Being First Means Being Credible? 
Examining the Impact of Message Source on Organizational Reputation

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Research in organizational communication and public relations suggest that in times of crises, messages generated by the organization are most likely to positively influence stakeholder perceptions, whereas those generated by the press may have negative ramifications. Although this advice seems logical, to date there is little research that investigates this claim empirically and directly. Two experiments were conducted to explore the separate and combined impact of print and televised messages concerning an organization in the midst of a crisis. The findings offer empirical evidence that statements from organizations experiencing crises may offset negative stakeholder responses. Theoretical and pragmatic implications are discussed regarding these findings.

Keywords: Crisis Communication; Press Release; Reputation

Crises are unpredictable events that disrupt the typical functioning of an organization and create a high amount of uncertainty for an organization’s employees and stakeholders (Reynolds, 2006; Seeger, 2006). Frequent, honest, and specific communication has been reiterated as one of the best remedies to help to reduce uncertainty (Spence et al., 2006; Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007) and to maintain (Ulmer, 2001) and restore (Coombs & Holladay, 1996) an organization’s reputation. Though there are ...
best practices forwarded specifically in regard to crisis communication (Seeger, 2006), there are still pragmatic aspects of creating and disseminating messages during a crisis that remain unknown.

Although practitioners are encouraged to pre-event plan, develop partnerships with the public, and listen to and understand their audiences (Seeger, 2006), empirical evidence has not yet been conducted that provides prescriptive guidelines in terms of which tactics are most effective and precisely when an organization should reach out to stakeholders during a crisis. However, extant theory does provide some clues in this regard. By example, the literature indicates that it is in an organization’s best interest to cultivate strong positive relationships prior to a crisis and to be truthful and forthcoming in their communication during a crisis (Seeger, 2006). The CDC, for example, recommends that to survive the first 48 hours of an emergency an organization should be first, be right, and be credible (Reynolds, 2002). Others (Marra, 1998) have positioned communication as the crux of an organization’s success or failure in turbulent times. Moreover, research suggests that communication that clearly articulates the role that stakeholders play in the organization’s effectiveness are directly related to stakeholder perceptions of organizational trust, satisfaction, and commitment (O’Neil, 2007). Other research has noted that organizations are seen as more credible when audiences learn of the crises from the organization itself, rather than from secondary sources (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). It should be noted that these studies are limited by designs relying on the induction of a single message, when ecologically affected audiences would be exposed to multiple sources of information regarding the crisis in question. This is worthy of further consideration, because organizations are not the only entities that provide information in times of crisis.

With the rise of citizen journalists—those who have a camera and access to the Internet—coupled with the prevalence of traditional journalists and bloggers, organizations possess only a small amount of control in terms of disseminating information to their stakeholders in times of crisis (Omilion-Hodges, Baker, & Petry, 2012). Members of the media and bystanders with access to a camera phone are also likely to feel an obligation to share breaking news with other members of the community and/or their interpersonal networks. Considering this, it is important to understand how communication tactics within an organization’s control, such as the press release (or any other media for contacting stakeholders), may affect stakeholders’ perceptions of the organization’s reputation. In that line, it is also valuable to consider the ramifications or benefits of stakeholders receiving information from other sources, such as through a video created by the media, before hearing directly from the organization. Understanding how stakeholders react to and perceive various communication tactics during a crisis will yield empirical data to guide further research endeavors and also direct practitioners who are in the midst of an organizational crisis. To that end, the following research questions are forwarded:

RQ1: How does the order of information received (e.g., received from an outside source, received from the media) influence stakeholders’ perceptions of organizational reputation?

RQ2: Are certain communication tactics more effective in influencing stakeholders’ perceptions of organizational reputation?
Methods

In order to investigate the research questions, two experimental studies were conducted. The first examined the separate and combined influences of messages on perceptions of organizational reputation. Given the findings from the first study, a second study was conducted to investigate whether or not the order of information received influences perceptions of organizational reputation.

Study 1

An experiment was used to determine the effectiveness of first receiving news directly from an organization or receiving the information from the media. Participants included 180 undergraduate students from a basic course at a medium-sized university in the Midwest. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In condition 1, participants were asked to watch a 2-minute Associated Press (AP) newscast about a university shooting and then complete a self-administered survey. Condition 2 asked participants to watch the same newscast as condition 1 but to also read a press release designed to outline the facts of the shooting and offering measures of self-efficacy that individuals could take to protect themselves in shootings (resolving the crisis and learning from the crisis) and then fill out the same self-administered survey. Condition 3 required participants to fill out a self-administered survey without any learned knowledge of the campus shooting and were provided only the press release. Condition 1 was made up of 56 participants, condition 2 included 64 participants, and there were 60 participants in condition 3. The newscast was a composite of several news reports on a university shooting at in Arkansas from the AP. It was edited in such a way as to eliminate the date of the shooting and provide a sense that it was a recent news report.

Measures

After viewing the newscast, participants were asked to fill out a self-administered survey evaluating their responses to the dependent variables. The responses included perceptions of organizational image adapted from the Organizational Reputational Scale (Coombs & Holiday, 1996). The scale has 10 items measured on a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Statements such as “This organization is basically honest” and I do not trust the organization to tell the truth about this incident” are typical of the scale. Alpha reliabilities for the Organizational Reputational Scale were .74.

Results

The research questions were then examined through a one-way analysis of covariance, comparing the organizational reputation index across all three conditions while controlling for variance attributable to age, sex, and race. The results indicate that audiences reported the most positive opinion of the organization in the press release condition ($\bar{X}=3.97$, $SD=0.39$), followed by the combined condition ($\bar{X}=3.82$, $SD=0.40$), and reported the least positive opinion of the organization in the newscast-only condition ($\bar{X}=3.76$, $SD=0.47$), $F(2, 169)=3.55, p<.03$, partial $\eta^2=0.04$. No covariates were found.
to significantly predict organizational reputation. A series of Bonferroni post hoc analyses indicated that participants in the newscast-only condition reported a less positive opinion of the organization than those in the press release condition, \( p < .03 \), and significant differences were not detected between either of these conditions and the combined condition.

**Study 2**

The second study consisted of 203 participants from upper division undergraduate communication courses at a large Midwestern public university. Of the 203 participants, 29.7% (\( n = 58 \)) were male and 70.3% (\( n = 137 \)) were female, with a mean age of 22.89 (SD = 5.42). Eight students did not disclose demographic information.

**Procedure**

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. Participants in condition 1 watched a 2-minute newscast from the AP about a university shooting, whereas participants in condition 2 watched the same newscast but also subsequently received a press release that reiterated the facts of the shooting. The press release outlined the facts of the shooting and contained prescriptive guidelines regarding self-efficacy actions they could take if they were in a similar situation. In condition 3, participants received the press release before watching the AP newscast that was utilized in conditions 1 and 2. In condition 4, participants were only administered the press release and then asked to complete the questionnaire. The newscast used was also about a university shooting. The video was a composite of several news reports on a university shooting in Virginia from the AP. It was edited is such a way as to eliminate the date of the shooting and provide a sense that it was a recent news report.

**Measures**

The same measures were used as in study 1. Alpha reliabilities for the Organizational Reputational Scale were \( \alpha = .81 \).

**Order Effects**

To check for ordering effects, the 10 questions from the Organizational Reputational Scale were reverse-ordered. The results fail to indicate effects related to the order of the presentation of questions. For those watching the newscast followed by the press release, significant differences were not detected across scale attitudes toward the university, \( t (46) = 0.481 \), n.s. Similar results were detected in the condition where participants read the press release followed by the newscast; marginally significant ordering effects were detected for attitudes, \( t (77) = 2.32, p < .04 \). Despite this significant result, the means were similar (3.40 vs. 3.60). Given these findings, all data were deemed consistently psychometrically sound and therefore were used in the subsequent analyses. The research questions were then examined through a one-way analysis of covariance, comparing the organizational reputation index across all four conditions.
while controlling for variance attributable to age, sex, and race. Significant effects were detected for attitudes toward the institution, $F(3, 195) = 2.43, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.04$. The pattern of means suggested a pattern consistent with the inverse relationship between knowledge and attitudes. Those in the newscast-only condition reported the least positive attitudes toward the institution ($M = 3.35, SD = 0.495$), followed by those who saw the newscast and then read the press release ($M = 3.47, SD = 0.422$) and those who read the press release before seeing the newscast ($M = 3.53, SD = 0.510$), with the most positive attitudes found in the press release only condition ($M = 3.64, SD = 0.433$).

Discussion

This study sought to examine the relationship between organizational response (through a press release) after a crisis and organizational reputation. With the intention to extend previous research, the current study used an experimental manipulation involving multiple forms of information delivery to empirically test the impact of information delivery. By and large, the findings support the under examined, but popular, contention regarding the need for organizations to craft and disseminate messages immediately and provide their message first. That is, the organization in crisis should be first in terms of alerting stakeholders, rather than having another entity, such as the media, do so.

The findings in both experiments suggest that audiences reported the strongest opinion of the organization when they only received a press release issued from the organization concerning the event. This was followed by the condition in which participants read a press release describing the event and then watched an (AP) newscast on the subject. In the condition where participants watched the AP newscast and then received the press release, they had a less positive opinion of the organization than in the other two conditions. Finally, the lowest level of organizational approval was detected in the condition in which participants viewed the AP newscast regarding the campus shooting but had not been provided with any additional information (e.g., the press release) from the organization.

Those who received both the AP newscast and the press release reported slightly lower levels of perceived organizational reputation and those who received the press release only, and those who received only the AP newscast had the lowest perceptions of the organization. These findings suggest that the presence of the AP newscast may have led to a reduction in perceived organizational reputation, which was salvaged or restored somewhat by the press release. Being first to report an issue has advantages for an organization.

Finally, the findings for the press release-only condition led participants to their highest perceptions of organizational reputation in both experiments. Because participants in this condition had not received any information reducing their opinion of the organization, their first alert was from the press release—again, communication from the organization directed to their stakeholders. This also raises issues attributable to information sources that might be worthy of consideration in the design and implement of emergency messages. It may be the case that participants responded well to the fact that the organization took accountability in announcing the incident to the outside world. In a sense, without the presence of alternate accounts of the incident, the organization appeared to be issuing a responsible action by acknowledging the incident.
and providing information to alleviate anxiety and dispel rumors. This likely led to a substantial bolstering in perceptions of the organization’s reputation.

This finding offers both practical and theoretical implications. From a theoretical standpoint, they confirm prior assertions regarding the need for mediated crisis information to reduce uncertainty and bolster an organization’s reputation (Ulmer, 2001; Ulmer et al., 2007). It adds additional evidence to the argument that messages sent directly from organizations in crisis are interpreted more positively than those generated by outside entities, including the news media. Furthermore, this result empirically confirms what other case study–driven scholarship has suggested: in times of crisis, messages produced by the organization are most likely to positively influence stakeholder perceptions. Such messages are more likely to be received positively given the degree of control the organization can exert over their content and dissemination.

In a pragmatic sense, these findings indicate that organizations have more control in influencing stakeholders’ perceptions during a crisis, ultimately leading to increased opportunities for reputation management. This is, of course, assuming that they respond in a timely manner. Crisis managers can take some solace in knowing that messages produced by the organization itself will be best received by the public. This does, however, reinforce the timeless public relations maxim of telling one’s story before someone else tells it. Organizations should be mindful of responding quickly and efficiently to crises through the use of official statements and make sure to place these messages such that they will be consumed by affected stakeholders.

As such, this study presents one of the first efforts to empirically demonstrate the utility of the press release as a functional message strategy in restoring or maintaining organizational reputation in the event of a crisis along with support for the notion that it is important for an organization to be quick to address the public. Although past studies in image restoration theory have relied upon rhetorical and anecdotal approaches, the current study measures audience responses and gauges their opinions of an organization having received different types of messages. The study is, however, not without limitations. First, participants were asked to report their opinions of a situation in which they were not directly involved. Though the pattern of means in the findings is consistent with popular thought, it remains to be seen whether these findings would replicate in a survey study conducted with individuals who had actually experienced a crisis such as the one used in this study. Moreover, future research should examine how organizations can partner with the media to get such messages to the public and ensure that the organization is acknowledged for being first.

This also leads to a limitation in the study, which is the nature of the crisis under consideration. Though the study does move the literature forward by empirically assessing these processes, it is bound by its nature to one particular type of incident: a campus shooting. Although this was chosen to be relevant to the targeted participants, it may be the case that different types of crises, which invoke different levels of fear and uncertainty to different stakeholders, may be more or less conducive to the use of a press release as a crisis strategy. Though the study should be replicated in field settings.
and in other types of crises and emergencies, the findings from the current data set are theoretically consistent.

**Conclusion**

Communication is a central part of handling and responding to crises. Timely and credible information is necessary to reduce uncertainty, inform the public of appropriate actions, and salvage organizational image. Organizations have a voice during a crisis, and that voice can be persuasive and informative. It can also aid in maintaining and building a reputation that could potentially be harmed by a crisis. The study findings suggest that alerting the public in the aftermath of a crisis benefits an organization's reputation, can help an organization frame its story, and can aid in communicating to its public. Rather than seeking to place blame, some situations allow the organization to focus on stakeholders and move forward.

**References**


