

# **Fundamental Mediation: A Classification of Media in Crisis Communication Research**

**Duncan Koerber**, York University

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the way that media have been positioned in the study of crisis communication. The paper asserts that crisis communication researchers have generally relegated media (mass media, new and social media) to a secondary or background position in studies of crises even though media are absolutely central to all crises in major ways. Through the consideration of framing, news values, ritual, amplification, and publics, this paper brings together a scattered literature to create a coherent description of how media is and should be considered in the study of crisis communication.

**Keywords:** mediation, media theory, crisis communication.

## **Introduction**

Crises and responses to them happen regularly in our hyper-mediated age: a politician denies a newspaper's allegation; a celebrity apologizes for a controversial tweet; a corporation responds to Internet rumours of a massive product failure. In all cases, media, both traditional and new, are implicated somehow. Media define, publicize, frame, judge, and amplify crises. Yet the crisis communication literature, viewed broadly, presents an often scattered picture of the role of media. Media lurk in studies of crises but rarely command full attention. As such, the intersection between media theory and crisis communication theory remains underdeveloped.

Typically, media take on two roles in the crisis communication literature: as stakeholder or channel. Positioned as stakeholder, media look like just another participant in a crisis, either to be ignored or to be supplied with information—this media relations perspective dominates. Positioned as a channel, media look like just a means to transmit information to stakeholders. Positioned either way, media stand on the periphery of crises and crisis communication research.

To encourage more work in this area, this paper employs a media lens to classify how media have been considered in the crisis communication research and show that they additionally should be considered more fundamental to crisis processes. The categories of the media lens considered here include framing, news values, ritual, amplification, and publics.

A recent book about crisis communication theory places mediation only as one “dimension” of crisis communication (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 159). In my consideration of media and crisis, I argue that media are actually central to crisis communication, not just stakeholders, channels, or dimensions. The role of media in crisis communication is much more fundamental than previously thought as the processes of mediated meaning-making are essential to crisis itself.

### **Media Framing of Crises**

One major way that researchers have implicated media in crisis communication has been in the study of how crises are framed. In framing, media professionals choose what and, more importantly, what not to include in reports, pushing some information outside a metaphorical picture frame. What is included and what is left out have a direct effect on the way audiences think about the event or incident.

Framing has a long history in the study of media effects. In his classic studies of the effects of framing, Shanto Iyengar (Iyengar, 1994; Kinder & Iyengar, 1989) shows how news frames push people

toward holding certain political opinions. Iyengar identifies two frames used in news reporting: episodic and thematic (these frames are not necessarily intentionally used by journalists). If a journalist uses episodic framing, the audience will likely see the problem as caused by the individual involved. If the journalist uses thematic framing, then the audience will likely see the problem as caused by society (episodic stories are usually devoid of this greater context).

For example, a shooting in a city's downtown may be portrayed as a single episode unconnected to anything else. On the other hand, a thematic frame places the shooting in a broader context—the shooting may be linked to an increase in poverty, a greater societal issue. Frames have been proven to influence public opinion (Iyengar, 1994; Kinder & Iyengar, 1989; Knight, 1999). With this in mind, media become “more than just a neutral field of representation and definitional struggle” Josh Greenberg (2012) writes in a study of health risk communication, and “they are also active players and influencers in the framing of public health issues and events” (p. 61).

Framing analysis has been applied by crisis communication researchers because it helps to understand better how media may influence attributions of responsibility (blame) for a crisis. From psychology, attribution theory understands that people look for causes for effects in their lives (Kelley, 1973; Kelley & Michela, 1980). Weiner (1985b) describes attributions as “perceptions of the causality or the perceived reasons for a particular event's occurrence” (p. 280). These attributions of blame affect people's emotions and relationships (Weiner, 1985a).

W. Timothy Coombs (Coombs, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2000; Coombs & Holladay, 2002) has applied attribution theory to develop Situational Crisis Communication Theory, which looks at crisis strategies that should be employed to protect reputations. The way media frame a crisis has been shown to direct the audience's thoughts on the crisis (Coombs, 2006a). As a part of this analysis, Coombs (2004a, 2004b, 2006b) has found that knowledge of a prior crisis amplifies blame by audiences. In other words, a history of

crises increases the threat of the next crisis to a reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2002).

Iyengar (1994) notes that the framing effect of news is strong due to what is called accessibility bias. People make decisions using relatively little information they have collected in their minds. They simplify. When making a decision, what comes to mind foremost is that information. Since people watch so much TV news, Iyengar argues, information from TV news comes to mind most easily when making judgments.

With this in mind, the inclusion of crisis history in media reports is an important aspect of framing. Dawar and Pillutla (2000) find that consumers' assessments of crisis response depend upon their previous knowledge of the organization. Additionally, people value negative information more than positive information when making assessments (Mizerski, 1982). Looking at it from a different perspective, Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava (2000) show that consumers who are committed to brands are not affected by negative news about that brand as much as others are.

Specific studies of frames reveal the importance of this media power in contextualizing potential crisis situations. Neuman (1992) finds that the news media in the United States frame events in four basic ways: conflict, economic consequences, human impact, and morality. In a study of how media frame crises, An and Gower (2009) show that morality, human interest, and attribution of responsibility frames prompted attribution of responsibility by audiences upon individuals. Cho and Gower (2006) find that if a corporate crisis is framed by news media in a human interest style, audience members' emotions are affected and it influences who the audience blames for the problem. If the crisis could have been prevented or controlled, and if the crisis was intentional, the news media use an attribution of responsibility frame (Cho & Gower, 2006). Finally, Druckman (2001) lists a caveat regarding framing: the credibility of the person who frames influences the effect of the framing.

A related but different concept to framing, one that has been related in a partial way to crisis communication, is the concept of agenda setting. Iyengar and Kinder (1989) look at how the television news media do not necessarily tell people what to think, but they tell people what to think about – they set the agenda for political debate.

In the new and social media age, agendas that may cause or influence crises are increasingly set online by a multitude of actors rather than by traditional media. Friedland, Hove, and Rojas (2006) argue that the Internet “network structure erodes the authority and agenda-setting power of the traditional media” (p. 18). More actors exist to comment on issues or raise awareness of issues, and they find a space online (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Morell, 2012). Besiou, Hunter, and Van Wassenhove (2013) argue that “if stakeholders successfully use their own media to make their claims more salient, the result may be a momentum effect, in which management finds itself under scrutiny and pressure from a constantly growing number of stakeholder groups” (p. 712). The publicity of social media, for example, encourages complainants to “petition the organization in full view of other stakeholders” (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 408). Little research, however, has been done on whether these new media complainants can drive public agendas (Besiou et al., 2013, p. 711) and thus instigate or propel crises. Besiou, Hunter and Wassenhove (2013) do note that some evidence exists that this media can “play a significant role in setting agendas at different levels and for different publics” (p. 711). How does this work in practice? Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira show how, during the recent Egypt political crisis, citizens and journalists provided news online through Facebook and Twitter, which formed a sort of collective news frame (2012, p. 269).

The long tradition of media framing in communication literature, and its recent application to crisis communication as shown here, suggests the first way to position media more significantly in the field. Here, media become absolutely vital to both to both research and practice. Media influence the very judgments people make about crisis situations.

## **News Values and Crisis Types**

The next underdeveloped connection between media theory and crisis communication theory is in media news values. For decades, researchers have examined how the news we read or watch consistently reflects certain values. Any reported occurrence is not inherently or naturally newsworthy. Media and communication researchers have shown how certain values are involved in the social construction of news (Elliott & Golding, 2000; Fairclough, 1995; Fowler, 1991; Gans, 1980; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, & Roberts, 2000; van Dijk, 1988).

In their oft-cited study of foreign news, Galtung and Ruge (1965) define the news values that direct which events and situations eventually become published or broadcast. Some of those values include negativity, unexpectedness, reference to elite persons, personalization, and threshold (significance). As well, Golding and Elliott (2000) outline three factors that affect news selection: 1) assumptions of what the audiences wants; 2) accessibility, or how easy it is to get the story; 3) and whether the story fits with the nature of the media form (some stories in print just do not work well on TV, such as those without visuals). Stories that reflect these news values and characteristics are more likely to be reported.

These news values are not modern. Mitchell Stephens (1988) shows how news values today resemble news values centuries ago, suggesting that there are eternal human interests that get taken up in the news. People have always had a strong interest in what is new, Stephens says, and this seemingly modern desire was not caused by the introduction of the newspaper. People in oral societies were interested in gossip and news of war, death, and danger. People had a natural desire for information, entertainment, and awareness of the world. How these news values are created is debatable and complex, but Fowler (1991) believes they are mostly cultural. This selection of news then is not a deliberate conspiracy by journalists and powerful people; it is often unconscious (Elliott & Golding, 2000).

What is interesting about news values is that they resemble the kinds of events that crisis communication researchers have categorized as crisis types. It is not simply a coincidence that news values and crisis types have a resemblance. Indeed, what makes an interesting news story or what makes a crisis event is rooted in our culture. In particular, people are interested in stories, stories of challenges, risk-taking, conflicts, battles, and so on. In his study of the reporting of a health clinic crisis in Ottawa, Greenberg (2012) noted that the case was significant because it fit with common news values and had “narrative appeal” (p. 64). Some organizations try to manage the narrative in crisis situations that may appeal to journalists. Venette, Sellnow, and Lang (2003) find that organizations have primary and secondary narratives during a crisis.

In his Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Coombs (2006b) lists crisis types within three clusters: (1) victim clusters (natural disaster, rumors, workplace violence, and product tampering), (2) accidental clusters (challenges, megadamage, technical error accidents, and technical error recalls), and (3) preventable clusters (human breakdown accidents, human breakdown product recalls, organizational misdeed with no injuries, organizational misdeed, management misconduct, and organizational misdeeds with injuries). Attribution of responsibility increases with each type of cluster (Coombs, 2004a). In the literature, these types are then associated with possible crisis strategy responses for repair of images.

These crisis types resemble the types of stories reporters are culturally conditioned to consider important, and thus news. The news value for personalization makes the victim cluster appealing to journalists, particularly if people were victimized by other people’s mistakes. In natural disasters, the response of leaders becomes a major focal point in media coverage. News of accidents abounds as well, such as power outages, plane crashes in difficult weather, and so on. Performing the role of watchdog, journalists are also fond of reporting preventable clusters, as these types combine personalization and responsibility with serious damage. These

incidents include such events as crib recalls and financial scams by organizational leaders.

Preceding these crisis types, the very definitions of crisis itself typically sound like the definitions of the most important stories for journalists. Barton (1993) defines a crisis as an unpredictable, potentially negative event. A similar definition comes from Pearson and Clair (1998), who define crisis as being low-probability yet having high impact. Dean (2004) calls it an unexpected, nonroutine event with uncertainty that threatens an organization's priority goals, putting the emphasis on the survival of the entity in crisis. In a foundational textbook on crisis communication, Fearn-Banks (2002) defines crisis 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" (p. 2).

Beyond the mass media, new or social media have been shown to replicate these news values, even in the scattered, disconnected world of tweets. A discourse analysis by Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) of the Egyptian uprising shows that the social media coverage "mimicked the tendency of traditional media to emphasize all of the following news values ... : large scale of events, closeness to home, clarity of meaning, short time scale, relevance, consonance, personification, significance, and drama and action" (p. 272).

What may be new for crisis communicators is the determination of four news values found exclusively in social media: instantaneity, crowdsourced elites, solidarity, and ambience (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012, p. 273). Applying these values, the crisis communicator must recognize that crises may rise, reach a fever pitch, and gain a sense of liveness—and importance—in an instant within the social media environment. During a crisis, the news value of crowdsourced elites means that certain important people—perhaps those in opposition to the individual or organization—may gain prominence through retweeting and sharing of news. This presents a new challenge of addressing and containing crises in communication. Perhaps even more challenging is Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira's (2012) discovery of the news



value of solidarity. The crisis communicator may face an emotional torrent of connection and communion during a crisis from the online audience. Even more telling is their point that in their study “it became difficult to separate factual reports from expressions of camaraderie” (p. 275). This unique social media news value of solidarity creates an environment of blurred lines for crisis communicators, who must help audiences separate fact from fiction, while trying to avoid attacking the feelings of the community engendered by this online communication. Finally, their news value of ambience would seem to prolong crises with the “creation of a live and lively environment that sustained online and offline expressions of the movement” (p. 276). Admittedly, the liveness inherent in traditional television news offers this value, but the online world seems to extend the continuity of a crisis.

An understanding of news values in traditional and new media has important implications for crisis communication practitioners. Since crises types and elements of crisis definitions resemble the common news values, traditional and new media are more likely to report on these kinds of crises; journalists and online posters know these situations are important to report or retweet. A wide range of difficult events will befall individuals and organizations, events that could damage reputations and stop operations. Yet the theory of news values shows that not all events will draw attention and be reported. In other words, selection is not random; journalists and online posters choose certain events more often than others. Crisis practitioners who attend to news values of their community’s media should have a better understanding of the media consequences of such potential crisis events. An event that falls within Coombs preventable cluster is not just significant for the organization and stakeholders; it is additionally significant for media, and it will likely receive much more attention than other events. This also shows that each cluster deserves attention not just as a crisis type leading to different levels of attribution, but as examples of news values that will likely be taken up in media.

### **Media, Legitimization, and Discourse**

Where media theory and crisis communication research also intersect – but this is not generally positioned as a factor of mediation – is in the very conception of the two fields today. In the early 20th century, media theorists conceptualized communication functionally, with concern for the effects of sending messages to audiences (propaganda being a particular concern). James Carey (1989) calls this a transmission model of communication. Carey presents a second model that describes people's relationships with media differently, as ritual. That is, people do not engage with media just for information but also for ritualized confirmation of beliefs and values of a community. This has a consequences for thinking about media effects – in a ritual concept of communication, effect is less pronounced and the communicator has less agency to influence or effect audiences.

While the ritual model of communication is fully accepted and entrenched in media and communication studies, it is only beginning to grow in influence in the study of public relations and crisis communication. A long-held perspective sees public relations as a means of transmitting messages to publics to affect audiences. From classical rhetoric, this perspective privileges “the firm's symbolic management of its external environment” (Livesey, 2001, p. 60). In this way, many PR professionals see their job as the creation and management of images. Grunig (1993) calls this the perspective of creating “an image out of nothing” (p. 125). Perhaps this orientation has given public relations a bad name; in this concept, PR practitioners are seen as trying to manipulate and spin situations to hoodwink audiences for the benefit of the client.

Nonetheless, public relations and crisis communication researchers have started to position public relations and crisis communication work in the same way Carey positions media as ritual (Massey, 2001). Audience research revolutionized the study of media decades ago with its emphasis on the way that audience members interpret media messages (Ang, 2001; Hall, 2001). In public relations, many researchers now believe audience reception plays a part in making individual and organizational images (Alvesson, 1990;

Denbow & Culbertson, 1985; Wan & Schell, 2007; Williams & Moffitt, 1997). Wan and Schell (2007) argue that the audience role in image construction suggests that the best image is one that reflects “the needs and the desires of both entities” (p. 26).

This concept of audience in public relations and crisis communication leads to the consideration of community norms and values—the resources readers and viewers bring to their interpretations of media. Moffitt (1994) argues that an organization or its audience does not create meaning. Meaning, he suggests, is a much more complicated and intertwined process between the two, and meaning is not necessarily created intentionally.

Thinking of public relations and crisis communication as ritual and in terms of audience means clients come into two-way communication with communities. Relationships with publics become dialogic, not monologic (C. Botan, 1993, 1997; C. H. Botan & Soto, 1998). Hale et al (2005) criticize the dominance of the monologic public relations perspective in crisis communication, saying it places too much emphasis on the dissemination of messages. In the study of public relations images, Botan describes two different ideas in the literature. One is that image is employed to manage publics through communication, a monologic approach. The other approach, which he describes as dialogic, sees publics as multivariied and communicative. The dialogic approach sees public relations as an attempt to connect with these varied publics (C. Botan, 1993, 1997). This process is a positive for both sides, showing that a “mutually beneficial relationship between an organization and its publics can be built at the symbolic level” (Wan & Schell, 2007, p. 26).

Hale, Dulek, and Hale (2005) describe Horsley and Barker’s concentric and dialogic model of crisis communication as a welcome divergence from the traditional linear model employed by Fink (1986) and Pearson and Clair (1998). This concept provokes new knowledge about how practitioners respond to crisis. From interviews with actual PR professionals, Hale, Dulek, and Hale developed a spiral model of crisis communication that is not a straightforward transmission or simply a loop – instead PR

professionals, they found, complete the loop, re-observe the crisis, and then begin the next loop with additional information (Observe, Interpret, Choose, and Disseminate).

This more complicated notion of the crisis communication process, which resembles similar concepts in media and communication studies, also draws our attention to the acknowledgement and determination of legitimacy. Public relations and crisis communication literature has a fully realized understanding of legitimacy; all crises are crises of legitimacy. Legitimacy is “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). A crisis is a threat to legitimacy in the eyes of a public, much like a concept of crisis described by Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer, which they call a crisis of “public perception” (2003, p. 54). Coombs (2012) calls this legitimacy social legitimacy, which draws attention to its origins in community and culture. In a ritual view of crisis communication then, legitimacy is not something an organization or individual creates or wholly controls. It is received from society and stakeholders. An essential study in public relations, legitimacy for an organization occurs when its values align with its environment (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975).

Yet while the crisis communication literature attends deeply to legitimacy, it does not foreground the media in legitimacy’s formation and maintenance despite the fact that, as Fowler argues, the “Press have had a major role in assisting the process of legitimization by citing alleged consensual values” (1991, p. 51). The above discussion of framing, news values, and crisis types shows media have a central role in defining and circulating meanings surrounding legitimacy. It is this social construction of meaning that defines what is right and wrong, legitimate and illegitimate. Meanings of legitimacy cannot be separated from media and discourse in our hyper-mediated society.

Considering crisis communication in this way means practitioners help clients act in ways that align with the values and

norms of a specific community. Alignment avoids actions that journalists regard as “news.” Public relations practitioners with a close connection to their communities will know what is acceptable or not within those communities. Otherwise, illegitimate or non-ritual actions portray them “undesirable or as violating societal norms” (Patterson & Allen, 1997, p. 293). Society is a broad term here—the community could be any subset of society too.

Looking at public relations and crisis communication in this way, practitioners then work not to transmit but to read—to read audiences and understand community norms and values. In practice, this means practitioners make meaning—through storytelling—to position clients within realms of acceptability and legitimacy produced within the audience’s community. In crisis communication this may mean working to ensure the client’s actions remain legitimate in a community and do not lead to crisis. In crisis response, this may mean encouraging the client to apologize to act out a ritual expected by a community. This approach is ethical as it considers stakeholders’ needs for resolution of a crisis, not clients’ needs to downplay, ignore, or hide a crisis.

How does legitimacy circulate through a community? It circulates through discourse in mass media (and also in face-to-face communication and social media). The idea is that there are some values that everyone in a community holds, and media work as protector of these values through discourse (Fowler, 1991). Similarly, Daniel Hallin (1986) notes that some issues violate norms of discussion in media. Hallin conceives of concentric spheres that represent different kinds of talk – the middle sphere is the sphere of consensus, agreement by most on what people can reasonable say. Surrounding the sphere of consensus is the sphere of legitimate controversy, where people in media can have a reasonable debate of issues. Surrounding these two spheres is the sphere of deviance, discussion that is illegitimate.

Applying Hallin’s spheres to crisis communication reveals that crisis can, indeed, be products of mediated discourse. For example, 50 years ago, the extraction and consumption of oil were fairly

unproblematic actions. These actions fell within the realm of consensus—America needed oil, the environmental damage was less clear, and companies were free to extract it at will. No crisis existed. However, community norms and values changed. Environmental groups influenced public discourses, publicizing cases of oil spills and arguing scientifically that the environmental damage was serious. Livesey (2001, 2002a, 2002b) is one crisis communication researcher who has discussed this concept of discourse, showing how oil companies, doing what they have always done, have had to respond to new, popular environmental discourses with their own hybrid discourse of sustainable development—a discourse communicated to audiences through mass media. Within this new discourse, oil spills become crises for oil companies. Thanks to discursive, mediated change, those actions moved from Hallin’s sphere of consensus to the sphere of legitimate controversy.

Accelerating challenges to the legitimacy of individuals and organizations is social media. Avoiding technological determinisms, researchers have noted that within social media, discourse can damage legitimacy or help build and maintain it (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Fieseler, Fleck, & Meckel, 2010). Social media affect legitimacy because “social media transform the communicative dynamics within and between corporations and their environment” (Castelló, Morsing, & Schultz, 2013, p. 683). Within that environment, this media facilitate “more combative ... voices on business responsibility” (Castelló, Morsing, & Schultz, 2013, p. 687). The pressures of social media on legitimacy may cause crisis communicators to rue the day these media forms were invented. But Castelló, Morsing, and Schultz argue that dissent expressed online is a good thing for legitimacy. Indeed, they call it a “necessary condition for the communicative constitution of legitimacy.” The argument goes that by appreciating dissent and working productively with it, individuals and organizations may look legitimate – even by critics. “Dissent can itself become a central norm in network societies,” they write, “and therefore directly constitutive for legitimacy at a meta level” (Castelló et al., 2013, p. 689). The regular appreciation of dissent may be a difficult habit for crisis communicators to develop if dissent is

typically always viewed as a threat or enemy to be stopped or countered.

Under these concepts of ritual, discourse, and legitimacy, the goal of the public relations practitioner must be to first recognize common discourses circulating in the media of the communities in which they work (e.g. Goolsby, 2009). Dissent should not be seen as a problem, necessarily, but an opportunity. Attention to traditional *and* new and social media is thus essential to developing this awareness. Nonetheless, studies have shown that organizations do not use new media forms to their fullest potential (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; K. K. Stephens & Malone, 2012; Taylor & Perry, 2005).

Second, crisis communicators must then ensure the actions of the individual or organization they represent fit with the ritualized or legitimized expectations of those communities. This attention will ensure that public relations practitioners do not miss the slow but ever-present shifts in discourses that may reposition a client's regular actions as a crisis. With this in mind, researchers of crisis communication may also consider how media define just what a crisis is, a question still in debate in the field (Kent, 2012).

### **Media as Amplifiers**

Another area in which media have been positioned in the crisis communication literature is as amplifiers in crisis. If media tend to promote stories that fit certain common news values, and crisis types resemble those types of stories, then media are 'amplifying' certain actions, actions deemed illegitimate. Social media forms may even accelerate crises due to their inherent high speed of transmission and association (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p. 145).

Not only do media identify and investigate the problem that caused the crisis, but also media can suggest that the individual and organization itself is the problem, reducing its legitimacy. This amplifies the focus of the crisis on the individual or organization. And as news transmitted through social media has been shown to

encourage political action (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012), it may cause the connections of solidarity described above.

Amplification has serious consequences as not all people who discover a crisis are simply its victims. Crisis communication researchers have shown that even non-victims learn about crisis situations through media (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Deephouse, 2000). Second, research shows that media may inadvertently help to make crises seem riskier than they really are. We live in what has been called a risk society (Beck, 1992), and media play a part in the social amplification of risk (Chong, 2006; Krinsky & Golding, 1992; Pidgeon, Kaspersen, & Slovic, 2003). For example, in the area of healthcare, Chong (2006) found that a crisis can seem potentially more damaging than it really is thanks to amplification that develops out of media reports. What is a potentially small outbreak of a contagious virus can seem more significant due to blanket media coverage. This way, media coverage amplifies the scope of the story.

Media also amplify a crisis by performing roles as watchdogs that chase down stories for citizens. For example, Martin and Boynton (2005) compared the crisis communication strategies of NASA after two space shuttle explosions and found that certain response approaches, such as being open and providing the media with information, affected how media covered the crisis. Providing regular, open communication, they found, seemed to promote positive reports of the crisis response and seemed to discourage journalists from digging deeper and finding alternative sources of information. This makes sense—journalists who view the crisis response as stonewalling may investigate deeper in ways that may not favour the individual or organization (Martin & Boynton, 2005). They may amplify by producing more stories, more stories that privilege views of sources who see the crisis differently than the individual or organization does. For example, Toronto mayor Rob Ford faced the allegations of a video allegedly showing him smoking crack. Members of the news media did not receive what they considered an appropriate response, causing them to camp out at his office and follow him into restaurants to get a response to the allegations—it was blanket, non-stop coverage, often using



commentary from sources unrelated to the mayor (Coutts, 2013; “Live at Noon,” 2013; Loriggio & Perkel, 2013; Mann, 2013) Those commentators may have no first-hand knowledge—they are employed to fill air time with conjecture, a typical approach of broadcasters like CNN when a crisis unfolds (Kauffman, 2005).

Media also amplify a crisis if the crisis response is inconsistent. Consistency in crisis response is a common virtue listed in much crisis communication literature (Benoit & McHale, 1999; Hay, 1995; Massey, 2001). Media commentators will often make note of an inconsistent response from politicians, business people, and celebrities. Stakeholders who receive inconsistent messages, one originating from media and one originating from the individual or organization, may become concerned as well, amplifying the significance of the crisis. Similarly, incomplete information may cause media to amplify—Greenberg (2012) shows how incomplete information about a public health scare seemed to exacerbate public concern around the case.

### **Media, Publics, and Crisis Communication**

An increasingly important intersection between media theory and crisis communication theory is the consideration of new media, particularly social media, as this paper has already shown. The role of social media in particular is only a very recent line of research in crisis communication (Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013). Crisis communication researchers are working to understand how new media reaffirm and alter prior thinking on crisis communication.

However, in many ways, the transmission model still dominates crisis communication in this new media world. Stephens and Malone (2012) imply as much when they write “there are so many new media options available for crisis communication ... it is even more important for scholars to carefully examine how these Internet resources are being used” (p. 381). This notion of new media as forms one ‘uses’ to accomplish crisis communication response goals has likely led to consideration of new media as just an element in strategy and tactics (e.g. Gainey, 2012; Perry, Taylor, & Doerfel,

2003). In this way, some researchers still position new media as tools or channels (e.g. Sellnow & Seeger, 2013; Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2011). PR practitioners are encouraged to engage with new media to do tasks they could not do before or tasks new media make easier or more efficient. The problem with this approach is that the greater discursive conditions of new media are not considered.

Some of the new media crisis communication literature does suggest notions of dialogue, as discussed above. New media allow crisis responders to communicate with stakeholders and stakeholders to communicate with crisis responders. In this way, Sellnow and Seeger (2013) suggest the possibility of new media “puts the public now at the center of a crisis and disaster, conveying important information and response needs” (p. 130).

But this analysis of media and publics could go further and deeper. New media and crisis communication are linked through the same essential historical processes. The very notion of the public in public relations is predicated on the historical emergence of the press in democratic societies. Habermas (1989, 2001) showed how the state developed to ensure mercantile trade, a state increasingly dependent upon taxation. Taxation prompted a desire among newly formed citizens for representation. Newspapers worked to publicize the business of the state for those citizens. Along the way, this mediated public sphere came to have a certain character as “some voices, some expressions, were legitimate—and legitimated—while others were constrained” (Gitelman, 2006, p. 13).

Many definitions of crisis communication speak of stakeholders who function as a public. These groups usually pay for a product or service, whether to a private business or a government. Through media, they address people, and the existence of these groups of people is founded upon media. They address these groups in unifying terms. For example, the Toronto Maple Leafs and Boston Red Sox sports teams call out to Leafs Nation and Red Sox Nation. As Calhoun (1992) writes, “media are used to create occasions for consumers to identify with the public positions or personas of others” (p. 26).

Looking at the public surrounding new media in crisis communication draws our attention to the varied characters of mediated communities. Gitelman (2006) calls new media “socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning” (p. 6). For Gitelman, all media are “socially realized structures of communication” (p. 7). Within these social sites of meaning, one must attend to “how interpretative communities are built or destroyed, how normative epistemologies emerge,” argue Gitelman and Pingree (2004, p. xv).

In the new media age, research on the character of these online communities or publics presents lessons for crisis communicators. New media, such as social media, has solved a problem of locating others affected in a crisis (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p. 147). But they have also fragmented the public—within those fragments there are now more unified smaller communities (Donsbach & Mothes, 2012). Negatively, those unified communities may lead to more confrontation—towards a target like an organization or an individual—resulting in more stark ‘black and white’ splits in public debates (Nie, Miller, Golde, Butler, & Winneg, 2010; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2012; Woodly, 2008).

Going beyond media as tools or channels, these considerations of the characteristics of new media are important for crisis researchers because they provide alternative, useful ways of looking at new media in crisis. New media in crisis may demand new approaches to response because these communities expect and respond to different ways of understanding their worlds and events, as Gitelman and Pingree argue that a “new medium in effect helps to produce a distinct public” (2004, p. xvii). Crisis responders on the front lines today must understand that distinctness of new media, which conditions among its users radical expectations for immediacy and openness in response. These forms promote immediate connections with individuals and organizations, but the very technology itself raises problems. Inappropriate or delayed Twitter responses, for example, provoke crisis in publics that demand immediate attention from crisis responders. Audiences may demand

immediate responses to crises that individuals and organizations had time to consider in early, different ages of slower media. These changes accelerate audience expectations of crisis response, the same way the advent of 24-hour television news changed the expectations of viewers. Crisis response researchers who move beyond thinking about new media as channels or tools will likely get closer to understanding effective response in these new and unique communities.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to bring into focus how media have been considered in crisis communication research and, more importantly, how media theory can help us see the greater importance of media in crisis communication. I classified these ideas into five general categories: framing, news values, ritual, amplification, and publics. A running thread throughout these categories is the greater systems of meaning that hover above the topic of crisis communication, systems of meaning predicated on media in our modern society.

Crises are not always situations that are tangible, concrete and real the way crisis definitions imply. Crises are not, metaphorically speaking, enemies or opponents that should be avoided, prevented, or stopped. This view of crisis, influenced by the transmission model of communication, situates these problems incorrectly. Instead, crisis situations should be situated in more complex relations of ritual and discourse. Indeed, each crisis is a “discursive break” (Koerber, 2014, p. 320). Crises are transgressions defined, publicized, framed, judged, and amplified by media. We live in the most highly mediated society in human history, so these discussions should be no surprise. By thinking about crisis and media in this way, however, crisis becomes a product of meaning within audiences, a crisis of legitimacy defined and circulated within highly-mediated communities.

This view emphasizes the social construction of crises and the central importance of media in their formation (Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013).

Robert Heath (2012) notes that crisis communication researchers are beginning to move in this direction:

Now, the net is being thrown more broadly and we see discourse (often including many voices) rather than mere media relations. We find the development of crisis narratives as something that occurs in a community and may under any set of circumstances and with various strategies be beyond the control of a single organization. In that way, we further advance the belief that communication is more than information sharing and information transmission. (p. 10)

Yet media are often conceptualized, even in this Digital Age, as a channel not an environment (e.g. González-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). Beyond stakeholder or channel, media must be considered central to crisis communication in these five, and certainly more, ways. Such a consideration will help crisis communication researchers and practitioners better understand the just what a crisis is, how it becomes significant, and how it might be resolved. In all ways then, media are essential to the very constitution of crisis.

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