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Organisational Crisis in the Media: Crisis Response Strategies and News Coverage

Lisa Tam
Peiyi Huang

Abstract

During a crisis, the crisis response strategies used reflect the extent to which an organisation accepts responsibility for the crisis. These strategies could subsequently affect the organisation's image and reputation. Thus, organisations are advised to be strategic in their choices of crisis response strategies through an analysis of the crisis situations. This study examines a crisis caused by an organisation's appointed advertising agency whose actions led the organisation to be accused of interfering with press freedom. This study uses content analysis to analyse the news coverage on the crisis response strategies used and the tone of the coverage. It found that justification was the most frequently used strategy. When the strategy of excuse was reported in the news coverage, the overall tone of the coverage was likely to be negative. The implications of the findings are also discussed.

Introduction

A crisis is an unexpected and overwhelming incident which could be threatening to organisational goals if they are not properly handled (Barton, 2001; Coombs, 1999; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998) To protect and repair their image during and after a crisis, organisations ought to respond to the public when confronting with accusations of unethical or inappropriate behaviours (Benoit, 1995). They are advised to use crisis response strategies *strategically* to minimise the negative impact of the crisis based on an analysis of the crisis situations (Coombs, 1998). The crisis response strategies selected are the *symbolic* resources which would shape attributions of responsibility for the crisis, change public perceptions about the organisation in crisis and reduce the negative impact caused by the crisis (Coombs, 2007a). In spite of the emergence of new and social media, traditional media coverage continues to play a significant role in influencing crisis reactions; the public is the most likely to discuss and share information about a crisis based on what is reported in traditional media coverage (Schultz, Utz, & Goritz, 2011). Thus, how the media frames a crisis, in terms of what they choose to include and exclude in their coverage of a crisis, could affect whether the crisis response strategies selected could achieve the desired outcome of minimising the negative impact of a crisis. To better understand how organisational crises are covered in the media, this study seeks to examine the relationship between the crisis response strategies used (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Coombs, 1995) and the tone conveyed in the news coverage.

Literature Review

The Impact of Crisis

Existing literature is yet to find a consensus on the definition of *crisis*; the different definitions are grounded on different assumptions (Coombs, 2007b). One of the definitions is that it is "an event that affects or has the potential to affect the whole of an organization." (Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001, p. 34-35). It could also be understood as "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company or industry, as well as its publics, products, services or, good name" (Fearn-Banks, 2002, p. 2). Amongst the different definitions, four common characteristics were identified: *specific*, *unexpected*, *uncertainty* and *threat* or *perceived threat* to an organisation's high priority goals. Each crisis is unique with its own causal factors, consequences, life cycle and the unknowns (Dilenschneider, 2000). In broader perspectives, a crisis could be defined as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2007a, p. 2-3). Although crisis situations are characterised by uncertainty and the lack of information and knowledge, well-prepared organisations should always acknowledge that they are exposed to the risk of having to deal with crises at all times (Coombs, 2007a).

Public relations practitioners are advised to always anticipate the unexpected by closely monitoring what is being discussed in society and to address the potential issues identified before they escalate into a crisis (e.g., Kim, Ni, & Sha, 2008). A crisis could make a potentially serious impact on organisations, their stakeholders, and even their industries as a whole (Coombs, 2007b;

2007c). When a crisis arises, an organisation's image could be seriously affected (Benoit, 1995). In response to the extensive news coverage caused by a crisis which affects the majority of the population, hot-issue publics would arise to be engaged in communicative behaviours to resolve the issue (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012; Kim, Ni, Kim, & Kim, 2012). In an empirical study, Tam and Lee (2016) found correlations between the amount of news coverage and the amount of online discussions about a nationalist crisis. Therefore, the extent and the frame of news coverage about a crisis could affect publics' perceptions and subsequent communicative behaviours about the crisis.

Existing literature has extensively discussed the impact of crises on an organisation's *image* and *reputation*. Image refers to the evaluation of an object at a certain point in time or for a specific period of time (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). According to Benoit (1995), after a crisis, the use of image repair strategies refers to the selection of message options which could shape the public's immediate perceptions about the crisis. It shapes the impression shared by an audience in response to the preventable and restorable measures taken by the organisation. On the other hand, unlike the concept of *image*, reputation is more long-term. As time goes by, the aggregate evaluations made by the public in response to the crisis could influence an organisation's overall reputation (Fombrun, 1996). According to Coombs (2007a), reputation is like the bank account of an organisation, consisting of the quality of the relationships between the organisation and its publics. Reputations are developed through publics' direct experiences with the organisation, mediated information about the organisation from the news media and second-hand information through word-of-mouth information. A positive reputation would help organisations suffer less and rebound faster during a crisis.

Crisis Response Strategies

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (e.g., Coombs, 2007a) suggested that the public is likely to seek to attribute responsibilities for the crisis (i.e., the attribution theory, Weiner, 1995) after a crisis. They would attribute *initial crisis responsibility* by looking at whether the organisation has control over the crisis. Their attribution of initial crisis responsibility would be dependent upon the crisis type (i.e., victim, accidental and preventable) and how the crisis is framed. These frames would put emphasis on certain facts about the crisis. As a result, the public would make assessments about the crisis based on selected facts. They would also make evaluations based on *crisis history*, i.e. whether or not the organisation has been involved in a similar crisis in the past, and *prior relational reputation*, i.e. whether the organisation is perceived to have positive or negative relationships with publics in the past. To protect their reputations during a crisis, organisations are advised to select their crisis response strategies based on these three criteria.

To determine what crisis response strategies would be the most appropriate in different crisis situations, models have been developed to relate different crisis situations to the selection of crisis response strategies. For instance, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) has classified crisis types into *the victim cluster*, *the accidental cluster* and *the preventable cluster* based on the attributions of responsibility and the reputational threat of a crisis (Coombs, 2007a). On the other hand, Bradford and Garrett (1995) developed the Corporate Communicative

Response Model based on two assumptions: the fundamental attribution error and the discounting principle. The fundamental attribution error proposes that people are more likely to attribute the responsibility of negative actions to internal causes associated with the character of the individuals or organisations involved, such as dishonesty, irresponsibility and selfishness, but they would omit the context in which the event takes place (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). The discounting principle suggests that the actors involved are capable of presenting information to influence how they are perceived by the public. If plausible explanations are provided, the negative dispositions could be discounted (Kelley, 1973).

The Corporate Communicative Response Model suggests that under certain crisis circumstances, some response strategies are correspondingly more effective than others in alleviating the negative impact of the crisis situation (Bradford & Garrett, 1995). For example, in a *commission* situation, *denial* would be the most effective. In a *control* situation, *excuse* would be the most effective. *Justification* should be used in a *standards* situation. In an *agreement* situation, *concession* should be used. Amongst them, *concession* would be the most optimal crisis response strategy in all crisis situations, except the *control* situation. Table 1 summarises Bradford and Garrett's (1995) Corporate Communicative Response Model.

Table 1. Bradford and Garrett's (1995) Corporate Communicative Response Model

Crisis Situations ⟶	Types of Response
Commission situation: No evidence of corporate commission.	*Denials*: Statements that deny the occurrence of the questionable event or that deny the accused organisation as the cause of the event.
Control situation: Evidence of corporate commission, but no evidence of corporate control.	*Excuses*: Statements that argue that the accused organisation should not be held responsible for the occurrence and/or impact of the questionable event because certain factors limited the organisation's control of the occurrence and/or impact of the event.
Standards situation: Evidence of corporate commission and control, but questionable standards of assessment.	*Justifications*: Statements that argue although the accused organisation is responsible for the questionable event, the standards being used by the accusers in evaluating the impact of the questionable event are inappropriate.
Agreement situation: Evidence of corporate commission and control, and appropriate standards of assessment.	*Concessions*: Statements that agree that the questionable event did occur, that the accused organisation had caused the event, that the accused organisation had control of the occurrence and/or impact of the event, and that the evaluative standards being used by the accusers are appropriate.

Since the inception of the Corporate Communicative Response Model, further research has been conducted to extend the model. First, Weick (1995) added *ambiguity* as a crisis response strategy which could result in multiple interpretations of a crisis situation. Under the constraints outside of the control of the accused person or organisation, ambiguity could be strategically used to manage the crisis (Sellnow & Ulmer, 2004). In the context of a product recall crisis situation, *strategic ambiguity* was found to have made a significant impact on the outcome (Miller & Littlefield, 2010). Numerous studies have also developed more crisis response strategies (e.g. Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995), such as *denial*, *evasion of responsibility* (e.g., provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intention, shifting the blame), *justification* (e.g., bolstering, minimisation, differentiation, attacking the accuser, reframing/transcendence), *admission/apology*, *concession* (e.g., corrective action, remediation, rectification and proactive works, changing corporate public policy), *information providing* (e.g., instructive information, adaptive information), *showing regards/sympathy* (e.g., without apology) and building a new agenda (e.g., issue).

To protect reputations, crisis communication has three objectives: shaping attributions of the crisis, changing public's perceptions about the organisation in crisis and reducing the negative impact caused by the crisis (Coombs, 2007a). Crisis managers are advised to provide solid evidence to support the claims they make. The success of their crisis communication is largely dependent on whether the news media and the public accept or reject the frames they present. Although crises are hot issues which are extensively reported in the mass media during a particular period of time and that hot-issue publics would dissipate after the crises no longer receive media attention, if not properly dealt with, some hot-issue publics could remain single-issue publics (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012). These media-driven hot-issue publics could be characterised by transitory problem recognition which fluctuates according to the amount of news coverage, but their engagement in communicative behaviours for problem solving (e.g., the situational theory of problem solving, Kim & Grunig, 2011) could amplify their situational perceptions (i.e., problem recognition, involvement recognition and constraint recognition) and their cognitive frames (i.e., referent criterion) about the crisis (Kim, Ni, Kim, & Kim, 2012).

With respect to the use of image repair strategies, Brinson and Benoit (1996) suggested examining them in association with the different stages of a crisis. According to Jordan -Meier (2011), the predictable patterns of news coverage about a crisis could be classified into four stages. In the first fact-finding stage, the media would be engaged in finding the newsworthy facts about the crisis. In the second stage, the media would present the facts to unfold the drama for debate and discussion, such as how the crisis happened. In the third stage, the media would explore why it happened, such as who should be held responsible. In the last stage, news coverage would be concluded with some resolutions to the crisis. In examining a crisis which involved Duke University's lacrosse team, Len-Rios (2010) found that as Duke University used different image repair strategies in different stages of a crisis, the media also used different frames in their coverage. The percentage of negative news coverage about the crisis tended to decrease over time.

In view of the significance of news coverage in affecting how the public perceives and reacts to a crisis (e.g., Huang 2006), this study seeks to study how organisational crises are covered in the media by identifying the relationship between the crisis response strategies used and the tone

of the coverage reported in the news media. It addresses two major questions: 1) what crisis response strategies are reported to have been used by the organisation during and after a crisis? and 2) what are the associations between the crisis response strategies reported in the news coverage and the overall tone of the coverage?

Method

To answer these research questions, this study selected a case on which content analysis was subsequently conducted. The crisis took place in April 2011. On April 4, the MTR Corporation, a listed company which runs the railway system and operates as a major property developer in Hong Kong, published an advertisement about rail track safety on Ming Pao Daily, a daily newspaper in Hong Kong. On the same page, there was a negative news article about MTR's plan to maximise the development density of one of its property projects. On April 19, MTR's appointed advertising agency, OMD, sent a letter to 15 media groups, stating that MTR would "reserve the right to cancel or reschedule any media insertions booked" with organisations which "published negative coverage about the brand image of the MTR Corporation" (Tam & Ng, 2011, para. 5). On April 22, three newspapers, including Apple Daily, Hong Kong Economic Times and Ta Kung Po, reported that MTR was interfering with press freedom. On the same day, apologies were made and the letter was withdrawn. Both MTR and OMD announced that OMD had misunderstood MTR's instructions on better optimising the effects of advertisements in newspapers and that MTR had never instructed OMD to express any opinion on news reporting.

Content analysis was used to analyse the news articles published about the crisis. Because the crisis first received media coverage on April 22 when Apple Daily, Ta Kung Po and the Hong Kong Economic Journal reported the issue, all the relevant news articles published in the 17 newspapers in Hong Kong over the two-week period between April 22 and May 5, 2011 were downloaded from the Wisenews database. The keyword "MTR" was searched, resulting in 727 relevant results. Two coders then manually filtered the news articles by eliminating the irrelevant news articles, such as other news about MTR's operations. As a result of the elimination, 39 news articles were used for the content analysis.

To answer the two research questions, the data were coded. First, the overall tone of the coverage was coded based on the comments conveyed in the information presented. The coders classified the comments conveyed into negative (-1), neutral (O) or positive (+1). *Positive* refers to the presence of positive descriptions about MTR, such as showing sympathy to MTR. On the contrary, *negative* refers to negative descriptions, such as criticising MTR for being irresponsible. *Neutral* refers to the presence or the absence of both positive and negative descriptions in the comments. Each article could consist of multiple positive, neutral and negative comments. Thus, the scores were added up and were averaged to calculate a score to reflect the overall tone of an article. Second, the crisis response strategies reported were coded based on Table 2, a revised model of crisis response strategies developed for this study based on existing research on crisis communication.

Table 2. Revised Crisis Response Strategies

Crisis response strategies	Definition	Example
Denial	Statements that deny the occurrence of the questionable event or that the accused organisation is the cause of the event.	MTR has never requested OMD to put pressure on the media and has never considered putting pressure on the media by withdrawing advertisements.
Excuse	Statements arguing that the accused organisation should not be held responsible for the occurrence and/or impact of the questionable event because certain factors have limited the organisation's control of the occurrence and/or impact of the event.	The use of language in the letter was based on the standard adopted by the advertising industry. MTR acknowledged the insensitivity of our staff, but asserted that all advertising matters were handled by the marketing department; the management executives were unaware.
Justification	Statements arguing that although the accused organisation is responsible for the questionable event, the standards being used by the accusers to evaluate the impact of the questionable event are inappropriate. Bolstering (reminding public of its past good performance or positive records) is considered a justification strategy.	It is OMD which misinterpreted MTR's intention to obtain the best placement for its advertisements. MTR have not led news organisations to make losses because of the withdrawal of advertisements resulting from negative news reports.

Concession	Statements agreeing that the questionable event did occur, that the accused organisation caused the event, that the accused organisation had control of the occurrence and/or impact of the event, and that the evaluative standards being used by the accusers are appropriate.	MTR acknowledged the insufficient sensitivity of MTR's management executives and would openly apologise for the issue. MTR has already instructed OMD to withdraw of the letter.
Strategic ambiguity	Statements showing regards/sympathy (without apology) or expressing generic thoughts/opinions which can be interpreted into different meanings by different people or in different contexts.	MTR reiterates that the company respects press freedom with no intention to interfere and express regrets about the use of language in OMD's letter.
Information providing	Statements that reveal more details of the case or provide suggestions to public.	MTR admitted that it requested OMD to try to obtain the best placement possible in newspapers earlier this month, but OMD misinterpreted MTR's intention. It was further explained that OMD shared the draft of the letter with some staff members of MTR's marketing department. OMD claimed that it was a standard procedure in the advertising industry, so the relevant staff members did not object.

To test the reliability of the coding scheme, Krippendorff's alpha was calculated to measure intercoder reliability. One of the two coders coded all the 39 news articles, whereas the other coder randomly selected and coded 13 of the articles (33.33% of the sample). The intercoder reliability for the sum score of the overall tone of each news article after averaging the *negative*, *neutral* and *positive* descriptions was .92. The intercoder reliability for *denial*, *excuse*, *justification*, *concession*, *strategic ambiguity* and *information providing* were .92, 1, .92, .92, .92 and 1 respectively. After measuring intercoder reliability to ensure intercoder agreements on the use of the coding scheme, the frequencies and percentages of the crisis response strategies reported in the news articles were calculated. Subsequently, regression analysis was run to identify the possible associations between the crisis response strategies reported and the overall tone of each article.

Results

The first research question seeks to identify the crisis response strategies presented in the news coverage. We addressed the question by calculating the frequency of the strategies used as reported in the news articles. In the present case, which is considered a *standards* situation (see Table 1) whereby MTR claims responsibility for the event but appeals to the public for their understanding on the miscommunication between MTR and OMD, the most frequently reported strategy is *justification* (29%), followed by *concession* (22%), *ambiguity* (17%), *denial* (13%) and *excuse* (9%) and *information providing* (9%). Table 3 summarizes the frequencies of each crisis response strategy reported in the news articles.

Table 3. Frequencies and Percentages of the Crisis Response Strategies Reported

Crisis Response Strategies	Frequencies (%)
Denial	25 (13.0)
Excuse	17 (9.0)
Justification	57 (29.0)
Concession	44 (22.0)
Information Providing	17 (9.0)
Ambiguity	38 (17.0)
Total	198 (100)

The second research question seeks to identify the relationship between the crisis response strategies reported and the overall tone of the coverage. Table 4 shows the results of the analysis. We found that none of the strategies, except *excuse* ($\beta = -1.017$, $p < .05$), were found to be a significant predictor of the overall tone of the news coverage. It indicates that *excuse* would be the least appropriate strategy for minimising the negative impact of the crisis through news coverage about the crisis.

Table 4. Results from the Multiple Regression Analysis

Variables	News coverage about the crisis (n=39)	
	ß	SE
Denial	.083	.328
Excuse	-1.017*	.466
Justification	.035	.225
Concession	.464	.263
Information Providing	-.206	.467
Ambiguity	-.380	.304
Adjusted R^2	.185	
F	2.441*	

Discussion and Conclusion

Consistent with the suggestions made by the Corporate Communicative Response Model (Bradford & Garrett, 1995), MTR used *justification* the most frequently as a crisis communicative strategy for a *standards* situation. *Excuse* was found to be the least effective crisis response strategy; the use of *excuse* would result in more negative news coverage about the crisis.

This study has several implications. First, the crisis situation in the case presented is characterised by a high degree of uncertainty about whether the crisis should have been a crisis in the first place. Even though it was found that when the *excuse* strategy was reported in the news coverage, the tone of the overall coverage would be the most likely to be negative, the use of the *justification* strategy and the *information providing* strategy were often used concurrently with the *excuse* strategy to reassert MTR's innocence in following "the standard" for requesting better advertisement placements as instructed by OMD. Because the *excuse* strategy is the most likely to cause negative news coverage, this study points out that in similar situations, it would be more appropriate for organisations to select *justification* and *information providing* as the major strategies to prevent speculations through the provision of consistent information.

Second, in addition to doubts about whether MTR had just followed "the standard," there were feelings of uncertainty about who should be held responsible for the accusation of interfering with press freedom. Editorials published about the crisis had commented that it was a common practice to request better placements for advertisements, but such discussions should have been held face-to-face or through direct conversations. Because the study had coded the news coverage for two weeks after the crisis, it was found that the editorials published after the crisis portrayed that the public had accepted MTR's and OMD's joint public apologies and corrective actions by ensuring that similar incidents would not take place again.

Third, while press freedom is a core value in society, the editorials published after the crisis had diverted the public's attention to the importance of defending press freedom. In addition, there were also discussions about other related issues, such as other internal problems within MTR, the lack of government's regulations on MTR and the bureaucratic administrative structures within MTR. Hence, there was presence of *problem chain recognition effects* (Kim, Shen, & Morgan, 2011) as the public became aware of other issues about MTR as a result of news coverage about the crisis. As hot-issue publics could potentially be turned into single-issue public (e.g., Aldoory & Grunig, 2012), it is of crucial importance that corporations follow principles of crisis communication to resolve the crisis as quickly as possible, such as building long-term relationships with publics, accepting responsibility for the crisis, disclosing all the information about the crisis and considering the public's interest above its own (Grunig, 2009).

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