

Significance and Structure of International Risk and Crisis Communication Research

Toward an Integrative Approach

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The Significance of International and Cross-Cultural Crisis Communication

In recent decades, communication scholars have increasingly recognized that the study of communication processes can no longer be restricted to national contexts (Brüggenmann & Wessler, 2014). This has been linked to the ongoing process of globalization that affects social, political, and economic activities across the planet. Castells (2010) argues: “Not everything or everyone is globalized, but the global networks that structure the planet affect everything and everyone. This is because all the core economic, communicative, and cultural activities are globalized” (p. 38). He further relates the increasingly networked and globalized society to a number of emerging issues that are global in their manifestation and treatment, including environmental threats (e.g., global warming), the globalization of human rights and social justice, as well as global security as it is linked to international arms trade, war, and terrorism. Between 2003 and 2012 an annual average of 106,654 people were killed and 216 million were affected by natural disasters worldwide, most from floods and storms (Guha-Sapir, Hoyois, & Below, 2014). In 2013, the US National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (2014) reported a total of 9,707 terrorist attacks worldwide, resulting in more than 17,800 deaths, more than 32,500 injuries, and more than 2,990 people kidnapped. Although the number of armed conflicts and wars as well as the number of battle fatalities has been decreasing since World War II, the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2014) reported a growing share of intrastate conflicts with intervention from other states or secondary parties outside the country. Other types of crises with increasingly international causes and impact are public health crises and pandemics (e.g., Ebola, H1N1, SARS), economic and financial crises, and several crises involving large transnational organizations such as British Petroleum, Toyota, and the European Union (e.g., the European debt crisis).

Risks and crises are becoming more and more international in at least two respects. First, crises are *physically* transcending national and cultural boundaries in terms of their causes and consequences. The causes of global warming, for example, are related to the global increase of carbon dioxide emissions caused by the combustion of fossil fuels, transportation, and industrial

production as well as transnational deforestation. Global warming has been associated with more and more deadly natural disasters with international impact. Second, crises are *symbolically* transcending national and cultural boundaries in terms of international public discourses on potential crises (risks), ongoing crises, and post-crises (commemoration, learning). The increasingly important role of international media organizations and news agencies, and the rise of networked, web-based, and mobile communication infrastructures and their growing use by ordinary people, professional communicators, and organizations have made many crises global.

Besides domestic actors in specific national environments and media organizations, the agents that play an important role in international risk and crisis communication are also multinational or transnational in terms of their organizational structures and operations. In the business sector, for instance, there are a reported total of 82,000 transnational corporations (TNCs) with 810,000 foreign affiliates worldwide, which account for one third of total world exports of goods and services and employ about 77 million people (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2009). Others have described the rise of a global civil society where especially international nongovernmental organizations establish a “global or international frame of reference in their action and goals” (Castells, 2010, p. 40). These NGOs are increasing in number and in influence on national and international political agendas, and they constantly professionalize their efforts in strategic communication including crisis communication across borders, media channels, and target groups (Schwarz & Fritsch, 2014). NGOs are actively raising awareness of international risks and even create public pressure and crises for domestic governments or private companies. But they are also increasingly affected by crises themselves due to cases of embezzlement, corruption, or misperception in foreign countries where they often operate according to western standards (salaries, values, etc.) (Tkalac & Pavicic, 2009). In addition to civil society actors, several transnational political entities such as the European Union or the United Nations are practicing international risk and crisis communication in the context of public diplomacy, development aid, or disaster relief activities.

Within such organizations, professionals who are in charge of managing communication processes between the organization and its stakeholders are reporting a growing importance in both international communication and crisis communication. According to a survey of more than 2,000 European communication professionals in 43 countries (Zerfass *et al.*, 2013), 45% of the practitioners communicate internationally across different countries on a regular basis, whereas only fewer than one fifth (18%) stated that they do not engage at all in international communication in their daily work. This validates the assumption that “[i]t is increasingly impossible [for communication practitioners] to escape communicating across national, cultural, and linguistic borders” (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007, p. 27). The survey also revealed that almost 70% of European communication managers in private companies, government organizations, nonprofit organizations, and consulting firms had to deal with one or even several crisis situations (including natural disasters) in the year preceding the survey (Zerfass *et al.*, 2013).

Despite the importance of international dimensions of communication, scholars have only recently begun to explore international or cross-cultural dimensions of crisis communication. The authors of the few existing publications on this topic largely agree that the internationalization of companies, NGOs, political organizations, and the media are linked to a growing number and a growing relevance of crises with cross-border impact, which significantly increase the complexity and needed skills of strategic crisis communication practice (Coombs, 2008; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Lee, 2005). However, the academic state of the art in this respect has been assessed rather pessimistically: “That international crisis communication is underdeveloped, if not undeveloped, reflects either insensitivity or ethnocentrism in the current crisis communication field” (Lee, 2005, p. 286). This raises serious questions concerning the external validity of the established theoretical frameworks, concepts, and practice recommendations in the crisis communication literature, which in most cases implicitly claim to be universally valid across national or cultural boundaries. However, the conceptual foundations of crisis and crisis communication

imply a highly culture-sensitive character in crises and related communication processes. Crises as social constructs emerge in social negotiation processes where (the violation of) societal values, beliefs, expectancies, and norms serve as a fundamental reference for crisis stakeholders to decide whether a certain event, behavior, or process is labeled as crisis. This is more or less explicitly stated in many definitions of the crisis concept (Coombs, 2012; Falkheimer, 2013; Hearit & Courtright, 2004; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Schwarz, 2010; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). On the other hand, such values and beliefs are assumed to be one of the core elements of the complex construct of culture (Hofstede, 1980; House *et al.*, 2002; Schwartz, 2006). Schwartz (2006) defines cultural values as “shared conceptions of what is good and desirable in the culture” (p. 139). In addition, he argues that cultural values “shape and justify individual and group beliefs, actions, and goals. Institutional arrangements and policies, norms, and everyday practices express underlying cultural value emphases in societies” (p. 139). This suggests that the way organizations plan, organize, perceive, and practice crisis communication as well as the way stakeholders engage in “co-creating the meaning of crises” (Coombs, 2012, p. 19) is highly contingent on the cultural context and cultural value emphases that shape perception, communication, and behavior of these social entities.

Categories of International, Cross-Cultural, and Comparative Crisis Communication Research

The state of research in international crisis communication including comparative and contextual research is still limited in quantity and scope which was also attributed to the relatively recent emergence of the field as topic of academic inquiry (see chapter 40, Coombs). According to Schwarz (2013), studies on international and/or cross-cultural crisis communication can be categorized by two dimensions: (1) the consideration of national or cultural context factors as independent or explaining sets of variables, and (2) the observation of crisis communication as a cross-national or cross-cultural communication process.

The first dimension has two categories: (1a) The first category includes studies that use respectively the national and the cultural context as a variable (or set of variables) to explain similarities and differences of certain aspects of risk or crisis communication (e.g., perceptions of risk, attributions of crisis responsibility, etc.). The identification of such context variables can be more theory-driven by deducing these factors from the state of research or established theoretical frameworks (e.g., cultural values). For the purpose of explaining international variation and similarities in public relations, for example, Sriramesh and Verčič (2003) proposed a framework of three factors that comprise further variables: the infrastructure of a country (including the political system, the level of economic development, the legal environment, and the role of activism in a country); the media environment (including media control, media outreach, and media access); and culture (referring to societal culture and corporate culture). In the broader field of comparative communication research (Hanitzsch & Esser, 2012), frameworks such as political communication systems, communication cultures, media systems, media markets, media cultures, or journalism cultures were mentioned as being valuable explanatory constructs that can guide theory-driven comparative research. In most studies related to crisis communication, however, context factors are used in a more explorative way to interpret differences on a post-hoc basis. (1b) The second category of the first dimension refers to studies that do not involve context variables to explain differences or similarities; or they do not involve any systematic variation of these context factors to explain domestic, cross-national, or cross-cultural crisis communication processes. Thus, these studies are either not theory-driven in terms of the explanation of dependent variables or sampling strategies, or they simply do not intend any cross-national/cross-cultural comparison.

The second dimension can be divided into: (2a) perceived risks or crises that transcend national or cultural boundaries in physical and/or symbolic terms; and (2b) crises that are largely limited to national or regional contexts in terms of scope, effects, and visibility. In addition, this can refer to studies that focus on either (2a) cross-border or (2b) context-specific activities or communications of institutionalized actors, media, or stakeholders in the context of crises. This results in four analytical categories of international crisis communication research, namely: (I) international-comparative or cross-cultural-comparative crisis communication research; (II) comparative crisis communication research; (III) international or cross-cultural crisis communication as object of study; and (IV) context-specific or country-specific crisis communication research (see Table 1.1).

Most crisis communication research that deals with international dimensions, or at least claims to do so, is limited to the analysis and contextualization of crisis communication practices in a certain country (Coombs, 2013), mostly by using some kind of framework or theory that was developed by Western-based scholars (category IV). Often, the goal was to test the external validity of a model or theory by applying it to a different population or to a different (national/cultural) context. In the field of corporate crisis communication research, for example, scholars have applied the widely cited situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) in different national contexts to test its basic assumptions (see Claeys & Schwarz, chapter 21). Other studies focused on identifying and validating existing typologies of crisis response strategies based on Corporate Apologia, Impression Management, Image Repair Theory, or SCCT in nations outside the US (see, for example, Huang, Lin, & Su, 2005). In addition, case studies from various countries that contextualize crisis communication practices, perceptions, or effects to some extent can be placed in this category (George & Pratt, 2012). However, such studies often do not apply any theoretical framework or do not include any systematic comparison across nations or cultures.

Table 1.1 Categories of international and cross-cultural crisis communication research based on Schwarz (2013) and context factors based on Sriramesh and Verčič (2003)

		<i>Risk and crisis communication across national or cultural boundaries</i>	
<i>National and/or cultural context as explaining variable(s)</i>		<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>Yes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National infrastructure • Media environment • Societal culture • Organizational culture • Crisis history • etc. 	<p>I.</p> <p>International-comparative or cross-cultural-comparative crisis communication research, e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparison of international media coverage on international crises • Comparison of local crisis response managed by a transnational organization in different regions 	<p>II.</p> <p>Comparative crisis communication research, e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparison of crisis preparedness of different national disaster protection agencies • Comparison of the media coverage on armed conflicts in different countries
<i>No</i>		<p>III.</p> <p>International or cross-cultural crisis communication as object of study, e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of coordination and control of risk and crisis communication in transnational corporations or nongovernmental organizations 	<p>IV.</p> <p>Context-specific or country-specific crisis communication (research), e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Validation of crisis communication theory in specific contexts • Case study of the government response to a terrorist attack in country A

Comparative crisis communication studies where context factors are used to explain applications, effects, messages, or media frames of cross-national or cross-cultural crisis communication processes are rare (category I). In most cases, multinational or international organizations being involved in cross-border crisis were observed. Usually these studies do not test hypotheses or well-established theoretical frameworks, but are of explorative character and use context-factors only as post-hoc explanations for differences or similarities that were found in advance. An often cited study in this category is Taylor's (2000) analysis of an international crisis for Coca-Cola in 1999. Other studies in this category compared the international media coverage of international crises such as the Fukushima crisis in 2011, when several nuclear reactors experienced a nuclear meltdown as a consequence of a major tsunami in Japan. Schwarz (2014), for example, applied framing, crisis communication concepts, and attribution theory, and identified eight different frames in the international media coverage of six countries and some significant differences between these countries in terms of the prominence of these frames. These differences were explained by variations in cultural value emphases of these countries based on Schwartz's (2006) value dimensions of autonomy, embeddedness, harmony, mastery, egalitarianism, and hierarchy.

Comparative crisis communication research without consideration of cross-border communication processes (category II) refers to studies where, for instance, country-specific characteristics or perceptions of crisis communication are compared across countries and possible differences are explained by specific context variables. Other examples would be studies comparing the extent and characteristics of crisis management or civil protection measures in different nation-states depending on their political system or cultural factors. This kind of research represents a significant desideratum of the crisis communication literature. One of the few quasi-experimental studies that applied an actual cross-cultural research design was conducted by An *et al.* (2010). The study indicated that cultural (or national) differences, namely the difference between individualist culture (American students) and collectivist culture (Korean students), have an impact on both perceptions of crisis responsibility and crisis-related emotions.

Category III refers to studies that treat cross-national or cross-cultural crisis communication as object of study without any intention to explain differences across boundaries by context variables. This kind of research is rare in the crisis communication literature. As an example, studies would be needed that analyze the coordination of crisis communication in or between transnational organizations (e.g., centralization vs. decentralization) or studies that deal with the design of cross-national crisis communication messages or strategies (e.g., standardization vs. differentiation). A survey of communication professionals at international NGOs revealed that 71 percent of the organizations actually have an international crisis communication function. In most cases this function was coordinated centrally by the NGOs' headquarters (50%) or in a collaborative way between headquarters and local offices (25%) (Schwarz & Fritsch, 2015). Another contribution to this research category is the concept of cross-national conflict shifting by Molleda and Connolly-Ahern (2002), who argue that "[d]omestic conflicts are increasingly shifting worldwide because of the growth of international transactions, transportation and communication, especially information technology" (p. 4). The authors introduced several propositions with regard to the nature of domestic conflicts affecting transnational organizations and how these conflicts may shift across national borders and by that tarnish international organizational reputation (Molleda & Quinn, 2004). So far, this framework has primarily been applied to individual case studies.

The still limited state of research on international and comparative crisis communication underlines the urgent need for more academic efforts in the field. Also governmental institutions responsible for disaster protection, disease control, or terrorism become increasingly aware of the challenges of addressing multicultural publics within domestic or international crises. Multicultural stakeholders affected by crises are likely to differ with regard to their perception and evaluation of risks, their preferred communication channels, or how much they trust in different institutions involved in crisis communication (e.g., Falkheimer, 2013; Lachlan *et al.*, 2009; Renn, 2009).

Social psychology has produced some evidence that attributions of cause and responsibility are highly culture-dependent (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999). Given the importance of attributions as found in crisis communication research, this points to the urgency of testing the established frameworks such as SCCT across cultural settings. Also with regard to the institutional perspective of crisis communication research, more international comparative studies are needed. Management scholars, for example, have shown that organizational cultures and preferred leadership attributes are heavily influenced by the dominating national culture, though they are not equivalent (Quigley, Sully de Luque, & House, 2005). That means that organizations with strong roots in countries with high levels of power distance are more hierarchic, more bureaucratic, and less transparent in handling information as compared to countries with low power distance (Quigley, Sully de Luque, & House, 2005). Considering the findings on organizational culture for crisis management, this raises important questions concerning cross-national differences between the crisis communication practices and structures of organizations. Earlier research in domestic contexts revealed that more open and participative organizational cultures with less rigid hierarchical structures are less vulnerable to crisis, put more emphasis on crisis preparation, and are more effective in recognizing emerging issues in their social environment (e.g., Ingenhoff, 2004; Marra, 1998; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1988). Research on such aspects from an international perspective has only just begun, if at all.

In other words, to date, transnational corporations, political institutions, disaster relief organizations, and other actors involved in cross-cultural crises and communication have almost no evidence-based and well-established guidelines they can use to organize or coordinate international crisis communication or to develop culture-sensitive crisis communication strategies or messages (instruction, adjusting information, etc.). Sound theoretical approaches that try to conceptualize international or cross-cultural risk and crisis communication are also rare and the few that have been proposed (e.g., Aldoory, 2010; Falkheimer, 2013; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Lee, 2005) are in an initial stage in terms of their empirical basis and the embeddedness in the existing body of knowledge in risk and crisis communication theory.

The *International Handbook of Crisis Communication Research* was conceptualized to give a first comprehensive overview of the state of research in crisis communication from an international perspective. This included understanding the regional nature of the research as well as the larger contextual grounding. The main goals and the handbook structure we deduced from these goals are explained in the next section.

Goals and Structure of the Handbook

Previous handbooks on risk and crisis communication have contributed important overviews of the body of knowledge in the field (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Heath & O'Hair, 2009; Thießen, 2014). However, each suffers from at least one of the following limitations: (a) the predominant focus on organizational and/or corporate crises; (b) the missing consideration of international and/or cross-cultural dimensions of crisis communication; and (c) the missing representation of crisis communication scholarship in terms of its disciplinary and international diversity. With the present handbook, we intend to broaden the perspective on risk and crisis communication. First, this handbook widens the scope of crisis types that are analyzed, including armed conflicts, terrorism, natural disasters, and pandemic, organizational crises as well as societal and political crises. Second, international contexts and dimensions of crises and crisis communication are considered in most of the chapters. Third, the project assembled contributions from a very broad spectrum of national and disciplinary backgrounds in crisis communication.

Identifying international crisis communication authors and bodies of relevant research and compiling their contributions in a consistent manner was challenging. Many scholars, for example, do not regard risk and crisis communication as their main field of study and only

explore crisis topics on a sporadic basis. Many relevant publications have not been written in English and are hardly accessible by the international academia. With regard to the study of crisis types and disciplinary foundations, different research traditions, different scientific communities, and separate publication channels emerged, which in part explains the fragmented nature of the field. Therefore, we conceptualized this handbook as a starting point for establishing a more interdisciplinary and international conversation about crisis communication as an emerging cross-cutting subdiscipline in communications that, in addition, seeks stronger links to other social science fields.

To explore the different roots of conceptualizing crisis and communication within the context of crisis, we therefore invited authors from different social sciences to offer disciplinary perspectives of the field; these are to be found in the first section of this handbook. Without any claim to representing an exhaustive overview of the disciplinary treatment of crisis, this section outlines the theoretical contributions from different perspectives such as psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, political science as well as management and economics. The chapters summarize how crises as social phenomena on different levels of global society (macro, meso, micro) are captured by theories and the state of research in their respective fields. The last chapter in this section builds on the previous disciplinary overviews and discusses their contribution to understanding communication in the context of crisis as an integrative and interdisciplinary field of study.

Building on this integrative understanding of risk and crisis communication, the second, third, and fourth sections of the handbook treat crisis communication based on a two-dimensional matrix (see Table 1.2). The first dimension refers to the most important social entities that are involved in cocreating the meaning and significance of risk and crisis in specific societal contexts. These are: (1) different institutionalized communicators who usually engage in crisis communication processes on a more strategic basis; (2) the media and the field of journalism, who are still important gatekeepers and mediators in the process of publicly framing risks and crises in different national and cultural settings; and (3) a broad array of crisis stakeholders and/or media audiences that for different reasons and with different motives actively or passively seek and disseminate information on risks and crises. By using this distinction, we intend to bring together authors from different subdisciplines such as public relations, political communication, science communication, journalism, and audience research. In addition, as in each of these fields specific crisis types have been focused (e.g., corporate crises in public relations research, disasters and war in journalism research, etc.) we included five chapters in each of these three sections with each chapter covering a specific crisis type (the second dimension in the matrix as shown in Table 1.2). Obviously, these crisis types are not mutually exclusive (e.g., organizational crises also occur in the context of natural disasters), but still represent typical categories of crises that are emphasized in different countries and subdisciplines.

Table 1.2 Rationale and structure of sections II, III, and IV of the handbook

Main object and/or perspective of study	<i>Crisis type</i>				
	War	Terrorism	Natural disasters/ pandemia	Organizational crisis	Societal/ political crisis
Institutionalized communicators	Chapter 8	Chapter 9	Chapter 10	Chapter 11	Chapter 12
Media/journalism	Chapter 13	Chapter 14	Chapter 15	Chapter 16	Chapter 17
Audience/ stakeholders	Chapter 18	Chapter 19	Chapter 20	Chapter 21	Chapter 22

For the fifth section, we asked contributors from different countries around the globe to present the state of research in crisis communication in their respective contexts, including countries in Africa, Asia, the Americas, Australia, Europe, and the Middle East. By providing a comprehensive overview on the state of international research, this section allows readers to compare conceptual frameworks and findings of crisis communication research in different countries. Thus, this section reflects the category of context-specific or country-specific crisis communication research (see Table 1.1). In many cases, understanding the specific nature of a field of study in a specific country is an indispensable step to prepare cross-cultural comparative research projects where scholars from different countries have to find feasible ways to develop common frameworks and methodologies based on their heterogeneous cultural and academic backgrounds. Several chapters in this section also include case studies of crises in specific countries that gained some kind of paradigmatic status. While in the past mostly the same US crisis cases were used repeatedly as a scheme to evaluate crisis communication (e.g., Exxon Valdez, Johnson and Johnson), the respective chapters refer to crisis cases in various countries and contextualize them.

In the last section, several chapters discuss emerging topics and challenges in the field of international crisis communication research. This refers to theoretical challenges and frameworks (e.g., chapters 39 and 43), methodological challenges for cross-national or cross-cultural comparative crisis communication research (chapter 40), the role of new technologies and new media in crisis communication (chapter 41 and 42), and didactic aspects of international crisis communication by exploring educational models (chapter 45) and the role of intercultural competence (chapter 44). Finally, the editors will summarize the main insights of the Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research and deduce main topics, challenges, and trends in future research on cross-cultural and cross-national risk and crisis communication (chapter 46).

Although there is still a long way to go to arrive at a theoretically and empirically valid integrative approach to international risk and crisis communication, this handbook is a valuable first step, as it offers a broad and comparative perspective on different dimensions that, so far, have been dealt with in rather fragmented scientific communities. The ingredients of such an integrative approach will have to be different disciplinary approaches, the comparison of different risk and crisis types, and the consideration of cross-national as well as cross-cultural context factors. Though still not well integrated, these ingredients are included in this *Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research*.

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