

Approaching Ethical Crisis Communication with Accuracy and Sensitivity: Exploring Common Ground and Gaps between Journalism and Public Relations

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ABSTRACT

Through 40 in-depth interviews with media professionals, this study explores: 1) how media professionals approach ethical crisis communication and stakeholder engagement and 2) media professionals' views of organizational crisis communication. Findings revealed participants' descriptions of ethical approaches, major ethical tenets they practiced, and levels of ethical obligations or guidance. Participants spoke of ethical approaches as rule-based, balanced or utilitarian, or situational. Most followed major ethical guidelines for crisis reporting, such as respect, objectivity/neutrality, sensitivity, empathy/compassion, accuracy, timeliness, verification of facts/sources, honesty, and transparency, with a strong focus on public interest. Participants mentioned obligations and guidance from their own moral compasses, organizations or newsrooms, schooling, professions, and communities and stakeholders. Findings indicate that crises represent unique situations for ethical communication and stakeholder engagement. Participants suggested that relationships with public relations professionals in times of crisis could be improved by receiving more complete, timely, and accurate information from organizations.

Keywords: crisis, engagement, ethics, media, social media, stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

Media play an essential role in crisis communication. Crisis information production and dissemination are critical for crisis preparedness, response, and recovery, as many have witnessed, from man-made disasters, such as the recent Boston marathon bombings, to corporate crises that endanger societal well being, such as the BP oil spill (Austin & Jin, in press). While media professionals and communication scholars recognize the importance of engaging stakeholders via different forms of media, how to

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effectively and ethically engage with stakeholders via both traditional and social media, especially in times of crises, lacks consensus.

Communicating through varying forms of media in times of crisis affects how stakeholders learn about and eventually recover from crises (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2014; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011). Expectations for organizations to communicate ethically in times of crisis are high; however, few studies have examined the ethical aspect in business crisis communication practice, especially in the complex media landscape where social and traditional media intertwine. This study furthers understanding of how social and traditional media produce and distribute crisis information, with emphasis on ethical standards, expectations, and practices. Through 40 in-depth interviews with media professionals, this study obtains insider insights on ethical decision-making and influences in crisis communication. Additionally, findings are compared to previous research on public relations practitioners' ethical decision-making to examine similarities and differences in crisis communication between media professionals and public relations professionals. Practical implications are suggested for business and media professionals on how to optimize ethical and effective communication with stakeholders who need timely, accurate crisis information tailored to their preferred communication channels and formats.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stakeholder Engagement in Crisis Communication

Stakeholder engagement is defined as the level of interaction between a stakeholder and an organization, which can influence stakeholders' thoughts, emotions, and behaviors toward the organization (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric & Ilic, 2011). According to Luoma-aho (2015), "the value of engagement lies in its understanding of dialogue dynamics and enabled participation" (p. 5).

Social media have presented new possibilities for organizations to engage with stakeholders by allowing real-time feedback and conversations about organizational announcements (Lovejoya, Waters, & Saxton, 2012). The majority of existing stakeholder engagement research has focused on how organizations connect and interact with stakeholders on a daily basis in non-crisis situations. For instance, Saxton and Waters (2014) examined 1,000 Facebook statuses sent by the 100 largest nonprofit organizations in the U.S. These organizations' stakeholder engagement activities were measured based on the public's variable reactions as evidenced in liking, sharing, and commenting on different organizational messages.

What is lacking in stakeholder engagement research is at least two-fold: 1) how organizations can effectively and ethically engage stakeholders in crisis situations vs. non-crisis situations; and 2) how public relations practitioners and media professionals utilize traditional and social media to engage stakeholders via effective and ethical crisis information production and dissemination.

More specifically, first, only recently researchers started to examine stakeholder engagement activities of organizations experiencing social media crises. Ott and Theunissen (in press) analyzed three multinational for-profit organizations experiencing social media crises after 2010. They found that, although each organization employed different engagement strategies with varied outcomes, authenticity of voice and transparency emerged as crucial factors for success. However, engaging indiscriminately with emotional individuals could potentially escalate an issue. Second, Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) pointed to a gap that exists between the goals public relations practitioners have for their organizations' websites and the capacity of their websites for helping organizations build relationships with journalists. Even with the fast-changing technology that allows for more rapid information flow and exchange, as Pettigrew and Reber (2010) pointed out, reactivity is unavoidable in public relations, which means that the timing of an event may prevent public relations practitioners from providing journalists with the information as immediately as desired for news story production and dissemination. This is especially challenging in crisis situations. Further, as Pettigrew and Reber (2010) suggested, stakeholder engagement should not only be examined in terms of how stakeholders respond to and interact with an organization but also via the lens of both communicators and senders themselves. Specifically, journalists and media professionals are crucial gatekeepers and influencers, and their role in organizational stakeholder engagement activities needs further examination.

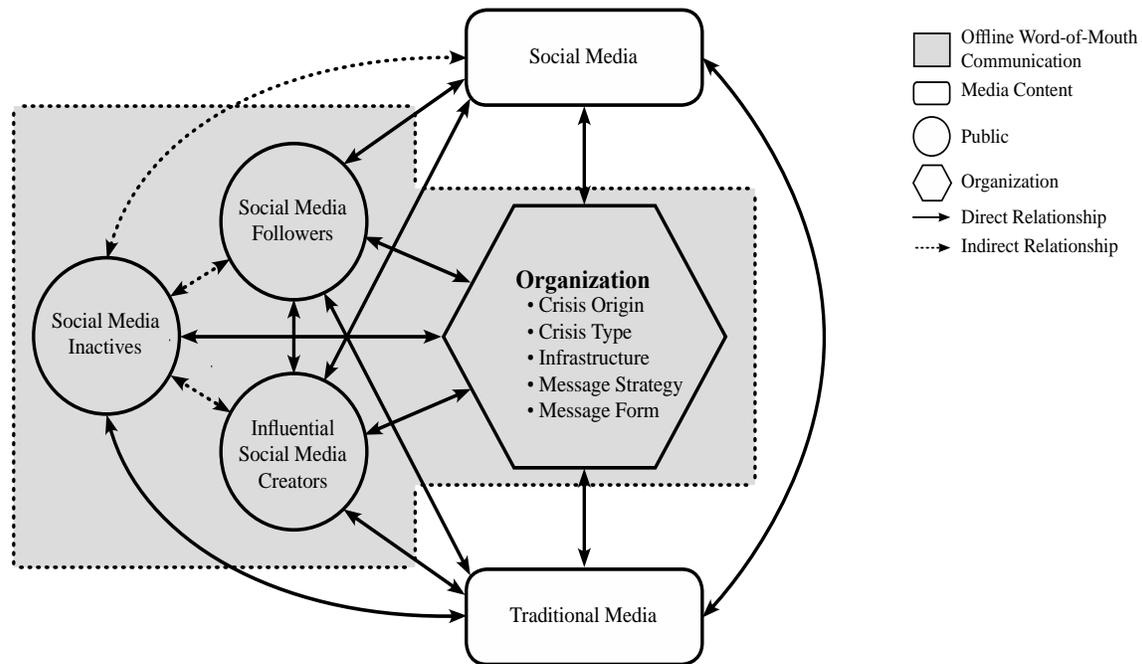
Media Professionals' Role in Crisis Communication and the SMCC

Increasingly, stakeholders turn to social media during crises to obtain the most up-to-date information (Moreo, 2012). At the same time, research indicates that traditional media are stakeholders' primary sources of crisis information (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012), helping reduce threat during times of ambiguity (Wilson, 2004). Consequently, researchers have paid recent attention to how stakeholders use (and do not use) social versus traditional media during crises.

Contributing to this robust research stream, Jin and Liu (2010) and Liu, Jin, Briones, and Kuch (2012) proposed and developed one of the first theoretical frameworks to explain how social media, traditional media, and word-of-mouth communication interact to inform stakeholders during crises: the SMCC model (See Figure 1). A key contribution of the SMCC model is identifying three audience types that interact to share and produce information before, during, and after crises: influential social media creators, social media followers, and social media inactives (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Liu, Jin, Austin, & Janoske, 2012). Creators develop and post crisis information online; followers consume this information from creators and also share this information both on and offline; and inactives receive this crisis information via other channels—including traditional media and word-of-mouth communication—from followers, creators, or other inactives (Austin & Jin, in press). *Influential social media creators* immediately recognize the gravity of a crisis or potential crisis and are able and motivated to talk about it online. *Social media followers* are those who receive crisis information from influential social media creators either directly or indirectly. *Social media inactives* do not directly receive crisis information from social media, but may receive information

shared via social media through offline word-of-mouth communication or as reported by media (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012).

Figure 1. Social-mediated Crisis Communication Model



Initial research points to the possibility of citizens, media, and crisis response organizations becoming influential social media creators during crises. Of these three audiences, however, traditional media seem to be the primary source of crisis information across all platforms. For example, Reynolds and Seeger (2012) noted that the majority of Twitter content comes from traditional mass media during crises, which Hughes and Palen (2009) termed “information broadcasting and brokerage” (p. 1). Chew and Eysenbach (2010) supported this conclusion through finding that Tweets that only provided personal accounts of the 2009 H1N1 pandemic were not retweeted, but Tweets that provided links to news sites were retweeted. As another example, researchers found that the top three most influential Twitter users worldwide during the 2011 Egyptian revolution were news organizations, as determined by their follower relationships and how those followers shared the organizations’ Tweets (Clouhary, et al., 2012).

The influence of traditional media is also strong for social media followers and inactives. Research indicates that the majority of those online during crises are social media followers as most people read rather than create content during crises (Reynolds & Seeger, 2012). For social media inactives, traditional media tend to be the main source of crisis information (Littlefield & Quenette, 2007; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998). However, crises may cause social media inactives to use social media for the first time.

Finally, social media inactives' opinions about crises may also be disseminated online by influential social media creators and followers.

For all of these audiences, initial research indicates that traditional media content creators are a key information source. At the same time, social media creators, such as bloggers, also provide a key information crisis creation and dissemination role. While considerable research investigates how traditional and social media frame crises through content analyses of crisis coverage (An & Gower, 2009; Durham, 1998; Scheufele, Nisbet, & Ostman, 2005; Tsung-Jen, Wijaya, & Brossard, 2008), no found study investigates how these media create content through speaking to the creators themselves. As researchers note, the crisis communication field largely lacks insider insights (Heath, 2010; Kim & Dutta, 2009). Additionally, knowledge about ethical standards for communicating via social and traditional media is largely lacking. Therefore, this study fills a key knowledge gap through providing insider insights into how social and traditional media produce crisis information and their ethical considerations, which in turn affects how well organizations and society can recover from crises.

Ethical Engagement and Decision-Making in Crisis Communication

Engaging in ethical communication in times of crises seems to be the ongoing theme in today's stakeholder communication research and practice. According to Murphy (2010), when an organization is in the middle of a crisis, "decisions need to be made in minutes, if not seconds; broad consensus is desirable, but rarely practical; information is nearly always incomplete; constituencies have no patience for delays or uncertainties; and the best and worst of human emotions can surface." For many organizations, the question is not whether to engage in ethical communication during crises, but how and what factors influence an ethical stance, which influences crisis response. The attribution of responsibility in business crises, as compared to external crises like natural disasters or terrorism, is often high and the locus of control is internal (Coombs, 2007, 2008). This means that expectations on organizations to communicate ethically are high. Arguably, few studies have examined the ethical aspect in business crisis communication practice, especially in the complex media landscape where social media and traditional media intertwine to set the public issues agenda and exert influence on not only what, but also how, stakeholders perceive and respond to organizations involved in different crises.

Practically, Gladstone (2013) outlined five ways to influence leaders to think and act ethically in a crisis situation (p. 24-25): 1) Ask the right questions; 2) Anticipate scrutiny; 3) Influence the first story ("Once the crisis team agrees on a reactive approach, collaborate on a standby statement so you're prepared to respond immediately to reporter inquiries or social media rumors," p. 25); 4) Outline the options; and 5) Compare the consequences. Additionally, two main philosophical, ethical decision-making approaches—*deontological* decision-making and *utilitarian* decision-making—have been studied in public relations (Bowen, 2004, 2005; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1996). Deontological ethical decision-making, also described as "rule-based" decision-

making (Fawkes, 2012), prioritizes decision-making based upon rules or set ethical guidelines or standards. These ethical tenets may come from organizations, codes of ethics, or from individuals, and are generally seen as “norms of obligation” (Bowen, 2004). Bowen (2005) found that the majority of organizations studied used deontological approaches to ethical decision-making; however, using individual ethics to guide decision-making was problematic and led to inconsistent communication. Utilitarian decision-making, also known as teleological or consequentialist decision-making, focuses on outcomes of decisions (Bowen, 2004; 2005). Decisions are often made via a cost-benefit analysis. Decisions that are perceived to result in more good than harm or the “greater good” for a greater number of people are prioritized, although outcomes of decision-making are uncertain at the point of the decision.

From a journalistic perspective, Slattery (2014) suggests that deontological approaches to ethics can help to fill gaps in journalistic codes of ethics, when these are based upon the moral principles from the deontological philosophies of Immanuel Kant and W. D. Ross. Bivins (2014) calls for individual journalists to return to making ethical decisions based on their own virtue and overarching human virtues, including sincerity, competency, thoroughness, mercy, and moderation.

To provide a road map to explore practical questions in ethical decision-making, Pang, Jin and Cameron (2010) unearthed a set of factors, grounded in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and conflict communication literature, called ethical variables that influence the organization’s stance before it communicates with its stakeholders. Insights from CSR literature provided the initial roadmap on what constitutes ethical decision-making in crises (Crandall, Parnell, & Spillan, 2010). CSR can inform ethics, as one manifestation of being responsible is being ethical (Joyner & Payne, 2002), and having an ethical bearing enables an organization to act responsibly (Velasquez, 1999). Individual, organizational, and contextual influencers all play roles in communicating ethically in moral conflicts (Fisher-Yoshida & Wasserman, 2006).

The six factors identified by Jin, Pang, and Cameron (2010) included: 1) *the role of public relations practitioners*; 2) *the role of top management*; 3) *exposure of organizational business and diversity of cultures*; 4) *government influence and intervention*; 5) *nature of crisis*; and 6) *activism of the stakeholders*. These ethical factors, anchored in the contingency theory of strategic conflict management (see Cameron, Pang, & Jin, 2008; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010), may influence the organization’s adoption of an ethical stance toward a given public at a given time from pure advocacy to pure accommodation.

As the first step to explore these theoretically identified ethical factors, Jin, Pang, and Smith (2014) conducted in-depth interviews with crisis managers to gauge the point of view of public relations practitioners in North America. Public relations practitioners interviewed defined an organization’s ethical crisis communication as “*communicating with its prioritized publics with accurate and timely crisis information, during the entire crisis cycle, in a transparent, responsible, and honest way, which contributes to the overall business strategy and reputational wellbeing of the organization in the long*

term.” Findings imply that ethical communication in a crisis takes thoughtful planning and support from top management. Practitioners need to be mindful and fully aware of personal, situational, and relational factors in handling crises, for the wellbeing of the organization and the interest of stakeholders involved. The message should be consistent and align with the organization’s vision, mission, and core values.

Although debatable whether a senior public relations practitioner plays the key role as “the moral conscience of the organization,” interviewees agreed that practitioners should plan for this role, depending on the organization and the nature of the crisis. To play this role well, a practitioner should be savvy in dealing with media and speak the business language within the organization. In addition, organizations were more likely to take a more ethical approach, when the organizations had an open culture, encouraged employees to communicate, and had a large, active media network or social media followers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the above literature on ethical decision-making and crisis communication, the following research questions are proposed to understand how media professionals define ethical crisis communication, how they engage stakeholders in crisis situations, and how these views differ from public relations practitioners’ views:

RQ1: How do media professionals approach ethical crisis communication and stakeholder engagement in crisis situations?

RQ2: How do media professionals’ views of their own ethical crisis communication and stakeholder engagement differ from those of organizations/public relations?

METHOD

The study included 40 in-depth, phone interviews with experienced traditional and social media professionals at regional and national U.S. news outlets covering varying organizational crises and natural disasters. In this study, media professionals were defined as the primary journalist, blogger, social media writer, or reporter for a crisis during the past year. Participants had on average 20 years of professional media experience, much of which was related to crisis reporting (Mean = 20.05, SD = 12.95). Crisis was defined broadly to include unpredictable incidents that threaten organizations, communities, and stakeholders; these may be disasters such as severe weather events, organizational misdeeds, terrorist attacks, scandals, etc. (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005; Seeger, 2006). Media professionals had covered a variety of types of crises, including organizational crises, health crises, and natural disasters.

Traditional mass media content creators and social media content creators were recruited through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling strategies to ensure

maximum variation of geographic location, type of media, and sector of media coverage, following the principle of maximum variation (Creswell, 2007). Interviews lasted on average just under an hour, depending on participants' responses and availability. Participants completed only one interview, unless follow-up questions arose. A semi-structured interview guide of open-ended questions explored the research questions listed above (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Participants were asked to provide examples of recent crises they had covered in their form of media and what constituted ethical communication through their form of media during a crisis. Participants were asked to share about ethical challenges and "grey areas" they faced in crisis communication and perceived ethical obligations in their crisis reporting and interactions with stakeholders and organizations.

Interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. Researchers stopped conducting interviews when the answers to the research questions displayed depth and variations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), reaching a saturation point and resulting in 40 interviews. Researchers systematically analyzed transcripts through Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2013) data analysis procedures: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Interview transcripts were coded, line-by-line, using Atlas.ti during the data reduction phase. Researchers merged related codes into common themes and exported the data into thematic, conceptually clustered matrices in Microsoft Excel to enable systematic collection and comparison.

RESULTS

RQ1: How do media professionals approach ethical crisis communication and stakeholder engagement in crisis situations?

Media professional participants described ethical crisis communication and stakeholder engagement in terms of their ethical approaches, major ethical tenets they practiced, and levels of ethical obligations or guidance.

Ethical Approaches

Participants largely spoke of their ethical approaches as rule-based (deontological), balanced or utilitarian (teleological), or situational.

Rule-based ethics. Some participants mentioned rule-based principles of ethics or deontological approaches to ethics. Participants mentioned following rule-based principles, such as "The Golden Rule," formalized codes of ethics from professional organizations, or rules of ethics from their college education. Most participants mentioned major ethical tenets or guidelines for crisis reporting, whether these originated from their personal sense of ethics or from formalized codes, as described further below under the section on ethical tenets.

Balanced/utilitarian ethics. Many participants mentioned the ethical notion of balancing benefits versus harms, or a teleological or utilitarian approach to ethics. Many

participants stressed the need for balancing ethical tenets, such as a balance between timeliness and accuracy, a balance between sensitivity and objectivity, a balance between empathy and honesty, etc. A teleological approach also often asks if the ends justify the means. For example, as a participant stated, “My ethic(s) basis is... the greatest good for the greatest number. I try to... have the greatest impact for the greatest number of people downstream from me.”

Situational ethics. Participants also addressed the need for situational ethics, varying depending on the situation and unique context. For example, as one participant noted, “It really depends on the situation. I don’t want to be...breaking the news to somebody... where a friend learns that a friend’s been in an accident when the parents don’t know yet.... I don’t think that’s necessarily my role.” As another noted, “It depends on the crisis. Is it a shooting? One thing I would say is you try not to hurt people further. The caveat there is that sometimes people are hurt by reporting... the truth.”

Major Ethical Tenets Described in Engaging Stakeholders

Most participants mentioned major ethical tenets or guidelines for crisis reporting that they followed, such as respect, objectivity/neutrality, sensitivity, empathy/compassion, accuracy, timeliness, verification of facts/sources, honesty, and transparency, with a strong focus on public interest, as described further below.

Respect to the situation and those involved. Many participants described the importance of showing respect to audiences, victims, community members, and the situation, often referencing principles such as “The Golden Rule” and the principle of “Do No Harm.” For example, as a participant noted, “I think my highest ethical standard is the golden rule... ‘do unto others as you want to be done unto you.’ I’ve had some exposure to the philosophical basis of ethics in media and for me none of them come any higher.” Another stated, “You don’t want to do any harm. In a crisis situation the worst thing you can do is to make life harder for everybody... it’s our job to make people’s lives a little better and not worse.”

Neutrality, objectivity, or openness. Media professionals participating in the interviews described the need for neutrality, others for objectivity, and some for being “open” to the situation. Participants stressed the need for balanced information and for presenting multiple sides to a story. For example, as a participant stated about objectivity and openness to the situation, it’s important to:

[Make] sure that you’ve got objectivity. You have to get the other side [and] give them a fair shot. Make sure you’re giving all perspectives. Because a lot of times you go at a story with a particular angle in mind because somebody came to you and told you what it is. And you go out and check it out, and you find out well, it might not be there. And if you’re not thorough about that, then ethically, you didn’t search for the truth.

Another participant stated that media professionals do not have to be objective, but rather “your job is to report neutrally —remember that you are a harbinger of neutral information.”

Sensitivity, empathy, and compassion. Media professional interview participants noted that sensitivity is increasingly important in crisis news coverage when more people are using social media and information is spreading from citizen journalists, as well as professionals. Due to the highly emotional nature of many crises for victims of the crisis, communities, and other parties involved, participants expressed that these ethical values were especially important for crisis reporting. For example, a participant stated, “Because crises bring out sharp emotions, ethics are even more important. They are always important because of what we do and the role that we play, but because they bring out strong emotions they are even more important.”

Some participants specifically mentioned showing empathy and compassion to victims, stakeholders, and affected community members of the crisis, while others mentioned being sensitive to the situation. For example, as one participant noted, “I would call empathy important especially if a private person has suffered a loss. You know, you don’t want to shove a microphone into a grieving person’s face, ‘How do you feel?’ It’s click bait. It’s cheap. It’s a low blow.” Others stressed showing empathy to victims and affected community members, regardless of how the media professional feels. For example, a participant stated, “I have to show empathy. And sometimes I can’t feel empathy, but I can show empathy. These are two different things. You have to have that little art of balance that comes with it.” As another mentioned about the emotional nature of crises and the need for sensitivity, “It takes a unique individual to cover a news crisis, especially repeatedly, and they’re all hard things to deal with emotionally... you have to have the sensitivity to cover those things while you’re there and the stability to be able to deal with those feelings afterwards.”

The visual nature and potential of social media has also affected these ethical implications. As one participant noted, “You see a lot of the publications using pictures that appear on Twitter and those kinds of things... they’ll use a picture that somebody took that was passing by an accident, and ‘got it.’ Got a picture that nobody else did, and all of the sudden that becomes the picture that appears in their newsprint as well as...social media.”

Accurate but timely. The majority of media professional participants mentioned the need for accuracy and for verification of facts; however, they also mentioned the increasing need for timeliness of information in times of crisis in this changing media environment. As participants noted, the changing media environment makes timely communication easier than ever; however, accuracy and verification of facts is increasingly challenging. For example, one participant stated, “Certainly, it’s important for you to know that what you’re putting on TV, or on the Internet, or on Twitter is accurate and that’s harder than ever before. It’s so easy to hear something and want to put it out there and be the first person to break that on Twitter, but you really have to stop and make sure it’s accurate.”

Another part of accuracy participants referenced was the need for multiple sources of information, verification of these sources, and verification of facts. For example, a participant talked about the importance of accuracy and multiple sources, "At one time, CBS always really trumpeted the fact that nothing would go on their air in a news context unless it had been independently verified by at least two unrelated sources who wouldn't have been able to necessarily tell each other and conspire to tell something... We need to get back to that idea..."

Even with multiple sources, however, some participants noted the difficulty in ensuring accuracy and pressure from external stakeholders. For example, as one participant noted, "That speaks to the kind of judgment-call, risk taking that we do when we decide, 'okay, when did something become confirmed?' Well it's when you've learned from multiple sources ... Well, you're still only believing it's the truth. You weren't there. And so everything is a judgment call, but sometimes there are outside influences that pressure journalists into making that decision in haste."

Others, though, stress the strength in numbers of sources. As another participant stated, "Dealing with social media... essentially is crowd sourcing... If you get 100 reports, and 50 of them are saying there's a tree laying across this road here and it's causing traffic to back up, just because of the sheer number there's probably more validity to some of those reports than to others... there's a high likelihood that it's true."

Honesty/Transparency. In addition to factual accuracy in crisis reporting, participants also specifically expressed the need for honesty in crisis reporting and dealing with sources, and transparency of any potential interests or biases. For example, as one participant stressed about the need for honesty in ethical crisis reporting, "I think to just make sure you have an honesty policy... there's no room for exaggeration or rumor. Journalism really needs to stay intact. It needs to be a place that's a statement of fact. It's not our place to tell you what to think about it, it's our place to tell you what happened."

In relation to transparency, participants cautioned about being transparent in identifying themselves as reporters or journalists, and being transparent about their interests to individuals they interviewed in times of crisis. For example, a participant stated, "Make sure the first thing anyone knows when you approach him or her is that you are a journalist and that is what you're there to do. If you go up and approach someone one-on-one, either in person or on the phone, you need to identify who you are."

Participants also stressed the importance of being transparent with viewers about where news information is coming from. Media professionals expressed that this transparency was particularly important in the changing media environment as more news outlets were utilizing content from public sources. For example, as one participant stated, "Everyone has a cell phone that can capture video, and that is sometimes the first video that you see on TV during a crisis... My goal is to always identify it as material or information coming from a member of the public. I believe in the importance of

transparency.” This participant went on to state, “Does the cell phone video of the explosion from the public deserve to be on our TV station even though we didn’t take that video? Absolutely...But we also can’t mislead the viewer into thinking it is ours and we wouldn’t want to. Because if it turns out that it was made up or something terrible like that, not that it’s an out, but we did mention that this was not our material...”

Levels of Ethical Obligations and Guidance in Engaging Stakeholders with Crisis Information

Media professionals participating in the interviews described varying levels of ethical obligations and ethical codes that they followed. Participants specifically mentioned obligations and ethical guidance coming from their own moral compasses, from their organizations or newsrooms, from their schooling, from their professions, and from their communities and stakeholders (whether locally-based or communities of readers).

One’s self. Most participants mentioned being guided by their own personal sense of ethics, in addition to other formalized codes of ethics and prior education on ethical standards. Participants expressed that these personal ethical guidelines were most natural to use in times of crisis reporting. Media professionals with many years of experience also expressed that their personal set of ethics had been redefined over time with their professional experiences. As one participant stated about his personal set of ethics in combination with professional codes of ethics, “You find yourself in certain situations, and you ultimately do what you think is the right thing to do. SPJ [code of ethics] is a good norm—a good touchstone. It’s good to have it so it backs me, like, ‘that’s what the code of ethics says’...to do, but the initial pulse about the right thing to do comes from my personal set of ethics not from SPJ.” Others mentioned relying on their own common sense for ethical principles. For example, as a participant noted, “I don’t have a particular protocol. I don’t have a checklist or anything like that—it might be a good idea to create one, but to me it’s common sense.”

School/educational. Others mentioned learning ethics from “school” or from other educational experiences, although this original learning was enhanced through learning on the job. As a participant stated about ethical foundations learned in school, “You probably carry your ethical requirements and practices from school. Hopefully you learned some in school and you carry that into work. But then it’s kind of a ‘learn on the job’ and there are lots of things that I probably did as a rookie reporter that I wouldn’t do now.” Many of those who had been in the profession for some time felt this ethics education was now outdated. For example, as one participant stated, “I mean, I was in school 30 some years ago...a lot of what I learned in ethics, doesn’t necessarily apply to the current situation of how news is gathered and disseminated. And to be honest... I’ve never had any training on social media and those kinds of things and the ethics of it and how it should be covered. I just try and use commonsense...”

Organizational. Many media professionals mentioned being guided by ethical standards from their individual newsroom or news organizations; however, these ethical guidelines differed from organization to organization and were often limited to very

specific topics. As a participant stated, “I always started with the ethical guidelines of my organization and made sure I knew those really well. Because they are different from organization to organization and who you’re working for... Before taking a job, you should make sure that the ethics of that organization are in line with things you feel personally are okay.” As another media professional stated, “I’d say most of the ethics that we use in the newsroom or in the two newsrooms that I’ve worked in professionally have kind of been generated by the newsroom and it’s kind of learned on the job.” Another stated about his newsroom, “Sometimes there’s a written policy. We have a written rule policy on sources here. It’s not like we look at it over and over. It’s supposed to be because it discourages you to use those sources.”

Professional. Many of the participants mentioned professional standards and professional codes of ethics, such as ethical standards from the Society of Professional Journalists, the Poynter Institute, individual State codes of ethics, etc. Most participants, however, could not state what was in these codes of ethics and did not turn to them regularly, but rather let “common sense” or their own personal sense of ethics or “moral compass” guide them. For example, as one participant noted about the SPJ code of ethics, “Well the SPJ code of ethics, you know they’re revising them right now, but I don’t think that’s something that my colleagues and I pay attention to a lot. I probably pay more attention than most of my colleagues.” As another stated, “Every so often I go back and use the code of ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists, which is a really good basis and a good thing to read maybe every quarter or every six months, just to remind yourself.”

Community. For regional reporters and community-based media professionals, being part of the community was an important ethical consideration in crisis reporting. Participants expressed the importance of thinking about the community and community stakeholders during times of crisis, emphasizing the importance of community stakeholder engagement prior to crises and maintaining the relationship during crises. For example, as one participant stated, “Good crisis reporting—community crisis reporting—comes out of community journalism... Whether you are working for the middle of nowhere... or the Washington Post, it’s still community journalism. If you don’t know your community, when your community is suddenly in turmoil, you don’t recognize the new condition of your community.” Other reporters expressed the importance of the community in fostering a sense of community ethics for crisis reporting. For example, as a participant stated, “You were a part of that community before the crisis and you were covering that community before the crisis; it’s important to be a part of that community during the crisis as well, so act responsibly.” As another participant stated when talking about a school shooting in her news community, “I think we treated it in a very different way than a lot of other media because these are our people, and so we were very careful... In our off-the-record comments, we never called it a massacre. We’re very sensitive about that word... And just having that sensitivity... to know this is us, it’s all of us and not just some other people somewhere else in the world.”

RQ2: How do media professionals' views of their own ethical crisis communication and stakeholder engagement differ from those of organizations/public relations?

Due to the unpredictable, fast-moving nature of crises that media professionals describe, participants identified many ethical concerns unique to crisis reporting from both organizations/public relations and from media professionals. Based on participants' responses, crises represent unique situations for ethical communication.

Views and Expectations of Public Relations/Organizations Crisis Ethics

Media professionals participating in the interviews described their views and expectations of public relations professionals in relation to organizational crises. Participants expressed that public relations professionals and media professionals did not have the same goals during crises, and some went as far as saying they were "enemies" in crisis reporting. For example, as one participant stated, "They are the enemy because they are between us and the truth and the public and the truth. They want to filter it. They want to put their own gloss on it...manipulating the media and putting a professional sheen on this and basically spinning and controlling things."

Participants suggested that their relationship with public relations professionals and organizations in times of crisis could be improved by receiving more complete, timely, and accurate information from organizations. For example, as a media professional noted, "Hopefully, one of the lessons [public relations] learn[s] with a lot of major things is to put out as much information as you can. If your organization has done something bad, put it out as quickly as you can do it practically and accurately. And the story arc will shorten, and your company will not be exposed to negative publicity for a long time. That's for corporate crisis."

Views and Expectations of Media Professionals' Own Ethics During Crisis Reporting

Media professional participants also mentioned challenges with the ethics of journalism in crisis reporting. Participants talked about the challenges of the new media environment and the push for getting information out quickly, as referenced earlier. Participants discussed increased pressure because of this push and the greater risk for having another news outlet or another person break the story first, due in part to the increased flow of information online. For example, as one participant stated, "Because so much is happening, the perception has been to just get it out there and by tomorrow we'll be on to a new crisis, and no one will remember that we really screwed up today on that crisis. I think that's dangerous. We really need to get back to best practices, [and] at least have more to do with ensuring accuracy."

Participants also mentioned the increased spread of rumor and this rumor or false reporting being socially constructed as "real." For example, a participant states, "The problem is we see news as something that is real, that is actually there, that is factual."

Information can be anything. It can be something that was never factual, but was reported. It has become common for news organizations to say, 'So-and-so is reporting this, even though we haven't checked it, we suspect that it may be false, but we say it is news just because CNN says it is news.'"

Other participants mentioned the lack of sensitivity of media professionals in crisis situations, an ethical tenet stressed earlier as important to many of the media professionals interviewed. For example, as one participant states, "I just stress the importance of being sensitive in most situations because I think a lot of journalists are not."

DISCUSSION

What Guides Media Professionals in Ethical Crisis Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

According to the interviewed media professionals in this study, the uniqueness of crisis situations—including expedited and multiplied channels for rumor spread in the new media environment and increased pressure for breaking a story—suggests the need for ethical guidance specific to crisis communication. Given the nature of journalistic practice, media professionals' primary goals in crisis communication are to report a crisis, inform the general public, and tell the story of/for the affected community, which is different from the general definition of organizational crisis from the practice and perspective of public relations.

Primary ethical approaches. The basic ethical approaches--rule-based (deontological), balanced or utilitarian (teleological), and situational—describe media professionals' ethical decision-making in crisis communication (Bowen, 2010). Interestingly, when rule-based ethics were referred to, participants mostly described written or formal rules such as codes of ethics from professional organizations or from their college education, with major pillars of journalistic tenets regardless of situations. Participants also mentioned that their own personal sense of ethics—often based on general ethical tenets—guided them in decision-making.

The majority of participants described their efforts in balancing benefits and harms in communicating to the general public about crises, taking a more teleological or utilitarian approach to ethics. As written rules do not always provide the most immediate or applicable guidance, especially in times of crisis coverage, these media professionals strived for a balance between *timeliness and accuracy*, *sensitivity and objectivity*, and *empathy and honesty*.

Similar to the "it depends" statements public relations practitioners frequently referred to in Jin, Pang, and Smith's (2014) study, situational ethics guided many media professionals in decision-making. Participants often made decisions on a case-by-case basis when a situation was not explicitly covered by a formal code of ethics or when the potential outcomes of balancing benefits and harms were unclear. These findings

reinforce the importance of increased sensitivity in crisis reporting, in which crisis types and potential emotional outcomes seem to weigh heavily in media professionals' situational approaches to crisis communication and stakeholder engagement.

Influencers of Ethical Crisis Communication Practice among Media Professionals

Similar to Jin, Pang, and Smith's (2014) study with public relations practitioners, key influencers of ethical crisis communication in the media profession were explored. Five influencers identified included the following. 1) *A media professional's own moral compass*: One's personal sense of ethics was identified as the most natural influence in crisis reporting. 2) *Media organization or newsroom*: Organizational ethics guided media professionals more generally (with mostly no specific guidelines tailored toward the complexity of crisis situations), and organizations varied from one another. Given that organizational codes of ethics varied so greatly, it might be meaningful to explore how different organizational ethics influence media professionals' crisis communication. 3) *A media professional's schooling or educational experience*: A combination of formal curricula, training programs, and hands-on learning from the daily job also guided media professionals. Given the need for more updated ethics education voiced by some participants, journalism and communication programs might consider revising ethics curricula to better reflect the needs and trends of ethical communication in this changing media environment, especially in regards to crisis and conflict. 4) *Media profession and professional associations*: Professions, particularly through formalized codes of ethics, provided general guides of ethical practice, which served as a foundation or reference for crisis reporting. 5) *Communities where a media professional is based locally or communities of readers*: For regional and community-based media professionals, this factor was especially important for balancing sensitivity with complete coverage when a crisis affected the community. Some interviewees used the term "community ethics" as another ethical guide in conjunction with the general journalistic ethics guide or one's own judgment in a given situation.

Some ethical communication influencers (Jin, Pang, & Smith, 2014) were found to be similar across both professions including: the role of the professional (media professionals and public relations practitioners); the role of top management (news organizations and organizational dominant coalitions); exposure of organization and cultural diversity (community and audience base of a given media professional and public relations business environment); activism of stakeholders (including the community); and the nature of crisis (when and how to be sensitive depends on the specific crisis type and situation). However, crisis managers emphasized one factor that media professionals did not: "government influence and intervention." This factor appeared to be influential to public relations practice in times of crisis but was not a main factor for media professionals' ethical decision-making in communicating a crisis.

Common Ground Shared by Media Professionals and Public Relations Practitioners

In addition to the shared sources of influence for ethical decision-making in crisis communication, most of the major ethical tenets suggested by the interviewed media professionals also coincided with the key aspects of “ethical crisis communication” from the perspective of public relations practitioners interviewed by Jin, Pang, and Smith (2014).

How to tell a crisis story ethically I: Respect multiple stakeholders involved.

Interviewed media professionals stressed the importance of showing respect to multiple stakeholders in crisis reporting, similar to the approach practiced by public relations practitioners. In crises, media professionals and public relations practitioners need to be mindfully respectful of what is being presented to audiences and the potential impact of crisis information on victims, community members, and other stakeholders.

How to tell a crisis story ethically II: Objective and timely crisis information. To evaluate whether certain information about a crisis is ethically communicated or not, both the cognitive (i.e., quality of the content of the information) and affective (i.e., how the information is conveyed) aspects need to be taken into consideration. Regardless of whether media professionals or organizations generate the crisis information, the information should be *neutral*, *objective*, and *open*. Stakeholders should be provided with objective information or competing sides of a story, in terms of how and why a crisis occurred, what is being done, and the next steps.

In addition, given the fast-developing pace of crises and the quick spread of impact, crisis information needs to be both *accurate* and *timely*. While accuracy is related to objectivity and balance as mentioned above, timeliness is not always related to ethical communication. One of the main cautions participants noted was the potential to forsake sufficient verification of facts and risk accuracy, in order to break a story before other media do. This perceived pressure was often enhanced by the increasing need for timeliness of information in times of crisis in this changing media environment. The same observation and argument has been made by public relations crisis scholars as well, given that, in certain crisis situations, organizations feel a need to be the first to reveal crisis information (Coombs, Claeys, & Holladay, 2014). This information-focused ethical criterion reflects the importance of being more stakeholder-oriented in crisis communication and facilitating stakeholders’ cognitive coping by supplying stakeholders with quality information that reduces stress resulting from the uncertainty of the crisis (Jin, 2010a).

How to tell a crisis story ethically III: Communicate with stakeholders with empathy. Beyond the fundamental function of journalistic practice to inform the public in crises, participants also pointed to the critical emotional attributes an ethical crisis communicator must demonstrate. Some even stated that the nature of crisis was emotional. To report on and communicate effectively and ethically with stakeholders about such emotion-laden events, high emotional intelligence is required. This high level

of emotional intelligence in crisis communication is manifested in *sensitivity*, *empathy*, and *compassion*, according to the study findings. First, this echoes the call for crisis managers to be sensible and sensitive (Jin, 2010a) and the need to demonstrate effective leadership in managing crises with a high level of empathy (Jin, 2010b).

According to the interviewed media professionals, these emotional attributes are critical in crisis communication because of the severity, uncertainty, and damaging nature of crises, which are amplified tremendously due to mobile technology and the new media environment. Some strong voices among the interviewees even suggested crisis communication would be unethical if the reporting was not sensitive and mindful of the strong emotions generated and spread among stakeholders, no matter how factually accurate the information was (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2012). This emotional dimension of ethical communication reflects the importance of media and organizations in facilitating stakeholders' affective coping needs by providing emotional support and allowing emotional expression in crisis (Jin, 2010a).

The emphasis on empathy and compassion, which goes beyond sympathy, is important. According to Jin (2010b), empathy is being able to feel what others are feeling and express one's feeling toward others at the same time. Compassion then is a more general term that emphasizes the nature of being kind (not to harm) and sharing loving kindness to other beings unconditionally. These are high ethical standards, yet critical when determining how to act ethically in a situation, especially when a deontological approach is impractical. For ethical crisis communicators, how one tells a crisis story is equally important as the legitimacy of the story itself, keeping the audience in mind—especially victims and affected community members.

Gaps in Ethical Crisis Communication and Stakeholder Engagement between Media Professionals and Public Relations Practitioners

Aside from similarities in defining or approaching ethical crisis communication, media professionals interviewed seemed to have unique perceptions of their role and challenges in crisis reporting. In addition, criticism of public relations in crisis communication also emerged. The most severe self-criticism given by the majority of the interviewed media professionals was the lack of sensitivity of media professionals in crises. The other main concern expressed was the increasing challenge to balance timely reporting and fact verification, given the new media environment and the increased pressure in the newsroom to break a story first. As related to the criterion of being honest in reporting and dealing with sources, transparency of potential interests or biases is also viewed as critical. Sources of crisis information need to be made clear, especially given the burgeoning public sources of information online.

The perception and criticism from media professionals about public relations practitioners and organizations related to crisis communication ethics clearly demonstrates knowledge and expectation gaps between media professionals and public relations practitioners.

Perceived gap I: Approaches to ethical decision-making. The majority of media professionals interviewed mentioned utilitarian or teleological approaches to ethical communication, often in combination with some rule-based or deontological approaches. As stated in the literature, Bowen (2005) found that the organizations studied employed more deontological approaches to ethical decision-making. This difference in approach to decision-making could be due to the unique nature of crisis communication, which is different from the focus of Bowen's study, or due to the greater autonomy as individual actors that journalists described experiencing. However, both media professionals and public relations practitioners appear to employ situational ethical decision-making in times of crisis communication (Jin, Pang, & Smith, 2014).

Perceived gap II: Goals of crisis communication. According to the interviewed media professionals in this study, journalism and public relations do not share the same goals during crises. Somewhat surprisingly, given recent research suggesting improved relations between public relations practitioners and journalists (Sallot & Johnston, 2006), a few media professionals described crisis journalists and crisis managers as "enemies" in crisis reporting.

Perceived gap III: Crisis information source and accuracy. While the accuracy of crisis reporting demands verification of multiple sources and facts, information provided by public relations practitioners represents an organization. For this information to be perceived as credible, public relations practitioners who manage an organization's crisis communication need to supply factually accurate information, as complete as legally feasible, in a timely manner (Coombs, Claeys, & Holladay, 2014).

Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media to Ethical Crisis Communication and Stakeholder Engagement in Crisis Situations

As key crisis information creators and disseminators, media together with organizations in crisis, are two of the most influential social media creators according to the SMCC model. Regardless of the crisis information form, the main effects of source (i.e., who sends out the initial crisis information: organization vs. media. vs. third-party) have been found in previous SMCC model empirical studies (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012). These interviews reaffirm the importance of the source of crisis communication and highlight the need to study the aggregated strength of multiple sources in telling a crisis story.

Similar to Jin, Pang, and Smith's (2014) findings, interviewed media professionals felt that having a large audience and network of social media followers encouraged them to be more accountable and ethical in their reporting. However, while social media brings ubiquity of crisis information supply, it is also vulnerable to the spread of rumors, especially those looking "real" as some of the interviewed media professionals warned. A socially-constructed "real" rumor, labeled by media professionals as "false reporting," can have a real harm to organizations through a direct or indirect impact on organizational reputation. In addition, the visual nature and potential of social media combined with the emotional nature of crises makes ethical crisis communication even more imperative. As media professionals suggest, ethical crisis communication should

balance the demand for accurate and timely crisis information with the sensitivity and empathy genuinely felt and conveyed in a crisis story.

Implications for Public Relations Practitioners

It is important for organizations to be aware of the gaps between how media professionals and public relations approach ethical decision-making and crisis communication goals differently. While media professionals focus on informing stakeholders about the crisis situation with crisis information provided by multiple sources (including the organizations involved), public relations practitioners serve as the advocate of organizations, protecting organizations' reputations and repairing reputation and image in the full cycle of organizational crisis communication. Media professionals' crisis reporting is primarily for the general public to be informed about what happened and what to do to protect themselves; whereas, organizations send and share crisis information with media professionals and stakeholders in order to shield damage from internal or external threats such as rumors, and, when possible, work with stakeholder groups to engage in crisis recovery together.

Public relations practitioners can utilize the common ground shared with media professionals, which is to tell a crisis story in a timely manner, accurately and ethically, in order to build mutually beneficial and trusting relationships with media professionals. Specifically, in providing crisis information regarding the organization, public relations practitioners must show respect to the multiple stakeholders involved, who might or might not have shared interests or may even be in conflict with their goals. To establish source and information credibility, information disseminated via organizational websites and social media channels should contain objective and timely information about the crisis situation. Although engaging emotionally charged stakeholders could be risky and have the potential to escalate a conflict, empathy remains an important component that adds a human element to organizations in crisis situations in the eyes of both media professionals and stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

Findings of this study highlight media professionals' approaches to and perspectives of ethical crisis communication. This study further provides a foundation to examine the similarities and differences between media professionals and public relations practitioners in regards to their ethical decision-making in crisis communication and engagement with stakeholders. The implications inform the SMCC model in regards to ethical factors to be taken into consideration across all channels of crisis information and the influence of social media content creators online and offline.

Further questions inspired by these qualitative findings include: Are there/or can there be overarching ethical guidelines for crisis communication, applying to all social media content creators, including both media professionals and public relations practitioners? In addition, how do crisis communicators (i.e., both media professionals and public

relations practitioners) address crisis situations or issues when multiple stakeholders are involved and their ethical principles are in conflict with each other?

Nevertheless, in crises, to be ethical and responsible to the stakeholders in the community, media professionals and public relations practitioners both need to be mindfully objective and empathetic in creating and communicating what is being presented to audiences. It is also critical for educators and professional associations in the fields of journalism, media, and public relations to examine existing educational programs in crisis communication. A need exists for cohesive education and training programs for media professionals and practitioners to mindfully co-create effective and ethical crisis information for stakeholders in need.

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