- Defining “mental readiness”

Mental readiness produced multiple different definitions according to the interviewees. Some of the most prevalent were knowing where to get information, possessing mental competence, being open, being adaptable to changing environments, remaining calm, and having a quick reaction time during a crisis.

“First of all, emotionally you have to be very calm when you have a lot of information coming your way.” (10)

- Other skills or attitudes for crisis leadership

Interviewees identified multiple skills and attitudes required of an effective crisis leader as set out below.

Table 2: Other requirements for crisis leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calmness</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional intelligence</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mindfulness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patience</td>
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</table>

RQ2: DEEP KNOWLEDGE

- Critical industry knowledge

The respondents made it abundantly clear that in order to have deep knowledge of one’s industry one has to have a very clear understanding of the field in which they work. This is often achieved through past experiences:

“So to understand your field and understand potentials” (01)

“industry knowledge is really important” (13)

The interviews display that understanding the field which one’s organisation is part of is extremely important. During a crisis, time is of the essence and if a leader does not have the basic foundation knowledge, their ability to harness
information and act in a timely manner can be greatly affected. A leader without the foundation knowledge of industry may also be distracted from the crisis at hand as they attempt to harness this knowledge rather than focusing on the impact of the crisis and how to lead in a constructive and diligent manner.

• Updating of industry knowledge

Respondents identified that crisis leaders need to know where to get information, specifically in times of crisis. In terms of deep knowledge, information and how one acquires it often allows one to gain knowledge. This knowledge allows one to gain a deeper understanding of the crisis at hand. This theme was linked specifically to the questions regarding mental readiness in the following ways:

“It is information or knowing where to get information” (01)

“Know where to get information to prepare yourself mentally as you go along” (02)

It is essential that crisis leaders know where to get information in times of crisis. The interviews display different scenarios whereby crisis leaders had access to the information vs. not having access to the information. The difference is immense and has shown just how important this theme is in relation to crisis leadership.

• Most important source for industry knowledge

This specific question garnered some interesting results. Whilst some interviewees provided specific websites, books and associations, over half reported that experience had taught them far more than any form of theoretical information:

• Impact of knowledge on specific aspects

Knowledge and the implementation of organisational culture, organisational learning, and the use of good judgement were found in the following ways.

Organisational culture

Many of the respondents used this as a starting point to speak about their organisation’s own culture and how this affected the organisation as a whole during a crisis. Another interesting point that came up was how the organisational culture was so important in a country such as South Africa as it has so many different cultures:

“So culture plays an enormous role in terms of who are your recognised leaders” (13)

Organisational culture plays a role in how crisis leaders are able to gain deep knowledge in that if an organisation has an open-door policy and a culture which promotes learning, the overall deep knowledge of those within the organisation has a chance to expand.

Organisational learning

Organisational learning was deemed incredibly important by all the interviewees. The interviewees felt that creating a culture that promoted learning allowed for a far greater amount of development and growth to occur within the organisation. Training, development, and workshops were the most used forms of organisational learning in the interviewee’s organisations.

Good judgement

Good judgment was deemed vital in terms of being an effective crisis leader. All interviewees felt this way.
“When you are a crisis leader you have to make good decisions which are sound and good, because you are still going to be accountable in whatever you do. So good judgement plays a role in it” (04)

• Preparing for the future

Organisations require the ability to learn from previous crisis and implement the relevant changes needed in order to avoid similar crises occurring. Interviewees further felt that their organisations needed to keep up with and adapt to the evolving nature of the digital environment.

RQ3: EMOTIONAL DISCIPLINE

• Crisis leaders’ emotions

Interviewees believed that emotions should not be a driving factor within a crisis situation:

“You always have to keep your emotions in check. It doesn’t mean that as leader, you don’t show your emotions. But you have to keep them very balanced” (05)

“You can’t allow your own emotions to become part of this crisis” (06)

Five of the interviewees argued that emotional intelligence is one of the most important aspects of being a good crisis leader. Emotional intelligence ultimately allows a crisis leader to lead in a more successful way as it promotes empathy and understanding:

• Reality vs. emotional reactions

Most of the interviewees felt that leaders should stick to facts as much as possible and avoiding emotional reactions as they have little place in crisis management. There were certain instances where emotional reactions were appropriate such as when dealing with a highly personal matter, but in terms of dealing with decisions for the organisation, emotions should be avoided. The interviewees also felt that logical thinking and planning was needed in order to ensure a professional reaction. Interviewees further highlighted emotions associated with good vs. destructive leadership behaviour:

“Anger, rage, lack of empathy, lack of understanding of other people’s situations, because if you don’t understand another person’s situation then you won’t understand their drivers and what caused them to get stuck” (02)

• Specific temperamental qualities

Interviewees commented on the qualities Garcia (2017a) mentioned. Twelve of thirteen interviewees agreed that these temperamental qualities were needed. The table below indicates the frequency of each of the temperamental qualities mentioned by interviewees.

Table 3: Table of frequencies related to research question 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temperamental qualities</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calmness</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forthrightness</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fierceness</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boldness</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fierceness was avoided by some of the interviewees as they felt that it was the wrong word to describe a leader. Most interviewees agreed that there was a time and place where a leader needed to be strong but that fierce was not the right word to describe this:
“I don’t know, I don’t like the word I think. I mean there’s a time to be strong and to be bold and to take action. But power that for me is ridiculous” (10)

The most desired temperamental is calmness. Each of the interviewees brought this quality into the discussion multiple times during interviews.

RQ4: INTELLECTUAL RIGOUR

• Clear thinking

Clear thinking was also mentioned by some of the interviewees prior to a specific question on the issue. This proves the importance thereof:

“I think it’s critical, to be able to think clearly, and not get overwhelmed by all of the different things that come your way, when you’re in a crisis” (05)

“You can’t lead through a crisis with a cloudy mind” (07)

• Naming a crisis correctly

Interviewees felt that naming a crisis correctly was vital in understanding the root cause of a crisis, allowing for the actual cause to be dealt with and not merely the symptoms. Many of the interviewees felt that dealing with the symptoms of a crisis did very little to aid in finding practical solutions to the crisis.

• Misnaming the underlying problem

Most of the interviewees felt that a good crisis leader is often able to deal with an issue before it becomes a crisis. A crisis leader’s ability to recognise symptoms of a crisis is of paramount importance as it may be the difference between a small crisis and a full blown crisis situation.

“it doesn’t become a crisis if you actually manage it properly” (13)

“You’ve got to see the smoking volcano and that is absolutely critical because if you are addressing the symptoms, you know, you’re not getting anywhere at all” (07)

• Avoiding false hope

Interviewees felt that false hope during or after a crisis should be avoided at all costs:

“Tell the truth on the good side as well as the bad side and false hope would evaporate” (12)

False hope is a concept which the interviewees felt uncomfortable with as it goes against the moral code of a crisis leader. Most interviewees gave examples of when false hope had been given to them and how this destroyed their confidence in the leaders who had misled them.

• Validity of key statements

Trust relationship with stakeholders

Most of the interviewees felt that a genuine apology did allow for a trusting relationship to be established with stakeholders. However, many felt that apologies were often used a great deal more than necessary and this decreased the credibility of the organisation and thus damaged relationships. Formal apologies should only be used when necessary and should be a truthful reflection of the leader and not what was merely expected of them.

Moral character

Moral character is imperative for a crisis leader as it creates a sense of trust and understanding in those that need someone to look to during crises:
“Not just during crisis times of crisis during the normal operations as usual as well because as leaders you want you want your team to show good moral character” (11)

One interviewee specifically pointed out that if the leader of an organisation does not uphold a good sense of moral character, it cannot be expected of their followers to do the same.

RQ5: PREVIOUS AND CURRENT CRISSES

• Patterns in behaviour

Interviewees were split on this issue. Some were very positive and some were very negative about their organisation’s past actions and ability to learn from these. Leaders’ (in)ability to notice changes in its environment would affect the organisation’s ability to plan for the future.

• Biggest lessons from the past

The lessons the crisis leaders had learned throughout different crises highlighted two themes, i.e. communication and the ability to reach out for help. Communication is noted as one of the absolute critical skill for an efficient crisis leader. Crisis leaders should also be willing to ask for and accept help from others as it allows for different viewpoints on the same crisis. Crisis leaders should at all times be open to learning.

• Impact of past crises

Organisational behaviour

Previous crisis allowed the interviewees to have more of an understanding of what would be required should a similar crisis take place. This allows the organisation to implement strategic planning based on previous experience and thus change their behaviour where necessary.

Leadership confidence

Interviewees agrees that at the start of one’s career one’s confidence is low. This changes with exposure to the management of issues and different crises.

“I would say it’s improved my confidence, because, you know, I’m much more aware and I’m talking then at sort of my level, I’m much more aware of potential issues than I was before” (07)

Confidence can have a great effect on the way a leader handles a crisis. Crisis leaders need to be aware of how their own personal attributes may affect the ways in which they lead others. Finding a balance of being confident in such a way that others trust it is vital.

• Unique challenges related to COVID-19

Unique challenges of an organisation were not very unique as every industry and crisis leader dealt with very similar issues:

“Definitely trying to manage a team remotely.” (06)

“How do you try and keep all of these balls in the air and make sure that the plans you are putting in place are actually achievable?” (08)

“People just being offline or people just not being accountable for their actions when they at home.” (01)

• Biggest successes related to COVID-19

One interesting point to make here is that many of the organisations appear to have had great success business wise in terms of keeping afloat during the pandemic. Some organisations that did not do as well appear to have had a slower
reaction time to the pandemic and this slowed the progress of the organisation as a whole.

CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory study confirmed the appropriateness of Garcia’s (2017a) framework for mental readiness of crisis leaders. Interviewees agree with these elements and provided anecdotal evidence in this regard. As such, it should be a fundamental component of crisis leadership training.

Further research is required to investigate an expanded framework, as well as the relationship between concepts of the framework.

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Crisis Strategy in the CEO Statements: An Analysis in Three Industries, Aviation, E-Commerce and Food

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Introduction

A crisis is a decisive moment for an organization: it is a turning point where the institutions need to take essential steps to protect their good image and reputation in the eyes of their public (Murray & Shohen, 1992). Crisis management professionals often focus on techniques to minimize the damage and help management overcome the crisis as quickly as possible (Turk et al., 2012, p. 574). Leadership communication, establishing and maintaining crisis networks of rescue operations, and officials who coordinate and communicate information to protect the public all are important during crisis (Johansson & Bäck, 2017, p. 324). A crisis provides an opportunity to assess the role of communication and reputation management both during and after the crisis (Turk et al., 2012, p. 575).

Although, crises are considered normal in the life of an organization, they can pose a significant threat to the profitability and survival of organizations (Barkley, 2020, p. 244). Undoubtedly, CEOs play a critical role in managing crises in an effective way, establishing good relations with the public, and overcoming the crisis with minimum damage to the organization. CEOs face the media during crisis and every word spoken by the CEO, every act they make, every message they share, all the public groups pay attention. What they say spread rapidly, determining the public’s trust in the organization or their actions against the organization. The stress and the uncertainty of the environment created by the crisis makes overall communication process difficult to handle. How the CEO communicates is also affected. Therefore, it is a necessary for the entire organization to be prepared for the crisis as well as the preparedness of the CEO: the CEO should be a good leader and communicator at handling crisis.

The analysis of CEO’s crisis statement of Turkish companies are from three sectors (food, e-commerce and aviation) and has been done with respect to the type, tone and crisis strategy. A total of eight cases of crisis are chosen due to their nature of publicity. This paper provides the background of these publicized cases. The literature review covers three main topics, the role of leadership in crisis management, the crisis cluster and response strategies.

Crisis and Crisis Management

Crises are described “as events characterized by threat, surprise, magnitude, with a need for an urgent response and expensive if they are not resolved effectively” (Greening & Johnson, 1996, p. 27). In fact, crises are normal in the life of an organization, but they can pose a risk to their profitability and survival. As more institutions transcend their national boundaries,
it has been observed that the complexity of crisis management increases (Barkley, 2020, p. 244). James et al. (2011) stated that as the business world becomes more complex, both the prevalence and severity of crisis conditions will increase. For profit and non-profit institutions are characterized by their diverse nature and operate in an ever-changing internal and external environments. Within this growing complex and turbulent environments, crises are likely to hit the institutions while they are struggling to understand the demands of their myriad stakeholders and meeting them. As highlighted by Bundy et al. (2017, p. 1662) “An organizational crisis is—an event perceived by managers and stakeholders as highly salient, unexpected, and potentially disruptive—can threaten an organization’s goal and have profound implications for its relationship with stakeholders.”

The importance of the legitimacy of an institution becomes evident to the institutions during the time of crisis (Massey, 2004, p. 239). Effective management of crises is important for the long-term benefit of the organization (Wang, 2008). Today crisis management is seen as vital for any type of institution because of the proliferation and acceleration of crises. Failure to manage a crisis can cause serious harm to stakeholders, generate losses for an institution and may end its existence (De Wolf & Mejri, 2013, p. 49). For institutions to maintain their existence and carry out their activities effectively, it is a necessity that they evaluate the situations and conditions which may create a crisis in a planned manner and take precautions (Kanilmaz, 2021, p. 7). Bundy et al. (2017, p. 1668) mentioned three elements of the preparation of an organization for crises from the internal perspective. The first one is often treated as a cognitive and behavioral task for a high degree of reliability. Secondly, many studies conducted showed that the institutions with high credibility are capable than others for preventing crises. Thirdly, corporate culture and its structure affect the occurrence of crises.

When stakeholders perceive that the organization has a strong reputation, they have confidence in the organization. As a result, the intention for positive behavior is reinforced. Crisis triggers negative effects on reputation, trust and behavioral intent of organizations (Demir et al., 2018, p. 416). Establishing positive relationships with stakeholders is essential because negative relationships can cause or escalate crises (Bundy et al., 2017, p. 1669).

Today, the risks during and after a crisis are very high and crisis images, stories and misinformation tend to move quickly (De Wolf & Mejri, 2013, p. 49). While effective crisis interventions provide a competitive advantage, ineffective crisis interventions can cause a competitive disadvantage and may endanger the existence of a business (Garcia, 2006, p. 4). The communication of crisis plays a central role in effective crisis management today and its importance has increased in recent years (De Wolf & Mejri, 2013, p. 49). The study of Yang et al. (2010) indicated the necessity of dialogic communication to develop an audience engaged in crisis communication, and this results in positive post-crisis perceptions. Schultz et al. (2011, p. 20) in their research on the effects of crisis communication strategies stated that “the medium matters more than the message.” Therefore, in addition to the content of the message, where this content will be delivered is important in communicating crisis.

**Crisis and CEOs**

Crises involve a discontinuity, a situation where the core values of the institution/system may be threatened. This process demands making significant decisions (Zamom & Gorpe, 2018). “Dealing with crises and managing them effectively demands effective management and strong leadership” (Emen & Hamza, 2020, p. 111).
Senkal and Ocak, (2020, p. 6) stated that the approach of the managers and leaders to crisis has an important weight on the ability of the organization to cope with crisis.

Due to their nature, crises contain positive and negative features or threats and opportunities. The crisis situation require individuals and institutions to reflect on their crisis management skills (Kanılmaz, 2021, p. 5). For developing effective responses to crisis, an organization should anticipate the potential situations and strive to predict the reputational threat levels (Ki & Nekmat, 2014, p. 141). The CEO should be able to interpret the values of the institutions within the context of change and competition and define the standards that will guide the decisions taken (Lafley, 2009). Boin et al (2016) stated that leaders have basic tasks in crisis management processes such as coping with crises, making decisions to overcome the crisis, explaining the crisis to stakeholders and ending the crisis.

In the leadership literature, CEO has the role of helping the organization overcome crisis (Lucera et al., 2009). Boin et al. (2005) mentioned five critical tasks of leadership in crisis as; making sense of the crisis; making decision to deal with the crisis; framing and making meaning of the crisis to stakeholders; terminating the crisis to restore normalcy to the organization and steering the organization to learn from the crisis. Bernstein (2011) lists ten steps of communicating crisis as anticipating crises, identifying crisis communication team, identifying spokespersons, spokespersons training, configuring crisis notification and monitoring systems, identifying and knowing stakeholders, “develop holding statements”, evaluating crisis situation, finalizing and adapting key messages and as post-crisis analysis.

Communication planning is an important work during the period of crisis. Who will represent the organization, who will be present at the press conferences, what are the limitations of senior managers in dealing with the media, when and how the information will be disclosed- all these should be included in the communication plans (Özgür, 2018, p. 36).

To successfully manage a crisis requires the organization to communicate with its stakeholders in a strategic and effective way by transferring information in an efficient and timely manner (Ki & Nekmat, 2014, p. 141). Heath and O’Hair (2020, p. 5) mentioned the need for a trusted spokesperson to communicate messages clearly in time of crisis and risk communication situations. The leaders of organizations should be prepared to speak to the news media to be able to communicate their strong crisis management strategy (Payton, 2021). “If there was a cardinal rule in communicating crisis, it must certainly be the critical and central nature of crisis leadership.” (Lucero et al., 2010, p. 234) The team of the leader carries importance as well as the leader himself/herself. Communication formed between the team members and the leader helps to develop an understanding of the situation of crisis within the team (İlgın, 2019, p. 261). “In addition to technical skills, the accurate perceptions created by leaders who have the skills to lead people will be effective in solving various problems that the organizations may encounter during and after crisis management.” (Emen & Hamza, 2020, p. 115). Bernstein (2011) suggests that during a crisis, all the corporate spokespersons should have the “right skills, the right position and the right training.”

Effective leaders demonstrate situational awareness by recognizing the importance of the underlying event of a crisis and its potential impact on the organization and its stakeholders. At the same time, with their awareness and attention, they can demonstrate their ability to mobilize their energies for urgent responses. Thus, they can help to protect the corporate values of the company (Garcia, 2006, p. 8). The role of emo-
tions in organizational crises are important and how crisis is managed by the CEO and organization is influenced by how well CEOs perceive and react to the emotions of their stakeholders (König, 2020). Jaques (2011) listed the reasons why CEOs fail in managing crisis. These are lack of prioritization and rejecting the main barriers to effective crisis management; little experience and not having a complete understanding of the potential risks; inadequate systems, processes and management; size and insufficient resources available to deal with; managers’ reluctance or lack of opportunity to share their experiences with handling crisis and leadership, and failure in upward communication.

According to König et al. (2020), there are four interrelated roles of CEOs during crisis management. First, CEOs need to be engaged in understanding organizational crises. Second, the CEOs must make decisions in situations of crisis by collecting and rigorously processing information to take timely actions aligned with the organization’s strategic priorities and moral obligations. Third, the CEOs, through communication, must interpret the impact of the organization’s decisions as well as consequences about the crisis on the internal and external stakeholders. Finally, the CEOs need to bring the organization to its normal status (previous status before the crisis) and be able to apply the lessons learned from the crisis.

Crisis Cluster and Crisis Response Strategies

Individuals and organizations are motivated to defend their image during crisis through a variety of rhetorical strategies: explanations, justifications, rationalizations, apologies, or excuses for behavior (Benoit, 1997 from Ferguson et al., 2018).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) presents an evidence-based framework for understanding how to maximize reputation through post-crisis communication (Coombs, 2007, p. 163). SCCT recommended the selection of crisis response strategy or strategies are appropriate to the characteristics of the crisis situation (Coombs, 2006, p. 242). The SCCT also recommended crisis communication professionals to examine the type of crises and the intensifying factors so that they can understand the crisis and responsibility that stakeholders attribute to organizations in the time of crisis. The attributions of crisis responsibility will not be uniform across all stakeholders, but an overall assessment of the responsibility of crisis can be done. The crisis type is the framework used to interpret the crisis situation (Coombs, 2017, p. 22). SCCT assumes that by understanding the crisis situation, the crisis manager should determine which response strategy or strategies will maximize the reputational protection (Coombs, 2007, p. 166).

Based on the attribution of crisis responsibility, SCCT mentions three crisis clusters: victim, accidental and preventable. Victim cluster has very weak attribution in crisis responsibility (for example, natural disaster) and the institution is seen as a victim of the event. There is minimal crisis attribution (in the case of technical-error accidents) in the accidental cluster and it is seen as unintentional or uncontrollable by the institution. In the intentional cluster, crisis responsibility has a very strong attribution (like human-error accident) and is considered as intentional (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 39; Coombs, 2007, p. 167; Coombs & Holladay, 2002).
Denial is most appropriate strategy in crisis situations where there are so-called misinformation and when the crisis is the result of an inaccurate or untrue information (a rumor) (Coombs, 2014). Deny strategies attempt to remove the connection between the institution and the crisis. If the institution is not involved in the crisis, it will not suffer from the event. In rumors and challenges, managers should argue that there is no real crisis (Coombs, 2007, p. 171).

The diminish crisis response strategies argues that the crisis that happened is not not as bad as people think or that the organization has no control over the crisis. If crisis managers reduce the organization’s connection with the crisis and/or make people perceive the crisis negatively, the harmful effects of the crisis will reduce (Coombs, 2007, p. 171).

Rebuilding strategies, help to create new reputational assets. What the institution does is that by offering some sort of compensation either material or symbolic means to the victims, they try to improve the organization’s reputation. The crisis managers work on satisfying the stakeholders. They take actions in this respect so that they can make stable the crisis (Coombs, 2007, s. 172).

Among positive reputational actions, we can include offering compensation or a full apology. The rebuilding strategies are used for crises that can have a severe reputational threat to the institutions. In cases where intentional crises or accidental crises when coupled with the history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denial</th>
<th>Diminish</th>
<th>Rebuild</th>
<th>Bolstering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attack the accuser: confront those saying negative things about the organization</td>
<td>Excuse: minimize organizational responsibility by denying the intention to do harm or denying the ability to control the situation</td>
<td>Compensation: give victims aid, material goods, or money</td>
<td>Reminding: remind stakeholders of past organizational good work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial: deny any responsibility for the crisis</td>
<td>Justification: attempt to minimize the perception of the damage inflicted by the crisis</td>
<td>Apology: publicly taking responsibility for the crisis and ask for forgiveness</td>
<td>Ingratiating: praise stakeholders for their help during the crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scapegoating: blame some other party for the crisis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Victimage: indicate the organization is also a victim in the crisis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. SCCT Crisis-Response Strategies (Source: Coombs, 2017, p. 24.)
(Note: This table has been directly quoted from the author’s work.)
of the crisis and/or unfavorable prior relationship reputation, use of rebuilding strategies are suggested.

Bolstering provides minimum opportunities to develop the reputational asset. If the organization had good relationships with their stakeholders, they can use this to protect the organization-reputation. “…praise stakeholders for efforts during the crisis as a means of improving the relationships with them or draw sympathy from being a victim of the crisis.” (Coombs, 2007, p. 172).

Denial works well with misinformation crises where misinformation about an organization

Table 2. Overview of the Crisis Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Type/cluster</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Crisis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aviation</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Human error accident (Preventable)</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>“Sabiha Gokcen Airport, 3 passengers died and several injured.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aviation</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Technical error or human error accident? (Accidental or preventable?)</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>“Amsterdam Schiphol. 9 people died and 50 injured.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aviation</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Human error accident or malevolence (sabotage?) (Preventable or victim?)</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>“Istanbul- Isparta Aircraft disappeared. 56 people died.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-Commerce</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Malevolence or technical error (Victim or accidental?)</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>“Cybercrime Website shut down, but retail stores operated.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-Commerce</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Malevolence or technical error (Victim or accidental?)</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>“Cybercrime Database hacked (21.5 million people’s data were taken).”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
spreads. Diminish strategies help to reinforce the idea that institutions have low responsibility for the crisis. Rebuilding strategies try to create positive information about the organization and includes apology and compensation. Bolstering is considered as a secondary strategy and it should not be used alone. It should be used with the other three primary strategies (Coombs, 2017, p. 24-25).

**Method**

In this study, the initial crisis communication statements issued by CEOs in eight different crisis situations from three industries (aviation, e-commerce and food) were analyzed. The selection criteria for the crises were based on the fact that they were highly publicized and well-known in Turkey which hit the important, well-known and visible corporations. The statements were analyzed using the content analysis technique. The analysis included; type of crisis, the crisis response strategies used, and the tone of the statements examined. The earliest of the crises that was analyzed was from year 2007, and the latest one was from 2021. Two cases were from 2021, two cases were from 2020, and the rest of the cases, one from each year, were from 2007, 2009, 2010 and 2017.

The research questions that guided the study are as follows:

- RQ1: What are the crisis response strategies used by the CEO in their crisis statements?
- RQ2: What is the tone of the CEOs’ statements?
- RQ3: Are there similarities and differences between their strategies?

The cases studied are listed in Table 2 with a brief explanation of its nature. All of them had attracted the attention of the public and consumers. The crisis situations were extensively covered in both the traditional and social media.

**Findings**

In the study, the statements of CEOs were primarily analyzed within the context of the response strategies used. The types of crises (cluster) that hit the corporations are different. Some corporations used not one, but two strategies. It is seen that of all the strategies, the CEOs used the “Bolstering” strategy the most. The table below (Table 3) summarizes the response strategies, its types and selected examples of CEO statements to illustrate the strategy utilized.
Table 3. Crisis Response Strategies with Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aviation</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Rebuilding &amp; Bolstering</td>
<td>Compensation &amp; Reminder and Ingratiation</td>
<td>“Our teams are constantly working with the wounded people in the hospitals, and with the families of the deceased. On duty rotating. What we do is real. Thanks to the people who are with us at all times.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aviation</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
<td>“Crisis management done by Dutch authorities. Praise.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aviation</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Diminishing</td>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>“Defective aircraft are not allowed to fly. Aircrafts can be rented. Bring here thousand pilot, they will write thousands of scenarios…there is no negative condition. Weather is ok.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E- Commerce</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
<td>“In this process, we thank all our stakeholders who are with us sincerely...This is our motivation.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E- Commerce</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Rebuilding &amp; Bolstering (too strong)</td>
<td>Apology &amp; Reminder Ingratiation</td>
<td>“I cannot find words to express my sorrow. I am devastated. …We are here not because of me and my colleagues, E family is formed by you and you have brought us here. Our priority has been the safety and satisfaction of our users for 20 years and this will continue.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Deny Very strong informing and adjusting information</td>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>“We investigated and “no” but investigating still. Not coming from production. Logistic process or from market. The product is produced in ten thousand units…We have had no other complaints from the same lot.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Deny &amp; Bolstering Very strong informing and adjusting information</td>
<td>Denial /Scapegoat &amp; Reminder</td>
<td>“No direct link. Supplier logistics company and manufacturer.” Not just the meat, all products used equipment… Food safety, quality and hygiene. International standards.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One of the companies in the aviation sector used the Bolstering strategy, another one used, both Rebuilding and Bolstering, and the third company used the Diminishing strategy. Situational Crisis Communication Theory recommends that when there are strong crisis attributions, instructing information and careful response should be considered and companies need to use compensation and/or apology strategies (Rebuilding). It is concluded that only one of the three aviation companies examined in this study used the Rebuilding Posture.

Bolstering strategy has been used extensively in the e-commerce sector. It is noticed that companies talk about the good works they have been previously engaged and emphasize how their stakeholders are important for them. It is noteworthy to say one the companies in this sector have used the Bolstering strategy intensively.

It is observed that CEOs in the food sector mostly used the Denial posture in their statements. The statements issued by the CEOs in this sector center around the denial that there is no prior situation that led to or caused the crisis. In the three cases that have been studied in this sector, one of the companies stated that there is no situation that caused the crisis while the other company found a scapegoat. Additionally, the third company in the food sector, by using the “Attack the accuser” blamed others for the outbreak of the crisis.

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**Table 4. An Overview of Crisis Response Strategies used**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Denial</th>
<th>Diminish</th>
<th>Rebuild</th>
<th>Bolstering</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
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<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
As seen from Table 4, the crisis strategy that was frequently used by the CEOs is the Bolstering Posture (secondary crisis response strategy). The Ingratiation is the most preferred type in the Bolstering posture. In this respect, it was noticed that businesses mostly emphasize their past, current, and future relations with their stakeholders and mention how important their stakeholders are to them. Overall, four CEO statements had used two crisis response strategies (X and Y), and the other four CEO statements used one. Out of eight cases, six of the statements used the Bolstering posture. Four statements used Bolstering with another response strategy: Bolstering was used with Denial (2 cases) and Rebuilding (2 cases).

It is observed that the statements made by the CEOs in the cases examined generally consist of informative statements which have the aim of “explanation” with facts. However, adding emotional statements to informative statements could be considered as well, not for all types of crises, but for some. It was found out that the statements did not have much of an emotional appeal in the study.

**Conclusion**

In this study, eight corporate crises in three different sectors in Turkey were analyzed by looking at the initial CEO’s statements. Bolstering is the posture that was used the most in the CEO statements. Bolstering in the SSCT is a secondary response strategy and that they should be used to supplement other strategies.

The first crisis studied in the aviation industry (A) is a preventable crisis. Situational Crisis Communication Theory recommended rebuilding strategies for this type of crisis. In this crisis, CEO disclosures are aligned with the proposed strategy. In the second crisis (B) studied, there are still questions whether the plane crash was a result of a technical or human error (accidental
or preventable). The general perception about this crisis was that it was a human error (pilot) crisis. The response strategy recommended is Rebuilding. However, in this crisis Bolstering is preferred in the CEO’s statement. Also, there was an implication that the other party (Dutch authorities) was in charge of the crisis management. This could be a reason why the CEO’s statement was more of bolstering posture, but with less of information about the crisis. In the third crisis (C), people still have doubts whether it was a human error accident or sabotage. Therefore, it can be considered as either preventable or victim crisis. The general perception about the cause of this crisis is that it is a preventable crisis (human error), not malevolence (victim). Situational Crisis Communication Theory suggested that Denial should be used in victim, and Rebuilding posture in the human error accidents. In this case, it was observed that the Diminishing posture is used in CEO’s statement and this is recommended for accidental crises.

It is seen that the two crises in the e-commerce sector are malevolence or technical-error accident (victim or accidental crisis). Both e-commerce organizations were hit by the same type of crisis where their websites were hacked. Situational Crisis Communication Theory suggested Denial posture in victim crisis. Here, it is noticed that Denial posture were not used in the statements of the two CEOs, Instead of Denial posture, Bolstering strategies were used in the first crisis (D) and both Rebuilding and Bolstering postures were utilized in the second crisis (E). In accidental crisis, Diminishing posture is recommended. In the e-commerce sector, data protection is a vital concern, therefore, this crisis can be easily perceived as an accidental crisis more than a victim one.

The first crisis case (F) in the food industry stems from a situation where the company does not admit the crisis even though there are accusations against the company. Hence there is a question mark regarding whether it should be taken as a rumor or human error product harm. In other words, is the organization a victim or could this crisis be preventable? However, the company claims in the statement that they are a victim in this situation, and thus uses Denial strategy. Therefore, according to Situational Crisis Communication Theory, the company follows an appropriate strategy. In the second crisis (G) there is a human error, product harm and it is a preventable crisis. In this situation, the theory proposes the use of Rebuilding posture. However, it has been noticed that the company used the Denial posture (with a Scapegoat) as well as the Bolstering posture. However, as the theory states, the denial strategy is not considered appropriate under this circumstance. The third crisis (H) is a victim crisis. Situational Crisis Communication Theory proposes the use of Denial posture. In the CEO statement, it is seen that the Denial Posture is used in alignment with what SCCT states. In addition to Denial, Bolstering was observed. The two crises (food) were rumors, and they both used Denial strategy.

The tone in the CEO statements is less emotional, but more informative. We do not know why the majority of these statements were informative. Maybe in later CEO statements, appeals to emotions would be used. Moreover, the emotions can be used in statements or observed when there is a face-to-face interaction with the CEO and the media or victims. Under what circumstances will only emotional statements work? The tone decision is another critical decision in the statements, showing the company both as an action-oriented (learning the facts and information provision) and feeling at the same time. Further research needs to be done
with respect to crisis statements and the tone.

The study has limitations of which one of them is that it takes into consideration a specific time frame (2007-2021). Also, the first statements of the CEOs were analyzed. The research covered only three sector crisis.

We do not know whether the content of CEO statements studied are reflecting the CEO himself/herself as the crisis leader or the public relations/communication professional. It could also be the work of all the parties involved. How these statements are prepared, the input of the communication professionals if they had any, the content/frame of the contribution and the challenges of communication professionals working directly with the CEOs under crisis situation in Turkey will be interesting to study.

Practical and Social Implications

As stated earlier, the CEO statements made in crisis situations affect the stakeholders. Therefore, CEOs statements should be carefully worked out and be prepared with great care. Selection of the correct response strategy will be helpful to dealing with crisis in the organization. Public relations/communications professionals should be informed on these strategies.

References


Demir, Z. G., Karakaya, Ç. Ş., & Erendağ, S. F.,


Citizens and politicians in Spain: How strategic communication could build confidence or distrust in the covid-19 pandemic?

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Gómez-Iniesta, Pablo, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha (Spain)

**Introduction**

The global health crisis generated by the outbreak of Covid-19 has provoked a constant need for information in society, given the general lack of knowledge about this new virus and as a result of the increase in the number of infections and deaths. The plurality of voices, represented by the media, institutions, as well as citizens themselves, has generated multiple streams of news and information, which has made it very difficult to obtain accurate information. The World Health Organization (WHO) itself has used the term “infodemic” to refer to the phenomenon that was occurring, also at a global level, in which the wide diversity of sources was exponentially increasing the proliferation of false news, commonly referred to in the global communication sphere as “fake news”.

On 14 March 2020, Spain decreed a State of Alert that substantially paralysed its economy and social activity due to the population being placed on lockdown, with some exceptions for essential sectors. Months later and after four waves of infections with significant variations in the incidence of the virus, citizens seem to prioritise personal contact, a source of transmission, over prudence in the face of the risk of infection. Communication plays a key role in the complicated process of convincing and persuading the population which, unfortunately, has led to so-called pandemic fatigue (WHO, 2020) and public distrust of their leaders, vaccination and the existence of the virus itself.

This article will attempt to analyse the lack of leadership in the aforementioned communication process, followed by the Spanish government, and developed in line with the different regional institutions and European authorities. The proposed research will focus on the quality and effectiveness of the messages communicated to the population. At the same time, a possible relationship between clear and unclear strategic communication messages, citizens’ behaviour and the different waves of contagion will be identified.

**Objectives**

**O1.** The main objective is to understand the fundamental meaning of the main messages issued by Spanish institutions during the management of the Covid-19 pandemic and, in turn, to try to establish a possible relationship between the messaging and the different waves of contagion.

**O2.** To develop a conceptual approach to better understand what is meant by risk communica-
tion and strategic communication in terms of health alerts and emergencies.

O3. Identify possible problems in the delivery of institutional messages during the health emergency that may have contributed to confusion or fatigue among citizens in the face of contradictions.

Theoretical Framework

Crisis communication: mainstream media and social media

Communicating becomes a key process in any kind of critical situation. Be it a reputational crisis or an emergency situation, the process of transmitting information is an inescapable responsibility for any individual, organisation or institution. If a parallel is made with the management of other non-health alerts, such as attacks or natural disasters, it is observed that collective traumas that provoke pain in the community create the need to express and share opinions about what has happened (Gortner and Pennebacker, 2003). This is where the importance of establishing information streams lies, that provide the citizen with the reassurance to assume and manage risk.

In today’s information-driven society, communication transcends all types of actors and is no longer processed and transmitted exclusively by institutions and the media. The latter play the role of amplifiers of the global knowledge of danger and risk “by their commitment to negativity, dramatisation, distortion or exaggeration of the issues”, as detailed by Suau-Gomila et al. (2017, p. 122) in the preamble to their communication study on the Ebola crisis in Spain in 2014.

In line with the above, social media, due to its technological advances that prioritise immediacy and ubiquity, has become the ideal vehicle for transmitting this type of information. Suau-Gomila et al. also believe that messages are no longer exclusive to the mainstream media and institutions; now the user can also participate in the debate and be proactive to the point of situating the social media platform as the space where information can be disseminated, extracted and analysed, leaving the traditional media to one side.

Calleja Reina et al. (2016, 2017, p.121) are clear about the role of social media:

In times of crisis, people turn to Twitter and other social media platforms to obtain and share public service information, react to the situation and make emotional statements, among other uses.

For authors, social media has meant overcoming the limitations of traditional media and today it must occupy a privileged place when it comes to planning the communication management of a crisis. Basically, due to five characteristics called the five J’s cited by Chan (2014): collectiveness, connectivity, totality, clarity and collaboration.

On the other hand, Sutton, Renshaw and Butts (2020) analyse the role of social media in crisis management and present two main objectives. Furthermore, they believe that engagement is sought to enable two-way communication, i.e., to build a dialogue in which organisations and users interact through messages containing hyperlinks, hashtags or direct appeals. On the other hand, the amplification, dissemination and transmission of the message through retweeting or quoting has to be a primary objective for those in a vulnerable situation. However, there are a number of factors that stimulate the transmission of messages: the message itself (multimedia content, structure, etc.), characteristics of the originating account (organisation, number of followers, relevance) and the time during which it was sent.
However, they consider that communication in such situations needs to be kept under constant review. Communication strategies need to be modified as the situation evolves in order to meet the needs of the public, prioritising the severity of the alarm, its potential impact and the prevention that can be undertaken. As a conclusion to their work, the authors highlight the crucial role played by improvisation in communication, in a pandemic situation, as a response to the changes and flows that the process was taking in the eyes of state public health bodies. In addition, they consider that the public has been involved in the broadcast throughout the phenomenon through the transmission of preventive messages and messages on the evolution of the pandemic.

**Risk communication**

Moreno (2008) defines risk communication not only as the ability to transmit information about a health crisis to citizens through planning and language identification, they also speak about the balance point and, therefore, about interaction. The World Health Organization itself (2020, p.1) defines risk communication:

“It refers to the real-time exchange of information, advice and opinions between experts or officials and people who are facing a threat (or danger) to their survival, health or their economic and social well-being. It employs communication techniques ranging from those embedded in social media, mass communication and the involvement of stakeholders and key community actors; it requires understanding stakeholders’ perceptions, issues and beliefs, knowledge and practices. Risk communication, if it is to be effective, must identify issues at an early stage and, subsequently, be able to handle rumours, misinformation and other communication challenges”.

Glick (2007) considers that risk communication in critical situations needs to clearly define its role as a generator of responses to health emergencies. In this way it will play a key part in helping people to cope and live with the physical and mental impacts of such situations. Communication in the health field, whether it is strictly medical, epidemiological or statistical knowledge, must be translated into messages and concepts that the audience can easily understand, even if this is difficult or stressful for them. In order to know whether the right messages are being conveyed, Glick refers to evaluation as the appropriate mechanism for this. Monitoring throughout the emergency is critical in trying to determine where messages are placed and how, through opinion polls, the degree of exposure and uptake by citizens.

**A recent precedent for Ebola in Spain: Lessons learned?**

Not long ago in Spain, a pandemic situation occurred, albeit in much less-serious circumstances. From a communicative point of view, some circumstances and behaviours can be extracted that allow a comparison with the current situation. Although there are parallels, such as the creation of an expert committee as in the current crisis, there are also some notable differences.

Calleja-Reina (2017) points out, in a detailed chronology of the crisis, some of the most important milestones from a communication perspective. It indicates the creation of a website and a Twitter account that came into existence four days after the case was reported. An updated message was posted on the social media profile every twelve hours (p. 90). As outstanding characteristics of this crisis, the author concludes on some of them, such as the lack of a representative figure in the spokesperson’s office, which alternated with different members of the executive and even a representative of the government of the Community of Madrid. None of them conveyed a clear and unambiguous message, and they had to apologise for their interventions. Another of the conclusions reached by
the author is the delay in taking communicative decisions on the part of those responsible, who reacted after two deaths and several ongoing controversies. A situation that the author describes as “misinformation” and “lack of coordination” that pushed society into a situation of panic and rejection of the disease.

Regarding the alarm created by Ebola, Suau et al (2017) assert that the profiles on social media were much more important than those of the institutions themselves, especially in terms of the spread and replication of messages. Moreover, after the analysis of a large corpus based on tweets from different profiles, they conclude that the language used was more emotional than informative with regard to the health crisis. Primarily, this argument is sustained by reference to the talking point to which the crisis led: the slaughter of the infected nurse’s pet.

**Targeted institutional communication in times of Covid: the case of Spain**

In this sense, frequent and transparent communication from institutions is necessary to try to inform and calm victims on the part of governments. In their study of the Spanish case, Castillo-Esparcia et al. (2020, p.3), point to the main purpose of establishing a direct government channel with citizens in their discursive strategy regarding the health crisis, which distinguishes the following fields of action:

- Generating communicative spaces for media and society: press conferences
- Empathise with actors involved in combating the pandemic: health workers, CFSG.
- Call on the voice of experts in communicating the decisions taken by the executive.
- Adapt the message to the channel and the characteristics of the audiences. Example: press conference by Pedro Duque and Fernando Simón with young people and children.
- Make decisions appropriate to social needs and understand how to communicate them.
- Report on actions to combat the pandemic.

For his part, López García (2020, pp. 2-3) highlights four aspects of the Spanish government’s communication strategy that should be taken into account:

- Continuous communication: a constant throughout the crisis, daily with Fernando Simón of the technical management committee, ministers or, on a weekly basis, with the Prime Minister.
- Emphasis on the seriousness of the crisis: seeking to raise public awareness through repetition and highlighting the seriousness of the crisis by emphasising the restrictive measures imposed, as well as putting them in perspective with other neighbouring countries.
- Conveying a sense of control and governance: they seek to ensure that citizens perceive that it is the government that has assumed sole command and, therefore, all the competences that it clearly fulfils.
- Message of unity: the government, in its interventions, constantly appeals to the strength of unity, to overcoming the crisis by putting aside political or personal differences.

The analysis proposed by López García focuses on the leading role of the Armed Forces and the State Security Forces and Bodies, entities which, until now, had lacked a primary communicative role in previous crises. According to the author, the “new” presence of both bodies is due to a government strategy that pursues three objectives:

- Use their popularity and reputation among Spanish society, which is quite distinct from
that of political parties and institutions.

- To protect itself from opposition criticism of its incorporation into management. Opposition (conservatives) voters and activists rate these bodies the highest.
- Give more importance to the role of such bodies in monitoring, supervising and enforcing the ordered lockdown measures.

The author draws a number of conclusions with regard to the Armed Forces and the Security Forces in their communication task during the crisis. He therefore considers that the image conveyed of his work is “very positive”. Although it is true, López García points out that, from a communicative point of view, there are quite a few limitations on the part of the spokespersons (non-professionals in communication) in their interventions. Mainly for two reasons: they provide too much information and sometimes it is irrelevant or secondary. In spite of this, political representatives usually adhere to generalised thinking and also show positivity towards bodies when referring to them.

**Public perception of the management of the pandemic: public trust in institutions**

A key aspect in understanding the public’s reaction to the measures decreed by the authorities is the concept of public trust, which, in this emergency situation, has the extra dimension of institutional trust itself. In this regard, Charron et al. (2020) present public trust as the cornerstone of the health system, whether in the patient-professional relationship, in the effective use of health services or in the adoption of preventive behaviours. For this reason, it is a key concept when it comes to offering an effective response to disasters or risk situations. However, this is a complex relationship involving the connection of different factors such as the socio-economic conditions of populations (neighbourhoods, municipalities, regions) that can affect human behaviour and awareness of the consequences of individual behaviour. The action of the authorities will depend on this public trust to combat the virus. The authors draw on comparisons between European countries. On the one hand, Italy and Spain, where the recommendations during the first week of the pandemic were disregarded with the consequent lockdowns; and, on the other hand, Sweden, where lighter measures were imposed to achieve better results and without resorting to stricter procedures.

The administration thus becomes another key actor on which citizens must rely. In addition, as Han et al. (2020) highlights, citizens will be more willing to act for the benefit of the collective if they perceive that the institutions are well organised and provide clear and convincing information about the virus by offering actions that are in line with these premises.

With reference to the above, there are also studies that have confirmed the existence of the aforementioned socio-demographic factors that condition a positive or negative stance towards control measures. Thus, for example, the analysis by White et al. (2020) looked at public perception of the fundamental control measures implemented in Spain to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, it is noted that there are several factors that may condition public perception of the management of the pandemic, such as perceived risk, confidence in the capacities of governments, and even the political, ideological and cultural beliefs or values of each of the respondents. It also argues that public trust in governments when there is a threat can be solved or improved when there is a communication strategy that advocates “competence, consistency, credibility, honesty and transparency” (p. 5). Evidence holds that low or high levels of trust in government reflect a gap between individual expectations of how government should behave and how it ultimately does behave. In any case, the authors state that the aforementioned trust
in institutions can be negatively affected when public representatives disagree or contradict each other on the proposed restrictions in the territory, which translates into distrust, uncertainty and doubts among citizens.

Several studies have attempted to analyse the response phenomenon, and researchers from the Spanish Centre for Health Emergencies and Alerts have even participated in some of them, resulting in publications on this issue in some of the leading academic journals in the field of health. Thus, Sierra et al. (2020) offer an academic response, as health workers, to criticism of the response to the first wave of the pandemic. In this text, they claim to have designed a plan that is constantly updated and adapted to the different territorial areas that make up the country. Lack of investment in primary care, public health, digitisation and research are cited as some of the main reasons limiting a stronger health system response. They also underline the existence of a continuous dialogue with political representatives, scientific societies and working groups at inter-territorial level to design strategies leading to coordinated actions. On the other hand, they show as a positive aspect the publication of daily and continuous information on the progress of the pandemic in order to strengthen the commitment of the scientific community and increase public confidence. Finally, they regret that the presence of politicisation and a climate of confrontation that is transmitted to different sectors makes crisis communication a real challenge that hinders a joint response.

**Strategic health communication**

Although true, and taking into account the above references, for health communication to be classified as strategic, it must have elements in common with that practised in organisations (Millar and Heath, 2004) and, therefore, it must base its effectiveness on objectives that allow it to establish a connection with the general public (Zerfass et al., 2018). Thus, Gupta et al. (2021) present some key aspects to better understand a field in which they see the need for further research, in particular on how individuals may cognitively and emotionally process health messages in different cultural and social contexts. One of the keys, according to the authors, lies in abandoning the traditional mono-linear model that characterises the transmission of information in this field. The purpose is to experience a positive change that enables the participation of community members in the design and implementation of health programmes around some basic elements such as: proactivity, the precise importance of knowledge in understanding behavioural changes, understanding communication as a two-way process, and the wide and numerous variety of communication tools that can be used to promote prevention and treatment of certain health issues. In conclusion, Gupta et al. propose some points for successful communication in health matters. Thus:

- Establishing a timeline is essential
- The message must be simple, direct and consistent
- Transmission channels must be appropriate
- Information must be transparent
- Trust in the communicator must be total

**A brief methodological note**

As a first methodological approach, a bibliographical review of some of the main concepts to be taken into account has been carried out. Mainly by focusing on advances in empirical knowledge in crisis communication (Zurro-Antón et al., 2021). There are also other aspects to be taken into account such as public trust, trust in institutions or the public’s perception of the management of the pandemic in order to determine causes and relationships.
The second and main task will be to establish a timeline between the different messages and the data on the waves of infections that Spain has experienced during the period between 31 January 2020 and 31 August 2021. For each stage, a data table has been drawn up containing the following items:

- Date
- Data
- Contact
- Message: summarised content

Faces, voices and key institutions during the pandemic

Throughout the pandemic, the voices of Spanish public bodies have been varied. On the one hand, direct management has fallen to the Ministry of Health, with the Centre for the Coordination of Emergencies and Health Alerts (CCAES) in the first phase of the pandemic. This body was created in 2004 to support and respond to crisis situations or health emergencies.

With interspersed messages from the Council of Ministers and the Prime Minister himself. With the end of the first State of Alert (May-JUNE 2020), voices multiplied with the transfer of powers to the autonomous communities. In this way, regional presidents and regional health councillors have come to play a central role in communication policy. In this sense, the judicial bodies of each territory, as well as the state, have also spoken out against the measures implemented. Below are the main figures who have been at the centre of communication during the pandemic:

Fernando Simón
Director of the Centre for the Coordination of Alerts and Health Emergencies (Ministry of Health)

Pedro Sánchez
President of the Government of Spain

Salvador Illa
Minister of Health (until January 2021)

Carolina Darias
Minister for Territorial Policy and Public Administration (until January 2021)
Minister of Health (from January 2021)
Other public representatives have also appeared before the media, especially during the first phase of the pandemic. Pedro Duque, Pablo Iglesias, Yolanda Díaz and, later, Miquel Iceta did so after assuming the post of Minister of Territorial Policy and Public Function.

**Results: chronology of the pandemic and its messages**

In order to better structure the key moments of the pandemic in Spain, the following graph allows us to identify each of the waves of infections recorded since the first infections in the first quarter of 2020. As can be seen, there have been four different waves in Spain up to June 2021.
### Key points

#### First Wave

First wave of infections. Source: Ministry of Health (Spanish Government)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31/01/2020</td>
<td>1 infection 0 deaths no incidences</td>
<td>Fernando Simón</td>
<td>Once the first infection in Spain has been confirmed, Simón gives assurances that there will only be 2.3 cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14/03/2020</td>
<td>5753 infections 136 deaths 12.23 (IA)</td>
<td>Pedro Sánchez</td>
<td>The President declares a State of Alert in Spain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02/04/2020</td>
<td>110238 infections 10003 deaths 197.96 (IA)</td>
<td>Fernando Simón</td>
<td>Spain is close to reaching the peak of the pandemic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23/05/2020</td>
<td>235290 infections 28678 deaths 14.81 (IA)</td>
<td>Pedro Sánchez</td>
<td>Sánchez confirms that Spain has overcome the virus and urges Spanish people to plan their summer holidays.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/06/2020</td>
<td>247486 infections 28330 deaths 7.74 (IA)</td>
<td>Salvador Illa</td>
<td>The Minister allows the autonomous communities to decide on the obligatory use of masks after months of contradictions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Second Wave

Second wave of infections. Source: Ministry of Health (Spanish Government)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Message</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14/08/2020</td>
<td>342813 infections</td>
<td>Salvador Illa</td>
<td>Minister and regions agree on coordinated actions to control the transmission of the virus.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28617 deaths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>109.27 (IA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>30/09/2020</td>
<td>769188 infections</td>
<td>Salvador Illa</td>
<td>The minister announces new restrictions coordinated with the autonomous regions: closure of local and regional borders, opening hours for the hotel and catering industry, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31791 deaths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>284.11 (IA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09/10/2020</td>
<td>861112 infections</td>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>The Supreme Court approves the government’s decision on the closure and lockdown of the Madrid region during the weekend of 12 October.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32929 deaths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>258.44 (IA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/10/2020</td>
<td>1098320 infections</td>
<td>Pedro Sánchez</td>
<td>The president announces a new State of Alert for the next six months with new actions: curfew, local lockdowns and more restrictions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35031 deaths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>410.18 (IA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02/11/2020</td>
<td>1240697 infections</td>
<td>Regions</td>
<td>Several regional corporations ask the central government to create the legal framework for a return to home lockdown, but the government rejects it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36257 deaths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>521.07 (IA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Third Wave

Third wave of infections. Source: Ministry of Health (Spanish Government)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>02/12/2020</td>
<td>1665775 infections 47784 deaths 251.61 (IA)</td>
<td>Salvador Illa</td>
<td>During the Christmas period, the Ministry of Health allows family members displaced in other territories, as well as those that are close to them, to return home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27/12/2020</td>
<td>1879413 infections 49824 deaths 246.19 (IA)</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Araceli Hidalgo is the first person to receive the COVID-19 vaccine in Spain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15/01/2021</td>
<td>2252164 infections 53314 deaths 575.1 (IA)</td>
<td>Fernando Simón</td>
<td>In view of the increase in infections due to the Christmas period, Fernando Simón rules out the use of strict home confinement. The government refuses to extend the curfew.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/01/2021</td>
<td>2593384 infections 56208 deaths 884.70 (IA)</td>
<td>Salvador Illa</td>
<td>At the height of the third wave, the health minister resigns to stand as a candidate in the Catalan regional elections. He takes over from Carolina Darias, who had held the Ministry of Interterritorial Policy until then.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28/01/2021</td>
<td>2705001 infections 57806 deaths 889.93 (IA)</td>
<td>Regions</td>
<td>Various reports indicate that public representatives in local and regional administrations have already received the vaccine by skipping the protocols designed for this purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08/02/2020</td>
<td>2989085 infections 62295 deceased 667.33 (IA)</td>
<td>Fernando Simón</td>
<td>Incidences begin to fall after the third intense wave. Fernando Simón admits the danger of a fourth wave if the necessary measures are not taken in the run-up to the Easter holidays.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fourth Wave

Fourth wave of infections. Source: Ministry of Health (Spanish Government)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Message</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24/02/2021</td>
<td>3170644 infections 68468 deceased 218.61 (IA)</td>
<td>Pedro Sánchez</td>
<td>The president admits failures in the management of the pandemic last sum-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>mer and rules out postponing the end of the state of alert.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/03/2021</td>
<td>3247738 infections 74420 deceased 134.1 (IA)</td>
<td>Carolina Darias</td>
<td>The health minister and the regions agree new restrictions for the Easter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>holidays. The movement of people away from their usual residences is not</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>permitted. The minister admits mistakes during Christmas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08/04/2021</td>
<td>3336637 infections 76179 deceased 174.52 (IA)</td>
<td>Carolina Darias</td>
<td>The Ministry of Health announces the cessation of vaccination with Astrazen-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>eca’s doses in the population under 60 years of age, due to fears of side</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>effects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24/04/2021</td>
<td>3496759 infections 78780 deaths 245.55 (IA)</td>
<td>EMA (European</td>
<td>The EMA states that the second dose of Astrazeneca’s vaccine has positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Medicines Agency</td>
<td>effects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/05/2021</td>
<td>3601409 infections 79707 deaths 193.79 (IA)</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>The State of Alert is coming to an end in Spain and the government refuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>to extend it at the request of various autonomous communities. There is no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>curfew and citizens can move freely throughout the territory.</td>
</tr>
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## A definitive return to normality?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Message</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20/05/2021</td>
<td>3651992 infections 80109 deceased 148.06 (IA)</td>
<td>Ministry of Health</td>
<td>The Ministry of Health allows those under 60 years of age and already vaccinated with AstraZeneca to choose the second dose from the same manufacturer or another vaccine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01/06/2021</td>
<td>3702717 infections 80417 deaths 130.08 (IA)</td>
<td>Regions</td>
<td>The president of the Castilla-La Mancha region, Emiliano García Page, unilaterally declares the end of the mandatory use of face masks in his territory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02/06/2021</td>
<td>3707886 infections 80448 deceased 129.64 (IA)</td>
<td>Ministry of Health</td>
<td>The Ministry of Health and the regional governments approve the opening of nightlife with different opening hours and capacity depending on the health situation in each territory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18/06/2021</td>
<td>3764731 infections 80739 deceased 100.22 (IA)</td>
<td>Pedro Sánchez</td>
<td>President Pedro Sánchez announces the end of the mandatory use of face masks outdoors from 26 June.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28/06/2021</td>
<td>3792642 infections 80789 deceased 100.06 (IA)</td>
<td>Fernando Simón</td>
<td>Simón admits the possibility of a resurgence in the virus among those of the younger population that are unvaccinated. He calls for caution in the face of new variants of the virus.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The controversial summer of 2021: the unexpected fifth wave

With the arrival of mass vaccination in Spain, and after designing a strategy of inoculation by risk and age groups, it seemed that the end of the pandemic was closer than ever. However, during the month of July, the number of infections has continued to rise steadily. For this reason, it has been decided to extend the analysis period until 31 August 2021 in order to analyse the messages issued during the summer season.

Fifth wave of infections. Source: Ministry of Health (Spanish Government)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30/06/2021</td>
<td>3808960 infections 80875 deceased 117.17 (IA)</td>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>A judge in Palma de Mallorca decrees an end to the lockdown of 181 students who were held in a hotel after an outbreak on a study trip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05/07/2021</td>
<td>3886475 infections 80934 deceased 204.16 (IA)</td>
<td>Fernando Simón</td>
<td>Simón again alerts the population to the danger of transmission of the virus among the youngest who have not yet been vaccinated and even admits that some of the youngest are likely to die.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/07/2021</td>
<td>3971124 infections 81020 deceased 368.03 (IA)</td>
<td>Regions and Justice</td>
<td>Faced with the increase in the number of infections, Valencian President Ximo Puig announces new restrictions, including a return to curfew. The High Court of Justice of Valencia upholds this measure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20/07/2021</td>
<td>4189136 infections 81148 deceased 622.41 (IA)</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>The Council of Ministers approves the over-the-counter sale of antigen tests in pharmacies following an agreement reached with the Ministry of Health and the various pharmacists' associations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28/07/2021</td>
<td>4422291 infections 81442 deceased 696.31 (IA)</td>
<td>Regions</td>
<td>Galicia announces new measures and restrictions mainly affecting the hotel and catering industry. Nightlife will close in the towns with the highest incidence and a negative test or vaccination certificate will also be required to enter the premises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30/07/2021</td>
<td>4430121 infections 81438 deceased 687.30 (IA)</td>
<td>Pedro Sánchez</td>
<td>Before going on holiday, President Sánchez claims that Spain leads in vaccination and economic growth forecasts. Sanchez also points out that the drama of the virus is not over and asks for more effort from the public. It also announces the arrival of more vaccines during the month of August.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

As a final point and conclusion to this article, some conclusions will be presented, focusing on four basic points that will better illustrate how to understand the management of the pandemic in Spain and the communicative phenomena that have taken place around it over the last few months. Thus:

- It is plausible to determine a strong relationship between the different waves of contagion and the messages conveyed by authorities, public officials and institutions. Looking at the chronology established according to the different waves, the trend in the positivity or negativity of the messages has led to significant spikes in cumulative incidence levels. In the period analysed between March 2020 and August 2021, five different waves of contagion have been considered whose communication procedure has similar characteristics. When
a message of reassurance and coping has been conveyed, the attitudinal response has translated into relaxation in following the measures. In addition, during the Christmas holiday period, there were confusing messages about mobility between territories and about meetings between family members and the term “close relative”.

• A key moment has been identified when communication about the management of the pandemic in Spain ceased to be strategic. This coincides with the summer of 2020 at the end of the first wave. After months of the strictest lockdowns, the messages from the Spanish government were in a spirit of victory, stressing that the virus had been overcome. The prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, encouraged Spanish people to prepare their holidays and to travel around the country, thus encouraging tourism. This break in strategic communication led to the second wave, the fiercest of all the waves experienced, which resulted in the decree of the second curfew and, with it, the perimeter lockdown and curfew.

• The multiplicity of voices during the process of communicating with citizens has been a key factor hindering the existence of a clear and transparent communication channel to Spanish society. Firstly, the hearings were conducted electronically and with the joint presence of public officials (president, ministers, secretaries of state), epidemiologists and the heads of the State Security Forces and Bodies, led by the secretary of state for communication. Subsequently, the territorial configuration of Spain and the end of the first State of Alert led to the transfer of powers to the autonomous regions. This change has multiplied the voices and decisions on the management of the pandemic.

• The contradictions in the different messages conveyed, be it on the use of masks, restrictions, limitation of movement or vaccination, have contributed to increasing the sense of confusion among citizens. Differing opinions on the need for masks, the effectiveness and obligation of vaccines, and the fear of contagion have contributed to confusion and, above all, mental exhaustion among the population. Undoubtedly, the younger population has been the one that has expressed this weariness most clearly, and images have been seen on television and in other media of young people exasperated by the continuous limitations on their alternatives for leisure or meeting up with family and friends. In line with this, the messages issued on vaccination coverage to the population have also promoted a message of positivity and overcoming that has had a negative effect during the summer of 2021. Also, the path of denial has contributed to generating doubt among citizens and thus fuelling dissatisfaction towards administrations.

As a final reflection, this publication aims to lay the foundations for future research into new models of communication in times of crisis or, as in this case, in situations of health risk, which has now become necessary. In Spain, the precedent of the Ebola virus could have provided an approximation of how public bodies should handle an issue of this calibre. However, what happened in 2014 showed the absence of a communication plan designed exclusively to solve possible communication deficiencies in such situations and, to make matters worse, it did not serve to outline a new course of action in the event of a new crisis of this magnitude, as has been shown.

Therefore, establishing strategic communication in crisis situations must be a priority for the communication departments of the main public administrations, be they local, regional or national. The findings reflected the need to es-
tablish fixed criteria for deciding what and how information on this issue should be conveyed to citizens. It has been proven that communication plays a decisive role in crisis contexts to promote a change in the behaviour of society. The positive and optimistic message encourages relaxed behaviour in citizens, while presenting content that emphasises caution and respect in the face of a health alert may prevent certain attitudes that underestimate the harmfulness of the virus.

References


Rejecting communication. When facts are “manipulated” and “manufactured”

Hewson, Sinead, TU Dublin City Campus (Ireland)

When facts are “manipulated” and “manufactured” (Biden, 2021, p. 2)

In recent times, the reputation of the communications sector has come under the spotlight as a consequence of Brexit, global politics and the pandemic. Trust in the sector has been compromised as a result of the actions and inaction of major institutions who, in theory, should know better. Society has experienced first-hand the consequences of leadership, decision-making, communication and ethical standards in organisations. Some experiences have been positive, others negative and, for communicators, negative incidents are more likely to be remembered by peers and stakeholders. This article focuses on the messaging adopted by two politicians, a comedian, and a broadcaster. It shares examples of communication best practise and questionable actions with vulnerable groups and proposes a path forward to thwart the normalisation of logical fallacies in the sector.

I recently completed my PhD in TU Dublin and interviewed 34 organisational leaders and communicators with an international remit over an eighteen month period. Many commented that communicators tend to complicate things and wondered why this was necessary. This sparked my curiosity because throughout the literature review process, I regularly used dictionaries and specialist resources to unpick the language patterns and thought processes of some writers to understand what they were saying. Participants in the doctoral research, (called Communication at the Core: Exploring decision-making when communication is at the heart of an organisation’s strategy development) said that communicators need to be clear on their strategic intent and adapt the message according to the context. This paper shares practical examples which demonstrate that language, clarity and accuracy are important drivers of communication and that there can be serious consequences when one or more elements are out of balance.

Communication, some say, boils down to “getting people to do what you want them to do” (Tolley, 1988, p. 4) and involves the creation of arguments based on “the interpretation and communication of scientific evidence in relation to concepts of the truth” (L’Etang, 2001, p. 158). When communication works well, it is invisible and often taken for granted by internal and external stakeholders. However, on occasions when things go wrong, the problem is often fault-based and framed as inept or clumsy communication, a job ‘anyone’ can do.

For example: Prime-Minister Johnson’s ad-lib communication style confused citizens throughout the UK as he explained English plans to open up after the first lockdown in May 2020 (quote 1). He said:
“And so no, this is not the time simply to end the lockdown this week. Instead, we are taking the first careful steps to modify our measures. And the first step is a change of emphasis that we hope that people will act on this week. We said that you should work from home if you can, and only go to work if you must. We now need to stress that anyone who can’t work from home, for instance those in construction or manufacturing, should be actively encouraged to can travel go to work. And we want it to be safe for you to get to work. So, you should avoid public transport, travel by car, cycle or walk if at all possible – because we must and will maintain social distancing, and capacity will therefore be limited. So, work from home if you can, but you should go to work if you can’t work from home. And to ensure you are safe at work we have been working to establish new guidance for employers to make workplaces COVID-secure has been updated. And when you do go to work, if possible do so by car or even better by walking or bicycle. But just as with workplaces, public transport operators will also be following COVID-secure standards.”

Quote 1: Original transcript (Johnson, 2020, pp. 1–6; Sky News, May 10th, 2020)

UK comedian Matt Lucas pointed out on social media platforms that the call to action was not clear. Truly frustrated, he demonstrated that communication which contradicts and lacks clarity creates confusion (Blake, 2018). His late night parody went viral and copycat videos were posted across multiple platforms. He joked, “so we are saying don’t go to work go to work don’t take public transport go to work don’t go to work stay indoors if you can work from home go to work don’t go to work go outside don’t go outside and then eh we will or won’t e s s something or other” (Lucas, 2020 Twitter).

Quote 2: Speech extract, redundant text removed (Johnson, 2020, pp. 1–11; Sky News May 10th, 2020)
Prime Minister Johnson’s original speech and language patterns were analysed. When redundant text was removed, the communication was clearer. The remaining text was concise, the message was easier to understand and instructions easier to follow (quote 2). The word count reduced from 215 to 51 words and the call to action is clear. Crisis communication requires clarity and in this example, the text in bold is explicit and crystal clear:

So what happens when organisations intentionally communicates messages which contradict and confuse stakeholders? What needs to be in place in order for communicators to act in the best interest of all interested parties in a discussion? Modern communication environments are in a continuous state of flux. Democratisation of media and technology platforms and citizen as communicator has created a paradigm where information sharing takes place in real time and not necessarily authenticated. What is said, is not necessarily true creating a situation where citizens do not know what to believe and disseminators of information leverage information gaps to adapt beliefs.

For example on January 6th 2021 a member of the US Senate, Ted Cruz (quote 3) made a speech in Congress and said:

“Recent polling shows that 39% of Americans believe the election that just occurred, “was rigged.” You may not agree with that assessment. But it is nonetheless a reality for nearly half the country. I would note it is not just Republicans who believe that. 31% of independents agree with that statement. 17% of Democrats believe the election was rigged. Even if you do not share that conviction, it is the responsibility, I believe of this office to acknowledge that as a profound threat to this country and to the legitimacy of any administrations that will come in the future.

I want to take a moment to speak to my Democratic colleagues. I understand. Your guy is winning right now. If Democrats vote as a block, Joe Biden will almost certainly be certified as the next president of the United States. I want to speak to the Republicans who are considering voting against these objections. I understand your concerns, but I urge you to pause and think, what does it say to the nearly half the country that believes this election was rigged if we vote? Not even to consider the claims of illegality and fraud in this election.”

Quote 3: Original text (Cruz, 2021b, pp. 1–11 transcript, 2021a video)
Analysis of the text suggests that the language choice in this example has two purposes. First of all it repeatedly questions the election result and secondly sentences and turns of phrase are explicitly used to build rapport with the receiver of the message. For instance, the scale of the problem shifts from “39% of Americans” to “nearly half the country” and is repeated twice in the speech. Furthermore phrases which cast doubt, fear or uncertainty such as “rigged” appear a number of times in the transcript. Synonyms such as “illegality” or “fraud”; “concerns”, “objections” and “threats” potentially build mistrust in validity of the result and that there is a risk to the country, to the people and to democracy itself. The speech is peppered with rapport building phrases such as “believe”, “acknowledge”, “I want to speak”, “I urge” and “I understand,” and the authors’ tone of voice appears reassuring, authentic, considered, informed and reasonable (quote 4).

The literature says that arguments can be strong or weak. Strong arguments are logical, truth-based and robust, which means that flawed reasoning is absent. Weak arguments on the other hand use logical fallacies and flawed logic to appear stronger than they actually are (Sesonske, 1968, p. 217 to 231) and evident in this example. This concurs with the viewpoint that logical fallacy based communication fractured US politics, influenced the outcome of the UK’s Brexit referendum and has enabled the rise of conspiracy movements for decades. It demonstrates that the selective use of information divides and polarises stakeholder groups (Rose, 2017, p. 556).

The normalisation of logical fallacies (intentional or not) in the UK and US political speech extracts casts doubt on the motivation and credibility of those involved in the design and dissemination of information. This is because communication which contradicts and lacks clarity creates confusion (Blake, 2018). Fake news hiding under a veneer of authenticity is commonplace (Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2018, pp. 137–153) and the blurred lines between trust, fact, evidence and fallacy has been experienced by at global and grass-roots level in political dialogue, during the pandemic and a characteristic of election communication styles. “Because of the
intense competition and the sophisticated technology which is needed to effectively reach the contemporary voter, the cost of modern communication is high-high enough to drive many out of the political marketplace and, occasionally, drive some into rebellion" (Alexander, 1969, p. 255). The resulting confusion, in many cases, undermines trust in the communications profession and the integrity of information circulated.

Yet when the message of the US speech is distilled down to its intent, the word count reduces from 198 to 25 words and contains a clear call to action which potentially has broader appeal. In this case, the selective use of information can divide and polarises stakeholder groups (Rose, 2017, p. 556). The text in bold (quote 5) reads as:

“When ‘repetitive public communication with a selection of supportive facts designed to manipulate or persuade where the source is not always identified’ (Moloney, 2006, p. 8), what is our responsibility as a sector and as a profession? Are we empowered to question the ethics of communication professionals who adopt these practices doubt when the evidence and data propose something different? Or are communicators tasked with ‘wrangling and horse-trading for advantage (material, ideological, legislative, reputational) between organisations and groups representing interests’? (Moloney, 2006, p. 85) where stakeholders question the integrity and intent of information circulated.

“Recent polling shows that 39% of Americans believe the election that just occurred, ‘was rigged.’ You may not agree with that assessment. But it is nonetheless a reality for nearly half the country. I would note it is not just Republicans who believe that. 31% of independents agree with that statement. 17% of Democrats believe the election was rigged. Even if you do not share that conviction, it is the responsibility, I believe of this office to acknowledge that as a profound threat to this country and to the legitimacy of any administrations that will come in the future.

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Quote 5: Speech extract with redundant text removed (Cruz, 2021b, pp. 1–11 transcript, 2021a video)
When an evidence, trust-based approach is taken and language is designed to be accessible. The message can be complex, clearly structured and understandable for all ages and reading levels. The best practice example below from public broadcaster NPO Zapp was originally published in Dutch and directed at mainstream media and youth audiences (quote 6).

Crisis requires accuracy, facts, critical thinking, clarity and a clear call to action. The intent of the communication was clear. The update states that two participants and a jury member tested positive for Covid-19 even though they had no symptoms of corona. The consequences of the positive test results were clearly communicated to stakeholders. In the case of the competition finalists aged between 10 and 15 years, the solo artist could not attend the event. The four-piece girl band performed as a trio and the judge was replaced with a standby jury member.

The text was examined and when redundant words were removed (quote 7), the structure of the message remained the same and word count reduced from 182 to 94 words. When communication works well, it is invisible and often taken for granted by internal and external stakeholders. In this case the primary audience consists of primary school children and the text is written to an equivalent level of the Crystal Mark in the UK which is run by the Plain English Campaign. The organisation campaigns against jargon and misleading public information and argues that people should have access to clear and concise information (Plain English Campaign, 2020).

The organisation acknowledges effective and ineffective communication. For example, Prime Minister Johnson was awarded a lifetime award in 2019 and the UK’s government information services received special recognition when it was announced that “the definition for deaths in England changed on 1 June 2020.” Organisations are also recognised for communicating clearly, especially on matters that are potentially complex, upsetting or sensitive. Trailblazers include the British Red Cross, mental health charity MIND and The Money Advice Service (Plain English Campaign, 2020).

**IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT!**

*Saturday, September 26, 2020*

*The corona virus strikes JSF finalists Demi and Robin*

*Unfortunately, we have sad news about tonight’s final. Two of our finalists, Demi from UNITY and Robin, tested positive for Corona, and did not have any symptoms. This means they cannot participate in the show. The final will continue, with 3 acts. Maud, Naomi and Jayda from UNITY perform as a trio. It’s incredibly disappointing for the girls and our best wishes go out to them. This automatically means that Robin no longer has a chance of winning. If UNITY wins tonight, Demi can participate in the international final. Sadly, moving the final is not an option.*

*Unfortunately, professional jury member Emma Heesters will not be there tonight, someone close to her has corona. Although she has no symptoms, we and Emma naturally take our responsibility and she will stay at home as a precaution. Fortunately, we found a good replacement: presenter and singer Femke Ramos takes place in her jury chair.*

*We hope everyone will watch our final and cheer on our finalists from home!*

Quote 6: Original text translated from Dutch (NPO Zapp, Junior Song Festival 2020, pp. 1–3)
It is time for the sector to work together and consider the following call to action. The sector (i.e. industry, academia in consultation with stakeholders) must hold ourselves accountable for the messages we disseminate and recalibrate standards of best practise. We need to position communicators as intermediaries managing mistrust (Bourne, 2013, p. 72; Hoffmann, 2019). As the sector works together for change, it is vital that the profession protects its’ reputation and raises the benchmark of what it means to be a communication specialist so that the profession is understood, its impact and value is recognised and that it rejects “the culture in which facts themselves are manipulated and even manufactured” (Biden, 2021, p. 2).

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The Science Of Risk Mitigation For Strategic Integrated Communications

Johnson, Lyndon, *Think Different(ly)* (Canada)

**Definition**

Strategic risk - the risk created by an obstacle preventing the achievement of a desired organizational outcome - is something that every communications practitioner faces. In some cases, the risks are known; in many others they are unknown. The ability to understand and quantify the risks that post a threat to the success of a communications strategy is something that is critical to the reputation of the function, as well as to ensuring the deliver of value to the organizations we serve.

The paper proposes a scientific method by which communications practitioners can identify, quantify and mitigate strategic risks, whether located within their specific area of practice, the broader communications function, or from within non-communications departments across the organization.

**Introduction**

Communications practitioners have long wanted to have their field recognized as a strategic management function. Proving it empirically has been hard to do. One of the most difficult challenges has been strategic risk mitigation. This is, in part, because there has been no objective way to identify, collect, organize and mitigate risks in a methodical and scientific way. While many of the direct risks relating to specific communications disciplines are well known, collecting data to enable each to be understood and prioritized, in order that they can be mitigated effectively, identifying risks that reside outside of the communications department has proved almost impossible. Even when this has been achieved, there has been no methodical way to validate that the information is objectively accurate. Building an effective communications strategy designed to achieve a specific, measurable desired outcome has remained a challenge.

It was hypothesized that it would be possible to develop an approach that would allow for strategic risk to be analyzed, for data to be collected and prioritized, and allow for risk data to be validated using scientific method, in order to allow for communications strategies to be built and de-risked in order to increase the probability of achieving a specific outcome. Using a combination of desk research and document review, model-building and experimentation a series of hypotheses were developed. This research also developed a series of tools and testing environments to allow controls to be build and experiments to be run, applying scientific method and rigor to this research.

**Defining Core Disciplines**

It was decided that, rather than using common discipline labels to differentiate between the varied communications functions - public relations, marketing and publicity, for example - we would instead use functional definitions. This focus on the functional value and outcome from each activity would, we believed, provide better clarity for establishing risk, and also allow us to
move beyond the communications department. In many cases, communications practitioners is called on to mitigate risk through the delivery of messages via a variety of channels, but in reality the risk existed outside of the remit of communications and was not considered, both by practitioners and those working in non-communications roles. By using definitions that looked at the function, it was believed that it would be easier to understand and evaluate risk.

The core areas of risk were grouped in to three main areas - building and maintaining key relationships, compelling strategically valuable actions and communication. All of these three areas were considered as being possible on a one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many basis. Each area, and each approach, it was hypothesized, could be evaluated for risk and calculated relative to the specific context of the organization as well as the competitive landscape. It was believed that risk could be calculated both as absolutes and relatives - as well as as compounds - where risk could be calculated based on more than one of these areas.

Given these functional outcomes form the fundamental elements of most organizational strategies it was believed that calculating the risk in each could be related directly to better understanding, evaluation, and measurement of risk for organizational strategies in order that it can be mitigated. The core outcomes of communications disciplines - relationships for PR, actions in the case of marketing and awareness as a result of publicity are, it was hypothesized the critical factors of strategic risk that could predict the likelihood of successfully achieving desired organizational outcomes.

**Methodology**

The research project used a combination of methods, including document review, academic theory and operationalized practice. It developed a body of knowledge independent from any business model or application and used a scientific method based on Eric Ries’s ‘Build Measure Learn’ feedback loop that allows for hypotheses to be built, tested and for knowledge to be captured as a way to inform the development of new testable hypotheses.

Visual tools were developed, using the work of Alexander Osterwalder, Ash Maruya and David Bland as a guide. This method allowed for information to be captured in context, and enabled it to be assessed in that same environment to ensure that the impact of risk to an organization could be understood fully. We used a method developed by the author to map assumptions that is similar to work done by Messrs Osterwalder, Bland and Professor Steve Blank of The University of California, Berkley. We used an adapted model based on work done by Rita Gunther McGrath and Ian MacMillan in the area of Discovery-Based Planning.

Hypotheses were tested both through live experiments and in the laboratory. Theories and hypotheses were also provided for peer-based review where possible. Publicly-available case studies were also tested against research findings and mapped to models and frameworks to evaluate whether anything could be learned to help provide or disprove research findings - or to understand potential anomalies and exceptions.

**Hypotheses**

This research built an initial set of four hypotheses that would provide a basis on which additional theories could be developed and tested.

Those hypotheses were:

- the primary cause of risk for strategic communications stemmed from inaccurate information
- strategic risk was significantly increased by changes happening outside of the commu-
• inaccurate assumptions created a significant risk to the achievement of both communications and organizational goals
• an unrealistic assessment of the current situation created significant (and often unknown) risks of strategic failure.

Pre-work had been undertaken to test these hypotheses, via experimenting with startups and small businesses. This sample was chosen because of its proximity to risk - a startup being, ‘a human institution designed to create a new product or service under conditions of extreme uncertainty’ using Eric Ries’s definition in his book, *The Lean Startup*. As a result of this proximity to risk, startups and small businesses also experience the consequences of risk more acutely and immediately - providing an environment where an understanding of risk exposures are actively sought as a way to ensure successful outcomes.

While this was the predominant basis for validating the foundational hypotheses for this research, it was not the only one. These hypotheses were also tested via thought experiments with communications practitioners in larger organizations, as well as non-communications practitioners at organizations of all sizes, academics and business and management thinkers.

**Objectives**

In addition to exploring methods for identifying and calculating strategic risk, the objectives of this research were to explore whether tools could be built to enable practitioners to understand the direct and indirect risks relative to the development of an effective communications strategy - both in their specific discipline and as part of an integrated cross-functional team. Tools, it was hypothesized, would provide mechanisms - including mathematical formulas - for calculating strategic risk. It was also believed that it may be possible to develop a methodology for embedding strategic risk evaluations into the fabric of everything communicators do, and create a measurement system that enables strategic communications risk to be calculated in terms of functional outputs, outcomes and impact to an organization.

**Strategic Blueprint**

In recent decades, communications disciplines have become harder to distinguish from each other. This has largely stemmed from the three things - the growth of social media, providing anybody with a private publishing platform, reinforcing a belief that exposure is central to the effectiveness of communication. The addition of communications suffixes to these platforms - whether social media marketing, digital public relations, brand marketing or the insertion of any one of an ever-growing number of platforms - positioned before the functional discipline (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) - has reduced clarity. Combine these with a growing lack of comprehension of the fundamentals of each discipline, and you have a recipe for significant unrecognized risk exposure.

Add to this definitions that are heavily influenced by operationalized commercial models and tactical activities rather than the fundamentals and it becomes almost impossible for strategic risks to be identified, let alone to be calculated.

In an industry fighting to justify its relevance and protect its commercial activities, this has created a vicious circle of self-fulfilling prophecies, where unidentified risks effectively guarantee failure before anything is done tactically to implement the strategic approach. This, it was hypothesized, poses an existential risk to the industry.

In order to address this, this research set out to determine whether it was possible to build a strategic blueprint for the core communica-
tions disciplines. It was also hypothesized that the functional blueprints might enable a better understanding of the entire strategic communications ecosystem and as a product, the associated risks. In attempting this, academic research was reviewed to search for models that could be used to differentiate each discipline and allow for the core elements of risk in each to be understood. This work resulted in the development of the strategic blueprint [figure #] incorporating the work of academics like Professors James and Larissa Grunig, Linda Hon, Jerome E. McCarthy, James Culliton, Neil Borden and Philip Kotler. It also included work by innovators from Edward Bernays to Don Bartholomew, as well as a growing list of researchers and authors writing on relevant themes.

By removing the traditional labels for each discipline and focusing instead on the functional outcome of each - building/maintaining relationships, compelling specific actions and communication at scale it enabled experiments to be run to investigate whether the risks relating to each, and also to compounds involving interrelated outcomes, to be identified and quantified. This blueprint also provided a mechanism for considering whether the assumptions that generated significant strategic risk in each field could be identified, and through experimentation determine whether there were compound risks that impacted the probability of achieving a desired organizational outcome, and associated impact.

Determining whether compound risk existed was, it was felt, critical. It was hypothesized that, while practitioners may be able to de-risk a strategy in their own communications field, there existed the potential that it would fail as a result of risk residing in another communications field. Failure to understand the unknown risks likely had a detrimental impact on the chances of success in their field, but also increased the risk of failure of integrated strategies. It was hypothesized that unknown risks could exist in more than one communications and that independently each could believe they had mitigated strategic

Fig.1 Integrated communications field map. (Source: Original Figure by the author)
risk, only to find a strategy failed while nobody would understand the cause.

As part of experiments to interrogate the compound risk hypothesis, it was also considered which of the functional outcomes may be reliant on data points from either other communications disciplines or from other non-communications functions within the business. It was considered important to understand whether direct or indirect links need to be investigated as part of building strategic hypotheses in order to build risk models that could be tested.

Figure 2 shows where this research found interdependencies between the various disciplines that created potential unknown strategic risk that would otherwise go unmitigated and, as a result, increase the probability of a strategy in each - and integrated strategies - failing to deliver the desired outcome if left unaddressed.

It was found that when building relationships it was critical to ensure that the strength of each relationship was of a requisite strength to support the purpose it would serve in achieving specific organizational outcomes. Failure to build, or maintain, a relationship to the point where it was useful - or actionable, for marketing purposes - would increase the risk of failure significantly. Equally, asking somebody to take an action - from a marketing perspective using a validated value proposition via marketing communications, would become increasingly risky without relationships of a sufficient strength to support the ‘called’ action. Awareness and engagement strategies would also have increased risk of failure without relationships in place to support the serving of information to an audience.

One significant risk associated with communication, particularly at scale - to an audience is the belief that because something had been published it had been seen by the people necessary for the achievement of a specific outcome.

This research found that in many cases strategies were built based on the assumption of awareness, where none existed in reality.

**Modeling Risk**

In recent years, visual tools have become popular and effective for collecting and mapping data - whether it is for understanding a value proposition, a business model or building a hypothesis for any number of topics. This research project determined that it might provide a mechanism for collecting and mapping assumptions relating to each of the core communications fields. By collecting all assumptions relevant to each field, it was hypothesized that it might be possible to get a complete picture of the elements of risk that could cause the failure of a communications strategy. It was speculated that it would also be possible to identify the key strategic relationships - both internal and external - that would be valuable for the purposes of prioritizing risk and testing strategic communications hypotheses, for example.

By collecting strategic assumptions and determining the relative risk of each it was believed that it would be possible to build risk models. These models would enable risk calculations to be made to allow informed decisions to be made with a clear understanding of the associated strategic risks.

In order to allow these hypotheses to be tested, and enable models to be developed, a series of visual tools were developed. These Strategy Canvases provided guides for each discipline, but also the development of a blank strategy canvas provided an opportunity for the research team to build a risk using data from multiple communications fields. This would allow for risk models and hypotheses to be developed for integrated communications strategies - and provide flexibility in a way that the individual field-specific
canvases would not. It was believed that the ability to identify strategic risks in each discipline independently would enable risk to be reduced across a cross-functional strategy.

**The Logic Of Risk**

One of the challenges undertaken by this research was to understand whether it was possible to build a logic model for evaluating risk. Much has been written about the role of logic in communications - particularly around evaluation. In their paper, “Revisiting the disciplinary home of evaluation: New perspectives to inform PR evaluation standards, Professor Jim Macnamara of School of Technology at Sydney University and Fraser Likely present a range of logic models developed over a twenty year period. It concludes that of the many logic theories exist most rely on systems theory and socio-psychology. Macnamara and Likely conclude that program theory has largely been ignored and posit that, theory and program logic models provide a framework to guide the process (of evaluation).

While reviewing existing logic models two major problems became clear. Both rely on predetermined tactical activity as the basis for determining the success or failure of communications activity. Using a process or program theory as the foundation for analyzing risk would, this research finds, create a degree of unnecessary strategic risk in itself. This would appear to be counter-productive (and illogical) as part of a logic model for quantifying and evaluating risk.

In his 2014 paper, The ‘toe bone to the head bone’ logic model to connect public relations and corporate communication to organisation outcomes Professor Macnamara had used an analogy of a human skeleton to demonstrate the interconnectivity of systems where the operation of one part relies on another function. While the examples in Professor Macnamara’s paper relied largely on tactical activity as the driver, this research explored that concept further using elements from program logic theory to understand how a logic model could be built for strategic risk.

The Blueprint developed to map core communications functions had identified the existence of dependent variables - not only within each function, but also between connected functions. Using Professor Macnamara’s analogy, this research explored whether these dependent variables could be used to develop a functioning mathematical model for identifying and quantifying strategic communications risk. Initial research in this area suggests that it is.

Using The Periodic Table Of Strategic Communications Elements (Figure #) it was hypothesized that strategic risk could be determined for each element of a strategy based on the strength of evidence available to support the underlying hypothesis. For key relationships, for example, it could be believed that an organizational outcome depends on building and/or maintaining a strong mutually beneficial relationship with a specific person or group. If the nature of the group is wrong (there is strong evidence they are not strategically important, for example) then they will have no impact in the likely achievement of the desired outcome. This would create a significant strategic risk which, if unrecognized or unaddressed, would likely cause the failure of both a strategy and any tactical activities performed as part of implementing it.

In the same way, a strategy which relies on the taking of an action, compelled via marketing communications requires a relationship strong enough to support the action being asked. Failure to ensure the requisite strength of a relationship would create a significant strategic risk and, likely, cause a failure to achieve a desired outcome irrespective of anything else.

Understanding these functional dependencies would, it was believed, allow a functional log-
A Strategic Risk Framework

In order to test the hypothesis that both independent field risk and compound risks, a tool was developed in order to enable data to be collected for each element of a strategy in a structured way. It was hypothesized that using a visual tool to collect data would allow for context to be understood in context - which would provide value in assessing and quantifying the risk of each strategic assumption and potentially allow for the testing of each through experimentation.

The figure above shows a wire-frame developed for a potential tool. This was subsequently formalized and adopted in a series of tools that form The Lean Communications Framework strategy canvases. The tools allow for strategic assumptions to be collected, mapped and interrogated through experiments to assess the risk posed to the achievement of a specified outcome. It was found that without a defined outcome, one of the most significant risks is that a strategy would be developed that didn’t deliver a desired outcome (which in itself is a significant strategic risk) simply because the outcome was unclear or not specified.

The development of a tool also allowed for control models to be developed to test strategies against situations where no strategy existed and no actions were taken, in order to evaluate the risk of doing nothing and to compare different strategic approaches to a strategy of doing nothing.

Each tool was built around a proven feedback loop - the Build, Measure, Learn offered in Eric Ries’s book The Lean Startup, which arose from a model for customer development first presented by Professor Steve Blank of The University of California, Berkeley. This method for assessing data through experimentation has been

Fig. 2 A Periodic Table of Strategic Communications Elements (Source: Original Figure by Author)
integrated into a range of tools for developing product, business model and value proposition strategies, and it was determined that it had significant value for the purposes of determining strategic communications risk. This method for collecting, analyzing and testing data through hypotheses was built into the anatomy of the Framework tools.

A Risk Ontology

Using a combination of the field blueprint and the periodic table of strategic communications elements, it was realized that the functional outcomes of each tool were - to return to Professor Jim Macnamara’s analogy of communications as a human skeleton - the connective strategic tissue. While each tool allowed for risk to be evaluated in achieving a single strategic outcome, so these outcomes were major risk factors in determining the probability of achieving an outcome in another. Understanding the state of a strategic data point on one field could help determine risk exposure in another as well as compound risks - risk that contains elements from more than one communications field - and allow these to be understood, evaluated and mitigated when building both strategies and tactical implementations of them.

Using a combination of the field blueprint and periodic table of strategic elements, it became clear that it was likely that in addition to creating a hierarchy of strategic elements at a field level, these two tools, combined with the strategic framework canvas tools, it would be possible to assess risk ontologically. Based on the context of an organization, the confidence based on evidence and the strategy being pursued in order to achieve a specific desired outcome it would be possible to rank risk to be able to identify the riskiest strategic assumptions being made, run controlled experiments using Scientific Method to test risk hypotheses and determine the best strategy to mitigate it.

In order to validate this hypothesis the research conducted experiments using both historic case studies in the public domain and ran live experiments with a number of startup and small business entrepreneurs. These experiments provided evidence to validate the hypothesis and further experiments are being conducted to test the hypothesis within larger organizations. The
ontology also allowed for the testing of key assumptions that would be critical to building an effective integrated communications strategy. Furthermore, the ontology enables a strategy using any of the core strategic elements to be tested based upon the strength or weakness of the assumptions on which it is built in order to assess risk. Further, a risk profile could be built based on the fundamental elements of each outcome to allow each component to be interrogated and tested using experiments in order to either de-risk it. It was discovered that using a hierarchy of risk, improved informed strategic decision making because it provided a better understanding of the associated risks.

**Risk Matrices**

In addition to the functional hierarchy between communications fields, this research also discovered that through the development of risk matrices it is possible to identify and rank assumptions within each field to enable them to be prioritized in order to enable structured experiments to be designed and undertaken to test each and minimize the strategic communications risk associated with each in order to increase the probability of achieving a successful functional outcome.

This research used a model developed by Eric Ries - known as Assumption Mapping - and popularized by Alex Osterwalder and David Bland in their book ‘Testing Business Ideas’ where a matrix is used to collect key communications assumptions in order to be able to better understand risk priorities. This research adapted this methodology for the purposes of this research.

**The Hierarchy of Strategic Communications Risk**

Using the functional outcomes from each communications discipline, this research has been able to prove that a hierarchy of strategic risk exists. Because of the interdependent nature of the different disciplines, risk in one field is largely dependent on the achievement of another outcome. Effective strategies require each (or a combination of) outcome to have been achieved. This research shows a clear and demonstrable hierarchy of risk based on what Professors Grunig & Kim termed interdependent variables. Each discipline has its own dependent risks - the strategic assumptions, on which a functional outcome is based - and independent risks. Independent risk are the standalone risks of each assumption in each field. But, dependent risk also exists between interdependent function:

Engagement, for example, requires not just ef-
Effective communication of a message, it requires an existing relationship between an organization to have been built. The exception is where the response is impulse-driven or time specific. This is not the case in many/most situations.

Without key relationships in place, the chances of achieving any organizational outcome diminishes significantly. A lack of actionable relationships - relationships that are strong enough to support the action being asked of a person or group - the greater the risk that the action will be taken. This research suggests that there is a correlation between the increase in the risk of strategic failure and a failure to ensure key risk indicators have been mitigated. The absence of these risk indicators result in compound risk - risk that is greater than that caused by any one strategic element.

This research found that the main areas of strategic risk are:

**Relationship Risk**

The risk that a relationship which has been built for the intended purpose it will be used for is in place. Significant risk exposure can also occur when the strength of a relationship is insufficient for it to be strategically useful to the organization.

**Value/Benefit Risk**

The risk that the perceived value of a relationship to an organization is not based in reality can be a significant strategic risk. It can cause significant problems in both the building of a relationship or in the activation of it via marketing. There is also a significant value risk related to value propositions used for marketing in the attempt to compel a strategically-valuable action. A significant cause of marketing failure can be attributed to the value proposition not being as compelling as an organization believes, or that it

The risk that the perceived value of a relationship to an organization is not based in reality can be a significant strategic risk. It can cause significant problems in both the building of a relationship and in the activation of it via marketing. There is also a significant value risk related to value propositions used for marketing in the attempt to compel a strategically-valuable action. A significant cause of marketing failure can be attributed to the value proposition not
being as compelling as an organization believes, or that the financial value placed on the proposition does not match the investment required to receive it.

**Action (or Inaction) Risk**

Marketing success is determined by whether an action has been compelled. If an action has not occurred continuing a marketing campaign on the assumption that it has - or that it indicates something for which there is no evidence to support is a significant strategic risk.

There are many reasons why a marketing action is not taken by the person or people being called to take it, including a failure to understand what they are being called to do or how they should take it. There is also evidence to show that even where they are willing to take an action, and understand the action they are being asked to take, an unwillingness to take it in the way being requested also causes significant (in)action risk.

**Awareness Risk**

Awareness of a product or service, or organization, that can be directly linked to the production of organizational value. Awareness cannot be assumed simply because something has been published by or in media (paid, earned, shared or owned) but must be demonstrated with evidence. Supported by evidence of operational delivery of the value and directly delivers value to an organization.

**Brand Risk**

Brand is an over-used term in modern communications. Brand is a promise, based on a set of core organizational values that determines how an organization makes decisions in every function. Significant risk exists where there is a misplaced belief that simply stating that an organization’s brand is ‘x’, as does the assumption that asserting it is enough.

**Trust Risk**

Trust is often cited by organizations and by communicators as if it is a default - an organization is trusted or distrusted. The reality is otherwise. Trust can be applied to every part of an organization, and every element of a communication strategy. To assume trust exists - whether in an individual field or compound - creates a significant strategic risk.

**Compound Risk**

This research shows that the strategic risk of failing to achieve an outcome increases for every unknown or unvalidated strategic assumption. By identifying the assumptions associated with each outcome it is possible to build a model for quantifying the compound strategic risk of a strategy and calculate the mitigation value for both each individual element and reduction in compound risks to an integrated strategy.

The research shows that there is a disproportionate risk between some elements of risk and a failure to identify and mitigate specific risks dramatically increases the strategic risk of failure in others. Equally, a failure to accurately predict the chances of success of a strategy and, as a result, its tactical implementation.

**Conclusion**

By understanding the strategic risks associated with each communications field, and compound risks associated with integrated communications strategies it is possible to build models for each discipline and reduce strategic risk related to the achievement of a specific, quantifiable desired organizational outcome.

Using an ontology of communications elements it is possible to quantify risk mathematically and using models it is possible to calculate the increase or decrease in strategic risk of each strategy. Models can be built that quantify risk at
both an individual field level and the compound risks of the elements of an integrated communications strategy across more than one functional communications discipline.

By establishing a taxonomy and ontology, this research has been able to demonstrate that it is possible to use experiments to validate or disprove strategic communications assumptions in order to reduce the risk of failure and predict the probability of success.

**Recommended Readings**


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Communication leadership in extraordinary times: exploring the role and work of female communications leaders during the coronavirus pandemic

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Abstract

Set against the backdrop of the profound impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the operation of organisations of all complexions around the world, this paper reports on the first stage of an ongoing study exploring the ascent to leadership of female PR leaders, exploring their backgrounds and the key influences shaping their experiences on their journey to leadership positions and in sustaining their roles. Moving away from the traditional focus on the ‘glass ceiling’ effect and pay and status differentials compared to men, this study looks to offer insights into the nuanced experiences of women who have succeeded in reaching leadership positions in communications/public relations and examining how the pandemic has affected their roles.

Introduction: a pandemic tale

The importance of strong and experienced leadership in organisations, is never more evident than when those organisations encounter challenging times. Indeed, how well leaders are able to steer their organisations through troubled and challenging times is often taken as a barometer of their capability as leaders. One intriguing question that has attracted considerable attention of late is whether men or women have been more effective leaders during the recent Coronavirus pandemic? While it may be far too early to reach any definitive judgement on this question, research published in a number of well-respected sources does seem to point to female leaders coming out on top in terms of effectiveness ratings during the pandemic both at the organisational and national leadership levels (Zenger and Folkman, 2020; The Guardian, 18 August, 2020). Arguably the pandemic has thrown the spotlight on questions about whether a more transformational, relationship-based “female orientated leadership style” is more effective than the traditionally autocratic command and control male orientated leadership style during crisis times. On balance, the evidence suggests that the former is the preferred and more effective approach during volatile and challenging circumstance that generally characterise periods of major change or crisis scenarios such as organisations of all complexions have faced during the Coronavirus pandemic.

There is little denying that the rapid worldwide spread of coronavirus to pandemic proportions, has had a devastating impact on peoples’ lives and livelihoods in countries across the world. With cases rising on an almost unprecedented scale. At the time of writing, the World Health
Organisation (WHO) reported over 100 million cases of coronavirus and over 2 million reported deaths worldwide. Here the USA heads the grim league table of coronavirus attributed deaths with over 600,000 deaths, followed by Brazil (507,000), India (392,000) and with the UK lying in sixth place (128,000). Heightened concerns now surround the rapid spread of an even more contagious strain of coronavirus (Delta variant) which threatens to overwhelm the health-care systems in many countries. The discovery and approval of a number of coronavirus vaccines has offered some ‘light at the end of a very dark tunnel’ but production and distribution issues have left most countries playing ‘catch up’ in a race to try to get ahead of and stem the growing tide of infections.

While governments around the world have committed resources on an unprecedented scale in an attempt to combat the coronavirus and treat those infected; most governments have also recognised the huge economic damage and cost of these measures, which threatens to bring about one of the worst economic recessions across the world since the Seventeenth Century. The UK government [mirrored by similar measures in the USA and other countries] has introduced a wide range of measures to address the sharp economic decline and prop-up failing sectors of business, ranging from a hugely expensive furlough scheme, and loan guaranteed scheme to support large swathes of business at risk of permanent closure. The total cost of these measures has been forecast to increase public debt to around £2.63 trillion by 2024 (Office for Budget Responsibility, OBR).

The lockdown and other restrictive measures have had a profound effect on many business sectors notably, travel and tourism and hospitality, leisure and professional services have suffered devastating losses and closures, others such as online retailing and gaming have boomed. One of the most profound changes enforced by the pandemic has been in the way many businesses have been forced to fundamentally change how they organise and manage their operations as well as their interaction with their stakeholders. Remote working has become almost the norm, with virtual team meetings and online conferencing often supported by the extensive use of social media.

**Research Purpose**

It is against the backdrop of unprecedented and ongoing challenges to the leadership and management of governments as well as public and private sector organisations across the world caused by the coronavirus pandemic, that this study seeks to examine the role of female communications leaders and how they have responded to the challenges and opportunities that they have faced during the pandemic. This paper forms the first part of an extended study of female leadership in the communications/public relations context, and focuses in particular on exploring the leadership pathways that women have followed in advancing to an executive role within their respective organisations. The next phase of this study will then go on to explore essentially what day-to-day leadership means and involves for women operating at this senior level within their respective organisations, and the challenges that they have faced in this role during the pandemic.

**Literature Review**

For the purposes of this paper, a literature review was conducted focusing specifically on the role of women in PR leadership over the past four decades (1980-2019), rather than exploring the earlier broader debates about the role of women in management and leadership positions (e.g. Mintzberg, 1973, 1979; Bass, 1985 and 1990; Kotter, 1992; Northhouse, 2007; Yukl, 1989, 1999 and 2002). In terms of the scope of this review, it focused primarily on a critical exam-
ination of scholarly peer-reviewed publications within the communications and public relations management literature, which an initial examination showed had already embraced many of the broader debates about female participation in management and leadership.

If we look beyond the ‘often well-rehearsed arguments found within the growing body of feminist literature focused on gender-based work discrimination and the ‘glass ceiling’ effects, another recurring storyline emerged. This discernable storyline was interwoven with these themes of gender-based discrimination and focused on the narrative of disadvantage and the challenges women have faced during their journeys to PR leadership. Moreover, it was interesting to observe how the interweaving of these themes around the challenging pathways women had to negotiate in advancing to and sustaining themselves in leadership roles seemed to recur to a greater or lesser extent across the four decades under review.

Indeed the ‘story’ of female participation in PR leadership is characterised by a strong emphasis on exploring the constraining factors standing in the way of women’s advancement to leadership. Rather than simply revisiting these debates, that might result in little more than reinforcing the existing strong feminist perspective in terms of arguments about the lack of equality for women in public relations in terms of status, pay and prospects; this review of the literature also sought to identify the ‘enabling factors’ that have supported those women who have successfully completed the upward ‘journey’ to leadership and sustained their position as PR leaders.

**Constraining Factors on Women’s Journey to PR Leadership**

Over the past four decades under review, public relations research has consistently reported a pattern of limited female representation in leadership positions, with most female practitioners indicating that they have often found themselves closely identified with performing primarily technical roles. As a result, female practitioners have often had limited opportunities to acquire the broader knowledge, skills and experience required to advance into leadership roles (Scringer, 1985:45; Broom 1982; CIPR 2014b; Fitch and Third, 2010; Yeomans, 2014;; Tench et al., 2017;; CIPR 2018a; Place and Vardeman Winter, 2018;).

Even though the majority of women entering the profession appear to do so with an education that matches or outstrips their male counterparts, their career trajectory generally quickly falls behind. It has been argued that women not progressing in their careers and remaining in technical positions has exacerbated the male-female pay gap, glass ceiling and lack of mentoring and power for women (Topic, 2019). The implications of women being unable to progress in their careers are significant and explain why research has predominantly sought to understand why this is the case and has traditionally been enmeshed in examining the barriers that women have faced.

**Glass Ceiling**

The so-called ‘glass ceiling’ that women working in PR have faced is significant in that it appears to be the springboard for a range of other challenges. If women cannot progress, they will have less power and influence and receive less pay than their male counterparts. Studies have repeatedly indicated that men have greater responsibility and opportunity than women to progress towards management from a technical role. Being female generally leads to less structural power (Toth and Grunig, 1993; Lee et al., 2018). This inter-relatedness of the issues that appear to constrain female career advancement in PR explains why examining the ‘glass ceiling’ has been a consistent area of interest for over
forty years.

Whilst research initially suggested that women self-selected to be technicians and had lower career expectations (Cline et al, 1986; Farmer and Waugh, 1999), there was also recognition that women have not necessarily been less ambitious but have been stifled by the work environment (De Rosa and Wilcox, 1989).

More recently, research has identified that some work environments could better support women than others. Public sector organisations such as Education and Government enable women to potentially forge a career pathway (Yeomans, 2017; Simon and Hoyt, 2018). Interestingly, many women in public relations are increasingly circumventing work discrimination in organisations and seeking to exercise more control over their own advancement through freelancing, setting up consultancies and working from home (Aldoory et al, 2008) rather than attempting to shatter the glass ceiling within organisations.

**Gender pay gap**

A logical corollary of women predominantly occupying technical roles is that they tend to earn less than men (Aldoory and Toth, 2002; Grunig, 2006 Dozier et al, 2007; Creedon, 2009; Beurer-Zuellig et al 2009) Whilst representative bodies have identified that the gender pay gap for men and women working in the PR industry fell for the first time in the UK in 2018 (CIPR, 2019), this represented an overall reduction across all roles, levelling out the starkest pay gap which exists between male and female leaders. In public relations under-representation at Board level is consistently identified as one of the biggest challenges facing the profession (Tench et al., 2017; Vardeman Winer and Place, 2017, CIPR, 2019), which also has implications for power and influence in addition to pay.

**Women’s networks**

One of the most frequently reported constituent elements helping to create and maintain the glass ceiling to female advancement is that women have consistently faced exclusion from informal and formal male networks, which could potentially have advanced their careers. These networks range from after-work drinking clubs and golf to mentoring opportunities (Cline et al., 1986, O’Neill, 2003, Place Varderman-Winter, 2018).

Perversely, studies across the past four decades have recorded that women have not always supported other women in progressing their careers. This has ranged from women actively sabotaging their ascent to the power struggles in all-female work environments. More recently, researchers have noted a refusal among an older generation of female PR leaders to respond positively to family-related requests or to acknowledge that work discrimination, which they have endured, even exists. (Cline et al, 1986; O’Neil, 2003; Sha and Toth, 2005; Frolic and Peters, 2007; CIPR and WPR, 2017:11; Yaxley, 2013; Yeomans, 2019). Without this support from male and female networks inside their organisations, women are often at a significant disadvantage in progressing their careers.

Again, more recent research suggests that some women may be able to circumvent such network-based workplace barriers by seeking development outside of their place of work. However, similar to those who opt instead to pursue a freelance career, this option does not in itself address the need for a long-term improvement of the career prospects for women in the workplace (Yeomans, 2019; Mathews, 2008).
Enabling Factors on Women’s Journey to PR Leadership

While the literature predominantly focuses on identifying the challenges and obstacles that women in the workplace face in their journey to PR leadership, much less attention has been paid to the study of the enabling factors that could potentially support women in attaining and sustaining these positions. Nevertheless, this imbalance in the literature has begun to be addressed in recent years.

Leadership Style and Approach

Some of the traits and behaviours that were identified as hindering women’s career progression in public relations forty years ago have now been recognised as those which may actively support them.

The fact that women are more likely to use two-way communication to build relationships and engage with staff, which are recognised as key characteristics of a ‘transformational’ approach to leadership, has been well documented in the literature ((Bass 1985; Bass, 1990; Aldoory and Toth, 2004; Powell et al., 2004; Brandt and Laiho, 2013)). Moreover, this ‘transformational approach’ seems closely associated with successful public relations (Cline et al., 1986; Tannen, 1990; Aldoory, 1998; Grunig, 1991, Grunig, 1999). The transformational approach to leadership is also acknowledged to be particularly effective in navigating turbulent environments and has increasingly been seen as the preferred PR leadership style (Aldoory, 1998; Aldoory and Toth, 2004; Werder and Holtzhausen, 2009; Jin, 2010; Wu, 2010) as well as being associated with effective PR leadership outcomes (Yang, 2012; Berger and Meng, 2014). The obvious inference here is that female PR leaders should be well placed to handle the turbulent conditions such as those caused by the recent pandemic.

Generational dynamics

Millennial females entering the industry seem to present a glimmer of hope for the future of women working in PR as studies indicate that they are much more agentic in their approach than those women studied forty years ago, requesting transparency of salaries and pay increases (Mathews, 1988; CIPR and WPR, 2017). Unlike their predecessors, this generation of women have also been found to be less likely to adjust their behaviours to fit in with a prevailing male-orientated workplace culture. Rather, the millennial generation seem more resilient and willing to stand up for their own values, signalling the potential to deliver a more authentic leadership in the future (Liu et al., 2015; Topic et al, 2019: Yeomans 2019).

Intersectionality

Increasingly attention has also fallen on the issue of ‘intersectionality’ in relation to women and PR, so that race, class and socialisation are recognised as playing a part in attributes and behaviours (Edwards, 2009; Grunig et al, 2000; Pomper, 2012; Place, 2015; Vardeman Winter and Place, 2017). Traditionally, the literature has treated women as a homogenous category without considering that women are not all the same and their personal stories need to be told to identify the commonalities and differences that exist. Although this is an area that is currently under-researched, it has been recognised that women should not just be examined in a silo but considered individually.

Discussion

As a feminised industry where it appears that a transformational approach to leadership is preferred, one might expect public relations should be a field where one would find a greater proportion of women would have broken through any traditional glass ceiling to senior management/leadership levels (Aldoory and Toth,
Yet another consideration is the fact that leadership stereotypes that favour men have continued to predominate, with women who have traditionally been less likely to promote themselves or negotiate losing out. However, increasing recognition of the value of transformational leadership, particularly in the type of turbulent environments that so many industries and organisations have experienced in recent years, compounded by the coronavirus pandemic, would suggest there should be more opportunities for women to move into leadership roles given the closer affinity between female traits and transformational leadership approaches.

What this review of the literature has identified is a notable gap in our understanding of female leadership in the public relations context in terms of the ‘journey’ that those successful female leaders undertake in advancing to leadership roles. As documented earlier, there is a well-trodden body of research focused on the barriers women encounter in seeking to advance their careers in public relations and the consequent gender gap in pay, power and realised potential, but we know relatively little about how those women who have successfully negotiated these barriers were able to do so. Here as was pointed out earlier, the emphasis on examining barriers to female advancement has often been at the expense of a deeper exploration of those factors that have both enabled and supported women’s ascent to leadership roles. And of course, all of this research needs to be set against the backdrop of unprecedented disruption and change caused by the pandemic.

**Methodology**

**Research purpose and Objectives**

This initial exploratory study of the experiences of female leaders working in PR draws on the results of extensive in-depth interviews with a small but select sample of highly experienced female Directors of Communication, each of whom had spent more than ten years in a senior role. A qualitative approach was adopted as it enabled the research to probe and uncover the individual and collective experiences of these Directors of Communication in terms of their career journeys to date. Here the study sought to explore the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of their pathways to leadership, examining the factors that shaped their journeys in terms of facilitating or accelerating their progress or serving to constrain or
block their progress. Here we were interested in exploring to what extent the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted their leadership priorities and practices.

Thus the key research objectives for the study were:

- To analyse the professional and personal backgrounds and attributes of the participating Directors of Communication.
- To identify the pathway/journey to leadership followed by female PR leaders, exploring common and diverse patterns.
- To examine the key barriers and enabling factors that impacted the participants’ leadership journeys.

**Data collection**

The exploratory nature of the research and the type of data required dictated the need for a qualitative data collection method rather than a quantitative survey approach. The latter was recognised as unlikely to elicit the kind of personal insights and experiences that the research sought to uncover. In-depth interviews would allow the researcher to engage directly with participating leaders to explore their feelings and beliefs about the pathway they had followed into leadership, the barriers and challenges they might have had to overcome and the key factors enabling their ascent to a leadership role. The use of focus groups or participant observation studies were considered but discarded as simply not feasible given the constraints of conducting this research during the pandemic. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed, which was intended to facilitate the collection of rich descriptions of participants’ experience, which in turn would provide a strongly nuanced understanding of the career journey of these leaders, which included working through the dynamic and challenging environment of Covid-19.

All interviews were conducted by Zoom because they were undertaken in May-August 2020 during a Covid-19 lockdown. This limited the research in terms of being unable to gather contextual cues from visiting the practitioners in their place of work or from being able to read their body language. However, the online working conditions did improve accessibility to and the availability of these women.

The interview protocol was constructed after reviewing the questions used in a number of previous studies of female practitioners and relating these to the specific research outcomes for this study. The interview protocol was tested with a pilot interview to assess the adequacy of the questions used to draw out the data sought. However, the semi-structured nature of the approach taken allowed for a degree of flexibility in the questioning of participants so that the conversation could be steered around their career experiences and could pursue particular lines of inquiry that would offer deeper insights into those areas of particular importance for the person being interviewed. The interviews lasted around 60 minutes.

**Sampling**

The participants were recruited from personal and professional networks that the researchers could access. Although this initial study comprised a relatively small sample of participants, all were highly experienced female practitioners who had worked their way into senior leadership positions over a number of years. In selecting participants, every effort was made to ensure a diversity of backgrounds and representation from across a number of industry and public service sectors.

The majority of women interviewed had worked or spent the majority of their careers in the public sector. Just under half of the women interviewed now worked as freelance consultants but
had held in-house positions during their careers, which enabled them to reflect on the role of women working inside organisations. Half of the women interviewed were or had previous experience of working in London whilst the others had been based in the North of England for the entirety of their careers. Although not through deliberate choice, it was notable that none of the women interviewed came from an ethnic minority background.

Data Analysis

All the interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed. A thematic approach of data analysis was adopted, combining the best guidance from Braun and Clarke, 2006; Cresswell, 2014; Miles et al., 2014; and Silverman, 2010. Having read the transcriptions several times and taking an inductive approach, the transcriptions were coded to help identify relevant insights into female practitioner career experiences.

The data collected was analysed using an open-coding approach, which enabled codes to be developed and modified as the researchers worked through the transcripts. As this was a relatively small data set, the analysis was completed manually without recourse to coding software. The resulting codes were subjected to an iterative process of repeated building and reconstruction to arrive at the most plausible and meaningful interpretation of the data collected. In this sense, they broadly adhered to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) multi-step coding model. Although the themes were derived inductively, allowing the data to ‘speak’ and direct the course of the analysis; nevertheless, the researchers were conscious of the desire to seek answers to the key research questions, which in part at least shaped how the data gathered was analysed and interpreted. Here there was a strong emphasis on factors that influenced and shaped the leadership journeys as well as how the organisational environment constrained or enabled female progress to leadership.

Limitations

As an exploratory study, clearly the research cannot claim to represent the experience of female PR leadership as a whole, nor does it represent practitioners across the full range of demographics, sectors, workplace settings or geographical locations. Thus while there might be questions over the validity of the findings presented, we believe the study captures the authentic voice of a quite diverse and highly experienced group of female PR leaders. In this sense, we believe the study presents a highly plausible and authentic insight into the participants’ leadership journeys, which offer a sound basis from which to build a more comprehensive picture of female leadership experiences across multiple contexts. Moreover, while face to face interviews might have allowed some further insights, zoom provided greater flexibility and accessibility to these senior leaders, which may have been more challenging to arrange in a pre-pandemic environment.

Finally, it is acknowledged that what is presented here remains only the initial step in a broader planned study into female leadership experience in the public relations context. Further stages of the survey will build on and expand this leadership journey research before progressing to examine the day-to-day lived experience of female leadership practice both during and hopefully beyond the pandemic.

Findings

In analysing the interview transcript data derived from this first phase of the research, two broad sets of data emerged. First patterns of responses that allowed us to map a number of female practitioner journeys or trajectories towards leadership roles. Second analysis that revealed themes relating to those factors both enabling and inhibiting female career advance-
ment along the leadership journey or pathway. Further interpretation of the data also revealed that many of the factors facilitating career advancement for female practitioners also served to help sustain women in leadership roles.

Mapping Leadership Journeys

Analysis of the interview data relating to the participants’ experiences on their individual pathways/ journeys to leadership allowed a mapping of these experiences across a number of broad criteria. A summary of this mapping is shown in Table 1 below.

Common threads

Reviewing this career path data, a number of common threads emerge. First all of the women interviewed had worked in various capacities for at least 15 years and in some cases over 20 years. Thus their progress to a senior leadership role had not come 'overnight'; rather in most cases it had been a long time coming. However, as in virtually all professions and industries, leadership is something that has to be earned. What is worth noting is that in most cases, the women in question had held a number of posts in different organisations and sectors/industries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Current Job Title</th>
<th>Years experience</th>
<th>Career Posts</th>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current job title:</strong> Communications Consultant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Environment Agency</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Local newspapers and journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Previous include:</strong> Head of Communications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Regional public service organisation 20 years</td>
<td>PG Journalism</td>
<td>Environment Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current job title:</strong> Director of Marketing and Communications</td>
<td>20yrs+</td>
<td>Early secretarial agency</td>
<td>PT Degree</td>
<td>Early secretarial agency to earn money. No early career advice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Previous include:</strong> Head of Corporate Communications</td>
<td></td>
<td>PR Agency account exec</td>
<td>CAM Diploma</td>
<td>Joined small start up account exec agency rapid growth. Learned on the job. No early role models</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR Manager</td>
<td></td>
<td>Local authority</td>
<td>Later completed MBA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 PR Leader Career Pathways
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current job title: Managing Director</th>
<th>Previous:</th>
<th>20 yrs +</th>
<th>PR Junior Tourism and Retail PR Agency Head of Communications at national mid-sized retail business Managing Director of a Communications Consultancy</th>
<th>Left school without degree started work at 18 trained up on job Early days male dominated - ex-military staff. Mid sized national-retail business</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Previous include: Head of Communications and Sustainability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current job title: Executive Director</th>
<th>Previous include: Director of Strategic Communications Head of Strategic Communications</th>
<th>15 yrs+</th>
<th>Joined a large city local authority as a graduate and worked up through the ranks. Civil Service</th>
<th>Degree MBA</th>
<th>Graduated from university without fixed career aspirations but saw women in PR / comms jobs as role models.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<p>| Current job title: Strategic Director | Previous include: Head of Communications Press Officer | 20 yrs + | PA / secretarial role PA/case worker for MP Press work for MP Local authority as Communications Officer | English Degree Master’s Degree | Did not start out thinking of career in PR English degree Did not want to be a journalist PA/ secretarial role to earn money Worked in a political environment -Westminster then local authority |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current job title</th>
<th>Previous include:</th>
<th>20 yrs+</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>No clear career aspirations - opportunistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managing Director</td>
<td>Director of Communications</td>
<td>Part-time work in marketing comms for local authority as a summer job during university</td>
<td>Degree Theology</td>
<td>Graduate trainee in PR for a local authority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate trainee in PR local authority</td>
<td>CIPR Diplom</td>
<td>Aspired to be Communications Director by 40 running own team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Moved through various Government Departments</td>
<td></td>
<td>Deliberate move to fill gaps in experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Currently MD of Communications Agency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current job title</td>
<td>Previous include:</td>
<td>20 yrs +</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Aware of PR in gap year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications Consultant</td>
<td>Information Manager</td>
<td>Various voluntary jobs in the media</td>
<td>PG Information Management</td>
<td>Volunteer work for the NHS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Head of PR</td>
<td>Post in library followed by News Librarian for regional news broadcaster</td>
<td></td>
<td>Worked in media during degree and won a media award</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant Information Manager for global retailer</td>
<td></td>
<td>Learned about information management from mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Promoted to Head of PR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Moved to Civil Service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Currently Communications Consultant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
prior to achieving their current leadership role. Indeed this tendency for practitioners to change jobs reasonably frequently appears to be common phenomenon within public relations, particularly during practitioners’ earlier careers. Indeed, only one interviewee had stayed in the same organisation for over 20 years. What we are unable to comment on is whether this female pathway to leadership is typically any longer than that experienced by male counterparts. One suspects this might well be the case but we have no definitive evidence one way or the other at this stage.

It was also interesting to note that unlike some professions such as the law or accountancy, there are no prescribed entry qualifications nor does entry and progress depend on any specific level of academic or professional qualifications. Quite the opposite with the women interviewed having quite varied academic and professional backgrounds and indeed very few had gained a formal academic qualification in the field of public relations. The absence of the latter was perhaps understandable given that virtually all of the women interviewed had entered the field before formal academic qualification in public relations were available to study in the UK. However, a number of interviewees had taken professional certificate and diploma programmes in public relations over the course of their careers, and one interviewee had completed a Master’s Degree in Public Relations and another an MBA business programme.

One further interesting observation that emerges from the interviews was that for most of the women interviewed, public relations was not a deliberate career path that they chose to pursue from the very start of their employment. Indeed for a number of interviewees they almost drifted into public relations having worked in other...
jobs beforehand. However, most interviewees acknowledged that having ‘discovered ‘public relations, sometimes opportunistically, they had never doubted that it was the ‘right’ career path for them to follow.

**Enablers and Inhibitors of Career Advancement**

We can now turn to examine what the data analysis has revealed about the factors that on one hand may have helped women advance their career journeys into leadership, or on the other hand inhibited that progress. One obvious caveat to acknowledge at the outset is the difficulty of establishing any direct and causal link between specific characteristics or behaviours that the women interviewed might exhibit and their progress into leadership. Of course, one might justifiably assume that how individuals perform in their roles – the approach they take in managing and leading others and how they behave towards others with whom they work will be major influences on how they are perceived by those holding power within organisations and hence on their career advancement prospects.

**Leadership Style and Approach: Transformational and Ambidextrous Approaches**

Analysis of the interview data sought to identify key behavioural markers or indicators that suggested alignment with broad leadership approaches or styles. While conscious of the need for caution when drawing any such inferences from a relatively small data set, nevertheless there was almost universal recognition among all those interviewed of the importance of the qualities traditionally associated with a ‘transformational leadership’ approach (Bass, 1985, Burns, 1978) – using emotional intelligence to build relationships, operating transparently to develop trust amongst the team and leading with integrity. Indeed, in discussing and reflecting on how the pandemic had impacted on the way they approached their jobs, the vast majority of interviewees emphasised how important they believed it was to demonstrate the sort of empathetic, listening skills that were critical to managing teams and colleagues. As one interviewee commented:

‘Women have an additional skills set.. they have no ego and are friendly and empathetic. I’ve heard so many times where female leaders have said to me I’ve never felt the need to feed my ego or have adulation I just wanted to get the job done.’

These women understood that a key factor in building relationships amongst colleagues was through empathy. Half of those interviewed outlined that they had specifically prioritised understanding the personal situations of their staff as they recognised this impacted on their productivity, although one stated that this almost sounded ‘Machiavellian.’

The importance of integrity, building trust and involving people in decision making were identified as significant factors in their success by all female PR leaders, particularly in relation to creating the organisational vision. During the pandemic all those interviewed agreed that engagement had become more important and suggested that ethics in terms of integrity, truth and transparency were integral to both communications and leadership. Half explicitly claimed that in their experience, women were more concerned with ethics than men. All suggested that emotional intelligence was closely aligned to communications work and the majority suggested that women have a greater skill set in this. One of the women suggested that it was easier for women to sit down and have proper conversations with each other as she believed they have the innate contacts and networking skills, which during Covid had been more important than ever.
Perhaps less readily identified but nevertheless evident from a number of the interviewees’ transcripts was a recognition of the importance of being able to balance a range of competing demands on their time and on how they sought to fulfil their roles. This recognition went beyond balancing the short and longer term priorities for the organisation, but embraced the notion of being capable of juggling the competing demands of the job alongside their wider commitments to their families and others. Although stretching the concept beyond its original organisational boundaries, here arguably there was evidence of female PR leaders demonstrating an ‘ambidextrous approach’ in their leadership style. Here the notion of successful female leaders often having to demonstrate the ability to ‘keep many plates spinning’ at the same time was well-captured by one interviewee who commented that the women in her team:

“worked incredibly hard….they were career minded and also wanted a family…juggling everything. They were fantastic.”

Moreover, there was also an acknowledgment that this type of juggling or balancing of priorities both within the job as well as between the demand of work-related leadership and domestic or non-work related demands was something that women were far more adept at than their male counterparts. However, several women cited the dangers attached to being too flexible and becoming enmeshed in too much technical delivery work whilst also trying to fulfill a leadership role. As leaders they recognised the greater value in ‘seeing the big picture’ and ‘working on strategic issues, which they acknowledged should be the focus of their work as leaders. However, there was also an almost resigned acceptance that far too many female practitioners allowed themselves to become preoccupied with technical work, in part because they were good at it and well rewarded for their work, but equally because many were genuinely frightened to try to tackle the type of broader more complex issues that those aspiring to leadership would need to deal with.

Exploring what the data tells us beyond the issue of leadership styles or approaches, a number of other significant themes emerged relating to other enabling and or inhibiting factors affecting female leadership advancement.

**Women’s Support Networks**

In terms of both practical and emotional support, all those interviewed highlighted the significance of connecting with and receiving support from other women during their pathway to leadership. Here interviewees highlighted the importance of the support from female networks inside their organisations in their day-to-day job and external networks in developing their careers. They were all keen to highlight how they themselves had in turn supported other women advancing their careers both inside and outside their organisations.

Whilst they identified ways and examples of how they had supported other women in progressing their careers, several were keen to stress that their support had to be matched by equal effort and determination from those seeking their help.

Interestingly, the majority interviewed identified race as an additional barrier to career progress citing the lack of representation at a leadership level in general and in communications. Several pointed out that they had specifically searched for opportunities to mentor BAME women in their careers.

**Personal Characteristics Related Themes**

One clearly important theme to emerge from the data analysis was the notion that ascending the ‘leadership ladder’ was not some time-served right, but had to be earned and or ‘won’ through the force of personality and individual traits that
equipped individuals to get to the top.

**Strong Work Ethic**

One of the most interesting areas to emerge from the analysis, which is less well recognised in the literature, was that half of the female leaders unprompted identified themselves as working class. They were keen to emphasise the connection between their hard work and less advantaged backgrounds resulting in an ability to spot and seize opportunities and have the determination to succeed.

They argued this ethos pushed them towards taking advantage of opportunities and taking risks - especially those which pushed them out of their comfort zone. One of these women described how her background drove her instinct to survive, moving jobs as soon as her future appeared less secure.

‘I saw the ship going down and this little rat has got no one and nothing ...there’s not anybody else who can help me out.’

These women attributed their work ethic to a tough upbringing, and those that didn’t identify as working class, instead talked about how their parents had encouraged them to pursue equality in the workplace and in taking advantage of education. All those interviewed therefore cited their upbringing as significantly shaping their commitment to hard work.

‘I worked hard...massively hard....I’ve never stopped working..I get things done... ...I’m a stickler.’

The majority of the women who had children described themselves as the main breadwinner, with husbands that had taken on the caring and home responsibilities. This was another driver in working hard and climbing the ladder as they carried the financial responsibilities for their family. One of these women reflected on the downside of being in this position:

‘I don’t think I recognised how miserable I was and just how much stress this caused.’

**Strength of Character**

The other significant personal trait acknowledged by the women interviewed was that they shared a ‘dugged determination’ to succeed. These women acknowledged the challenges of working through Covid, but recognised the need ‘to power through’ with strong personal resilience.

The sheer grit described by all women was identified as a strength of character and related to resilience and strong mental health tested and strengthened through organisational and personal crises. Several women from working class backgrounds gave examples of having been ridiculed for their accent early on in their careers whilst others had met barriers because they had been perceived as too young to provide counsel to senior management. All of these women navigated these barriers and continued on their ascent.

One of the women interviewed however believed that resilience was naturally part of her DNA rather than having developed it though experience ‘I’m lucky I never feel anxious, depressed or paranoid.....I was born that way.’ However, even she admitted that Covid had tested her optimism.

Another interviewee who recognised that resilience was a significant factor in enabling women to maintain senior positions highlighted that there were ‘a lot of casualties along the way,’ but she herself had refused to be ‘squashed by the organisation.’ One female leader recognised that it was having a ‘bigger purpose’ in the work she was doing that gave her the strength to continue.

All recognised the challenge of working through Covid but acknowledged the need ‘to power through’ with strong personal resilience. Several identified the importance of executive level
coaching to develop the skills required to lead a team through a crisis in addition to those they had developed through experience. All women stated they had received informal mentoring, with over half identifying significant men who had supported their development.

The majority of those interviewed stated that being assertive and female could be a problem in that many male colleagues perceived this combination negatively as being aggressive or feisty. One of these women stated that she felt as though she had to ‘become a man’ to fit in, and in doing so this had lessened her emotional intelligence, which she also recognised was a crucial component in leading through the pandemic.

Lack of Confidence

Interestingly, in spite of achieving and sustaining impressive careers, several women reported experiencing a sense of ‘imposter syndrome’ and admitted to lacking in confidence even when having the requisite skills to perform their leadership role. The majority felt that they had to tick every box before applying for their next role and admitted it had hampered them in putting themselves forward for leadership positions. Significantly, only one interviewee suggested that she would like to progress to the Chief Executive position. The most commonly cited reason for not aspiring to the top position and leading the organisation was the belief that despite the experience possessed, most still lacked the specialist, practical understanding of the sector in which they operated.

Interestingly only one woman referred to her individual personality and capabilities as a reason for not wanting to progress to Chief Executive level, admitting her ‘shoulders were not broad enough,’ although she recognised she already had substantial responsibilities. The interviewee who stated that she would like to go for the position of Chief Executive admitted ‘I want to give myself more time before I take another step’, which reflected the responses of the other women interviewed who noted that women need to feel like they tick every box to meet all the requirements before applying for promotions. One of these women suggested that it is this fundamental lack of female confidence, which can also erode the confidence that others have in them.

Caring responsibilities

Although something of an outlier to other specific career progression or job-performance-related themes, nevertheless caring responsibilities emerged as an important theme for many of the interviewees in terms of the work environment and the work-life balance related issues affecting the leadership role. Clearly caring responsibilities were an important consideration for the majority of the interviewees whether in terms of how these female leaders accommodated the caring responsibilities of their teams, or how they themselves managed their own caring responsibilities towards their own families. The need for more flexible working hours to accommodate changing work patterns in a steadily ageing society was widely acknowledged by interviewees. The data analysis indicated that the work environment, in terms of how it accommodated flexible working, and how the women themselves chose to meet their responsibilities had a significant impact on their ability to perform the leadership role.

The female leaders who didn’t have children all identified that this could potentially have hampered their career progress. The majority of those with children had substantial partner support and emphasised the need for this particularly during Covid’s lockdown phases.

Those women without children cited the 24/7 nature of communications work and the long hours as being incompatible with having children. The need to be visible and available for
senior leadership was cited by the majority of women. Several women specifically stated that part-time work would have signalled the end of their careers, one of whom had been warned explicitly by a senior male manager.

During the homeworking phase of Covid all but one of those with children of school age stated they had husbands who managed the home and caring responsibilities. Without the support of their husbands one commented ‘It would have been really hard and horrid if I was also trying to juggle all the childcare.’

Whilst all the female leaders agreed that the workplace culture hadn’t previously supported work-life balance or equality, the majority expressed hope that the pandemic would erode ‘presenteeism’ as a benchmark for delivery.

Women with and without children were in agreement that family comes first and even those whose children had already grown up, recognised this in leading their teams, in spite of enduring the challenges of a less accommodating work environment when they themselves had children. A significant number of those interviewed noted that young women joining their teams had different expectations than they themselves had on entering the profession and that the millennial generation expected equality and a level playing field across genders.

Conclusions

The dominant narrative emerging from the research examining women’s role in PR over the last forty years has centred around the challenges women face in seeking advancement in what has been and remains a predominantly male-dominated leadership class in public relations. Indeed, women have been predominately associated with the public relations’ technician’ role (e.g. Dozier, 1984; Broom & Dozier, 1995) and traditionally significantly under-represented in managerial ranks. The most obvious consequence of this under-representation has been the impact that this has on areas such as female pay, power and influence. Of course, in many ways, the gender divide in terms of female under-representation amongst managerial ranks is a phenomenon replicated across most sectors and organisational types. However, it is all the more noticeable and even perverse in the public relations context, given the disproportionate number of women working within this field.

We sought to avoid simply revisiting the well-trodden research pathways examining the barriers to female career advancement in public relations in terms of such recurrent themes as the glass ceiling, the pay gap and professional networks (e.g. Cline et al., 1986; Hon et al., 1992, Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Instead, this study sought to explore the career journeys of those women who have succeeded in reaching and maintaining leadership positions. This study examines how the women interviewed were able to negotiate the barriers and surmount the well-documented challenges and succeed where many others have failed. In short, this research also considers the factors which enabled these women to be exceptional.

Significantly, beyond the transformational and ambidextrous approaches to leadership that the literature suggests women have a natural predisposition towards and which are particularly suited to PR and leadership, this study highlights the importance of the personal characteristics and attributes of the women who have enabled them to succeed.

All the women interviewed described a ‘strong work ethic’ and ‘dogged determination to succeed instilled in them by their often tough upbringing, with half describing their background as ‘deprived’. Those from middle-class homes outlined the importance of education and were actively encouraged to pursue careers, often by their mothers. All identified as having the
'strength of character' to power through, particularly important during the pandemic.

Whilst all women juggled the caring responsibilities of children or parents or both, there was significant variance in the duties they had and how they were able to arrange these. Here we were able to identify three broad explanatory categorisations for how women in this study were able to engineer or manoeuvre their way into an executive/leadership role and sustain that position over time.

The first of these categories we named - 'Compartmentalisers' - best characterised as those women who described being able to achieve and maintain leadership roles through having partners who released them from any daily responsibilities of managing family and domestic commitments. These women all asserted that without this support, they would have been unable to sustain their positions. In effect, separating and compartmentalising domestic and family demands from the professional work-related world enabled these women to manage having children or elderly caring responsibilities and a demanding '24/7' leadership role. However, this separation was precarious, and the notion that family could be effectively compartmentalised was recognised as 'nonsensical 'in that the boundaries in responsibilities were often quite porous. As one respondent pointed out, "There was one night when my husband was out, and I was working late that I suddenly realised I had forgotten about my children."

The second category we termed - 'Jugglers' comprising those women whose partners also had demanding jobs and shared childcare and ageing parental responsibilities between themselves and sometimes also relying on outside support. These women are incredibly organised and resilient. 'I think I probably have the most robust mental health of anyone I know... and I don't know why, it's just the way I have been born. I never get anxious or depressed.' However, one interviewee admitted that Covid had pushed her to the limit, testing her powers of optimism and that it was family rather than work that had suffered.

The third category we term 'Careerists' describes those women who did not have children and, on the surface, may be perceived as having made that deliberate choice in order to progress. Some might perceive these women as the stereotypically 'cold, steely and single-minded, career-driven individuals.' And while this description might fit a small number of such individuals, in most cases, the experiences of these women were instead most closely aligned to those of the 'jugglers.' Some of these women described raising the children of partners, and all of these women had cared for their parents, with one sacrificing going to university in order to do so.

The commonality therefore shared by all of the women interviewed was that they all managed substantial caring responsibilities. Although the ways in which they arranged them varied – all can be considered to a greater or lesser extent 'jugglers.'

The pandemic as a turbulent environment, which the literature suggested could have provided women with opportunities to excel in leading with a naturally transformational and ambidextrous approach, instead presented additional challenges. Home-schooling, working from home and caring for ageing parents during lock-downs accelerated caring responsibilities.

This study highlights that it is the personal characteristics of these women and their determination to succeed which enabled them to initially ascend the ladder to leadership and sustain these positions even through the challenges presented by Covid-19. Moreover, it is perhaps worth emphasizing that leadership is, by definition, not for everyone, and it is perhaps those women who demonstrate the flexibility to work across
both the technical and more strategic elements of the role who are most likely to advance furthest along the leadership career pathway.

The next phase of research will move from having examined how these female PR leaders achieved and sustained these positions to an examination of what these women do on a day-to-day basis – their behaviours and interactions with others who they manage and who they in turn report to – their lived experience of leadership as women and how this might differ, if at all, from that of their male counterparts.

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Public Relations in risk communication: a critical asset

Pereira, Sandra, ESCS-ICML (Portugal)
Nunes, Mariana, ISCTE-CIES & ESCS (Portugal)

Theoretical Background: From risky situations to risk communication

In the midst of global society, whose nickname is risk, public institutions closest to citizens take responsibility for ensuring public safety, through awareness and training of individuals for a more informed and timely action on the collateral impacts in the volatile environment they cohabit.

However, this mission is not always effective. In addition to the climate of insecurity and distrust that citizens feel by living in a VUCA environment, there is also a feeling of disbelief towards the technocratic and (ultra)bureaucratic entities that oversee their lives. This is because normally these bodies invest more in unilateral communication (top-down) than in symmetrical bidirectional communication (multilevel) with their community. With a more multilevel communication public bodies would be capable of (1) practicing openness policies and inclusion of citizens; (2) empower an active participation of the public in the decision-making process regarding matters of public interest, such as risk; (3) and, finally, promote trust and cooperation between all parties.

It is understood, therefore, that educating about risk represents a huge challenge when communication between organizations and the public is deficient, that is, when large differences are revealed between the levels of awareness, perception and information about risk among technicians and decision-makers/regulators, on the one hand, and the lay public, on the other.

Therefore, this research intends to prove that an effective risk communication can depend on a strategic practice of Public Relations. This is because, as a communication management function, the exercise of Public Relations has the power to mediate the relationship between organizations and their stakeholders and publics, establishing strategic and integrated plans capable of uniting the perceptions of all players and, as a consequence, facilitate the decision-making process and policy formulations about risk. Basically, the risk communication practiced by Public Relations professionals must be understood as the backbone of the entire process responsible for controlling, deciding and mitigating risk in society, and not as a simple part of the risk regulatory circuit.

Thus risk is associated with a set of possible adverse effects likely to occur in the future as a consequence of a certain natural or anthropic event (Renn, 1998; Althaus, 2005; Renn, 2008). Basically, risk works as a dystopian scenario of reality that highlights the threatening character that should enhance the prognostic and preventive action, or even visionary action of risks, making them real and present (Beck, 1992).

It is therefore understood that all unforeseen events, threats and uncertainties - from industrial accidents to real estate speculation, including
unemployment, social conflicts, terrorist attacks, pollution and environmental crisis we face - are direct consequences of the risks that affect life and their mitigation does not pass exclusively through the autonomous decision-making of local government entities.

The inertia of political and scientific bodies, vis-à-vis the relevance of the role of this interactive communication in terms of risks, reveals the perspective by which governments focus on risk management in a community. This means that, as a rule, governments understand the manifestation of a certain risk on a macro scale, that is according to a technical-scientific approach to risk generically estimated in the community in question; but this focus should be on the concern to manage risk according to a micro approach, or in other words, in line with the vulnerabilities, insecurities and expectations of the community in its own social context (Covello et al., 1986). We agree with Covello & Sandman (2001), who suggest a reform of the traditional calculus of risk assessment and management, based on the probability and magnitude of risk, in order to adopt a new paradigm that presents a formula based on the calculation of the danger and outrage about the risks.

The risk governance process can represent a complex, irregular and even disorderly dynamic, if it does not benefit from the practice of symmetrical and persistent bidirectional communication, able to control the public risk agenda, subjecting itself to compromise governance and the confluence of all risk considerations that move towards a common goal - as if the voices of all parties, experts and lay persons, rang out in disharmony and uproar about divergent risk perceptions (Kasperson, 2014; Sjoraida & Anwar, 2018; Boholm, 2019a). Therefore, a reformulation of the principles that regulate communication practices of these local public organizations is needed, which would change the statute on which organizations frame the public in terms of risks, and vice versa. However, the core of this change and update of risk communication carried out by political and scientific organizations lies in the way they face this imposition, and also in the reformulation of their own values and culture, a change that would require a robust capacity not to usurp power delegated to them and give over part of their political supremacy to empower the public (Covello & Sandman, 2001).

What we wanted to defend with the study carried out was the fact that risk communication, as a disciplinary and professional area, adds value by integrating its practice in the scientific field of risk to cement the cohesion between its traditional analytical and evaluative component (Lofstedt, 2003), enriching its intense scientific load with the social component, required by institutions whose strategic planning needs to hybridize with the intuitive way in which the public reflects and perceives social reality (Fischhoff & Bostrom, 1992). In this way, empowering the scientific source of risk with strategic communication favours its vigour in mitigating potential errors that could compromise the effective execution of the basic purposes of communication in terms of risk: (1) alert and train for risks and (2) provide security assurance (Covello, 1986; Covello & Sandman, 2001; Covello, 2009; Telg, 2010).

We believe that risk communication corresponds to a practice responsible for guiding the communication flow, in a scenario of risk and threat, between academics, specialists, political regulators (governments), industries, groups representing civil society, individual citizens and the media (Leiss, 1996; Covello & Sandman, 2001), with the purpose of deliberating all players, stakeholders and publics participating in the risk governance process.

It is then possible to develop risk communication strategies planned according to central
guidelines, capable of reaching an understanding among the participants of a risk governance process about emerging issues and respective actions - thus promoting shared responsibilities as social and political agents in the public arena (Covello et al., 1986; Boholm, 2019). As guidelines we can point out: (1) inform, raise awareness and educate/train the public; (2) legitimize critical assets to be protected through public participation in deliberation and risk resolution; (3) promote proactive protective actions and change behaviours, preparing the population to respond to emergencies; and (4) evaluate the pursuit of the previous guidelines in order to improve the methods that ensure the achievement of communication goals.

However, even with all the scientific progress registered in the field of risk communication research in recent years, there are still some obstacles to the recognition of Public Relations in this field of action, especially in the public sector. For this reason, the biggest value at risk is the reputation of government organizations themselves, because they underestimate the importance of strategic communication/Public Relations in the entire governance and organizational management process.

Now, considering that communication is the cornerstone able to establish such favourable conditions for nurturing the relationship between organizations and their public and that it is often broken, or poorly cemented, there is little research carried out by the area of strategic risk communication in Portugal and, therefore, by Public Relations professionals, especially in the public administration field.

In this sense, the present research aims to explore the practice of Public Relations in matters of risk communication between the Municipality of Mafra (CMM) and its citizens. If, on the one hand, contemporary communities are increasingly made up of heterogeneous audiences at various levels (economic, cultural, professional, among others), the greater the influx of generated opinions, with heightened concerns and interests at stake (Urban Europe, 2019); on the other hand, it becomes more demanding for municipal executive bodies to be able to respond to all these variables, ending up making the environment more complex and vulnerable to countless risks and consequent crises if a negotiation of meanings between the parties is not carried out.

**Methodology of a study in the public sector**

The study presented here echoes some results of a master's thesis project in Strategic Public Relations Management, from the School of Social Communication of the Polytechnic Institute of Lisbon - Portugal, which sought to build a more informed discourse about the role that Strategic Public Relations can play in risk prevention and, subsequently, in the resolution phase of a crisis triggered by an uncontrolled risk or threat. The study then answers the following starting question: what contribution is reserved to Public Relations in communicating risks to citizens in the context of a local government?

To guide the data collection procedure and respective techniques in the course of the investigation procedure carried out, four central hypotheses or explanatory propositions were formulated - which relate the key concepts that are sought to be addressed with the empirical reality to be explored. Only from the sketch of this “organized conceptual system, capable of expressing the logic that the researcher assumes to be at the base of the phenomenon” (Quivy & van Campenhoudt, 2013, 26), is it possible to build a fruitful theoretical construction capable of sustaining a valid experimentation. Thus, we guarantee the “calculated suspension of the investigator’s attention”, that is, the suspension of theoretical knowledge that guides the considerations of those involved in the investigative
process to formulate, in a rational way, a set of guiding hypotheses (Flick, 2005). Otherwise, there was a risk of developing a study about a reality that was already known and not another one that was socially questioned and scientifically unknown, as we propose here. Thus, the present investigation undertook to follow the following hypotheses:

• **H1**: Risk communication is an integrated area at the top of local government management;

• **H2**: The municipal public sector recognizes the role of Public Relations in the practice of strategic risk communication for the training its various players.

• **H3**: Risk messages in the municipal public sector focus on empowering the population and not just warning them;

• **H4**: The perception that communication/Public Relations professionals in the municipal public sector have about their contribution to strategic risk communication does not correspond to the basic parameters of the practice of the profession in theoretical terms.

The study developed followed a mixed methodology, to enable gathering and analysing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study (Creswell, 2007, 213) and because it was the most adjusted procedure for different data sources on which we wanted to cross and converge results. The methodological process was then in two stages: the first, using qualitative research tools, and the second, using a quantitative research tool.

In the first instance, a communication audit (centred in risk messages and information) was carried out to the local authority chosen as an empirical object - the Municipality of Mafra (CMM), with a detailed analysis of the contents of its website. In addition, the news published by the City Council under study was monitored, not only on its website but also on its Facebook - a social network in which the City Council is more active, as it has a greater number of followers (49,185) - in order to compare the type of risk messages issued by the City Council on both digital platforms.

Once the available information was collected, several interviews were carried out, first exploratory with specialist informants in the field of risk and public safety, in order to gain a more specialized and in-depth knowledge of the spectrum of disciplinary and professional action in the area of risk, and later on to conduct formal and systematic interviews with the closest members of risk management and decision-making in this local government, such as the Mayor, and technical professionals and managers of municipal risk communication and responsible for public safety bodies.

A thorough SWOT analysis representing the practice of risk communication by Mafra City Council was also developed, which although it is not considered a scientific method of data analysis (Szondi & Theilmann, 2009), Public Relations professionals request it as a technique that, enriched and supported by data from the methodological approaches used by it, helps them, more appropriately, in monitoring the internal environment of the organizations on which their practice focuses.

In the analysis of the interviews, a content analysis was applied and a coding framework was developed according to the logic of Schreier (2014), which resulted in seven categories (Table 1).

Also noteworthy is the exploratory purpose of the study. Initially, the scientific record of the empirical object of the study pointed to a descriptive purpose, as it was committed to describing the practices, discourses and/or repre-
sentations that an autarchy established with its community in terms of risk communication. However, due to restrictions imposed by the entity to which this study is empirically linked, it was alternatively chosen to proceed with an exploratory study (Johnson & Hruschka, 2014). This required procedural change may corroborate the reason why the municipal public sector, in particular, and the state sector in general, is not frequently portrayed in academic scientific investigations, especially when it comes to the area of strategic risk communication.

**Case Study: The Municipality of Mafra**

**Social and economic map**

The municipality under study is located in the town of Mafra, more precisely in the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon – Portugal – with an area of 291,7 km². According to 2011 Census, it has 17 sub-territories with a population density of 84,412 inhabitants (40,667 males and 43,745 females) and an average of 290,8 inhabitants per km².

The municipality of Mafra has 16.8% of the young population, under 15 years old - a percentage very close to 16.2% of the elderly population, that is, over 65 years old. The remaining portion of the population, corresponding to 67%, refers to the working population, with ages between 15 and 64 years old.

It is also important to characterize the level of education of the population, in order to map their degree of understanding regarding the messages issued by the local government. Most of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>Perception that the City Council has about risk communication in the municipal context and what value they attribute to it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Who owns and/or shares the risk communication portfolio in the City Council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Alert-information: Intention, demonstrated by the Chamber, to prepare communications to citizens to fulfil the legal purpose of disclosing risk warning information. Training-information: Intention, demonstrated by the Chamber, to prepare communications to citizens to fulfil the institutional mission of training them to take action on risks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of Involvement</td>
<td>Considerations of the City Council professionals regarding the active participation and cooperation of citizens in decisions about managing risks, above all, in the Municipal Security Council - a body that brings together individuals and entities of different capacities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messages</td>
<td>Risk message construction process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channels</td>
<td>Means of communication - traditional and/or digital - used by professionals of communication/Public Relations of the City Council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biggest Challenges</td>
<td>Target audience(s): The City Council recognizes it is difficult to effectively deliver its messages to the intended target audiences; Timings: Potential challenges faced by the City Council in establishing timings - short, medium, or long - to achieve the objectives of risk communication actions; Budget: Potential challenges faced by the City Council in budget segmentation for the various risk communication actions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the population, corresponding to 25.9%, reached primary education, a percentage almost reached by citizens who completed basic education, with 25.2%. With a lower value we have 19.4% of the citizens who acquired secondary level of educational qualifications and the tendency seems for them to pursue higher education. This is because the rate of citizens completing higher education, equivalent to 16.5%, greatly exceeds the rate of 1.2% of those who continued their schooling for post-secondary education (Figure 1). Even though the community of this Municipality is divided into three large poles - that is, (a) citizens with the 4th year of schooling; (b) citizens with the 6th and 9th grade of schooling; and (c) citizens with a higher degree - it is important to note that 8% of the total population does not benefit from any of the levels of education listed above, contributing to the illiteracy rate in this municipality, a percentage to be taken into consideration when launching any communication.

**Population Education Levels**

Figure 1: Education Level of the Population in Mafra

According to the latest data consulted in the 2015 Social Diagnosis of the Municipality, Mafra’s business core is in harmony with that of the national scenario with 9,087 companies accounted for that year, of which 77% are in the form of the tertiary sector, 15% in the secondary sector and 8% in the primary sector - a scale that also respects the order of distribution of 25,938 residents employed by sector of activity in the County (Figure 2).

**Business Core by Sector of Activity**

Figure 2: Mafra's Business Core

**Mission (political-legal framework)**

As a governmental organization, the Municipality of Mafra aims to maintain a harmonious and prosperous relationship between its stakeholders and the community. For this, it undertakes - with a rigorous, ethical and transparent conduct/behaviour - (1) to serve the community, (2) to protect civil rights and (3) to defend the interests and expectations of citizens, respecting always legal compliance with the equal treatment of all citizens, the right to transparent expression of dialogue and community participation, as well as the quality of innovative, strategic and integrated management. In addition it performs its functions with a view that encourages an organized participation of citizens and socio-economic agents of the Municipality of Mafra in municipal decision-making processes, and at the same time it fulfils the duty of information and communication, even though this may happen more from an internal perspective from the inside to the outside instead of receiving and considering feedback processes from the exterior.

The organization chart of the municipality under study is in accordance with the general principles with which the City Council subordinates its municipal services: efficiency; planning; coordination and cooperation; control and accountability; quality, innovation and modernization;
and management by objectives. Thus, the Municipality of Mafra is, in organizational terms, composed of a common trunk of services that, for the benefit of the legal powers assigned to it, branch out into nuclear organic units.

Among the common trunk of the organic units that make up the administrative apparatus of the Municipality of Mafra, the Office of Support to the Presidency and Communication (GAPC) stands out (Figure 3). This is because it brings together organizational communication skills under the direction of the Mayor himself - a fact that already demonstrates the value attributed to organizational communication at the top of executive management.

However, more than a Cabinet dedicated (a) to the exercise of municipal communication, it is also dedicated (b) to administrative communication - that is, to support the Mayor in the performance of his functions - and, also, (c) to institutional communication - that is, communication from the City Council to its internal audience, the employees.

Thus, the powers of this Office are divided into two areas of action: the area that supports the Mayor and the area of Communication. The first area is responsible for: (a) advise the Mayor in political, technical, administrative and reputational terms; (b) promoting, scheduling and mediating institutional protocol relations between councillors’ offices and the Municipal Assembly, and also between the Municipal Council, representative bodies of central-region-al-local powers and stakeholders - national or international - from the public, private, or social sector - that contribute to the interests/objectives of the Municipality of Mafra. The second area undertakes: (a) the promotion of the image of municipal services for citizens, local, regional and national media, through publicity initiatives; (b) plan and periodically publicize the activities of the Municipality to encourage citizen participation; (c) management of the network of large advertising structures, as well as the database of contacts of all entities of strategic interest to the

Figure 3: Department of Communication and support office for the Mayor
Municipality; (d) the dynamization and accessibility of institutional communication platforms - website and social networks - encouraging continuous dialogue with citizens; (e) clipping and news content published in local and national media about the favourability of municipal actions; (f) development of internal communication actions to inform and motivate municipal employees.

Communication Tools

Regarding the communication tools used to transmit the mission, principles and values, strategic objectives, municipal goals and public services of this Municipality towards its community, the following stand out:

The official website, as a traditional means of transmission of trustworthy and more formal content by the City Council – namely: (1) enumeration and characterization of the entities constitute the Administrative Council of the Municipality; (2) Specific information about the COVID-19 virus; (3) organization and timetables for services provided by municipal services and Chamber meetings; (4) presentation of public notices, notices, management documents, assessments and public consultations and municipal bulletins; (5) list of available Municipal Councils; (6) description of the City Council’s service quality management system; and (6) public satisfaction questionnaires and answers to frequently asked questions.

The social networks, namely Facebook, for attracting a large number of people, regardless of their age and education level - in order to monitor the language used in news/risk messages (especially those issued by the Security Service and Civil Protection of the City Council and by the central government regarding the pandemic) published in comparison to the official website;

To a lesser extent, the billboards, billboards, advertisements on local radio and institutional advertising on national public television, fulfilling the general purpose of the communication department and support to the presidency of this Autarchy, that is, to use all the communication resources/supports that has at your disposal, in order to spread your messages as far as possible, reaching the greatest number of citizens;

The traditional tools with paper support, used only for the transmission of messages on the most relevant subjects/themes in specific periods - such as the time of forest fires, for example - mainly to inform and train the elderly population and/or with less access to digital communication and schooling.

Data Systematization

Next, we will present a systematization of the empirical data collected, followed with an interpretation and analysis of the interviews, as well as the news published on the Mafra City Council website and facebook, culminating with a brief SWOT analysis that helps to better contextualize the positioning and the work carried out in the public institution under study. Basically, it intended to cross the considerations given by the interviewees with the objective information that was observed in the communication platforms.

Interviews

Table 2: Total Categories of the Interview Coding Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Registration units</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>20,50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9,60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11,50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of Involvement</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>14,90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messages</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5,60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channels</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6,20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biggest Challenges</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>31,40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>99,7%≈100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the interviews carried out, 302 registration units were registered, distributed by the seven categories referring to the coding framework of the content analysis directed to the data collected during the study. The categories with the highest number of registration units are: “Challenges”, with 95 records and “Recognition” with 62 records, respectively (Table 2). Taking into account the definition given in the codification framework to each of these two categories, a causal relationship between them is identified. This is because the category “Challenges” is a consequence of the category “Recognition”, that is, it presuppusses that this Municipality recognizes many challenges in a risk communication plan. The “Challenges” are mostly about managing budgeting problems, proper timings and difficulties to reach audiences in useful time frames. In fact, communication is reduced to a technical function of information management without appealing to citizen’s involvement mainly because it is very difficult to reach the targeted audiences about such matters. This may explain why the category “Messages” (about risks) is the one with the lowest number of registration units, as a few statements seized about the process of formulating risk messages lead to believe that the communication office of Mafra’s City Council does not have a very elaborate strategy regarding the planning of risk communications, despite being a region with many associated risks, namely fire and other problems associated with meteorological causes.

Based on the analysis and interpretation of the interviews we can also note that:

- a) Although the Mayor is assuming the role of maximum responsible for risk communication in the Municipality, he was the respondent who intervened the least, or who gave the least consideration to the matter;
- b) Despite the Communication Office is situated at the top of the City Council’s organic structure and directly dependent on the mayor, the PR staff does not reveal sufficient knowledge about risk situations to share responsibilities in the strategic planning of communication actions in this matter, limiting its activity to a more administrative performance, advising the Mayor and technical production of general information along with publishing risk messages that are created by the Security and Civil Protection Division;
- c) The significant contribution of the last Head of the Security and Civil Protection Division proved to be of great value for the communication of risk in the Municipality. The fact that he is well versed in Public Relations and heads a division focused on risk, proves the strategic role that this disciplinary and professional area can play when addressing on risk communication in a municipal context.

**Website and Facebook Analysis**

The way Mafra City Council communicates Risk on its official website points to a more formal tone with countless information and warnings. As an example, the page dedicated to the presentation and characterization of the Municipality is subdivided into another 23 thematic pages that point to municipal regulations and legislation, procedures, information on ongoing municipal services and programs from education to safety, heritage, cultural agenda, municipal bulletins, management documents, fees and tariffs in force, support and resources, meeting records and feedback applications such as a satisfaction questionnaire, among several other topics. The way this information is structured and organized, as well as the type of messages it presents, differs from the communication found on social networks, in particular Facebook, which attract a large number of people, regardless of their age and degree of schooling, on the other. Here appears less detailed information and in a more informal tone that gives a sense of greater proximity and dialogue with the citizens.
To limit the observation only to the communication about risk, we developed an analysis that brought together the news published on both platforms: from the 192 news monitored in October 2020, 40.56% are representative of risk situations and the remaining 59.28% represent different news that we call fait divers - mainly, about culture, environment, sport, tourism and economy, in decreasing order (Table 3). A justification for this percentage distribution between news and information about risk situations and news about “Fait Divers” - the latter largely related to cultural events, which represent 24.44% of the channels under analysis – comes from the testimony given by the Head of the Division of Security and Civil Protection when referring that “(…) we cannot make a communication in such an incisive, large and very abrupt way that it can generate social upheaval and alarm people. Then we increase the risk, or we create a new risk, which is people's own alarm (…)”. This implies always a very delicate management of communications and alerts (…). We only must say: “This is a risk, be careful, get ready!”. However, we cannot say: “This is a risk, attention, attention, attention!” (Interviewee #1, 2020). This means that messages and information about risk are alternated with other matters, such as the publication of cultural, tourist and sporting events and municipal economic initiatives, among others.

This response contrasts with the disbelief and even the apathy that the population begins to feel in relation to their governing bodies due to the massive publication of communications that often overlap with highly important information - “(...) if a message about a certain risk, even with the symbol of civil protection, is in the middle of other 30 reported events, it goes completely unnoticed. There has to be a careful management of the communication itself, not only of risk, but of all the surrounding divisions. It may happen that people stop following us because their feeds are completely overloaded with publications from the Municipality and, at times, it becomes boring and confusing. If this happens, the City Council loses all the communications it made, not only about all events, but especially those communications alerting to risky situations that are essential to the preservation of life” (interviewee #1, 2020).

### SWOT Analysis

Aligning the knowledge that the content analyses - both on the website and on Facebook as well as the interviews carried out - provided about the internal dynamics of risk communication in the Mafra City Council, with the knowledge provided by the literature review about risk communications in the public sector, gave us enough information to outline the inherent strengths and weaknesses of this Municipality’s risk communication compared to neighbour municipalities, as well as the opportunities and threats of macro-environmental influence capable of conditioning the communication flow in terms of risk (Appendix A).

The Mafra City Council assumes a proactive position as a mediator between local authorities, governance bodies, experts, other stakeholders and the lay population by integrating risk communication at the top of the municipal executive management, more precisely, in the Office of Support to the Presidency and Communication. However, it weakens this position by not including any communication/PR professional in the strategic risk planning carried out by the Municipal Security Council, reserving risk communication a secondary role in the governance and management process and limiting it to a
technical function for message formulation and administrative assistance. As a consequence, this setback in the practice of risk Public Relations in the Municipality of Mafra proves the relevance of one of the most pronounced external threats: the scant recognition that Portugal still has in relation to the disciplinary and professional exercise of risk Public Relations. These unfavourable points can be reversed if the Municipality of Mafra pays attention to the trends that the public sector (at a local context) has been revealing, taking advantage of opportunities to strengthen its communication and relationship with the various players involved in its activity.

**Final Remarks**

Responding now directly to the hypotheses raised, it is possible to record the following observations and conclusions:

**H1:** The study verified this hypothesis, because the Municipality of Mafra integrates the practice of risk communication in one of the top flexible organic units of its organizational chart, therefore, under the direct supervision of the Mayor, confirming what is pointed out in the literature. Therefore, it is recognized the value that risk communication gains by being elevated to the top of executive management, and it assumes a more proactive and mediating position in multi-lateral communication.

**H2:** This hypothesis has been refuted. Although there has been a certain recognition about the value of Public Relations by incorporating risk communication into the top organic constitution of the municipal executive management, there are no evidences of a concerted and permanent strategic communication practice, that is, there is no involvement of PR staff in the risk decision-making process. Thus, as the revised literature problematized: 1. There is also a discrepancy between the theory developed on strategic risk communication and its praxis in an organizational environment; 2. and risk communication continues to play a secondary role in the governance process and in risk management, when it should be the protagonist that aligns players’ interactions and prepares confident responses to combat not only the risks but also the uncertainties inherent in the areas management and governance. In summary, the Municipality of Mafra recognizes the practice of risk communication according to a triangulation, management-governance-communication, as described in the literature but it does not apply the same responsibility to all vertices failing to fulfil a determinant role when communicating about risky and dangerous situations in the region.

**H3:** The study also confirms this hypothesis. Although it is considered that the most active role of the townspeople should focus on communicating the risk to the authorities and not giving them a role in the decision-making process, because of the commotion with which they can perceive the risks, Mafras’ Civil Council includes in their governance process two community members in order to consider the insights of residents in formulating risk message strategies. Therefore, as a local government institution concerned with controlling risk and reducing the uncertainty inherent to it, this local government views risk communication not only as an activity that is focused on objectively informing the population about a certain risks, but is also concerned, in a certain way, with exercising a symbolic communication of risk in order to empower the community to protect and combat risks according to their vulnerabilities.

**H4:** Also confirmed. Taking into account the definition of Risk Public Relations, its purpose is distorted when the Municipality of Mafra commits the management and communication of risk to the Municipal Civil Protection Service and not to the Communication Office. The Public Relations staff members themselves admit that they do not master the issues of risk and
safety and it is natural that the instructions on how to communicate the risks come from another department. This finding leads us to conclude that in this municipality the basic role of the Public Relations regarded to risk communication is not in accordance with what is theoretically defended about the role of the Public Relations in this matter, although this role ends up being performed by a professional with recognized training in the disciplinary area of PR.

Finally, the answer to the initial question proves to be inconclusive because, on the one hand, there is, although little elaborated, a strategic management of risk communication, which is under the responsibility of the Municipal Civil Protection Service and not, as the literature points out, in the communication unit supporting the Mayor. That said, we note the need to insist on defending the enormous value that the discipline and profession of Public Relations can have in promoting the principles of risk governance, contributing to support decision-making processes and program planning that streamline relations between organizations and its stakeholders and audiences in situations of danger and risk.

Bibliography


Appendix A
SWOT Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>. The Mayor assumes leadership of the communication;</td>
<td>. None of the professionals in the Communications Office has a degree in Public Relations;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Two years of mandate allows to maintain the pre-established communication strategy;</td>
<td>. Communication Office works on technical communication;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Municipal management shaped by the ISO 9001:2015 Standard;</td>
<td>. Communication Office without direct articulation with other departments related to management;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Municipal Security Council as a multilevel governance process;</td>
<td>. Communication Office does not participate in strategic planning with the Civil Protection Service;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Two community members elected to participate in the governance process;</td>
<td>. Municipal Security Council without a seat for the Communication Office;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Communication functions itself at the top executive;</td>
<td>. Mafra City Council makes little use of local media;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Head of Security Division licensed in Public Relations;</td>
<td>. Site of the Municipality of Mafra with little transparency regarding the strategic communication axes for the Municipality;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Symmetrical bidirectional communication present in organizational culture;</td>
<td>. They invest more in training younger people than older people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Simple and accessible communication;</td>
<td></td>
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<td>. Individual and collective protection measures on the website.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>. Risk communication gained importance with Covid 19;</td>
<td>. Budget constraints and distribution rigidities;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Renewed citizens' trust in civil security and protection bodies;</td>
<td>. Portuguese ultra-bureaucratic system</td>
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<tr>
<td>. Synergies between groups of security authorities and civil protection;</td>
<td>. Citizens’ disbelief towards government bodies;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Annual risk monitoring and intervention programs;</td>
<td>. Restricted access and government institutions a strong culture of silence;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Space for participation of citizens in the assessment of communication from municipalities;</td>
<td>. Slow scientific progress in the field of risk Public Relations;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Potential and technological accessibility for the development of proximity programs;</td>
<td>. Crisis communication still excels in communication of risk;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Integrated programs in security support institutions and protection of the senior public;</td>
<td>. Portuguese legislation prohibits the administrative management of civil protection departments by PR professionals;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. Recent graduates in Public Relations are able to innovate senior organizational management with stronger strategic communication insights of risk.</td>
<td>. PR practice is still little recognized in Portugal;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>. Risk concept lacks consensus;</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>. Risk assessment requires a scientific and social component;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>. Difficult balance between risk communication and uncertainty communication.</td>
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The challenges of ‘neo-intermediation’

Rotolo, Francesco, Storyfly (Italy)

“Some people don’t like change, but you need to embrace change if the alternative is disaster.”
Elon Musk

Introduction

The work behind this Study ideally started at the 2019 Bledcom Symposium, within the Panel held by a delegation of Ferpi associates led by Toni Muzi Falconi about the role and the purpose of the “Social Weaver”. The experience of that year Symposium paved the road to ongoing work, focused on the role of social organisations towards creating Social Capital. Our Research, in particular, focuses on those “representative bodies,” or Intermediate Bodies (for convenience, in this Study: IBs) such as professional and trade associations, parties, citizens committees, to name but a few, whose role went into decline since the late eighties, moving into what has been called “the era of disintermediation”.

Preliminarily, each type of representative organisation requires a specific focus, especially when addressing its history and evolution. Way before the pandemic stroke, many signals indicated that the world of intermediation in all sectors was on the decline: the Covid-19 global crisis just sped things up, making the whole picture even more complicated, with dire consequences on many social sectors, and in particular on the working class and its rights, especially in low-/lower-income countries.

During this difficult time, CNEL, the Italian National Council for Economics and Labor (an important Institutional Body provided for in art. 99 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic, established during the late 50s), commissioned to Storyfly – an international Network of consultants, communication agencies and freelances, a signature Study on the dynamics of corporate intermediation.

This Article means to explore the implications of some of the findings of this Investigation and some of its possible outcomes in the light of a new approach to intermediation and the governance of relationship systems for the intermediate bodies. Leveraging on the hints provided by the IBs themselves throughout the Research, the Essay also dares to propose a new interpretation, based on a constructivist semiotic framework, of the key concept of “Neo-intermediation”.

Literature review and Study Background

Disintermediation as a work-frame

The ongoing process of disintermediation has moved from being a transactional, insurance or a market model to a whole-scale phenomenon, nowadays affecting every part of the ‘social body’. We can describe disintermediation as a social frame in which the new consumer/citizen would sooner choose and make decisions autonomously, basing on the data available (e.g. from the internet), instead of seeking the guidance of an expert regarding the matter at hand. Disintermediation per se is not inherently bad: it can also be considered the byproduct of a claim to freedom from citizenship. As such, it could support a process towards Grunig Fourth Model.

Therefore, the key elements in this frame are
competence and responsibility\textsuperscript{13}, two inter-twined elements supporting the quality of any relationship system. Competence could be addressed as a measure of experience on professional capability; it is inevitably related to efficacy and the outtakes of complex processes. On the other hand, responsibility should be related with transparency and ethics and as a degree of consistency in any discourse from its premises to its conclusions. A choice based on competence and responsibility implies a deep understanding of the matter at hand and clear references to the sources of the information on which the reasoning supporting the choice has been based.

As nobody can be realistically an expert in every field, a truly disintermediated society should require a higher degree of average competence to guide complex choices from the public: this, in turn, would be closely related to the quality and quantity of information available\textsuperscript{14}. Providing valuable information and insights, possibly via consistent and understandable communication, should be the main task for those organisations charged with the burdening role of representing the interests of a group of citizens. Transparency and quality of information are amongst the pillars of CSR, especially when organisations such as trade unions are involved\textsuperscript{15}. On a deeper level, those same organisations, namely governmental and intermediate associations, should embody and demonstrate a stronger commitment to ethical behaviour\textsuperscript{16}. Nowadays, it is largely agreed by PR and Social Sciences scholars that ethics is a key factor in business, in an era when ethical missteps can often lead to corporate bankruptcies or worse. As Ronald R. Sims clearly outlined, “ethical failures are rooted in leadership failure, the lack of a corporate culture in which ethical concerns have been integrated, and unresponsiveness to key organisational stakeholders.”\textsuperscript{17} This statement is true for private companies and revenue-driven corporations. It is vital for all representing organisations, such as trade associations, unions, parties, to name but a few of them, which built on the relationship with their stakeholders their very raison d'être.

Disintermediation in the Social sector: the case of Trade Unions

Even if disintermediation is not an inherently negative process, many signals point out that it can lead to disastrous outcomes when applied to the social sector. The competency/responsibility framework enables, in turn, the generation of trust and reputation. When these two key factors are missed, the result is a sense of disorientation and a loss of trust (and of reputation!); in this case, from the citizenships towards the institutions and the representative bodies as a whole\textsuperscript{18}. As stated above, the decline of intermediate bodies greatly preceded the latest health crisis: even if the nature of the issued Investigation is national, in its essence, and therefore Italy-focused, the theoretical framework has been preliminarily widened in order to assess if such a decline could be considered an Italian anomaly or rather a global trend.

Numerous studies lead to lean for the second hypothesis: if, for instance, we consider the late history of trade union associations worldwide, it will be easy to see how they went to decline in many countries beyond Italy. What do unions do, and why do they do it? Do they seek to maximise profit for their members or obtain better working conditions that benefit society as a whole? Derek H. Aldcroft and Michael J. Oliver were amongst the first to provide a sound study of the effects of union activities in terms of economic performance and the impact on the business world\textsuperscript{19}. From the rise of the mass trade union movements in the 1870s to the present day, several trends arose in union development and structure regarding the core strategies they have used to achieve their objectives, such as the use of strikes and work rules and restrictive practices. In this complex frame, many diverse variables have to be addressed: workers’ attitudes to innovation,
the wage bargaining process, and the response from governmental organisations to their inputs. Important assessments are made of the influence of these strategies on investment, innovation, economic growth, and the cost of structure and competitiveness of the UK economy.

Trade unions went into decline in many more countries, such as in Germany and the UK, and even beyond Europe, such as in the US, Asia and Australia. Many of these studies used time-series regression models on the national-level data available at their time to the authors, drawing on institutional and market accounts, to detect that trade union decline coincided with a steady rise of income inequality and structural changes to the economy, magnifying social inequality at all levels. Among the typical KPIs, these researches used international and comparable trends, such as union membership, union density, and collective bargaining (e.g. number of contracts). Of course, each one focuses on the relative position of trade unions in the research issued country. Finally, at least one study hints that there is some evidence that it is age of workplace, rather than age of worker, that is the critical age-based factor behind union decline. One of the quoted studies tested this argument (net of other important determinants of income inequality) from 1947 to 2015, in the United States of America: here trade union decline, occurring within the context of deindustrialisation and the offshoring of routine manufacturing jobs, created more profound distributional effects than these factors would create in isolation. The study results supported the proposed interaction effects, suggesting that a thorough understanding of inequality and social stratification must consider not only institutions and markets, but how they interact: in this framework, a key role has been played by trade unions for a long time, also suggesting that inequality is driven by financialisation, public sector retrenchment, and unemployment, but not necessarily by technological change. I shall return to this crucial point later on in this Essay, as the role of technology is largely overrated in the Italian public debate about unions’ decline.

Another study considered three hypotheses concerning the development of unionism in the last decades. The first one is that globalisation and structural change in the economy and labour market pull all countries towards a neo-liberal convergence of which union decline is one manifestation. The second predicts that resilient national collective bargaining and union-employer cooperation enable continued divergence in unionisation levels across Western economies. The third one states that feedback mechanisms from internal diversity among both employers and workers trigger institutional destabilisation and decline from which both employers associations and unions suffer.

The development of Trade Unions worldwide also confirms the initial assumption that the decline of the intermediate bodies does not coincide with the advent of Covid-19. Furthermore, according to many of the quoted authors, reversing union decline is very difficult and presents a major challenge for both unions, the institutions and the private sector worldwide due to several theoretical and empirical reasons.

The impact of Covid-19 on the intermediation world

The Covid-19 pandemic, with more than 4 million lives lost and joblessness equivalent if not worst than the Great Depression, has significantly accelerated the erosion of trust around the world. The pandemic has been widely acknowledged as a public health issue and an economic and organisational disruptive factor.

As clearly shown by the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer, in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, none of the four societal institutions mea-
sured—government, business, NGOs, and media—is trusted anymore. The consequences of this scenario are there to see: the recent wave of “infodemic” related to the Covid-19 Pandemic only sped us quicker to the present situation: demagogic and populist parties and movements thrive everywhere. At the same time, the debate on scientific communication has reached a critical point, with virologists and other scientists suddenly in the spotlight of main TV shows and political discussions, too frequently without any support from professional PR and communicators. Long story short, it would be all too easy to shift the blame for this situation entirely on the shoulders of a “dumb citizenship” or the unstoppable impact of technology. The underlined thesis of the present Study is that such an outcome has also been the responsibility of those intermediate organisations themselves, when their representation capability decayed into the mere governance of ‘a share of power,’ as a mix of position and social influence. When people ask questions that are not replied to, too late, or ineffectively, it should not surprise us if they eventually turn their eyes elsewhere to seek advice and guidance. Technology enabled what society already had called for long before the advent of the web: the possibility of symmetrical interaction at a new scale.

The decline of the IBs status and influence, and therefore of their traditional functions, is a serious issue, as Associations, Unions, and similar non-private organisations proved key to generating new Social Capital. When individualism and egoism become predominant, even at a national scale, the very bonds at the foundation of the social pact seem to falter. The recent scandal about low vaccine access in backward countries is the late proof of a critical global situation involving all social parts. In a world where governments and general complex organisations reached an all-time low in terms of trust, instead of vainly trying to regain their lost status, the representative bodies should aim to achieve a new role, moving towards an alternative paradigm: that of ‘Neo-intermediation’.

This Study hopes to be a small but useful contribution towards this aim, supporting a path for the IBs to recover lost ground and regain the influence needed to influence policy-making once again. The stakes are higher than the status of a specific type of corporation: they involve social bargaining, social construction as a whole and the resilience of representative democracies.

Theoretical Framework

One of the greatest challenges that we had to face in the setting stage of the Study was a feasible reconstruction of an ideal “timeline” of intermediation, at least regarding the main western countries and Italy in particular when the world of representation seemed to enjoy good health yet.

Moving from this ideal “time zero”, we have to assume that disintermediation can be considered the previous state’s alteration. To define the characteristics and the limits of disintermediation, it was necessary to assess its possible causes and main factors and their reciprocal weight, such as technology, social change, politics, and economy, as well as the different scenarios outstanding from this crisis.

In recent times, many attempts have been made to overcome this conjuncture by introducing alternative models of “intermediation”: for convenience, these have been skimmed to three main paradigms.
According to some scholars, “neo-intermediation” should coincide with all those attempts of direct participation, which undermine the very foundation, at least theoretically, of representative democratic systems. It is not by chance that this has been particularly evident in politics, by example, with the experience of the “5 Stars” Party in Italy. However, many scholars point out that a similar trend is in progress in many different sectors and industries worldwide, ranging from Insurance to Banking to the services industry. Alternatively, we aimed to propose the definition of “Post-intermediation”, alluding to the purpose of Postmodernism - due to its disregard for the status quo and the established values at the foundation of a given society; this is convenient, also to leave the “neo-intermediation” term available for the third paradigm in this series.

At the very beginning of this health crisis, some scholars analysed the situation of the IBs in Italy, only to conclude that a “Re-intermediation” is needed, in fact calling for a return to the previous paradigm of the “initial” intermediation. We analysed in detail this hypothesis, concluding that it is simply unenforceable, as the very foundation of the social context, sociological, cultural, economic, technological, have deeply changed when compared to the stage of the “original”, first intermediation. Moving from this consideration, we agreed that a third model was missing, one able to provide a meaningful way for the IBs to regain relevance and capability to influence, once again, the processes of social bargaining. Some scholars already proposed using the term “Neo-intermediation” in a similar framework, although overrating the role of technology and digital platforms in shaping this new paradigm.

This is not a new assumption: of course, technology is a key factor in the equation, as it enables new scenarios, but we shouldn’t be entirely conditioned by it by keeping a proactive disposition in our interaction with it, especially as professionals of the relations. This assumption should be particularly true for the IBs, which build their entire meaning around the relationship with their associates. To address this third model, we needed a deeper theoretical framework, also to provide an original interpretation of the concept of “neo-intermediation”.

To accomplish this, we leveraged three different theoretical points of view.

A Sociologic view

The first theoretical input takes the cue from Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action, which recognised that public participation is necessary to build democratic consensus and legitimise political institutions. Above all, it depends mainly on the communicative structure established: this is a particularly important assumption to understand the
dynamics of intermediation and dis-intermediation, as they are key to the construction and the stability of representative democracies. Habermas’s Theory is precious also in which it highlights the importance of proper communication as a strategic element and not a secondary, non-structural issue.

An organisational view

To fully grasp Habermas’ Theory’s implications and convey them into a more practical approach to intermediation, an organisational approach was needed in turn. The Four Models of Public Relations by Grunig & Hunt\(^4^4\) promptly came to the rescue when applied to the dynamics of intermediation. Our initial analysis showed that many IBs are still stuck on a one-way communication model, especially the Public Information one. Only a minority moved to a two way, although still asymmetric model (the third one) by taking more into account the feedback of their stakeholders (mainly their associates), still to influence them towards the aims of the organisation’s agenda. As later confirmed by the Investigation results, only a few organisations (at least in Italy) fully embraced the Fourth Model (two way, symmetrical), establishing a new “pact”, based on trust, with their associates: it is noteworthy that these organisations, as demonstrated by our Investigation, are also those which better withstood the impact of the health crisis, indicating that the governance of stakeholder relation system is a crucial factor for the resilience of representative systems.

A semiotic approach

A shift towards Grunig’s Fourth model looks advisable, if not vital, for the IBs. Therefore, what “anthropological factors” can ease this process, considering each organisation’s culture, management model, and internal behaviour? To answer these questions, I finally tapped on the Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman’s theories, taken up later on by Umberto Eco\(^4^5\), who applied this framework to cultures and societies as whole structures.

Lotman’s fundamental distinction is between textual and grammatical orientations, as two not exclusive models inside complex organisations; Umberto Eco defined them as follows:

“text-oriented societies are at the same time expression-oriented ones, while grammar-oriented societies are content-oriented. [...] a culture which has evolved a highly differentiated content system has also provided [...] a so-called grammatical system - this simply being a highly articulated code. On the contrary a culture which has not yet differentiated its content-units expresses through macroscopic expressive groupings: the texts”\(^4^6\)

Fig. 1 exemplifies some of the differences between the two models: by assessing and measuring their “balance", it could be possible to analyse the “after-disintermediation scenarios” in terms of representational capability, as a qualitative and quantitative benchmark which to build on a new hypothesis of “Neo-intermediation Model”. I will come back to this in the Conclusions.
The Investigation: General features and Research Questions

The Institutional Contractor

The Investigation on the Intermediate Bodies and their Representativity represents an important step into CNEL’s path supporting Italian Intermediate Bodies. The composition of the Council, in 60 members, is divided into three groups:

- representatives of the economic and labour categories;
- representatives of councils and public economic bodies;
- people particularly experienced in work or production problems.

The topic of intermediation, particularly neo-intermediation, is therefore deeply routed into CNEL’s Mission and Agenda, aiming to position itself as the institutional referral point for all the Italian Intermediate Bodies, especially at a time of crisis.

Research Questions

The following are the Research Questions that we selected at the beginning of the Project to better understand the state of health of the Intermediate Bodies (IBs) and their perspectives beyond the crisis.

Definition and Sample Taxonomy

Net of their typological difference, what are the basic variables that define an organisation as an intermediate or representative body? What are the criteria to determine a viable taxonomy?

Functional patterns and Relation Systems

What are the functional features of such organisations? What are their main stakeholders, and how do they govern their relationship systems with/to/about them? How well did they take care of their stakeholder relation systems, and how much did this coincide with their capability to cope with the crisis?
Causes of dis-intermediations
What could the main causes of disintermediation be, according to the IBs themselves? And how did the intermediate bodies cope with their deterioration? Was it unavoidable for them, or have they been somehow «co-responsible» for their decline?

The impact of Covid-19
What was the impact of the pandemic on the world of representation? How did the IBs manage the health crisis, and how much this impacted the previous scenario?

The role of technology
What was/is the perceived role of technology regarding the changes in representation?

The ingredients for a new paradigm
What could be the key ingredients towards a new, effective paradigm of «intermediation»? What do the Intermediate Bodies themselves perceive as more urgent to regain ground?

Methodology
The issued Investigation on the Italian ‘representative bodies’ commissioned by CNEL is based on a sample of more than 500 organisations, ranging from Parties, Trade Unions, Embassies, Associations, Confederations, Chambers of Commerce, and other top tier Italian organisations from the wide ‘intermediation landscape’. We used both qualitative and quantitative analysis to investigate the issued sample throughout both primary and secondary research.

Primary Research encompassed both an extensive self-administered online Survey, which has been sent to more than 3000 different organisations, and an in-depth interview, semi-structured, of the duration of approximately 45 minutes, administered to the establishment of the Italian Intermediate Bodies.

The self-administered email Questionnaire with closed questions has been sent to the heads and the secretariats of all the involved organisations, aiming to make them report on various statistics concerning topics such as reporting relationships before and after the advent of the pandemic, communication tools and the channels actively used by their organisations to build and maintain relationships with all stakeholders, classification of priorities regarding stakeholder relationship management, and subjective and organisational forecasting regarding the future of intermediation as a whole.

Furtherly, Heads from top organisations have been interviewed individually about the challenges they faced both in the period before the pandemic and during it. In many cases, the interviews have been semi-structured, with the interviewees receiving a blueprint a week or so before the interview itself. We investigated the changes they had to introduce, such as to the overall structure, organisation and reporting, to and within various branches and responsibilities, as to their budget and resource allocation situation, to adapt to remote working and the new and management relationships and policies (to name but some of the key topics from the interview). Heads have also been asked to explore how they see the future of their sector, the possible role of leadership and intermediation, and the active contribution that PR can provide to this increasingly complex scenario, both within their deputed organisations and across their overall communications communities.

Secondary Research included content analysis of communication messages and statements from top representative Italian organisations by analysing typical owned media such as the corporation websites, as well as the analysis of already available data on the Italian IBs, such as the evaluation and comparison of available national and international research and statistic studies regarding intermediation as a whole and the IBs, with a clear focus on the Italian situation.
Results

Sample definition and taxonomy

In the early stage of the Project, the first issue that we addressed was the definition and taxonomy of the sample to be analysed. The very definition of “intermediate body” seemed elusive, as so far, there has not been much agreement between scholars and literature traditions regarding the status of such organisations. To address this issue, we decided to raise it to a preliminary research hypothesis: what are the key factors which all representative organisations have in common? We skimmed the elements involved by applying aspects of regression analysis to a preliminary sample of organisations selected from different types to two basic features:

1. An Intermediate Body is not necessarily an Institution; it is neither a firm, company, enterprise, or other private capital organisation whose core business is revenue or turnover. Most of the organisations analysed are mixed capital ones and maintain a high degree of independence.

2. An Intermediate Body, as per its defining word’s etymology, “comes in the middle ground” between its associates, or members, and the authorities or institutions, or more in general towards any involved parties, with which it represents and defends their interests.

Truly the first known use of the word ‘intermediation’ dates back to 1602, meaning the act of coming between to provide an intervention, generally as mediation between two conflicting parties. From this early origin comes the concept of representation, which is key to understand the fundamental distinction between genuine IBs and other types of associations or no-profit organisations.

Moving from these premises, we took into account 15 different types of complex organisations:

1. Foundation
2. Union
3. Trade Association
4. Simple Association
5. Employers Association
6. Other (enter answer)
7. Association of Associations
8. International Organization
9. Cultural or Academic organisation
10. Embassy or Foreign Representative
11. Party
12. Professional Association
13. Academic or Educational Association
14. Local Board
15. Non-party political movement or Association

We used this series for the participants’ census at the beginning of the Survey (Q6). Fig.2 displays the Results: as it can be checked, Foundations have been the main respondent of the Survey, followed at a distance by Unions and Trade Associations, and therefore by other types of IBs with diverse but low percentages.

In the two following questions of the Survey, we further refined the sample by asking the respondent about the dimension (Q4) and the geographical position (Q5) of their organisations, their areas of reference (Q7) and what kind of audiences or stakeholders they address (Q12), together with a series of Questions specifically addressing the individual experience of each respondent.
**Functional patterns and Relation Systems**

If typological definition worked well as the setting stage, we needed a deeper functional work-frame in order to assess the IBs’ **stakeholder relation systems**. Once again, the definition of “inter-mediation” came to our aid by helping us focus the diverse “layers” of relationships featuring the IBs, with their external and internal stakeholders. Fig.3 depicts such a framework, useful to define a “vertical taxonomy” of the IBs, regardless of their specific typology, and categorises them by the distance from the general Public.

However, the Vertical Taxonomy didn’t clarify the relationships between the IBs and their territories. Therefore, we devised a **Horizontal Taxonomy based on the reciprocal influence of social actors in space and on different subjects**. Fig.4 clarifies these relationships, also highlighting the influence intersections between each different actor.

By ‘crossing’ the two taxonomies, we finally depicted a more convincing “relation framework” for the IBs, addressing both their ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ stakeholders, as shown by Fig.5.

Leveraging this original framework, we then focused on the **“Functional Patterns” (FP) of the IBs**. By analysing the contents and the media of many diverse IBs, we defined eight functional patterns to be investigated, four regarding the layers’ above’ and four regarding the layers’ below’ them (Fig.6).

These eight patterns aim to summarize the action and the commitment of the IBs in relationship with both their “represented stakeholder” and their counterparts (authorities, regulators, influencers, etc.).

We also described the patterns as the “abilities” of the IBs, as per the following list.
Figure 3

Vertical Taxonomy (functional)
Institutions, Representative Organizations, Represented Stakeholders and Citizenship

1. Institutions and Authorities
   - Supranational Institutions
   - Constitutional Bodies
   - Public Administration
   - Authorities and Regulators

2. Intermediate Bodies
   - First Level (Conferences, Assos. of Assos. of Associations)
   - Second Level (Professional associations, or A. of Associations)
   - Third Level (Local associations, simple associations of citizens, etc.)

3. Represented Stakeholders
   - Towns and entrepreneurs
   - Workers
   - Restaurants, Local Brands
   - Communities, Social groups
   - Citizens

Figure 4

Horizontal Taxonomy
Peripheries, Center, Supra-national entities and organizations

Local Institutions and Public Administration
Regional or Specific Institutions
National Institutions
Representatives from other Countries
Supranational institutions
Citizens, Local Associations (3rd LV)
Regional Associations (2nd LV)
National Organizations (1st LV)
Embassies
International Organizations

Territories, Provinces/Regions, National Level, Other Countries, International Level
**Figure 5**

**Intermediate Bodies. Relationship Arena**

- Constitutional Bodies
- National Institutions
- Local Institutions
- Public Administration
- Associates, Members
- Prospect Associates
- Public Opinion
- Media, Op. Leaders, Influencers
- Other IBs; Suppliers, Partners

**Figure 6**

**Intermediate Bodies. Functional Patterns**

1. **SUPPORT** TO DECISION-MAKERS AND POLICY MAKERS
2. **INTEGRATION** OF EXECUTION (PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY)
3. **DEFENCE** OF THEIR ASSOCIATES’ INTERESTS
4. **DEVELOPMENT** OF THEIR SECTOR CULTURE

**I.B. FUNCTIONAL PATTERNS**

5. **AUDIT OF THEIR STAKEHOLDERS** (ACTIVE/PERMANENT LISTENING)
6. **EDUCATION** AND TRAINING OF THEIR ASSOCIATES
7. **REPRESENTATION** OF THEIR ASSOCIATES IDENTITIES/NEEDS
8. **EMPOWERMENT** OF RELATIONSHIP NETWORKS
The ability to

1. Assist Authorities and Institutions in decision-making processes
2. Integrate/support Authorities and Institutions at the executive and operational level (according to the Principle of Subsidiarity)
3. Represent and protect the interests of its Associates to public decision-makers and Institutions
4. Contribute to the development of the ethics and culture of their sector, encouraging Research and debate
5. Detect / Listen to the needs, characteristics, aspirations and points of view of its Associates
6. Provide Training, Updating and Information to its Associates
7. Representing the identity and values of its Associates to all their stakeholders
8. Promote the creation of networks of relationships between and for its Associates

These FPs have been turned into smooth KPIs to enable the IBs a genuine self-evaluation regarding their performance. To limit the risk of biases, we used a split-way form, addressing through different Questions in diverse positions in the Survey the upper and lower level of the series, assessing both the perceived importance and performance for each of them, as shown by Fig.7. As it can be seen, Defence is still the main focus of the IBs performance, as it was in their early decades, both in terms of relevance and of perceived performance. Interesting enough, Listening is considered the second most important function in the frame. Still, in this case, the self-assessment from the IBs produced a result only average in terms of performance, outlining great margins for improvement.

Finally, we asked the IBs how they perceive the evolution of the services and overall action of their organisations in the last five years before the period beginning of the pandemic (Q22): the majority of the respondents (~66%) answered that they got better over the period of time analysed, a piece of information which is apparently contradicted by the subsequent answers.

Causes of dis-intermediations

Moving from this two-side scenario, we dedicated an entire section of the Survey to investigate if and how much the IBs considered themselves into a decline before the advent of Covid-19. Using a proprietary protocol (the Relationship Framework™), we assessed the ongoing quality of the relationship system of the involved organisations. The chart shows how the majority of the respondents agree on a slight worsening of their overall relation system throughout the pandemic (Fig.8).

This indirect result, made out of aggregated data, is consistent with the direct answer provided to Q27 regarding the general state of health of the ”Representation “ at the current time. According to 38% of the respondents, it is in crisis due to an inability of representation. This group is followed, six percentage points below, by those who think that this crisis is due instead to a loss of representativeness (Fig.9). This result is critical to this study. It shows that the capability of representation is considered even more strategic than representativeness itself, almost as if the second should be regarded as a byproduct of the first one.

We further investigated this direction by assessing the “what” and the “who” behind the crisis, as perceived by the IBs themselves. To the question: “What was the decisive factor that led to the emergence of attempts at direct participation, within the traditional representative systems?” (Q28),
Figure 7

INTERMEDIATE BODIES PERFORMANCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Perceived Performance</th>
<th>Perceived Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SUPPORT (Emergency)</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTEGRATION (Public Policy)</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEVELOPMENT (Urban)</td>
<td>5.99</td>
<td>3.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LISTENING</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REPRESENTATION</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMPLOYMENT</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8

RELATIONSHIP FRAMEWORK. COMPARISON.

Before Covid-19

During Covid-19
Figure 9

Figure 10
the three main answers collected have been the **Degradation of politics** (~26%), followed by **Social transformation** (~24%) and by **Cultural change** (~22%). This result is confirmed and amplified by the results of the following question (Q29): “Who has had the greatest responsibility, direct or indirect, in the processes of disintermediation?” In this case, there has been a net agreement amongst the respondents, with a striking ~55% considering the Politicians as the ones responsible for the decline of intermediation (Fig.10).

This is another key point in the Study. It shows a great deal of criticism towards the establishment and the political ruling class from the IBs, somehow putting these organisations in a trend similar to that affecting today so many citizenships around the world. This is also a sign of the broken dialogue between politics and the IBs, as they can no longer influence the policy-making processes effectively.

**The impact of Covid-19**

The results from this section (Q 31-36) clearly show that the IBs have suffered the impact of the health crisis not unlike other categories of social actors and, in certain cases, even more. Q 36 showed that for most of the respondents (36%), **Covid-19 had a Negative impact**, requiring prompt action to react to the crisis. (Q33 (Fig.11) revealed that half of these organisations (~50%) continued to operate through digital channels and platforms and by switching to “remote operations” to keep going on, while only 20% of them suffered a downsizing of their agenda, activities and objectives, and only 12% of them continued to operate but with difficulty, greatly reducing the type and number of activities carried out. All in all, the IBs think to have held the blow; moving from this positive assessment, we asked them: “What is the best contribution that Intermediate Bodies can offer at this particularly problematic time?” (Q 36). The results show that even during this critical time the main focus of the IBs is towards their associates (Fig.12), with most of the respondents believing that “the best contribution they can offer is helping their associates and the citizens to better express their needs and views with the institutions. Finally, we asked what the outcomes for the IBs could be, moving out of the health crisis (Q 37): despite the dire state of the present situation, the majority of the respondents (~40%) believes that this health emergency, once overcome, will have changed, for the better, the world of intermediation (Fig.13). This is an interesting point, as it shows that the IBs do believe in the possibility to raise from this conjunction and that the current crisis could be an opportunity to speed up change. This result is confirmed and complicated by the result of Q 40: “How do you see the Italian Intermediate Bodies in front of the prospect of a restart?”, with a wide majority of respondents (55%) agreeing that the Italian IBs are quite in good shape, but they also have to fix various things in order to be ready to face the challenges at hand.

**The role of technology**

We collected data regarding this specific topic in many places of the Survey: long story short, the results confirmed that the vast majority of the IBs do consider technology as a resource rather than a criticality to be avoided (Q 18). Despite this agreement, other Questions revealed as the greatest percentage of the Italian IBs are not ready to seize this opportunity (Q 20), as we assessed their performance across a variety of different tools and media, both traditional (e.g., emails, corporate circulars) and innovative (such as AI-powered platforms for data mining and user interactions).

**The ingredients for a new paradigm**

In the final part of the Survey, we investigated many dependent and independent variables
Figure 11

How and how much did the current health emergency affect the activities of your organization?

- 59.55%
- 29.43%
- 10.00%
- 0.00%
- 0.00%
- 0.00%

Responses:
- I don't know
- There were no major differences, continued to operate as before
- He continued to operate, through digital channels and platforms and performing activities "remotely"
- It has continued to operate but redefining its own agenda, activities and objectives
- Continued to operate but with difficulty, greatly reducing the type and number of activities carried out
- Has not continued to operate in any way, the activities of are completely stopped
- Other (specify)

Figure 12

What is the best contribution that Intermediate Bodies can offer at this particularly problematic time?

- 39.06%
- 18.18%
- 15.00%
- 0.00%
- 0.00%
- 0.00%

Responses:
- I don't know
- Helping the institutions to explain to citizens the meaning of the measures taken
- Helping citizens to better express their needs and views with the institutions
- Express their own views on the situation and the measures taken
- Remain neutral, do not get involved in a situation destined to pass
- Other (specify)
Figure 13

Believes that this health emergency, once overcome...

- I don't know: 27.96%
- Will have changed, for the worse, the world of intermediation: 40.80%
- Will have changed, for the better, the world of intermediation: 27.70%
- For the Intermediate Bodies nothing will be changed: 33.96%

Figure 14

Considering the relations between your organization and its members, choose one of the following:

- We must above all set an example, we need charismatic leaders and models to follow: 15.94%
- Above all, we must provide information, we need clear rules and accessible data: 35.69%
through direct and indirect questions to check the possible ingredients towards a new, effective paradigm of intermediation. We asked the respondents to select three Values from a closed list for the Future of the Intermediation (Q 45). The three most voted Values have been Competence (~54%), Responsibility (~44%), and Transparency (~42%), fully confirming our initial hypothesis and also showing a good degree of awareness regarding “what it takes” to get out of this crisis. When prompted about choosing one verb only from a finite list (Q 46) to describe the future of intermediation, the IBs provided an even more consistent answer: To innovate (~24%) is the key factor for the world of representation, followed only by half measure by To listen and To connect (~12%).

We also assessed the prevalent semiotic model (see above, Theoretical Framework) amongst the interviewed organisations (Q 43). The majority of respondents (~57%) agree on the importance to provide useful information as a priority (thus embodying a Grammatical Model), as opposed to those (~43%) who believe that above all, they must set an example through charismatic leaders and models easy to be followed (Fig.14). The close result is a reproval of the transition the IBs are going through, with a new model only recently emerging to balance a leadership entirely based on example and charisma.

Conclusions

The general findings of this Investigation can be summarised as follows:

The health crisis generated a huge shake on a sector, that of intermediation as a whole, already in crisis way before the advent of Covid-19.

The crisis of intermediation, in turn, has proved to be a key factor in the exacerbation of the global crisis, as the IBs are strategic actors to the creation and growth of Social Capital.

A new paradigm of ‘Neo-intermediation’ is needed to speed up positive change within these organisations and their relation systems with all their stakeholders.

In light of these findings, this study’s initial hypothesis has been challenged and updated, aiming to provide a minimum viable definition of a constructive concept of “neo-intermediation”, as a fundamental part of the proper functioning of western democracies.

To recap the main features of this model, we will use a descriptive approach, based on key statements in subsequential order:

- Participation is of the essence to build, maintain and grow healthful relationship systems in any democratic system.
- The IBs need to base their very “license to operate” (quoting a Toni Muzi Falconi’s definition) on the quality of the governance of their relationship systems; as such, they need to invest in resources, technologies, and competencies to genuinely embrace a two-ways, symmetrical model in order to generate social capital and to maximise the outcomes of active participation from all the involved stakeholders.
- In a transparent eco-system, organisations that already embodied a grammatical model, based on constant negotiation of meanings, assumptions, and information, are more viable to adopt and adapt to a two-way symmetrical model, bridging the gap between leadership and communities.

Neo-intermediation can be therefore defined as a relationship model, based on the active participation of all the involved stakeholders, in which the central organisation or Intermediate Body acts as a catalyst of value, information, energies and knowledge, which in turn are shared back with the associates of the organisation and with all the other involved parts with
via selection based on competency, whilst complete transparency is to be considered a prerequisite, e.g. regarding the tracking of data flow and the sources of information.

To perform in this new frame effectively, IBs need to embrace a ‘horizontal/circular/grammatical’ paradigm instead of the old vertical/linear/textual one: this implies focusing on social construction, as opposed to the mere defence of partisan interests. The new model needs to be based on merit, and the constant measurement of the quality of relation systems, instead of the sole purpose to hold at any cost a “stake” of power or influence.

The Study confirmed the initial hypothesis: the very essence of this type of organisation lies in their relationships: it should make no surprise, therefore, if the heads of such organisations finally started to invest, even if belatedly, into proper governance of their stakeholder government systems. The importance of adequate communication, information and listening also emerged clearly, which is true today for every organisation but is vital for the IBs.

According to this perspective, the professional Public Relator could be the best candidate to support those “representative bodies,” with its implied capability of improving the quality of stakeholder relationships of private, public, and social organisations, creating measurable social capital within-and-amongst them and with their respective territories.

The organisations that more likely will emerge successfully from this global crisis will be those that are already “organically focused” on building social capital: for the organisations themselves and their stakeholders and territories. This process is based mainly on listening instead of adding just more “propaganda” to an already overexerted context. The new leading Intermediate Bodies, based on a grammatical interactional paradigm, will be able to go through the difficult transition from being “dispensers of truth,” as they pretended to be at the end of the “intermediation-era,” to “enablers of meaning,” as actors able to guide the citizenship in an over-complex world. In this new scenario, authoritativeness will come from the capability to “give representation” to complexity and ambiguity, which in turn could lead to a new model of “representativeness” for the intermediate organisation.

**Final Considerations**

To put into action the outtakes of this Study, we would like to propose six predicates for the IBs, which will be recounted from their point of view, as ideal issues to be put on their agenda.

We need to continuously listen to our stakeholders to be able to «represent» them adequately

We have to measure the quality of the relationship with the represented stakeholders to be able to assess the quality of our representation

We have to recount the identity of the represented stakeholders, and not (only) that of our organisation as their representative

We have to share with the represented parties (our associates) the narrative that concerns them

We have to strengthen/nurture over time representativeness instead of just focusing on the action of representation itself

We have to support our stakeholders to achieve their goals, which, in the medium and long term, should tend to coincide with those of our plan (to fix the “split-agenda” issue for good).
Endnotes

1 Muzi Falconi, T. et al. The role of active relationship governance in building social capital, improving trust and reinforcing reputation


3 Colarieti S., Perazzi M., Comunicazione e Rappresentanza, Luiss University press, 2011.

4 See for example https://www.etuc.org/en/trade-unions-and-coronavirus

5 As an instance, many useful and updated information is available on the the periodical review from Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, an international NGO that tracks the human rights impacts (positive & negative) of over 8,000 companies in over 180 countries making information available on its website.


7 https://www.cnel.it/Chi-Siamo/English-version/About

8 www.storyfly.it/en

9 By example in Martino E. et al., FinTech and The Law & Economics of Disintermediation, in The Routledge Handbook of Financial Technology and law, University of Amsterdam, Forthcoming


11 For an example of the usage of the term “neo-intermediation” in the insurance sector, see Beck H., Banking is essential, banks are not. The future of financial intermediation in the age of the Internet, in NETNOMICS: Economic Research and Electronic Networking, 3(1):7-22, June 2001


14 Brownell S.E., Price J.V., Steinman L., Science Communication to the General Public: Why We Need to Teach Undergraduate and Graduate Students this Skill as Part of Their Formal Scientific Training, J. Undergrad. Neurosci. Educ., 2013


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19 Aldcroft D. H., Oliver M. J., ibid.


Kollmeyer C., Trade union decline, deindustrialization, and rising income inequality in the United States, 1947 to 2015, Research in Social Stratification and Mobility, Volume 57, 2018.


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id.

Visser J., Ibid.

The 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer clearly shows as none of the four societal institutions that it measures—government, business, NGOs and media—is trusted anymore. The cause of this paradox can be found in people's fears about the future and their role in it, which are a wake-up call for our institutions to embrace a new way of effectively building trust: balancing competence with ethical behavior.

As in Manke V. et al., Offshore middlemen: transnational intermediation in technology sourcing, in Journal of Information Technology, 2008

For a recent example see https://www.allerin.com/blog/were-in-the-age-of-disintermediation-the-reason-is-blockchain

For a recent view on the increasing importance of purpose inside complex organizations, see the 2021 The Global PR & Communication Model developed by Global Alliance in joint collaboration with Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership.


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38 Gli italiani e i corpi intermedi, a National Research carried out by Ipsos, on behalf of the Astrid Foundation and the Italian Foundation for Subsidiarity.

39 Giacomini, G., Towards neointermediation. The power of large digital platforms and the public sphere. Iride. 31. 457-468 (10.1414/92394), 2018


45 Eco U., A Theory of Semiotics, 1976,

46 Eco U., Ibid., p.138 et seq.

47 https://www.cnel.it/Comunicazione-e-Stampa/Indagine-sui-corpi-intermedi


49 A “code” which is nowadays literally one, as it is already written almost entirely by an algorithm (on this topic I wrote before the pandemic in one of my contributes for the Italian Federation of Public Relations, https://www.ferpi.it/news/quel-ramo-del-lago-di-bled).
#adidasgate and Crisis Award

Winners: Excellence within Corporate Communication during the COVID-19 Crisis

Sievert, Holger, Macromedia University of Applied Sciences (Germany)
Meißner, Florian, Macromedia University of Applied Sciences (Germany)
Buse, Christine, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf (Germany)

Introduction

“These recent months have seen corporate reputations made. And corporate reputations wrecked” (PRCA, 2020, p. 13)—these are the words Francis Ingham, Director General of the Public Relations and Communications Association. Companies across the globe have been affected by the pandemic economically and/or epidemiologically, causing countless organizational crises. It is without question that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic poses significant challenges for the corporate communication sector. Depending on whether these challenges were met successfully, the pandemic crisis has strained or strengthened relations with stakeholders.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, stakeholders have developed new communication expectations and information demands of businesses and brands. In times of such crises and pandemics, businesses need to develop persuasive corporate narratives and crisis response strategies to protect their reputation and mitigate negative reactions from key stakeholders inside and outside the organization. This paper explores to what degree companies across the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US) and Germany (GER) have met this challenge—and the key factors that made response strategies a success or a failure.

The literature so far provides little to answer this question. Instead, one mostly relies on anecdotal evidence with regard to corporate crisis responses and their effect on reputation. Several researchers point out how corporate communication and marketing have been strongly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and how it provides both challenges and opportunities for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication (e.g., Crane & Matten, 2021; He & Harris, 2020). In fact, CSR initiatives taken by companies (e.g., Han, 2021; Leonidou et al., 2020; Urban & Tefertiller, 2021) are one of the most salient themes so far.

Both Han (2021) and Urban and Tefertiller (2021) analyzed whether companies in the United States used proactive or reactive CSR communication strategies to address their stakeholders during the pandemic. Han (2021) found that excellent CSR companies communicated more proactively on social media during the crisis. They prioritized addressing external publics and focused more on information dissemination...
than on persuasive communication. However, companies with lower CSR ratings communicated more actively and showed a stronger online presence during the pandemic (Han, 2021, pp. 13-14). Analyzing corporate emails, Urban and Tefertiller (2021) found that many companies employed a corrective action approach. National businesses were more likely to employ CSR than local companies, and anticipatory responses constituted the overwhelming majority of the corporate email responses (Urban & Tefertiller, 2021, pp. 5-6). Leonidou et al. (2020) examined different internal and external CSR communication initiatives taken by American international business firms. In terms of internal CSR activities, their study showed that companies like AT&T suspended fees for home usage and overage caps of certain products and refrained from canceling services or charging late fees (Leonidou et al., 2020, p. 246). Furthermore, their analysis demonstrated that in order to maintain or build a positive reputation, it is important for an international company to select CSR response strategies proportionately with the stakeholders’ expectations, focusing on CSR initiatives that are suited to the requirements of the crisis, and to disseminate information about the results of their CSR activities to various stakeholders (Leonidou et al., 2020, p. 249).

Another theme emerging in the early literature is leadership communication and internal crisis communication which is, however, not the scope of this paper. Finally, there are also some studies that focus on consumers’ reactions to crisis communication responses. For example, Wang et al. (2021) focused on the influence of defensive and offensive response strategies as well as emotional and rational response framing on consumer sentiment and trust recovery. Their study revealed that using a defensive, emotionally framed response strategy led to a more positive consumer sentiment, while consumer trust recovered significantly when crisis responses were framed in an emotional manner (Wang et al., 2021, p. 1).

The findings described in this chapter show that most research on corporate communication related to the COVID-19 crisis has so far focused on CSR communication and to internal communication (describe more in detail in the footnote). A crisis communication perspective is rare, which is surprising given that the pandemic crisis also led to countless organizational crises globally; also a perspective on the needed internal management structure for the communication function is mainly missing. As a first step to close this gap, we use Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Excellence

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1 Leadership communication is a subject for instance in hospitality companies (e.g., Im et al., 2021) or with a special focus on corporate narratives (e.g., Lee, 2021). In this context, Lee (2021) noted that management letters and messages to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic contained fewer corporate narratives on diversity and inclusion (Lee, 2021, p. 17). Einwiller et al. (2021) showed the importance of informational and relational internal communication during a pandemic and their positive effect on employee support and job engagement (Einwiller et al., 2021, pp. 246-247). Furthermore, Lee et al. (2021) showed that diversity-oriented leadership and transparent internal communication increased employees’ intrinsic needs, which in turn fostered their knowledge-sharing behavior and job engagement during the COVID-19 crisis (Lee et al., 2021, pp. 16-17). Moreover, in their empirical study, Guzzo et al. (2021) showed that managers’ communication that followed the US Centers For Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines had a positive impact on employees’ emotions and therefore subsequently on their organizational trust (Guzzo et al., 2021, p. 1). Furthermore, a number of studies were published that focus on internal crisis communication during the pandemic (e.g., Heide & Simonsson, 2021; Macnamara, 2021). As part of their qualitative case study, Heide & Simonsson (2021) found that during the pandemic, among other things, communicative practices within the organization under investigation were characterized by top-down communication, rather than horizontal or bottom-up communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2021, pp. 270-271).
Theory to identify appropriate communication strategies based on a series of case studies.

**Theoretical foundations**

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

“A crisis is a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat” (Coombs, 2007, p. 164). The situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) helps to anticipate how stakeholders will react to a crisis and respond to corporate crisis response strategies used to manage a crisis (Coombs, 2020, p. 137). Therefore, SCCT helps to match the crisis response to the crisis situation and provides a set of guidelines for communication managers on how to repair or prevent reputational damage (Coombs, 2007, p. 163). SCCT is built upon crisis responsibility and attribution theory (Heider, 1958). The premise of attribution theory is that individuals seek to determine the causes of events and have a need to attribute responsibility (Weiner, 2018). Depending on the causes of a crisis and the perceived responsibility, the reputational threat is varied. According to Coombs, the initial threat is based on the crisis type (Coombs, 2007, p. 166). A crisis type is a frame that emphasizes certain aspects of a crisis (Coombs, 2020, p. 126). The frame shapes how individuals define a crisis, interpret its causes, attribute responsibility and evaluate possible crisis solutions (Coombs, 2007, p. 167). In SCCT, crisis types are grouped into three clusters based on the level of crisis responsibility and public expectations in relation to the response. Coombs differentiates between three different clusters: (1) the victim cluster, (2) the accidental cluster and (3) the preventable/intentional cluster (see Table 1).

If a crisis falls into the victim category, the organization is seen as an unintentional victim of the crisis event. If a crisis falls into the accidental cluster, the event is considered unintentional or uncontrollable by the organization. In case of a preventable or intentional crisis, the crisis event is considered purposeful (Coombs, 2007, pp. 167-168; Coombs, 2020, p. 131). In addition to the perceived crisis responsibility, contextual modifiers, such as the company’s crisis history and prior reputation, can alter the initial crisis assessment and shape the reputational threat.

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**Table 1: Crisis clusters**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Attributions of responsibility</th>
<th>Reputational threat</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victim cluster</td>
<td>Very low attributions of responsibility</td>
<td>Mild reputational threat</td>
<td>Natural disasters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Workplace violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Product tampering/malevolence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rumors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidental cluster</td>
<td>Minimal attributions of responsibility</td>
<td>Moderate reputational threat</td>
<td>Technical-error accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Technical-error product harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preventable/intentional cluster</td>
<td>High attributions of responsibility</td>
<td>Severe reputational threat</td>
<td>Human-error accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Human-error product harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational misdeeds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Depending on the crisis type, communication managers can choose from a variety of response strategies that can be used to shape crisis attributions, change perceptions of the organization in crisis and reduce reputational damage generated by the crisis (Coombs, 2007, p. 171). According to SCCT, communication professionals should assess the potential crisis responsibility a crisis event will generate and select a response that fits the anticipated level of responsibility (Coombs, 2020, p. 137). Coombs proposes different crisis response strategies that vary in their acceptance of responsibility for the crisis (see Table 2). Furthermore, he differentiates between primary and secondary postures. Some strategies are considered secondary because they seem to be most effective when being used in combination with primary response strategies (Coombs, 2020, pp. 125-126).

According to Coombs, communication professionals should focus on reputation-oriented crisis response strategies only after effectively addressing the physical and physiological concerns of their stakeholders by providing instructing and adjusting information as part of their initial ethical base response (Coombs, 2007, p. 165; Coombs, 2020, p. 125). Furthermore, Coombs argues that highly accommodative crisis response strategies, such as compensation or apology, are optimal crisis response strategies when attributions of crisis responsibility are high, whereas the ethical base response serves as the optimal strategy when attributions of crisis responsibility are low (Coombs, 2020, pp. 127-128).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are a few studies that draw from SCCT to distinguish crisis types and response strategies (Han, 2021; Macnamara, 2021; Leonidas et al., 2020). In his ethnographic case study of an Australian university Macnamara (2021) found that the crisis types did not fully align with the situation at hand. Furthermore, his analysis showed that primary crisis response strategies were mostly irrelevant to the organization studied (Macnamara, 2021, pp. 250-251). In contrast to SCCT, no studies could be found that included the widely accepted Excellence Theory as their analytical framework.

**Excellence Theory in Public Relations**

The Excellence Theory is a general theory that explains the value of public relations and identi-
fies characteristics that are correlated with managerial and organizational effectiveness (Grunig et al., 2002, pp. 90-92; Grunig & Grunig, 2008, pp. 327-328). Excellence in public relations can be defined as a set of attributes that help to “build quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies” (Grunig & Grunig, 2008, p. 328). The general theory stems from a longitudinal study of best practices in public relations and communication management and incorporates middle-range theories, including concepts of publics, organizational theory and decision-making, models of public relations, and evaluation of public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 2008, p. 333). Thanks to the study, several generic principles of excellent public relations could be formulated that can be categorized into four different groups (Grunig & Grunig, 2008, p. 335).

According to the Excellence Theory, in order to generate organizational value, the company should empower the public relations function as a strategic management function. Furthermore, characteristics of excellent public relations are the involvement of the senior public relations executive in strategic management decisions, the identification of strategic publics, the development of specific and strategically managed communication programmes, the senior public relations executive’s membership in the organization’s dominant coalition, and the empowerment of public relations practitioners with diverse backgrounds (Grunig & Grunig, 2008, p. 335; Grunig et al., 2002, p. 141). With regard to the communicator roles, Excellence Theory postulates that a strategic manager rather than a technician or an administrative manager should head the public relations unit, members of the public relations unit should have the knowledge needed to carry out the managerial role, and people of all genders should have equal opportunities to occupy the manager role (Grunig & Grunig, 2008, p. 336; Grunig et al., 2002, p. 196). Concerning the organization of the communication function and its relationship to other management functions, Excellence Theory postulates that public relations should be an integrated communication function and a specialized management function separate from other management functions, e.g., human resources or marketing (Grunig & Grunig, 2008, p. 337; Grunig et al., 2002, p. 262). Additionally, Excellence Theory stresses that the two-way symmetric model of public relations is normatively superior to other models of public relations, such as the press agent/publicity model, the public-information model, and the two-way asymmetric model because it contributes more to organizational effectiveness of corporate crisis communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, pp. 13-14, 43). Furthermore, Excellence Theory defines the two-way symmetric model as the most adequate model for effective and ethical public relations because it is based on dialogue, mutual understanding between organizations and their publics, employee empowerment and participation in decision-making, resulting in better long-term relationship with key stakeholders (Grunig & Grunig, 2008, pp. 337-338; Grunig & Hunt, 1984, pp. 21-25). However, this model has been further developed into a less categorized and more open scheme, but the general perspective and most implications remain the same.

Method and sample

The study follows an exploratory, qualitative approach. In a first step, contrasting examples based on some of the most prominently discussed positive and negative cases of corporate crisis communication were collected. In order to be able to draw comparison and avoid having only one national perspective, after an initial check of the material, six cases in Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States of America were selected. A positive and a negative case from each country was included in the study (N= 6). The three best practice cases were selected based on communication award winners,
especially in the category “crisis communication”. The three worst practice cases were select-
ed based on negative press and media coverage that reached national news.

In a next step, all related press releases and selected social media posts that were published be-	ween March and December 2020 were collect-\ned and analyzed, drawing from SCCT to code crisis types and crisis response strategies.

Finally, press releases and/or additional publicly available sources were used to analyze the extent
to which crisis communication and crisis man-
agement correspond to the principles of Excel-
ence Theory. The three selected negative cases in this explorative study were Adidas AG (Ger-
many), Frasers Group (UK) and Tyson Foods (US) (Figure 1). The three selected positive cases were Webasto (Germany), Tesco (UK) and AT&T (US) (see Figure 2).

Adidas is a German multinational corporation and the second largest sportswear manufacturer in Europe. During Germany’s first lockdown in March 2020, Adidas announced that it would withhold rent payment for its stores in Ger-
many, citing a pandemic aid agreement issued by the German Federal Ministry of Justice that was made to protect tenants who were unable to pay their rent as a result of the COVID-19 pandem-
ic (Bauchmüller et al., 2020). The second neg-
ative example Frasers Group is a British retail company that owns Sports Direct – the largest sports goods retailer in the UK. During the first UK lockdown, Frasers tried to keep its Sports Direct stores open, despite lockdown rules. Several company statements stated that Sport Direct stores should have been deemed essential retail

![Figure 1: Negative cases](image1)
Note. Retrieved from corporate websites and corporate social media accounts.

![Figure 2: Positive cases](image2)
Note. Retrieved from corporate websites and corporate social media accounts.
because selling fitness equipment made them a vital asset to keep the UK healthy (Sweney & Goodley, 2020). The third selected negative case is Tyson Foods, an American multinational corporation and the second largest processor and marketer of chicken, beef, and pork in the world. According to a lawsuit filed by an employee’s family, company managers at Tyson’s Waterloo plant betted on how many workers would get infected with COVID-19 (Shepherd, 2020).

The first selected best practice case is Webasto, a German manufacturing company and one of the 100 largest automotive suppliers in the world. In January 2020, Webasto confirmed that a worker at its headquarters had been infected with COVID-19 following the visit of an employee from China, becoming the first known COVID-19 case in Germany (Boseley, 2020). Webasto reacted quickly and transparently. Webasto’s head of corporate communications won the PR Report Award 2020 for the company’s successful crisis communication (Schasche, 2020). The second positive example Tesco is the largest supermarket chain in the UK. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, Tesco launched the campaigns ‘Keeping you safe’ and ‘Some little helps for safer shopping’ to inform customers about the implemented social distancing measures and to trigger positive emotions and reduce fear among consumers (Rogers, 2020). For its widely praised corporate response to the coronavirus crisis, Tesco won ‘Brand of the Year’ at the 2020 Marketing Week Masters Awards (Marketing Week, 2020). The last selected positive case is AT&T, the world’s largest telecommunications company and the second largest provider of mobile telephone services. During the first lockdown, AT&T established a COVID-19 team to be able to respond quickly to communications needs throughout the pandemic. As a result, AT&T won an award for ‘Best Global Crisis Communications/Crisis Management’ at the 2020 Platinum PR Awards (PR News, 2020).

Of course, one has to keep in mind that the method is subject to limitations. For instance, all observations concerning the excellence perspective are external and will need to be validated with internal interviews in the future. Also, the sampling strategy is highly dependent on the visibility of cases thanks to awards (best cases, mainly based on self-nomination) or in the context of media criticism (worst cases, mainly based on external coverage). Therefore, our study is just an exploratory first step.

Selected Results

Our analysis shows that despite the pandemic being a natural disaster in the first place, all three negative examples faced a preventable crisis caused by organizational misdeed / management

Table 3: Crisis type and selected response strategy
Note. Assessment and categorization by the research team.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Crisis type</th>
<th>Primary response strategy</th>
<th>Secondary response strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adidas (GER)</td>
<td>Preventable crisis</td>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>Victimage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frasers Group (UK)</td>
<td>Preventable crisis</td>
<td>Compensation, justification</td>
<td>Victimage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyson Foods (US)</td>
<td>Preventable crisis</td>
<td>Excuse, (internal) scapegoat</td>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webasto (GER)</td>
<td>Victim crisis</td>
<td>Excuse (with elements of compensation)</td>
<td>Victimage (with minor elements of reminder)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tesco (UK)</td>
<td>Victim crisis</td>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>Victimage (with elements of ingratiation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT&amp;T (US)</td>
<td>Victim crisis</td>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>Reminder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
misconduct accompanied by high attributions of responsibility and a severe reputational threat. Meanwhile, all selected positive cases were faced with a victim crisis caused by the natural disaster and therefore confronted with very low attributions of crisis responsibility and a mild reputational threat (see Table 3).

Additionally, the qualitative content analysis shows that between the best practice and worst practice examples the selected response strategies varied quite a lot. As its primary response strategy, the German sportswear manufacturer Adidas accepted its responsibility, apologized for its statements and asked key stakeholders for forgiveness. In addition to this very accommodating primary response strategy, Adidas reminded its publics that it was a victim of the crisis too.

In contrast to Adidas, Frasers Group made use of the compensation and the justification strategy by offering the victims compensation and minimizing the perceived reputational damage. As well as Adidas, the retail company presented itself a victim of the crisis.

Other than Adidas and Frasers Group, Tyson Foods tried to minimize the reputational damage by denying the intent to do harm and distancing itself from specific persons inside the organization. Furthermore, the company praised its stakeholders and reminded them of past good works.

All in all, all three negative examples chose different primary response strategies, while two of the three cases chose victimage as their second response strategy, reminding their stakeholders that they were a victim too (see Figure 3).

Regarding the positive examples, the German automotive manufacturer Webasto made use of the excuse strategy with elements of compensation, denying the intent to harm, claiming that the events that triggered the crisis were out of its control and trying to minimize the damage through quick and transparent actions. In addition to this primary response strategies, Webasto presented itself as a victim of the crisis and informed its stakeholders of past good works. This has worked well for Webasto, which for a long time after being affected by the COVID-19 cases was repeatedly cited as a crisis management and communication role model in the news media.

In contrast to Webasto, Tesco made use of the justification strategy and tried to minimize the reputational threat by focusing on customer safety. On top of that, Tesco presented itself a victim of the crisis, praised its stakeholders and reminded them of former efforts and accomplishments.

Similar to Tesco, the telecommunications company AT&T made use of the justification strategy and tried to minimize reputational damage...
by supporting online communication. Furthermore, AT&T focused on communicating past good deeds. All in all, two out of the three positive examples chose justification as their primary response strategy. Furthermore, two out of the three cases chose victimage as their second response strategy, reminding their stakeholders that they were a victim of the crisis too (see Figure 4).

The findings show that different crisis response strategies led to different outcomes that were closely linked to the principles of the Excellence Theory. Thanks to the strong empowerment of the public relations function, the quick and transparent communication and the special role of the senior public relations executive in the crisis management, the automotive supplier Webasto was able to protect and possibly even enhance its reputation. Contrarily, the sporting goods manufacturer Adidas created a preventable crisis with high attributions of responsibility by deferring the rent for its stores. Judging from the company’s communication history, it seems that initially a lower management level was involved in the communication and only in the end the CEO got involved and decided to continue the payment and issue an apology which resulted in immediate negative reputational consequences (Boehmer & Harrison, 2021).

Due to the consideration of public relations interest in strategic management decision-making and the empowerment of the public relations function, the supermarket chain Tesco was able to protect its reputational capital. Contrarily, Tyson Foods created a preventable crisis with high attributions of responsibility that resulted in negative reputational consequences. Due to the consideration of public relations interest in strategic management decision-making and the empowerment of the public relations function, the telecommunications company AT&T was able to protect its reputational capital. While there was room for improvement for all the included examples, Tyson Foods public relations function corresponded the least to the principles of effective public relations.

Conclusion

All in all, COVID-19 had/has a strong impact on corporate crisis communication and stakeholder relations. The qualitative analysis illustrates that for affected companies, the pandemic can be both a chance to build and extend a positive reputation, but also a significant reputational threat. Additionally, the findings showed that the selected crisis response strategy should always follow

Figure 4: Crisis responses of the positive cases
Note. Retrieved from corporate websites and corporate social media accounts.
the type of crisis at hand. In a preventable/intentional crisis with a severe reputational threat, highly accommodating strategies, such as apology and excuse strategies, were more successful than less accommodating stances, whereas less accommodating gestures, such as justification or excuse, were more effective in crisis situations with low attributions of responsibility.

Furthermore, we conclude that a combined application of SCCT and Excellence Theory appears to be very powerful in crises like COVID-19. With regard to the selected case studies, a strong empowerment of the public relations function helped to navigate around communicative pitfalls. Moreover, Excellence Theory can be deemed suitable for evaluating a company’s response strategy. With regard to the application of SCCT in the context of COVID-19, slight modifications of the crisis types and a broader understanding of responsibility are needed because in some sense all companies are victims of the natural disaster that is the global pandemic COVID-19.

As mentioned above, this study is just an exploratory first step. In order to learn more about effective corporate crisis communication strategies in the face of the pandemic, a broader in-depth study on the subject is needed. For example, the research team plans to conduct qualitative interviews with communication officials of the companies concerned as well as a quantitative content analysis of media coverage and social media discourse.

**Practical and social implications**

The analysis shows that the main factors for a successful crisis communication are defined a long time ahead of the crisis. In the long run, the underlying threat of another pandemic crisis remains a concern for corporations worldwide. In the future, corporate communications must be ready to handle a long-term public health crisis, strengthen its crisis communication strategies and perhaps develop new crisis response strategies to add to the theory. All in all, the combination of SCCT and Excellence Theory provides a powerful tool to improve crisis preparedness and response.

Especially for those working in communication professions, these findings can be helpful in at least two directions: On one side, they may be used as an argument for a stronger empowerment of PR and similar functions within their own institutions, e.g. towards their board; only a really empowered communication professional can really help to reduce the negative effect of communicative crisis situations or even avoid these. On the other side, the exemplary findings regarding crisis types, chosen communication approach and their effects may even help well established communication manager to choose their strategies even more carefully. However, as mentioned above, still much research on the issue is needed.

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Social Media as a Gift and Curse in Crisis Communication: A Study on Turkish Public Relations Practitioners

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Introduction and Purpose

As social media has been causing a redefinition of communication function in general, its effects on crisis communication are quite remarkable. The ongoing change of social media has made the crisis environment much more complicated (Lee, 2020) that has led to the evolution of crisis communication practice and understanding.

The purpose of this study was to examine how Turkish public relations (PR) practitioners evaluate social media in terms of its threats and opportunities for crisis communication, and its effects on crisis consulting process. It also aimed to take recommendations to use social media more effectively during crisis communication.

Literature Review

In crisis communication field, social media is generally considered as both a gift and curse (Cheng, 2016) since it can trigger or inflame crises (Pang et al., 2014) and can help organizations to prevent them, respond better or learn from crises (Lin et al., 2016). In digital age, it plays a crucial role to know how social media should be used and managed before, during or after a crisis.

The impact of social media on crisis communication has been seriously debated all around the world. However, studies that include recommendations for use of social media in crisis communication are mostly disorganized (Lachlan, Spence and Eith, 2014) and research on how PR practitioners in Turkey approach social media in terms of crisis communication is extremely limited. This study aims to explore views of PR practitioners related to the role of social media in crisis communication in Turkey.

Methodology

The present study followed an exploratory approach and utilized qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviewing method with 20 senior PR practitioners who work in agencies that are members of Turkish Public Relations Association (TUHID) and Communication Consultancies Association of Turkey (IDA). The participants were chosen through purposive sampling technique. All interviews were conducted online via between June and August 2020. After data collection process, interviews were subjected to a thematic analysis which indicated 14 themes based on the research questions.
Results and Conclusions

The findings showed that Turkish PR practitioners mostly regard social media as a curse rather than a gift due to number of threats they asserted about social media. This study revealed two significant risks which are relatively less mentioned in the crisis communication literature. The first one was the inexperience of the digital content agencies in sensing the risks that may cause a crisis. Another serious risk was related to context of Turkey discussing opposing parties on social media created by the polarization in Turkey which are likely to put organizations in a dangerous position any moment.

When it comes to crisis consulting practice, all participants agreed upon the view that crisis communication consultancy has risen to the top among the services most demanded from them. In addition, it was a common view that it has become very difficult to develop scenarios due to the increasing difficulty of making predictions in this new world. The majority of the participants recommended an emphasis on relationship building and two-way communication opportunities with key stakeholders on social media in proactive crisis communication phase which is underutilized due to workload in agencies.

There were two main limitations in this study. Firstly, only PR agencies that are members of TUHID and IDA were included in the study. Future studies could include other PR agencies to widen the scope of the research. Secondly, it only discussed consulting services; further studies could examine the organizational part of the crisis communication to compare both sides.

Practical and Social Implications

This paper presents a comprehensive and up-to-date crisis communications guide to communication professionals that includes practical recommendations and emphasizes risks and opportunities that social media brings along. The results are also insightful for highlighting dynamics of Turkish context.

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Frames, Rationalities, and Image Repair Responses of Public Officials in the 2018 wildfire disaster of Mati in Greece

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Yannas, Prodromos, University of West Attica (Greece)

Introduction

This article attempts to investigate the Greek government’s communication on the natural fire disaster of Eastern Attica suburbs, in particular Mati, a seaside residential area in July 2018. The disaster killed 102 people, uprooted families, left psychological scars on victims’ relatives and friends and destroyed many properties. These wildfires were one of the deadliest in Europe since 1900.

The analysis will focus on the major political protagonist, the then Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras. To our knowledge only few studies have examined how political leaders and public officials respond during natural disasters. Until now, a sizeable number of scholars have analyzed crisis communication responses based on two dominant theories, the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 1997) and image repair theory (Benoit, 1997) while some have tried to understand crisis responses through alternative approaches (Tao and Kim, 2017) such as the ethical perspective in crisis communications (Linsley and Slack, 2013; Fraustino and Kennedy, 2018) and few have focused into the relationship between public leadership and crisis communication in times of major disasters. In fact, the notion of the caring leader in literature has received inadequate attention (Gabriel, 2015) and even lesser in the context of crisis communication.

In this article, we draw upon insights originating in the disciplines of philosophy, communication, and business studies as well as geography. Philosophers have pondered over the ethics of care and have debated whether an ethics of care or an ethics of justice is more appropriate for analyzing disasters (Ciulla, 2009). An ethic of justice approach is characterized by using objective standards, making impartial judgments, and resolving conflicting rights (Bauman, 2011) while an ethic of care favors the cultivation of relationships (Fraustino and Kennedy, 2018), sensitivity and responsiveness to the feelings of others (Tao and Kim, 2017).

We will approach the natural disaster through a social constructivist lens (Schultz, and Raupp, 2010) concentrating on the framing and sense-giving of the disaster by major political actors. The social constructivist perspective pays particular attention to the socio-cultural context and underscores the symbolic meaning of disaster communication.

The way leaders act during the unfolding of the disasters has also important repercussions on how they will be judged by the publics the day after, in the post-disaster period. In politics, the ultimate test is the time the leader puts up candidacy for re-election.
Crises and disasters offer a great leeway for the unfolding of the qualities and pitfalls of leadership. In this paper we will try to elaborate more on the role of political leadership in disaster communication. In times of disasters with high collective impact, public leaders communicate the meaning and sense-making process of crisis to the public by using different sets of rhetorical approaches and frames (Jong, 2017). The different frames of various political actors compete with each other and the most appealing help the public understand the crisis (Liu and Boin, 2020). The framing and handling of crises and disasters by political leaders during the period of their occurrence impact a) the courses of action being taken, b) attributions of responsibility and c) the legitimacy accorded to the government and the political leadership in charge. Crises and disasters are unusual out-of-the-ordinary events that trigger easily emotions that may find their way in political decision making and in the flow of interactions between leaders and various publics, especially concerning groups directly affected by these unfortunate developments. Communication scholars have elaborated and applied the concept of framing in a variety of contexts and have offered theoretical models of crisis-response strategies crafted upon attributions of responsibility. However, framing incorporates rational and emotional aspects. Hence, this study is expected to increase our knowledge about the different frames, rationalities, and response strategies employed by the then Prime-Minister Alexis Tsipras. In addition, we will approach the framing process of public leaders through the lens of the ethics of care approach.

Looking at the 2018 July wildfire disaster in the Eastern Attica suburbs including Mati, we are primarily interested in analyzing the discourse of the main protagonist Alexis Tsipras, the Prime Minister at the time. Concentrating on the Prime Minister, we proceed to analyze his discourse in order to answer questions related to the type of framing and the attributions of responsibility. These questions relate to the frames that the leader utilized and whether he espoused a rationality of caring mode of reasoning.

**A Caring Approach to Disaster and Crisis Communication**

Disasters have been defined as “man-made or natural causes that disrupt a population and cause widespread human, material, economic, or environmental losses, exceeding that population’s capacity to cope using its own resources” (Shilkofski et al., 2017). Moreover, disasters are regarded as traumatic events (McFarlane and Norris, 2006) that can cause collective stress (Barton, 1969) in the affected region. During such mega-damage events public figures apart from trying to restore their reputation, have an ethical duty to support the affected stakeholders through a caring narrative (Jong and Brataas, 2021). Vetterrnanta (2015), drawing upon Heidegger’s existential phenomenology, applies the distinction between technical-instrumental rationality and rationality of caring to the ways Norwegian government authorities responded in two crises situations. Technical-instrumental rationality is short term, applies scientific norms and relies on quantifiable information. The rationality of caring is long term, appeals to tradition and political culture and underlines the care for the welfare of the community.

To clarify more the concept of caring, geographers have proposed the distinction between caring for and caring about (Lawson 2007; Milligan and Wiles, 2010). Caring for is more personal and specific, involving the undertaking of certain tasks towards specific others. Caring for is assessed over the long-term and in many cases requires a life-long personal commitment. Caring about entails the emotional aspects of care towards more generalized others. Both types of caring can be applied to both socially proximate or distant others (Milligan & Wiles, 2010). In the political realm, caring about is more prev-
alent and much easier to identify than caring for. Politicians, fully cognizant that their decisions will be judged in the short-run, identify with the plight of the victims, and exhibit, if they so choose, empathy and emotional attachment to their condition. At a very basic level, caring about entails the capacity of leaders to be attentive to the needs of others. This can be done through subjective expressions of feelings such as sadness and sorrow but also through a strong sense of duty associated with holding high office. The sense of duty acquires added importance in times of crises (Ciulla, 2009). Irrespective of the source of motivation, it is imperative that leaders appear to be sensitive to the concerns of the victims, their relatives and their communities. Gesser-Edelsburg and Zemach (2012) analyzing the communication of the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during the 2010 forest fires in the Carmel Mountains that killed 44 people found that identification with the bereaved was included in his narrative and sense-making of the crisis. More specifically, Netanyahu expressed his sorrow and compassion for the victims and the affected families while showing a caring profile.

In politics and especially with regards to crises and disasters, the caring about of the leaders is demonstrated through emotional proximity to those affected and is observed through their visible physical presence to the sites of destruction. The on-site presence of the leaders, interacting, listening and showing concern for the people of the impacted communities is crucial from the onset of the disaster. A good recent example of empathetic- caring about leadership is the way the Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern handled the Christchurch mosque attack in 2019. She not only made her presence felt but intermingled with the people and wore the hijab as a symbolic way of sharing in the tragedy that had befallen on the religious community (Tomkins, 2020). Thus, “being there” either at the site of the crisis or at the office is a primary element of an ethic of care communicative approach that reflects the active involvement of the public leader in the crisis (Ciulla, 2010). Moreover, besides “being there” a caring leader need to be visible and accessible in times of crisis (Gabriel, 2015).

Empathy has also been regarded as a key aspect of a caring leader in times of crisis that pays attention to the needs of his/her followers (Ciulla, 2010), listens to them and shows compassion that is enduring and long-lasting (Gabriel, 2015) and does not fade at the post-crisis phase. Caring leaders during disasters show sensitivity and cultivate a sense of personal connection with the affected stakeholders (Tao and Kim, 2017) by “hearing, understanding, and being responsive to the voices and experiences” of the affected stakeholders (Simola, 2003, p. 328). Jong (2017) indicates that during a crisis with high collective impact and high responsibility, leaders should act as “orchestrators” and seek to engage emotionally with the impacted communities through participation in remembrances, memorials, and personal meetings with them. This way, hope and trust can be restored. Jong and Duckers (2018) found that the affected people of a disaster expect a “connected” leader that orchestrates and participates in remembrances as well as an “empathetic” leader that offers a listening ear, acknowledges their feelings, and relates with them in a more personal way.

In a similar vein, Bauman (2011) suggested that an ethic of care approach in crisis communication could be employed through the AAA strategy (Acknowledgement, Apologia, Action). More specifically, a caring response requires the acknowledgement of the harm and the magnitude of the crisis as well as engagement with the affected stakeholders. According to Liu and Boin (2020) it is important for political leaders to acknowledge the significance of the crisis and not downplay its extent in order to minimize the reputational harm. Furthermore, when crisis
responsibility is high, the use of apologia is also
an indication of a caring response. Through the
lens of the ethic of care, Diers-Lawson and Pang
(2016) suggest that an ethical, caring, and com-
passionate apologia should include the element
of empathy that reflects responsiveness to the
needs and the state of the affected people as well
as identification with them. Moreover, action is
a significant part of a caring apologia as it is
important for crisis leaders to sincerely accept
responsibility, do the right thing for the affected
stakeholders, and offer voluntary compensation.

Last but not least, a caring approach to crisis
management is also related to crisis prepared-
ness of organizations and institutions which is
translated to early identification and attention
to warning signs (Madden and Alt, 2021). Early
intervention and treatment of risks is also a
dimension of a “care” approach during the crisis
intervention stage (Simola, 2005).

The Disaster of Eastern Attica (Mati)

On July 23 around 12.00 pm a fire that initially
appeared in the Gerania Mountains shortly
thereafter due to strong winds enveloped the
seaside resort of Kineta and within a few hours,
at 17.00 pm, had crossed over the other side of
the motor highway burning on its catastrophic
spree the seaside suburbs of Rafina Neos Vout-
zas, Oropos and Mati. The disaster killed 102
people and burned or damaged almost 2,500
houses. The youngest victim was a 6-month-old
baby and the oldest a 94-year-old. Many animals
were also killed or injured. The fires were so
intense that caused people to be trapped in their
houses or cars as they tried to escape. A group
of 26 people were killed after being trapped in
an area at the top of cliff, with some of them
embracing each other. Moreover, many people
ran towards the beach and jumped into the sea
to save their lives.

Before proceeding any further, a word of cau-
tion is in order. There is unanimous agreement
across the political spectrum and among technical
experts that the disaster could not have been
avoided. The speed, direction and intensity of the
winds (western wind gusts at 95 kilometer per
hour) coupled with high precipitation levels, low
humidity at 19%, and extreme air temperatures
in excess of 38-degree Celcius (Lagouvardos et
al., 2019) made the occurrence of the disaster
inevitable. As the general secretary of the Union
of Retirees from the Fire Department Ioannis
Zachilas succinctly put it, “no matter what we
do, we couldn’t confront such a fire” (dynatiel-
ladanews.com, 2018). All the available technical
reports of experts concur in this conclusion
(Lekkas et al., 2018; Lagouvardos et al., 2019).
What is however an issue of contention deals
with the actions that could have been taken by
the acting government or by governments pre-
ceding it to mitigate the tragic results of the di-
saster, including the high death toll. Cognizant
of the fact that the analysis could take us down
the path of identifying as causes long standing
political clientelist practices like legalizing unli-
censed houses and constructions or pointing out
to bureaucratic inefficiencies and overlapping of
responsibilities of state agencies, we have opted
to mention but not to elaborate on them. The
case in the suburb of Mati illegally constructed
structures blocked the access to the sea for many
inhabitants who tried to escape the flames can
be considered a main factor contributing to the
high number of deaths. Even if the blame for
this sad state of affairs is attributed to successive
Greek governments that did not rollback illegal-
ities, the fact of the matter remains that politi-
cians and citizens were complicit in perpetuat-
ing arrangements made for mutual benefit. As
a result, only a disaster of this magnitude could
undo, as it is expected, past wrongdoings.

Method

The main goal of the present study is to ana-
lyze the initial crisis communication response
of Alexis Tsipras, the then Prime Minister of Greece by examining his first four media appearances and speeches (i.e., meeting in the coordinating center, a recorded announcement, a meeting with his cabinet, and his first visit to the disaster scene). Based on the preceding literature review we content analyzed his narrative in order to identify the different frames utilized as well as the elements of “caring rationality”.

**Meeting and Announcement at the Coordination Center**

Four hours after the fire erupted, Tsipras urgently returned to Greece from a trip to Bosnia. Shortly after, at 11:00 pm on July 23, 2018, Tsipras appeared in a meeting at the main coordination center where he was shown in live broadcast being briefed by the deputy chief of fire department and his ministers. In that meeting, Tsipras was asking questions about the active fire spots, the firefighting rescue forces mobilized and available, and the state of fire danger (fuel danger index). Several frames have been identified in his first media appearance the day of the disaster such as “control of the situation”, “strategic ambiguity about the magnitude and responsibility”, “international help”, and “heroism and sacrifice”.

The frame of control was evident in several questions addressed by Tsipras, as he wanted to be informed by the deputy chief of fire department about the number of forces that were combating in the field.

**Deputy Chief of Fire Department:** We had a fire in Daou Penteli in Rafina, which started at 16.49. Around the affected area there were 80 fire trucks, one group of firefighters, 3 aircrafts, and 1 helicopter. We don’t have an active fire right now. All fires are in remission...

**Tsipras:** How many forces are currently to Voutzas, in Rafina?

**Deputy Chief of Fire Department:** There are 80 firefighters in total and are constantly being reinforced from Northern Greece.

**Tsipras:** I assume you have all the resources...

**Deputy Chief of Fire Department:** Most of them. In Gerania Mountains, Agioi Theodoroi there are 88 cars... Apart from the points where we have done something, we have also sent boats to transfer some people from the port of Rafina to safe places.

**Tsipras:** From where did the boats originate? The Army?

**Minister of Civil Protection – Nikos Toskas:** The Coast Guard, plus a Navy frigate, plus a Tanker that will arrive shortly afterwards in...

Moreover, the frame of control was further utilized in comments about the rescue stations that had been developed and the actions undertaken to transfer residents to safer places and injured people to hospitals in Athens.

Simultaneously, during the meeting the rhetoric approach of strategic ambiguity was employed regarding the responsibility for the disaster as it was attributed to macro factors like the strong winds and the high number of fires that broke out across the area on July 23. Herein, technical rationality was used through the simplification of the scientific information about the extreme weather conditions and fire-related information.

**Tsipras:** So, what is your assessment? How many outbreaks did we have at the same time?

**Deputy Chief of Fire Department:** Today? Several... because the weather conditions were very extreme, and we had...

**Tsipras:** Winds blowing from west...

**Firefighter:** Several outbreaks begun. That is, every hour we had a fire, and in dangerous areas, mainly Corinthia, around Attica, Gerania Ori, Kineta, Agioi...
Theodoroi, Kalamos and in Daou Penteli.

Meteorologist: Winds in the afternoon reached 11 Beaufort.

Tsipras: 11?

Tsipras: I am surprised by the fact that the timeframe for the severe weather was short. We predicted it yesterday. From this morning until this evening. The number of outbreaks is high for this very short amount of time.

Strategic ambiguity was also utilized in regard to the magnitude of the damage through the transmission of equivocal messages. In the following dialogue between Tsipras, the Deputy Chief of Fire Department and the Minister of Civil Protection, Nikos Toskas it can be argued that there was an absence of specificity in regard to the extent of human and material damage in terms of people being trapped and killed and housed burnt.

Deputy Chief of Fire Department: The active fire-ground is in recession, we don’t have a forest fire. But the fire still burns some houses, because priority has been given to save the people. To go to a safe place...

Tsipras: So we have people trapped in the port?

Toskas: People were trapped in a small port, in Mati and the Kokkino Limanaki. We transferred them from there. The operation continues. We transfer them to Rafina.

According to researchers, strategic ambiguity is a reasonable rhetoric approach during the initial stages of a crisis when facts and evidence are still unclear or lacking or changing rapidly (Sohn and Hatfield Edwards, 2018). This approach enables organizations to “preserve future options and flexibility of interpretations” (Kline et al., 2009, p. 42). As more information is brought to light with the passage of time, it is more than plausible that in trying to assess the severity of the situation the Prime-Minister was fed by misleading information by Vasilis Mathaiopoulos, the Deputy Chief of the Fire Service.

The international help frame was also utilized by the Prime Minister and his cabinet as they emphasized the support provided by leaders of other countries.

After the meeting was over, Tsipras made an announcement to journalists acknowledging the extent of the crisis.

“I had to terminate my trip when I was informed that the situation was out of control...it is an asymmetrical phenomenon...It is a difficult night for Attica and for Greece”.

Again, he emphasized the government’s operational crisis management performance showing that the government was in control of the situation.

“Over 600 men and women firefighters are operating with more than 300 vehicles across three fire points. At the moment, there is a tremendous operation and all the forces are being coordinated. The army will also join the operation.”

Moreover, he made an attempt to calm down the public and enhance the feeling of solidarity urging:

“to pull ourselves together in order to do what is best for our people that are in danger”...“nothing matters more than the human life. So they have to keep their calmness and to try to protect the most precious asset... the human lives”

The frame of heroism was also found in the narrative of Tsipras as he spoke about the firefighters that acted with sacrifice to save human lives. Although, Tsipras tried to create an image that he was in control of the situation and to create a sense of solidarity, his response did not show
care and concern for the victims.

According to news stories, the most important pitfall of Tsipras’ initial response was the fact that he did not make any reference to deaths although two hours after his first media appearance, the government’s spokesperson Dimitris Tzanakopoulos had announced 20 deaths (Kanellopoulos, 2020). The media accused Tsipras and the government for trying to cover up the high death toll. Some of the headlines, few days later were “The Video of Shame Exposing both Tsipras and the Fire Brigade Leadership” (Kapsis, 2018), ‘Everyone knew that there were dead in Mati before the Tsipras show on “black Monday night” (protothema.gr, 2018a). All these accusations caused severe public outrage and criticism. The official response of the government was that Tsipras was not informed about “officially confirmed deaths” when he arrived at the coordination center and that there were only rumors about 1 or 2 deaths from smoke exposure. Media reports and the main opposition party on the other hand, indicated that the government and Tsipras knew about the deaths and deliberately decided not to disclose this information at that moment. Reports of the first dead body arrived at the coordination center around 20:40 pm, more than two hours prior to the meeting with the Prime-Minister (Chrysopoulos, 2018). The picture of what transpired at night in the presence of Tsipras at the coordination center becomes crystal clear with revelations that came to light out of a 2-year investigation conducted by magistrate Athanasios Marneris. Excerpts of the magistrate’s lengthy report reveal that a) officials at the meeting knew of at least three dead or possibly even more but couldn’t confirm them (sigmalive.com, 2021; Lifo.gr, 2021); and b) the Deputy Chief of the Fire Department, Vasilis Mathaiopoulos bypassed the line of authority, the Chief Sotiris Terzoudis, and misled Tsipras about the likelihood of deaths (Ganymidis.blogspot.com, 2021)

A Recorded Announcement

The next day, on July 24, Tsipras made his second media appearance through a recorded announcement. In an effort to appear more sensitive, Tsipras started his speech by expressing in a general and abstract way his emotions about the disaster.

“... there are no words to describe the emotions of all of us. Greece experiences an unspeakable tragedy where dozens of human lives have been lost and this is unbearable for everyone of us but especially for the families who lost their loved ones and for us that hold positions of responsibility and understand that there is nothing more valuable than the human life. Today Greece mourns and to the memory of those lost I declare three days of National mourning.”

“I will also like to commit myself, that nothing and nobody will be ever forgotten, and nothing and nobody will be left without help from the state and nothing will remain unanswered”

In the second announcement Tsipras repeated the communication patterns of his first media appearance by acknowledging the magnitude of the disaster through words such as “unspeakable tragedy” and “Greece undergoes a great suffering” while he continued praising the firefighters and rescuers for their heroism and sacrifice. Moreover, he emphasized his gratitude towards the international leaders who expressed their solidarity and offered help to Greece in an attempt to downplay the feelings of isolation felt by citizens. The theme also of silencing was identified in Tsipras’ narrative as he stated that:

“During these moments there are no differences between us and the time will come to investigate the “how and why” of this tragedy with respect to the deceased.”

This way he tried to unify the Greek people and increase their feeling of solidarity while also pushing aside the severe criticism concerning
the government’s responsibilities for the disaster.

**Tsipras presiding over a cabinet meeting**

Three days after his second announcement Tsipras chaired a cabinet meeting that was broadcasted live by all the major news channels in Greece.

“I won’t hide that I am overwhelmed by mixed feelings right now ... Pain, devastation for the human lives unexpectedly and unfairly lost. But also anguish at whether we acted correctly in everything we did and if we could have acted differently in order to save at least one more life from those that were lost so unfairly. Moreover, I cannot hide my thoughts or fears that due to our self-preservation instinct we might mistakenly exaggerated on excuses in order to reduce our responsibilities...”

In his third appearance, Tsipras expressed his emotions about the victims as well as his emotions of self-doubt about the way the government managed the crisis. Tsipras was shown most of the times looking down at his papers while the expressions of his emotions about the victims were general. He also accepted the “political responsibility for the tragedy”:

“I want to fully accept the responsibility before the cabinet members and the Greek people regarding the tragedy... and I call you (the ministers) to also accept the responsibility no matter how heavy the burden is... we are not going to try and escape from our responsibilities like we haven’t been escaping when we faced the huge and catastrophic national and humanistic crisis that others have caused”

Through this narrative, Tsipras tried to reduce the public outrage and fierce criticism from the main opposition party for the mismanagement of the crisis. Moreover, he differentiated the political performance from the operational performance of the fire service and police stating: “self-criticism should not be associated with the colossal rescue operations during this unprecedented disaster”. Again, Tsipras wanted to frame the crisis management efforts as effective emphasizing the extent of the crisis.

However, as several news stories and the opposition parties indicated, the acceptance of the political responsibility meant nothing to the affected people and was not accompanied by any resignation (protothema.gr, 2018b).

In his third appearance before his cabinet, Tsipras again employed the strategic ambiguity response by adopting mixed-response strategies (Sohn and Hatfield Edwards, 2018). Specifically, along with the acceptance of political responsibility, he utilized the “shifting the blame” and “scapegoating” rhetoric as he attributed the responsibility to previous governments that allowed illegal constructions as well as to arsonists challenging the stability of the society and “creating a sense of insecurity”. Strategic ambiguity was also combined with (a) general corrective actions and promises on changes regarding plans for resolving the issues of illegal constructions, the reforming of the civil protection mechanism, and the restructuring of the state’s defense and security system, and (b) the theme of silencing as he stated that the investigation about the causes and those accountable for the disaster will be conducted after the crisis is over.

Moreover, Tsipras also tried to address the lack of a caring approach during the crisis prevention stage through the strategy of transcendence (Benoit, 2007) stating that his government’s indecisiveness regarding the long overdue problem of unlicensed and anarchic constructions was overtaken by the much wider economic crisis facing the country.

Emphasis was also placed on praising the firefighters, the coastal guard personnel, the emergency rescuers, as well as the volunteers who helped during the times of crisis.
After one week (July 30, 2018) Tsipras visited the disaster scene [Mati] early at 8:20am in the morning. He met with emergency and fire service crews and a few residents. Following the site visit, Tsipras ordered that a fast-track approach devoid of bureaucratic red tape be implemented for alleviating the suffering of the victims and for expediting the recovery of the region (gr.euronews.com, 2018). Tsipras was accused by the main opposition party New Democracy and the media for arriving too early in the morning at the fire-stricken site to avoid meeting and interacting with outraged residents (protagon.gr, 3018). There is, however, an alternative interpretation explaining the decision not to stage a news event in this and subsequent visits of the Prime-Minister in the area. To begin with, the Prime-Minister wanted to minimize exposure to established media which were hostile to the government and would have used hyperbole in exacerbating an already grim situation. Additionally, the Prime-Minister opted to lay weight on a result-oriented operational instead of a communication-driven approach. In his visit to the area on September 4, 2018, Tsipras assured residents that cabinet members were working behind the scenes expediting the recovery process and pledged to continue his visits to the area unaccompanied by TV cameras in order to oversee step by step the restoration progress (naftemporiki.gr, 2018).

The profile of Tsipras as a caring crisis leader took a further blow when news stories appeared showing him with his family spending their summer vacations on a luxury yacht 25 days after the disaster (protothema.gr, 2019). The media as well as the main opposition party seized that opportunity to portray him as an insensitive leader who failed to identify with the plight of the affected people.

The aim of the present study was to analyze the crisis communication response of the then Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras during the 2018 wildfires in Mati, Greece through the framing and ethic of care approaches.

Looking at the initial responses of the Prime Minister it can be argued that he did not conform to a caring communication approach with regard to the victims and the affected people. More specifically, the then Prime Minister exhibited low levels of identification with the emotional needs of the affected community. On the other hand, in the initial crisis stages, he employed the rhetoric of strategic ambiguity by addressing the victims and the magnitude of the crisis in a general way and providing mixed-response strategies (acceptance of responsibility, shifting blame, scapegoating, and transcendence). Throughout his narrative several frames have been used effectively such as the frame of “control”, “international help”, and “acts of heroism” that helped counterbalance the public outrage. These frames have also been used by other leaders during times of disasters (e.g., Liu, 2007; Gesser-Edelsburg and Zemach, 2012).

In general, the disaster communication of Tsipras was deemed by several media analysts as ineffective (Parvou, 2021; Kanellopoulos, 2020). Part of this communication failure could be attributed to the lack of an ethic of care in the initial crisis communication response of the Prime Minister and the government. However, it should be noted that the majority of the leading media were hostile towards the government and conveyed a negative image of Tsipras and the government with respect to the Mati crisis while favoring the main opposition party (Karyotakis, 2021). One month after the crisis, a published opinion poll showed that the majority of the respondents also evaluated negatively the government’s crisis management performance (iefime-
Of course, the national elections of July 2019 were the litmus test for the popularity of the Tsipras-led left of center SYRIZA party. His party lost the elections and acknowledged in its appraisal that the communication policy pursued at the Mati disaster was flawed and partly to blame for the electoral outcome (eklogika.gr, 2020).

Findings of the present study underline the significance of a caring communication approach for public leadership in times of crisis. Future research could shed light on the differences between the main political actors (ministers, leader of the main opposition party, municipal authorities) in regard to their caring rhetoric approach during the Mati’s disaster.

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The Hiccup Paradox of Corporate Communication in the Pandemic

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Introduction

Hiccups – a phenomenon everyone can relate to. Not life-threatening, yet disruptive and omnipresent. Focusing on getting rid of this unpleasant state, present surroundings and events fade into the background. This does not only apply to hiccups, but also to corporate communication during the coronavirus crisis of 2020/2021. Obviously, it is not the sole or decisive issue organisations face, however it appears to become the pivotal point in corporate communication.

Based on this assumption, the authors conducted a study which examined the crisis communication of the DAX 30 companies in Germany six months before and after the first lockdown in Germany. It reveals that the attribution of causes for corporate crises has changed during the pandemic.

When German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel stepped in front of the press to inform the public about the first nationwide lockdown, the coronavirus had already caused difficulties for around two months in Germany. Contact restrictions, mandatory mask wearing, and the shutdown of any public life as well as the economic system paralysed a whole population – and the entire world. The pandemic not only affects individuals in their private, but also in their working life. From the home office and the intruding digitalisation in all business sectors to the development of incisive hygiene concepts: a rethinking of long-established structures has been required (Kießler, 2021).

The economic consequences of the pandemic in Germany have been severe. A poll on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy outlines that three of four enterprises stated that they had perceived negative effects at the time of the interview (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie, 2020). In April 2020, about 6 million employees were compelled to work on short-time (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2021) and the GDP in Q2 (compared to the corresponding quarter of the previous year) declined markedly by 11.3% (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021). Moreover, a survey conducted by DIHK1 shows that 69% of interviewed companies in Germany expect a decrease in turnover for 2020 (Deutscher Industrie und Handelskammertag, 2021).

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1 Deutscher Industrie- und Handelskammertag e.V.
Even large-scale enterprises such as Adidas are not immune to the coronavirus crisis. As chairman Kasper Rorsted stated the results of the first quarter in 2020, he highlighted “the grave challenges that the global coronavirus outbreak poses even to healthy companies” (Adidas, 2020).

To sum it up, the coronavirus pandemic hit the economy hard and had severe consequences for it. But of course, not all crises that companies have faced during the last 18 months have been caused by the virus and the lockdowns. Economic problems encountered by some companies have existed before; so in these cases the pandemic just exacerbated already existing problems which have been caused by wrong strategies, management failure or a missing adaptation to a changing political or social environment. And, of course, also when handling the effects of a crisis which may have been due to the pandemic, not everything that goes wrong is inevitable. Good crisis management can help to diminish negative effects whereas bad crisis management can promote them.

However, a global crisis situation such as the coronavirus pandemic can be used by companies to distract from own failures. The answer concerning the reasons for a crisis situation may be always the same: It is not our fault, it is the pandemic!

Theoretical background, research gap and research questions

To understand this from a theoretical perspective let’s have a look at the theoretical background. Coombs defines corporate crises as a “perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectations of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organisation’s performance and generate negative outcome” (Coombs, 2007b).

By regarding a crisis as an event, one can not only identify the name of the incident, but at the same time analyse variables such as type, scope and magnitude as the holistic nature of a crisis (Pearson and Mitroff, 1993).

The triggers are manifold: the causes can be attributed to human error or self-inflicted misconduct, but can also be based on external circumstances such as natural disasters (e.g. Hurricane Irene in 2011) or threats to public health (e.g. SARS 2003) (Cheng, 2018). An unambiguous classification is often not possible – exogenous factors can be a catalyst for already existing structural problems, but they can also have a disruptive character that harms previously successful companies.

Of course, crises are a threat to any organisation – in the financial dimension, but also with regard to reputation. Understood as “a collection […] of personal (direct) or mediated (indirect) experiences and stakeholders’ attitude towards an entity” (Thiessen, 2013), reputation entails future expectations towards an organisation based on past actions or immanent signals. Being able to damage reputation and change the way stakeholders interact with the company, this intangible yet valuable asset needs to be saved (Coombs, 2007a).

With the corporate crisis as an event that produces uncertainty for the stakeholders, a need for information is created. To enable the stakeholders to cope with the emergent psychological stress, the organisation must answer the questions as to why things have happened and who (or what) is responsible for it. By finding a clearly identifiable scapegoat, organisations aim “to repair the reputation, to reduce negative effects and to prevent negative behavioural intentions” (Coombs, 2007a).

Thus, standing in the limelight, companies are forced to engage in damage limitation for the protection of their reputational assets and social licence to operate. At this moment, it is crucial to present the crisis to the outside world in the
form of a credible story by attributing the responsibility to someone – or something (such as the coronavirus crisis) (Möhrle, 2016).

From a theoretical point of view, this leads to attributing blame and image repair, which is performed under the influence of classic and social media (Cheng, 2018). In order to provide companies with a guideline for appropriate crisis communication, Coombs (2007) developed the Situational Crisis Communication Theory based on Benoit’s (1995) Image Repair Theory, under the assumption that stakeholders are looking for a responsible party (Cheng, 2018).

Based on the approach of apology and accounts, referring to Benoit, Cheng points out that “an attack with two dimensions (i.e. an offensive act and an accusation of responsibility for the action) might threaten the image of the organisation” (Cheng, 2018). Therefore, five strategies are proposed in order to help in maintaining a positive reputation, namely denial (denying anything happened, rejecting accountability), evasion of responsibility (blamed on either provocation, defeasibility, accidental or good intentions), reducing offensiveness (including six sub-strategies, such as bolstering, minimisation, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser or compensation), taking corrective action or mortification (Benoit, 1997). However, this approach lacks “the clear direction on when and how to choose the right strategy” (Cheng, 2018) in the respective crisis context.

In the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (1995), Coombs includes two additional dimensions: the attribution theory and situation-oriented strategies based on experimental studies (Cheng, 2018).

Its basic assumption is that people search for the causes of events (Coombs, 2007a). When a crisis occurs, the stakeholders involved make attributions about crisis responsibility (Cheng, 2018) and an emotional reaction will follow (Coombs, 2007a). With emotions operating on a parallel track, in fact stakeholder attributions of crisis responsibility (i.e. as a result of a crisis factor that could have been controlled) have affective and behavioural consequences for an organisation (Coombs and Holladay, 2010).

In order to prevent negative outcomes, such as the anger of stakeholders, the severing of connections or harmful word-of-mouth propaganda, crisis managers are in debt of understanding the complex crisis situation. Aiming to determine which crisis response strategy will provide maximum reputational protection, the level of reputational threat (compared to state if no actions were taken) presented by the crisis needs to be assessed. Thereby, three key aspects for attribution need to be distinguished: initial crisis responsibility, crisis history and prior relational reputation (Coombs, 2007a).

According to Coombs, initial crisis responsibility can be understood as “the attributions of personal control for the crisis by the organisation – how much stakeholders believe an organisation’s actions caused the crisis” (Coombs, 2007a). Thereby, the crisis type serves as an overall frame, which provides orientation and serves as a vehicle for the attribution of responsibility. After all, from a stakeholder’s point of view, it is highly decisive regarding the attribution of responsibility whether the crisis was a result of an external force, accidental or a result of intentional actions by members of the organisation or technical or human error (Coombs, 2007a).

Similarly, the crisis history is of major importance. If an organisation has had an ongoing timeline of crises in the past, this leads to the suggestion of a deeper problem, which needs to be addressed properly (Martinko et al., 2014). In the same manner, the prior relational reputation deals with how well (or badly) an organisation has treated its stakeholders previously.
Unfavourable treatment may indicate little consideration for the stakeholders, not just in the context of a crisis (Coombs, 2007a).

To summarise, the degree of accountability is considered the decisive cornerstone for attributing crises to external environmental factors or internal causes. The perception of “who is responsible?” shapes the evaluation of an organisation’s reputation as well as the “stakeholder’s emotional response and future interactions” (Nerb and Spada, 1997).

Research regarding this topic has been based primarily on the aspects identified in Coomb’s SCCT, the derivation of suitable communication response strategies or shifts in leadership communication during a crisis (cf. Coombs, 2007, Liu et al. 2018, Watkins and Walker, 2021). However, what has not been considered so far are the effects of an external, global crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic on the perception and attribution of an organisation’s crises.

Our hypothesis is that a global crisis may be used by corporate communications to explain nearly everything that goes wrong in the context of this crisis and to attribute every occurring crisis externally, i.e. in the present context: “It is not our fault, it is the coronavirus pandemic”. The communicative effect both on the side of the communicating companies as well as on the side of public perception can be compared to that of a hiccup: it stays for a longer time; it is omnipresent and repetitive. And it pushes other aspects into the background and becomes the pivotal point in corporate communication (and public perception) though it may not be the decisive trigger for a crisis.

Therefore, our central research questions are:

- Has the share of externally attributed crises risen in comparison to the time before the pandemic?
- Are there any hints that a hiccup effect exists, i.e. that companies are using the global crisis to attribute the origins of crises ex-
ternally to the pandemic, even though they may have come about due to internal reasons?

**Methodology**

In order to capture the external attribution of crises, the authors have decided to record and evaluate the online communication concerning DAX 30 companies. Over the last two decades, internet use has increased rapidly (Schneller, 2017). In 2020, about 88% of the German population were “online”, 80% even on mobile devices (see figure 1, cf. Initiative D21, 2021). With more communication taking place via internet-based channels such as social media apps, communication behaviour is changing markedly. Everyone can act as a journalist in their own right.

In fact, consumers’ interaction with posts by sharing, liking or commenting has strengthened the communication effect (Szwajca, 2017). Bearing in mind the growing importance of digital means, a rethink for businesses is required (Kaul et al., 2015). Aula and Mantere add that the brand image of companies is no longer in their sphere of action, but rather dependent on the millions of people who share their thoughts about the business publicly and thus play a significant role in shaping its perception (Aula and Mantere, 2008).

So far, the analysis of internet-based communication has been quite popular in classical market research to gain in-depth customer insights and to carve out one’s unique positioning in the market (Chui et al., 2012).

As such, social listening is a well-elaborated tool for conducting meaningful content analyses based on digital communication on the internet. Thereby, all targeted, digital communication about companies and brands in online media as well as social media channels is collected and evaluated (Westermann & Forthmann, 2020). With the help of artificial intelligence, it is possible to analyse dozens of statements aiming to extract the content behind the communication – such as core topics, reputational statements or image perceptions (Forthmann et al., 2021).

**Methods, Part 2: The econometrics**

For this study, all communication of DAX 30 companies was collected from 213,000 internet sources. Thus, the public statements from online media, forums, blogs, communities, Twitter, Facebook, etc. were evaluated. A total of 5,306,568 statements on the companies examined were included in the study.

After the “social listening” had been conducted, the data needed to be sorted in order to obtain an analysable database. To do this, the fragments were organised according to the day for each company. As a result, 30 time series display the number of text fragments for each company and each day. In order to work with the greatest possible precision in text analysis, texts with several statements are divided into individual fragments. This ensures that each individual statement is evaluated correctly.

Figure 2 shows the resulting time series for the DAX 30 company Adidas on a timeline from 2019 to 2021:

Following this, these time series are used to detect potential crises. In a first step, all outliers have been detected for each company. To do this,
the basic definition of an outlier has been applied:

"An outlier is a value higher than the third quartile plus 1.5 times the interquartile range." (Fahrmeir et. al., 2016, S.62)

Once these outliers have been identified, each outlier has been examined particularly to determine whether or not this outlier indicates a crisis. If so, all information on this respective crisis (e.g. internal or external attribution, date, etc.) has been collected and, if necessary combined in an individual approach. To do so, we have analysed press releases concerning the crisis in detail, checking if the company mentions an external or internal reason.

As a result, an overview has been created which crisis each company in the DAX 30 has had in the 2019/2020 time period. This list of 340 crises (150 within the period of 1 January 2019 to 26 February 2020 and 190 within the period from 27 February 2020 to 31 December 2020) guides us in relation to the main question: Has the proportion of crises which have been attributed externally increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic?

In order to answer this question, several steps have to be taken:

1st.) Calculating the proportion of externally attributed crises before the beginning of the pandemic (1/1/2019–26/2/2020).

2nd.) Calculating the proportion of externally attributed crises since the beginning of the pandemic (27/2/2020–31/12/2020).

3rd.) Conducting a statistical significance test on the (alternative) hypothesis that these proportions show significant differences.

4th.) Repetition of steps one to three for different levels of aggregation (e.g. individual consider-
eration of the company, industry sector, total).

In addition, the collection of data allows the resolution of the following questions:

1. In which direction did the change go?
2. How strong was the change?
3. Which companies.branches of business changed the most?

Results

The following graph shows the outcomes on a corporate level. For each company, the left bar displays the proportion of externally attributed crises before the pandemic, while the right bar depicts the proportion since the beginning of the pandemic.

Three of these companies (Allianz, Deutsche Börse, Deutsche Wohnen) have shown significant changes in the proportion of externally attributed crises at around the 5% level. Three companies (Adidas, Beiersdorf, Vonovia) were significant at around the 1% level, and one company (Continental) was around the level of 0.1%.

Interestingly, many companies have had a proportion of 100% after the pandemic had begun.

The following graph represents these changes:
All companies that have had a significant change show an increase in the proportion except for one, RWE, which demonstrates a decrease. Allianz, Beiersdorf and Deutsche Börse appear as the companies with the largest growth in proportion (all 100%). The respective change for Fresenius could not be calculated, as the company apparently has not had any crises since the beginning of the pandemic.

The results after aggregation on sector level have shown similar proportions:

Out of the 7 sectors of the economy, four have shown to be significant at the 0,1 %-level (Finance, Chemicals/Pharma, Industry, Consumer Goods). All shifts have been positive, except for one (B2C-Services). The consumer goods sector reveals the largest growth in the proportion of externally attributed crises (79,81 %).
Combining all companies, the proportion of externally attributed crises increased significantly from 19.33% to 68.42% (p value < 0.1%).

To summarise, the total proportion of externally attributed crises within the data set increased by almost 50%.

**Discussion**

The analysis of the communication of the DAX 30 companies shows that the share of externally attributed crises after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has increased significantly compared to the time before the outbreak of the pandemic. This applies in particular to the finance, chemicals/pharmaceuticals, industry, IT & communication and consumer goods sectors. In view of the diversity of the pandemic effects on
the different sectors, it is not possible to make a
general statement on the reasons why companies
cited external causes as the crisis triggers. Cer-
tainly, there were companies that experienced
economic problems as a result of the pandemic
that did not exist before. Nevertheless, the ques-
tion arises as to whether this statement is true
across the full range of companies studied. In
other words, whether the pandemic was indeed
a serious external crisis for almost all companies,
with which the problems that occurred can ac-
tually be explained, or whether the companies at
least partly used the opportunity to explain any
problems caused by the coronavirus pandemic
because this is accepted by the public, and as a
result their reputation did not suffer.

It is worth looking at some examples here. Figure
8 shows Continental’s share price performance.
Even before the coronavirus outbreak, the com-
pany was already in economic trouble, essential-
ly caused internally. After the outbreak of the
coronavirus pandemic, the company recovered
economically, but gave the impression that Con-
tinental was severely affected by the coronavi-

In March 2020, for example, Continental’s
management said: “The risks of the coronavirus
demic make us look to the business year with
greater concern.” In September of the same year,
Continental tightened its austerity measures “in
view of the setbacks for the automotive industry
in the Corona crisis”.

Adidas has actually had a slump in sales due to
the coronavirus pandemic (figure 9). But al-
though the share price has recovered and the
economic situation has improved, the company
blamed almost a good part of the crises on the
coronavirus after the pandemic began. For ex-
ample, Adidas suspended rent payments for its
own shops in March 2020 due to the pandem-
ic. Three months later, the company announced
that it expected to lose business in China be-
cause of the coronavirus. The management an-
nounced business figures “under the impact of
the coronavirus”.

The examples show that some companies used

Example Continental

Figure 8: Share price development for Continental before and after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic
the coronavirus pandemic to portray a crisis situation that was different in terms of share price development. Be it that the economic downward trend had already begun before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic or that a slump in the share price was quickly followed by a trend reversal.

Against this background, it can be assumed that some of the companies studied actually used the coronavirus to blame the cause of problems on the pandemic in order to avoid reputational damage.

There was thus a hiccup phenomenon: the omnipresence of coronavirus reporting – analogous to the omnipresence of a hiccup – was used to explain the causes of crises with the already omnipresent pandemic. Along the way, a paradox emerged: The coronavirus pandemic was blamed for more crises than in reality – but it fitted well into the general mood of the public. In this way, the untruth – which usually carries the risk of reputational damage – could be used to protect reputations. However, such a communication strategy is only possible if the public is gullible, which it has been during the coronavirus crisis, because the pandemic was so profound that it could be blamed for any damage.

Nevertheless, the widespread outrage in Germany at the suspension of rent payments to landlords of Adidas shops shows that the hiccup effect should not be overused. If you get your toes stepped on hard during a hiccup, you still scream – see Adidas. Other companies, however, have successfully used the hiccup paradox in reputation management.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen the proportion of crises that have been attributed externally has increased significantly since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic seems to have been made responsible for many problems that companies are facing or have faced since February/March 2020. Of course, the coronavirus pandemic has caused vast economic dislocations
and the external attribution may be true for several, especially economic, crises. However, the sheer number of external attributions and the degree to which their share has risen is astonishing. Furthermore, the single cases considered in detail show that not only formerly successful companies, but also companies that have faced economic problems or problems of social acceptance before now blame their situation on the coronavirus pandemic.

The coronavirus pandemic seems to be the perfect scapegoat to explain company crises and obviously leads to a hiccup phenomenon helping companies to attribute a large number of crises externally.

**Limitations and future research**

As already mentioned, the major limitation of our research is that we cannot judge if the external attribution of the different company crises to the coronavirus pandemic is plausible or if there are other (internal) reasons being suppressed by the “communicative hiccup”. Furthermore, of course, the results are limited to German companies and here to those belonging to the DAX 30.

Future research could investigate if the described effect can be witnessed from an international perspective as well and if the effect of increasing external attribution could be proved also for other global crises, such as the financial crisis or 9/11, for example.

But the most interesting aspect for future research, in our opinion, is to dive deeper into single cases to find evidence for company crises being attributed to the pandemic which have already existed before or have internal reasons; therefore, a case-based approach including qualitative interviews could be a promising research method.

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