

ADVANCES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS
AND COMMUNICATION
MANAGEMENT

COMMUNICATION IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

HOW ORGANIZATIONS
DEAL WITH ISSUES,
RISKS AND CRISES

EDITED BY

SABINE EINWILLER
JENS SEIFFERT-BROCKMANN
STEFANIA ROMENTI
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COMMUNICATION IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

ADVANCES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

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ADVANCES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND
COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT VOLUME 7

COMMUNICATION IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: HOW ORGANIZATIONS DEAL WITH ISSUES, RISKS AND CRISES

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	vii
<i>About the Editors</i>	ix
<i>About the Contributors</i>	xi
Introduction to the Volume <i>Stefania Romenti</i>	1
Working With Paradoxes: How Shifts in Risks Are Altering Public Relations <i>W. Timothy Coombs</i>	7
Mapping the Challenges of COVID-19 from the Point of View of Organisational Communication <i>Helena Kantanen and Merja Koskela</i>	21
Crisis Communication at the Intersection of Responsibility and Consumer Engagement Opportunity: A Case Study of Ryanair Tweets During the COVID-19 Pandemic <i>Ursula Lutzky</i>	37
Negotiations in Various Crisis Situations <i>Kristijan Sedak, Katia Matijašević and Lucija Pranjić</i>	55
What's Happening at Your Company?! Employees' Reactions to Inquiries of Outsiders in the Event of Negative Media Coverage <i>Sabine Einwiller and Christine Korn</i>	73
Taliban's Communication on Afghan Women: Narratives and Image Repair Strategies After the Kabul Takeover <i>Juliane J. Gabel</i>	93

Crisis Communication Challenges in Czech Pandemic Education: Recommendations for Strategic Communication in the Public Sector	109
<i>Denisa Hejlová, Petra Koudelková, Tereza Ježková, Soňa Schneiderová, Tereza Klabíková Rábová and Marcela Konrádová</i>	
So Close, Yet So Far? Effects of Privatisation and Communicative Strategy on the Perceptions of Stakeholders in Corporate Crises	127
<i>Benno Viererbl, Nora Denner and Stefanie Holzer</i>	
Understanding Factors That Influence Risk Perception in Strategic Communication: The Case of CCUS Communication	145
<i>Diana-Maria Cismaru and Raluca Silvia Ciochina</i>	
The Effects of Corporate Philanthropy on Reputation Following Natural Disasters: The Benefits of Helping When Hurting	159
<i>Guy Bennett-Longley and Daniel Laufer</i>	
The Quest for Crisis Management Keystone: Reflections on the Future of Risk, Crisis and Disaster Research and Practice	173
<i>Yan Jin</i>	

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Mapping the Challenges of COVID-19 from the Point of View of Organisational Communication

Table 1.	Communication Journals Included in the Sample and the Number of COVID-Related Articles in Them (2020–Mid-2022).	24
Table 2.	Codes and Preliminary Findings Based on Pandemic Communication Research.	25
Fig. 1.	A Preliminary Model of Central Aspects of Organisational Pandemic Communication.	31

Crisis Communication at the Intersection of Responsibility and Consumer Engagement Opportunity: A Case Study of Ryanair Tweets During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 1.	Keywords in the Ryanair 2022 Corpus.	44
Table 2.	Top 5 Two-Word Clusters of <i>Government</i> and <i>Country</i> .	46
Table 3.	Two-Word Clusters of <i>Anti</i> and a Vaccination-Related Word.	47
Table 4.	Top 5 Two-Word Clusters of <i>Account</i> .	50

Negotiations in Various Crisis Situations

Table 1.	Researched Categories and Associated Codes.	63
----------	---	----

What's Happening at Your Company?! Employees' Reactions to Inquiries of Outsiders in the Event of Negative Media Coverage

Fig. 1.	Theoretical Models.	80
Table 1.	Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA).	85
Fig. 2.	Structural Model Assertive Reactions.	86
Fig. 3.	Structural Model Defensive Reactions.	87

Taliban's Communication on Afghan Women: Narratives and Image Repair Strategies After the Kabul Takeover

Table 1.	Taliban's Communication Strategies on Afghan Women.	101
Fig. 1.	Taliban's Narrative Stages.	102

**Crisis Communication Challenges in Czech Pandemic Education:
Recommendations for Strategic Communication in the Public Sector**

Fig. 1.	Proportion of Directors Who Agree With the Statements by Scores 10–8 on 10-Point Scales (Strongly Agree).	119
Fig. 2.	Long-Term Goals for the Czech Ministry of Education Towards Communication.	122

So Close, Yet So Far? Effects of Privatisation and Communicative Strategy on the Perceptions of Stakeholders in Corporate Crises

Fig. 1.	Results of the Moderated Mediation Analysis With Affective Image of the CEO as Dependent Variable.	136
Fig. 2.	Results of the Moderated Mediation Analysis With Cognitive Image of the CEO as Dependent Variable.	136
Fig. 3.	Results of the Moderated Mediation Analysis With Affective Image of the Organisation as Dependent Variable.	137
Fig. 4.	Results of the Moderated Mediation Analysis With Cognitive Image of the Organisation as Dependent Variable.	138
Stimulus A.1.	Information on a Cyber Security Crisis at the Company.	142
Stimulus A.2.	Crisis Statement of the CEO (Rebuild Strategy).	143
Stimulus A.3.	Crisis Statement of the CEO (Deny Strategy).	144

Understanding Factors That Influence Risk Perception in Strategic Communication: The Case of CCUS Communication

Fig. 1.	Distribution of Articles on CCUS Topics in Romania per Year ($n = 61$).	151
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The Effects of Corporate Philanthropy on Reputation Following Natural Disasters: The Benefits of Helping When Hurting

Table 1.	Experiment 1: ANOVA Descriptive Statistics.	166
Table 2.	Experiment 1: Scepticism t -test Descriptive Statistics.	166
Table 3.	Experiment 2: t -test Descriptive Statistics.	167

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INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME

Stefania Romenti

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This book is the result of the fruitful discussions and intellectual exchange among scholars, PhD students and professionals in public relations and strategic communication during the excellent Congress of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) organised by the University of Vienna and the Vienna University of Economics and Business from September 21 to 23, 2022. EUPRERA is an association with nearly 550 members from 50 countries interested in advancing academic research and knowledge in strategic communication. The EUPRERA Congress in Vienna had the title “Public Relations in the Risk Society.” The call for papers invited scholars to reflect on the challenges that technological development and globalisation have posed in terms of new forms of risks to be faced. The role of public relations can be crucial in a society where uncertainty, insecurity and crisis situations prevail. In our contemporary communicative ecosystem, the need for effective crisis communication has become of paramount importance. The speed and velocity of information exchange in today’s digital ecosystem magnify the impact of corporate crises and require skilful management of such disruptions, not only to maintain operations but also to protect reputational capital. Crises can no longer be considered rare disruptions.

That’s the reason why for practitioners and academics it was strategic during the EUPRERA Congress to devote time to discussing the landscape of continuous potential crises that must be faced, and how it is necessary to transform crisis management from a reactive task to a continual strategic engagement.

This new communicative ecosystem is characterised by several dynamics that make it imperative to urgently re-evaluate the established theory of crisis communication. The proliferation of digital platforms has enabled an unprecedented speed of information dissemination, creating fertile ground for the escalation of crises. The traditional role of the media as gatekeeper has been weakened, allowing unverified information to circulate alongside verified information. In addition, the global interconnectedness of stakeholders means that the impact of a crisis is no longer confined by geographical or temporal boundaries.

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This borderless and instantaneous exchange has changed stakeholder expectations of corporate transparency and responsiveness and set a new bar for what constitutes legitimate and reputable behaviour.

Against this backdrop, the future of crisis communication studies is poised to pivot around three critical questions that have emerged as a result of this new environment.

Firstly, scholarship needs to critically rethink the very notion of “crisis” to go beyond the idea that a corporate crisis is generated only within the company, encompassing the challenges that originate externally from the company. Global phenomena such as the climate crisis or health emergencies, like the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), are examples of crises that, while not caused by companies, require their active engagement and thoughtful response. This expanded notion of crisis is forcing companies to take on new responsibilities and requires the development of innovative responses and strategies tailored to their role in these extensive societal challenges. It is imperative that our research opens to a broader conceptualisation of crisis to remain relevant and effective in a world where corporate influence and accountability extend far beyond the boundaries of one’s industry.

Secondly, crisis communication scholarship must grapple with the growing challenges posed by the manipulation of crisis narratives, especially given the digital age’s capacity for information distortion. Technologies such as generative AI, including platforms such as ChatGPT, have introduced a new frontier where the creation and dissemination of convincing, yet entirely fabricated, narratives can occur at alarming speed and scale. This phenomenon has significant implications for organisations, as they can become embroiled in crises created by “fake news” – situations in which they must defend themselves against accusations or circumstances that are not based on reality. These fabricated crises require a re-evaluation of how organisations monitor and respond to potential threats. Scholars and practitioners alike need to examine how false information can impact companies, the mechanisms by which such misinformation spreads, and the impact it can have on stakeholder perceptions and behaviour. Strategies need to be formulated that equip organisations with the tools they need to quickly counter misrepresentations while maintaining stakeholder trust. The integrity of an organisation’s response to these “fake crises” is paramount, not only for their immediate resolution but also for the long-term preservation of one’s reputation. This requires a concerted effort to understand and navigate the intricacies of information authenticity in the digital communications landscape.

Lastly, there is an imperative for our scholarship to move beyond response strategies that embrace only strategic considerations, incorporating the ethical dimensions of our actions. This approach moves beyond the traditional focus on minimising corporate responsibility, through strategies such as scapegoating, and towards a holistic vision that integrates ethical accountability into the core of crisis management practices. The synergy of these dimensions emphasises the essential need for a nuanced, principle-based approach to crisis communication, one that is finely attuned to the intricacies and ethical implications of the digital age.

In sum, the crisis communication landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by the relentless pace of digital innovation and the global interconnectedness it fosters. The imperative now is no longer only about reacting to crises but anticipating them and understanding that the terrain has shifted from the predictable to the unpredictable. As crisis communication scholars, we find ourselves at a critical juncture where redefining crises, curbing misinformation and ethically recalibrating corporate responses are not just theoretical imperatives but practical necessities. Our scholarship must rise to the occasion and provide insights and frameworks that are both robust and flexible enough to navigate the uncharted waters of this new communicative ecosystem. We need to equip practitioners with the tools to discern the truth in an age of generative AI and to act ethically with stakeholders across the communicative environment.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book contains a selection of the best papers presented and discussed during the Vienna Congress. The following words provide a flavour of each chapter.

In “Working with Paradoxes: How Shifts in Risks are Altering Public Relations,” W. Timothy Coombs explores the challenges faced by organisations in contemporary polarised societies. The chapter examines the reasons behind organisations feeling compelled to engage with divisive socio-political issues and explores how they can effectively navigate these issues through values advocacy.

The chapter titled “Mapping the Challenges of COVID-19 from the Point of View of Organizational Communication” by Helena Kantanen and Merja Koskela is a qualitative literature review and provides guidelines for professionals for the development of communication practices during health crises. Moreover, the research proves the importance of trustful workplace relationships and informal and horizontal communication as prerequisites for coping with uncertainty in risk societies.

The chapter “Crisis Communication at the Intersection of Responsibility and Consumer Engagement Opportunity: A Case Study of Ryanair Tweets During the COVID-19 Pandemic” by Ursula Lutzky studies crisis communication of the Irish airline Ryanair during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering insights on the airline industry pandemic experience. The analysis is focused on the use of Twitter by Ryanair in early 2022 and shows how the company reappropriated instructing and adapting information on crisis-related topics, as promotion and took a political stance in its tweets to encourage consumer engagement.

In “Negotiations in Various Crisis Situations,” Kristijan Sedak, Katia Matijašević and Lucija Pranjić look at strategies and tactics for negotiating in crisis situations, examine specific strategies and tactics, and determine whether there are certain regularities in negotiating in crisis situations. Through semi-structured interviews from different countries in Europe and the Middle East, the study highlights that effective negotiations are built on long-term relationships, an integrative strategy, and attention to ethical tactics.

Sabine Einwiller and Christine Korn in the chapter, “What’s Happening at Your Company?! Employees’ Reactions to Inquiries of Outsiders in the Event of Negative Media Coverage,” explore the role of employees when the media report negatively about an organisation. A survey among employed people revealed that employees can support communication managers to preserve or restore organisational reputation in critical situations. Internal Corporate Communication (ICC) can play a key role in winning employees as ambassadors.

In the chapter titled “Taliban’s Communication on Afghan Women: Narratives and Image Repair Strategies after the Kabul Takeover,” Juliane J. Gabel delves into the communication strategies and narratives of the Taliban as they interact with the international media. Through a qualitative content analysis of the Taliban’s initial press conference, subsequent interviews and statements on the women in Afghanistan after the Kabul takeover in August 2021, the study suggests that the Taliban adopt image repair strategies and coherent communication tools.

The research team of Denisa Hejlová, Petra Koudelková, Tereza Ježková, Soňa Schneiderová, Tereza Klabíková Rábová and Marcela Konrádová explores the topic of government communication during pandemic crisis. Their chapter, “Crisis Communication Challenges in Czech Pandemic Education: Recommendations for Strategic Communication in the Public Sector,” presents research results regarding how the Czech Ministry of Education communicated during the pandemic crisis, how its communications were received by key stakeholders, and what pitfalls in communication it faced. The chapter presents empirical evidence of government communication challenges in times of crisis in a post-communist country and thus addresses the gap in government communication knowledge concerning the role of democracy and stakeholder participation in transforming societies.

In the chapter “So Close, Yet So Far? Effects of Privatization and Communicative Strategy on the Perceptions of Stakeholders in Corporate Crises,” Benno Viererbl, Nora Denner and Stefanie Holzer study the effects of personalised statements by CEOs during corporate crises. The research shows how the social distance of the CEO can affect both the image of the organisation and the image of the CEO.

In the chapter “Understanding Factors That Influence Risk Perception in Strategic Communication: The Case of CCUS Communication,” Diana-Maria Cismaru and Raluca Silvia Ciochina analyse the past and current messages disseminated about Carbon Capture, Usage and Storage (CCUS) in Romania, as well as how new messages about CCUS are perceived by stakeholders. On one side, media analysis and website analysis were conducted to identify the current and past core messages about CCUS used in society; on the other side, focus group research was conducted to test new core messages among citizens in Romania. The results of the study show the need for clarity, accessibility and appeal to citizens’ personal interests.

Guy Bennett-Longley and Daniel Laufer are authors of the chapter “The Effects of Corporate Philanthropy on Reputation Following Natural Disasters: The Benefits of Helping when Hurting.” The research focuses on consumer

reactions to corporate philanthropy during crises and natural disasters. Results from an experimental design demonstrate that a company's reputation can be impacted in a different manner depending on the level of scepticism among consumers and corporate engagement in philanthropic activities.

Finally, the chapter by Yan Jin, "The Quest for Crisis Management Keystone: Reflections on the Future of Risk, Crisis and Disaster Research and Practice" offers some food-for-thought reflections on possible directions in the fields of risk, crisis and disaster research and addressing the impelling needs of professionals for new and update knowledge to navigate complex situations.

We hope that reading this volume will inspire professionals to use communication strategically in times of crisis and make them aware of how delicate their role is in a society where risk is prevalent. At the same time, we hope that this book will inspire academics to learn more and more about the mechanisms of crisis communication.

I take this opportunity to thank the Head of the Scientific Committee, Prof Chiara Valentini, all the reviewers involved in the process of paper selection and revision, and the co-authors of this book for their valuable work.

Stefania Romenti
President of EUPRERA
Milano, November 20th, 2023

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WORKING WITH PARADOXES: HOW SHIFTS IN RISKS ARE ALTERING PUBLIC RELATIONS

W. Timothy Coombs

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ABSTRACT

Managers are increasingly finding their organisations being drawn into polarising socio-political issues. While not an entirely novel form of risk for organisations, the ability to avoid this form of risk is eroding, resulting in a new risk environment. This chapter is a conceptual piece that explores why organisations are compelled to address polarising socio-political issues, and how they might navigate issues communicatively through the use of values advocacy. Stakeholder expectations and potential benefits from taking stances on issues result in organisational managers taking stands on polarising, socio-political issues. However, the polarisation creates dangers by risking to intensify the issue division among constituents, causing segments of organisational constituents to turn against the organisation. Values advocacy may be one way to limit the dangers when taking stands on socio-political issues.

Keywords: Crisis communication; risk; socio-political issues; values advocacy; polarisation; dissensus

INTRODUCTION

Organisational constituents have never reacted monolithically to organisational actions. People can and do react differently to organisations, their actions and their policies; a point [Boulding \(1956\)](#) made as early as the 1950s. Public relations concentrate on how most people will react, especially the most salient constituents ([Coombs & Holladay, 2010](#)), not on how all people react to messages. When constituents hear information about an organisation, some might have a positive emotional reaction to the information while others might have a negative

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emotional reaction. This is the nature of selective perception, as people tend to see what they want to see in their environments. [Zavyalova et al. \(2016\)](#) used Chick-fil-A to illustrate the possible divergence in reactions to organisations. When Chick-fil-A became associated with their owner's position against same-sex marriage, supporters of same-sex marriage boycotted the restaurant chain. However, proponents of traditional marriage showed support for eat-ins at restaurants. The information that attracts some constituents can repulse others. The Chick-fil-A example is insightful because it not only shows how constituents can view organisational actions differently but also links these divergent views to social issues. LGBTQ+ rights (same-sex marriage is a part of it) is a social issue. True to social issues, LGBTQ+ has been noted as being polarising in the US society ([USC, 2022](#)).

In the past, organisations sought to avoid addressing social issues ([Wowak et al., 2022](#)). However, managers are experiencing increasing pressure to take stands and actions on social issues ([Porter Novelli, 2020](#)). A number of emerging academic research lines intersect with this trend. As managers find their organisations being drawn into the discussion of social issues, the polarising nature of these issues creates a new and unique risk environment for public relations professionals. They are challenged to find ways to navigate the realm of social issues without escalating divisions between the organisation and its various constituents. The wrong comments and actions will escalate divisions and trigger additional combative discourse. While dissensus can be a valuable tool ([Ciszek, 2016](#)), it can inflict harm as well when the various sides become enemies ([Mouffe, 1999](#)). The purpose of this piece is to explore how managers can navigate this new risk environment when they must engage with polarising issues. The first part of the chapter explores polarising issues by explaining polarisation and explicating the concept of socio-political issues. The attention then shifts to why managers often feel compelled to engage with polarising socio-political issues. Dissensus, agonistic communication and paradox theory are used as underlying theoretical explanations for the new risk context. Finally, values advocacy is offered as one means of navigating this new risk environment.

CONTEXT AND KEY CONCEPTS

The new risk environment is predicated upon polarising socio-political issues. But what is polarisation, what are socio-political issues, why are socio-political issues polarising, and why would managers feel compelled to engage with these problematic issues?

Polarisation

Polarisation is a concept from political science that indicates deep divisions between how groups perceive issues – people strongly hold divergent views on an issue. There are multiple facets to polarisation and this chapter focuses on the issue polarisation and affective polarisation. Issue polarisation attempts to