

Introduction to Crisis Communication

Crises are increasingly important social, political, economic, and environmental forces and arguably create more change, more quickly than any other single phenomenon. Crises have the potential to do great harm, creating widespread and systematic disruption, but they may also be forces for constructive change, growth, resilience, and renewal. They can quickly reshape institutions, create shifts in demographics and populations, alter ecosystems, undermine economic stability, and rapidly alter widely held beliefs. Understanding these events, therefore, is critical. A significant component of that understanding involves clarifying the role of communication processes in the onset, management, resolution, and meaning of crises.

Recent examples, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2018 Camp Fire in Northern California, 9/11 terrorist attacks, Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami illustrate the rapid change that happens following a crisis. The events of 9/11 precipitated not only a fundamental rethinking

of federal policy but also created the most comprehensive reorganization of the U.S. federal government to occur in decades. Hurricane Maria devastated the island of Puerto Rico, claimed 3,000 lives, and prompted a massive migration of residents from the island to the U.S. mainland. Hurricane Katrina also created a major demographic shift in New Orleans and prompted new understandings of risk and the role of governments in response to disasters. The 2004 tsunami claimed as many as 230,000 lives in 14 countries, wiped away entire communities, and created widespread economic and environmental damage. It also called attention to the risks associated with tsunamis and development in coastal areas. The 2018 Camp Fire was the worst wildfire in California in more than 100 years, claiming 85 lives and costing over \$1.5 billion. The COVID-19 pandemic was the most devastating infectious disease outbreak since the 1918 influenza pandemic. Public health professionals and disaster researchers had been warning about the risks of a global pandemic for decades.

Historically, the worst crises have been earthquakes and infectious disease pandemics. The 1918–1919 influenza, or Spanish flu, pandemic, is estimated to have infected 500 million people worldwide and may have resulted in more than 20 million deaths. The worst earthquake of the twentieth century occurred in Tangshan in China in 1976. Official death tolls indicate that about 255,000 people lost their lives and another 150,000 were injured. Crises, big and small, natural and human caused, are inevitable. In fact, many scholars suggest they are occurring with more frequency and causing more harm than they have in the past (Perrow, 1984; Seeger et al., 2003).

While avoiding all crises and disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis is impossible, some can be avoided and most can be more effectively managed. Crisis management is a well-established practice drawing on a variety of fields including medicine, sociology, psychology, engineering, logistics, political science, criminal justice, as well as communication. In fact, it simply would not be possible to conduct strategic crisis management without a comprehensive communication plan, and, in many cases, “communication is the essence of crisis management” (Coombs, 2010, p. 25). Agencies, both public and private, such as the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) and the American Red Cross, have a critical role in creating crisis response capacities. Internationally, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent have taken on more of a crisis management mission. Crises are, by definition, interdisciplinary events and often reach across regional, cultural,

economic, and political boundaries. Some researchers have pointed out that this interdisciplinary aspect has made integration of both research and practice more challenging (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Along with communication, integration, coordination, and cooperation are critical to negotiating these boundaries and to effective crisis management and response.

Crisis communication theories problematize the messages and meaning construction process in all the forms of human interaction and coordination that surround these threatening and high uncertainty events. Owing to the unpredictable nature of crises, theorizing about them creates many challenges. In some ways, every crisis may be seen as an entirely anomalous and unique event that, by definition, defies any systematic explanation. It is common to see a crisis as just an accident, an unusual combination of events that could not happen again. Conversely, the fact that crises occur at an increasing and alarming frequency allows scholars to observe similarities, patterns, and relationships across numerous occurrences. Many theoretical crisis frameworks described throughout this book were developed for specific types of events, including warning theories and evacuation models for hurricanes and recall models for contaminated food (Chapter 3). In many cases, scholars have also found these approaches have utility for understanding other kinds of crises. Increasingly, efforts are directed toward developing broader, more encompassing theories, using what is sometimes called an all-hazards approach. These approaches begin by understanding that all events described as crises will have some common elements – such as threat, uncertainty, and the need for an immediate response – and that common response contingencies will be required.

Crisis research and theory have historically been driven largely by the need to improve crisis management practice. Initially, practitioners sought to develop frameworks and models to promote understanding and improve their practice. After analyses and critiques of their responses, managers often developed after action reports, which were then used in subsequent training and planning for future events. These efforts began to reveal patterns and relationships that eventually led to more general theoretical frameworks and systematic research. Experience-based approaches eventually evolved into formal case studies, which remain a dominant methodology used for studying crises. For the emergency manager, the primary communication issues relate to coordination of efforts and logistics and public warnings and notification. Communication technologies – such as 800 MHz radios, web-based systems of targeted text alerts, warning systems such as sirens, and

mass media alerts such as the emergency broadcasting system – were the primary focus for improving communication. More recently, social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become important tools for crisis communication.

Case studies have been enriched as researchers combined them with survey questionnaires and ethnographic techniques. Survey data has contributed significantly to understanding audience needs and interests. Ethnographies have helped capture the complex and often devastating experiences of people living through crises. In addition to case studies, laboratory-based research including simulations and experiments has been used to test specific hypotheses, thereby contributing to the development and refinement of crisis communication theory. These include investigations of attribution of crisis cause, examinations of how audiences perceive and respond to crises, and tests of the effectiveness of various message forms. Critical methodologies, including descriptive and rhetorical approaches, have been employed to develop more general frameworks of crisis communication that address issues such as ethics and social justice.

In this chapter we provide an overview of crisis and communication concepts. Crisis communication theorizing and the development of a wide range of theoretical frameworks is necessary to explain, understand, and predict crises as well as inform crisis communication practice. Crisis theory also draws on both field research and research in controlled experimental settings as well as qualitative and critical approaches. Theory drives research by suggesting relationships and questions and by calling attention to gaps in our understanding and deficiencies in practice.

We begin this chapter by discussing definitions of crisis, communication, and crisis communication. Definitions are essential elements of any theorizing process, which provide the basic conceptual component necessary to build a theory.

Defining Crisis

As with many fields of study, scholars have debated the merits of various definitions of crises. In addition, different fields of study favor different terms. Sociology generally uses the term disaster while organizational studies and communication researchers prefer the term crisis. Regardless of the terminology, these debates about definitions are important in establishing the parameters of a field and indicating the

principal components of the phenomenon. Definitions are also important components of any theory. For example, within the area of crisis studies some debate exists about the level of harm necessary for an event to qualify as a crisis. A bad snowstorm may be disruptive to a community, but the storm may only be characterized as a crisis when it threatens public safety and property. High winds may be disruptive but only constitute a crisis when they create significant property damage. To construct a theory of crisis, it is first necessary to ensure the event under examination actually meets the definition of a crisis.

The FEMA uses several criteria to determine when a situation qualifies as a disaster. A disaster declaration is required for federal aid to be available to communities (see Table 1.1).

These criteria allow FEMA to assess the relative magnitude of disruption and harm an event has created and determine the amount and form of assistance a community may need. A federal disaster declaration is necessary under the provisions of the Disaster Relief Act of 1974 and the Stafford Act of 1988 for federal assistance and aid to be distributed. The WHO identifies elements required for an infectious disease outbreak to be declared a pandemic. An epidemic involves the emergence of a new disease or reemergence of a disease, with sustained human transmission, occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people (Kelly, 2011).

Some crises are distinct in terms of their scope and the level of harm created. These so-called mega-crises “defy boundaries, limits, neat demarcations, patterned connections and linear consequences”

Table 1.1 FEMA Disaster Declaration Criteria.

-
- Amount and type of damage (number of homes destroyed or with major damage);
 - Impact on the infrastructure of affected areas or critical facilities;
 - Imminent threats to public health and safety;
 - Impacts to essential government services and functions;
 - Unique capability of federal government;
 - Dispersion or concentration of damage;
 - Level of insurance coverage in place for homeowners and public facilities;
 - Assistance available from other sources (federal, state, local, voluntary organizations);
 - State and local resource commitments from previous, undeclared events; and
 - Frequency of disaster events over recent time period (FEMA, 2011).
-

Source: FEMA (2011), Declaration Process Fact Sheet.

(Helsloot et al., 2012, p. 5). Mega-crises create especially significant threats, overwhelm capacity to respond, and have both short- and long-term consequences. These events are often inconsistent with the “traditional dichotomy between natural and man-made disasters” by creating complex interactions between human-caused and natural phenomena (Helsloot et al., 2012, p. 5). Mega-crises may profoundly and permanently undermine the viability of communities, institutions, and regions and require a fundamental rethinking of preparation, response, management. Most importantly, mega-crises require consideration of causes and consequences. Climate change, for example, involves the complex and nonlinear interaction of human and natural phenomena. As climate patterns that have been relatively stable for thousands of years shift, the consequences for local weather patterns, sea level rises, agricultural practices, and human migration will be profound. Management of this mega-crisis will require sustained, cooperative, multinational efforts and social and political change on a scale not seen before. Managing the consequences of climate change will become an imperative for communities, organizations, industries, and countries. Mega-crises such as climate change have prompted an emphasis on building and improving resilience as an important strategy of response.

From other perspectives, the question of the magnitude of a crisis is best understood as a matter of personal, community, and even cultural perception. Not surprisingly, people are more likely to understand an event as a crisis when it affects them. Coombs (2010) describes a crisis as a function of perceptions based on a violation of some strongly held expectation. Food, for example, should be safe to eat and free of harmful *E. coli* contamination. Tap water should be safe to drink. It is generally expected that rivers will remain within defined areas and not spread to inundate residential or downtown areas. Seasonal influenza should be a relatively minor disorder and should not create widespread illness, death, and social disruptions. The violation of these expectations and some level of community and social consensus about the relative level of risk and threat create the *perception* of a crisis. A crisis condition is in contrast to what would be considered a normal condition. When people believe there is a crisis, they are likely to behave differently than they would in so-called normal times.

Similar debates about definitions have also focused on the notion of the intentional creation of harm. For example, some scholars have argued that international conflicts between countries represent crises, while others have suggested that war itself should not be classified as a crisis,

although the consequences, such as the dislocation of populations, disruption of food supplies, or disease outbreaks, do represent crises. War usually but not always is the outcome of some extended conflict and as such is not surprising in the same way as most crises. Terrorism attacks are intentional, unanticipated, and surprising and are generally classified as crisis events.

These various crises all generally evoke the notion of some dramatic, unanticipated threat with widespread and wholly negative impact. Events such as the Japanese tsunami and Fukushima nuclear accident, the Challenger Shuttle disaster, the British Petroleum (BP) Gulf oil spill, and the anthrax letter contamination episode represent crises. These events share three general attributes: they are largely unanticipated or violate expectations; they threaten high-priority goals, and they require relatively rapid response to contain or mitigate the harm (Hermann, 1963; Seeger et al., 2003). Crises are almost always unanticipated by key stakeholders, although there are usually warning signs and cues. Most often, they involve a radical departure from the status quo and a violation of general assumptions and expectations, disrupting “normal” and limiting the ability to anticipate and predict. The severe violation of

Table 1.2 Typologies of Crisis.

Crisis Types:		
Lerbinger (1997)	Seeger et al. (2003)	Coombs (2010)
Natural disaster	Public perception	Natural disasters
Technological crises	Natural disasters	Malevolence
Confrontation	Product or service crisis	Technical breakdowns
Malevolence	Terrorist attack	Human breakdowns
Organizational misdeeds	Economic crisis	Challenges
Workplace violence	Human resource crisis	Mega-damage
Rumors	Industrial crisis	Organizational misdeeds
Terrorist attacks/ man-made disasters	Spills (oil, chemical)	Workplace violence
Crises from environmental factors	Transportation disasters	Rumor

expectations is usually a source of uncertainty, psychological discomfort, and stress. Sometimes, the occurrences are so confusing people simply do not know what to do and experience extreme psychological dislocation. Weick has described this response as a cosmological episode: "When people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together" (Weick, 1993, p. 633).

Significant threats to such high-priority goals as life, property, security, health, and psychological stability are often associated with crises. These threats also create severe anxiety and stress and the need to do something, that is, to take some action in response to the threat. This reaction is sometimes described as the fight or flight response, a natural neurological response first described by psychologist Walter Cannon in the 1920s. The primary mammalian stress hormone, adrenaline, is activated when a threatening situation is faced. This hormone produces several neurological responses, including increased heart rate, constricted blood vessels, and dilated air passages. In general, these responses enhance an organism's physical capacity to respond to a threatening situation. Gray (1988) updated the fight or flight framework into a more comprehensive four-stage process of "freeze, flight, fight, and fright." Initially, an organism may exhibit a freeze response, exhibiting hypervigilance or awareness to the threat. The second response, according to Gray, is to flee, and if this is not an option or if fleeing is exhausted as a strategy, a fight response is activated. Finally, a strategy of fright, freezing, or immobility may occur as the organism "plays dead" in a final effort to avoid the threat.

A third defining condition of crisis is that the event usually requires some immediate action or response by agencies and groups to limit and contain the harm. Actions such as shelter-in-place or evacuation are common for some kinds of events. During the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended members of the public get vaccinations, wash their hands frequently, cover their cough, and stay home when sick. These actions are mitigation strategies designed to limit the spread of the disease. In cases of contaminated products, avoiding the product is necessary to reduce harm. Power outages, heavy rains, or floods often contaminate municipal water supplies. In these cases, water must be disinfected through actions such as boiling to avoid waterborne diseases. These actions usually require some communication of expert or situational advice. The need for a rapid response implies that crises emerge quickly

and are of relatively short duration. This is not always the case. The consequences of a crisis can emerge slowly over time and last for very long durations. Environmental crises, for example, may be years, even decades in the making and the consequences may only become clear slowly over time. Chemical contamination is an especially challenging source of slow-moving crises. With over 50,000 known landfill sites with toxic chemicals, these legacy “time bombs” have the potential to slowly yet significantly impact human health for years and even decades (Worthley & Torkelson, 1981).

We have suggested elsewhere that a crisis may be defined as a specific, unexpected, non-routine event or series of events that creates high levels of uncertainty and a significant or perceived threat to high-priority goals (Seeger et al., 2003). This definition captures the three primary conditions of crisis and suggests a crisis may be a contained, single event such as the 27 April 2011, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, tornado in which 52 people died, or it may be a series of interacting and cascading events, such as the Fukushima earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster. This definition also includes the idea that a crisis should be contained or specific in its parameters. Larger issues, such as the ongoing healthcare crisis or the energy crisis, would not meet this definition.

Others have offered more straightforward crisis definitions. Heath (1995), for example, suggests that a crisis is a risk manifest. From this perspective, a risk occurs before a crisis and is the consequence of a risk continuing to develop without appropriate efforts to manage it. This notion of a risk incubating, developing unchecked, and perhaps interacting with other factors is one of the most common views of a crisis “cause.” Therefore, crisis is also closely related to the concept of risk. Risk communication generally concerns “risk estimates, whether they are appropriate, tolerable, and risk consequences” (Heath, 1995, p. 257). Birkland (1968) described crises as focusing events, bringing attention to issues and setting the larger public policy agenda. Thus, a crisis can be a significant force in political and social change and may determine what actions government might take.

Crisis comes from the Greek *krisis* and *krinein*. *Krisis* was a medical term used by the Greek writer and physician Hippocrates to describe the turning point in a disease. *Krinein* means to judge, separate, or decide. Crisis in its eastern etymology refers to a decision point requiring a decision of judgment. The Chinese symbol for crisis, *wēijī*, sheds light on the way the term is understood in some eastern cultures. Composed of two symbols, *wei* roughly translates to “danger, dangerous, endanger, jeopardize, perilous, precipitous, precarious, high, fear, afraid.” While

there is some debate about *ji*, it may sometimes mean “opportunity” and may also mean “a crucial point” (Mair, 2010). According to this translation, *wēiji* may refer to a dangerous situation and a crucial point.

Other fields have their own debates around definitions and terminology. Sociology, which probably has the longest tradition of research in this field, uses the term disaster to represent events that can be designated in time and space that have impacts on social units. These social units, in turn, enact responses and changes to manage the impacts (Fritz, 1961). Although many definitions have been proposed, most investigations of disaster refer to the physical impacts or problems unplanned or socially disruptive events cause for human communities (Kreps, 1984). Disasters create considerable harm to people and the physical infrastructure. They generally occur suddenly and prompt actions that can be taken to mitigate the harm. Quarantelli (2005) argued further that the term disaster is rooted in two fundamental ideas. First, disasters are social phenomena as opposed to simply natural forces. Natural forces, storm surges, earthquakes, or infectious diseases are sources of damage, while the disaster is the impact on social systems and processes. Second, a disaster involves the established social structure and associated changes, such as disruptions, to that structure. Although the term disaster is preferred by sociologists, it is conceptually very similar to the term crisis used in fields such as communication.

Closely associated with efforts to define crisis is the question: what causes a crisis? A number of perspectives have been offered to explain the cause of crisis (see Seeger et al., 2003, pp. 12–15). These include faulty decision making, oversights, accidents, natural changes, and unanticipated events. These may be summarized in three views: (1) normal failure and interactive complexity; (2) failures in warnings, faulty risk perception, and foresight, and (3) breakdowns in vigilance (Seeger et al., 2003, p. 12).

Normal accident theory (NAT) describes the ways in which normal, routine failures may lead to catastrophic crises. Developed by the sociologist Charles Perrow (1984), NAT emphasizes the interactive complexity that develops around larger scale socio-technical systems. Large systems, particularly those built on industrial or even societal scales, typically are technologically intense and create very high levels of complexity. The east coast electrical blackout of 2003 involved the interaction of environmental conditions (a very hot day and peak demand), inadequate maintenance in the form of tree trimming, a software bug, operator error, and an electrical grid that was highly integrated. The result was a loss of power to 55 million people in eight U.S. states and in

Ontario, Canada. Perrow (1984) notes that failures such as these are characterized by interactivity and tight coupling. Interactivity simply means that one system, or subsystem, impacts another. In the case of the blackout, peak demand and hot weather caused transmission lines to expand and come into contact with trees that had not been trimmed. When systems become overly complex, managers cannot anticipate these interactions. Most so-called natural disasters (floods, hurricanes, tornadoes) involve the interaction of natural phenomena with human systems (dams, levees, building codes and housing developments). Tight coupling occurs when there is “no slack or buffer between two items” (Perrow, 1984, p. 90). Managers thus have little time or ability to correct failures. Quite literally, there is no room for error. Perrow’s work has been highly influential to the development of crisis theory. Among other things, his work predicts that as society becomes more complex, more crises will occur. Thus, accidents are becoming increasingly normal. FEMA reports that federal disaster declarations have been steadily increasing since 1953. In 1953, there were only 13 such declarations, yet 2011 saw 99 declarations, the highest ever recorded (FEMA, 2013).

A second but related view of crises posits that they are caused by failures in warnings, faulty risk perception, and inadequate foresight. This view follows the logic that when a risk or threat can be anticipated, it can be avoided. Turner (1976), for example, suggested a crisis is an “intelligence failure” or a “failure in foresight” (p. 381). Risks are often poorly understood or poorly communicated. Sometimes the signals of an impending crisis are not accurately interpreted or not assembled in ways that allow managers to connect the dots. Many crises, such as the Bhopal, Indiana/Union Carbide disaster, the New Orleans/Hurricane Katrina crisis, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, and the Flint water crisis can all be understood as failures to perceive, understand, or appropriately communicate risks.

A third view of crisis cause suggests these events occur when vigilance breaks down. This view of cause was initially popularized by the concept of groupthink developed by Janis (1972). According to this theory, decision systems, such as small groups, sometimes develop pressures to conform and reach consensus and a sense of invulnerability that reduces their ability to critically evaluate information and assess risk. Faulty decision making characterizes many crises, including the collapse of Enron and the 1986 Challenger Shuttle disaster. These faulty decisions systems and breakdowns in vigilance are often reflected in what Clarke (1999) described as fantasy planning. Disaster plans are often based on wildly optimistic assumptions and have little hope of actually working.

Clarke characterizes such plans as rhetorical documents designed primarily to convince publics that technologies are safe and that appropriate precautions have been taken.

Although there is general consensus about what constitutes a crisis, there is almost always debate about what and who caused a crisis. Issues of causality are related to responsibility, accountability, and often liability. Therefore, as discussed in Chapter 10, strategic portrayals of blame, cause, and responsibility tend to dominate the discourse following a crisis. It is also important to recognize that the term carries considerable semantic weight and thus is used strategically to call attention to issues. Defining an issue as a crisis means that action must be taken in response and resources should be made available. Sometimes there is public disagreement regarding whether a situation constitutes a crisis, with advocates hoping to make the issue part of the public agenda precisely because it is a crisis.

Defining Communication

As with the definition of crisis, scholars have also wrestled with definitions of communication and have offered a variety of competing and complementary views. Traditional notions of communication have tended to be more static and emphasize the role of the sender in a process of distributing messages to receivers. Receivers were largely seen as passive participants who were assumed to simply accept and act upon the message. The best-known formulation of this approach is Berlo's (1960) sender-message-channel-receiver model. This model created a straightforward linear view of communication, a perspective that dominated many early emergency communication conceptualizations and tended to frame crisis communication as a unidirectional process of issuing warnings or alerts through systems such as the emergency broadcast system or community-based weather sirens.

More contemporary notions of communication draw on a much broader set of concepts and describe a much more dynamic and transactive process. Participants are described simultaneously as senders and receivers, transacting and co-creating meaning through the ongoing and simultaneous exchange of a variety of messages using multiple channels. One of the best examples of this approach is Barnlund's (1970) transactional model, initially developed as a theory of interpersonal communication. This approach emphasized the view that communication is a complex process that is dynamic, continuous, circular, and

unrepeatable. Communication involves encoding and decoding systems, ongoing feedback loops, and the ongoing, co-creation of meaning.

Other views of communication emphasize different aspects of the process and many of these conceptualizations have direct application to communication in crisis contexts. Dance (1967), for example, argued that communication is both dynamic and cumulative in that it is heavily influenced by past experiences. Thus, previous experiences with a crisis influence the interpretations and communicative choices one makes. During the response to Hurricane Katrina, for example, the agencies responsible for crisis management made mistakes that damaged their reputations. This undermined their credibility, making subsequent efforts more difficult. Cushman and Whiting (2006) developed a framework that suggested much of the meaning derived through communication is created through the rules governing the communication process. During a crisis, some of these rules may no longer function and involve new actors in new contexts; thus, communication may become more complex and less effective. In other cases, new rules may surface or be imposed, influencing how meaning is created. Many theorists emphasize the symbolic nature of the process. Communication relies on symbols or an arbitrary but agreed-upon system of labels and representations that carry or encode the message and connect the message to larger systems of meaning. During crises, symbols, such as warning signs and sirens, can play an important role. In fact, many crises, like 9/11, become their own meaning systems, conveying values, ideologies, and specific views of power.

Ultimately, communication is about the construction of meaning, sharing some interpretation or consensual understanding between senders/receivers, audiences, publics, stakeholders, or communities. Scholars differ on the locus of that meaning. The mass communication theorist McLuhan (1964) offered the view that the medium is the message, suggesting that any technology (medium) used to distribute meaning directly affects the meaning that arises. Thus, the warning siren becomes the message.

Contrasting this view are the general semanticists who argue that meaning is in people's interpretation of symbols and thus exist in the communicators' cognitive processes. People who have experienced the pain and trauma of a disaster, for example, carry an interpretive system of meaning associated with disasters that is not available to others. Communication can also be understood to occur within a larger ecology (Foth & Hearn, 2007). This may include the media used, relationships, networks, history, and the larger social, political, cultural, and economic

context. Communication both influences and is influenced by the context and ecology. A crisis, for example, creates a specific context, which influences communication activities, and the communication activities also influence the context. Digital communication technology, including social media and handheld devices, has significantly altered the ecology of crisis communication. Some researchers argue that these technologies have repositioned those who are at the center of the crisis as active sources and senders of information rather than as passive receivers (Pechta et al., 2010).

An additional view of communication important in consideration of crises is the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) perspective. This view, developed initially by McPhee and Zaig (2000) and expanded by others, suggests that organizations are constituted in and through human communication. Communication is the fundamental process whereby organizations are created by individual actors and actions. Organizations are “ongoing and precarious accomplishments realized, experienced, and identified primarily – if not exclusively – *in* communication processes” (Cooren et al., 2011, p. 1151). The CCO perspective unifies a number of views from systems theory, narrative theory, social constructivism, and critical theory, among others (Putnam et al., 2009). CCO also foregrounds a number of competing views regarding what constitutes an organization. Some perspectives, for example, emphasize the material and substantive nature of an organization, while others emphasize organizing as an ongoing process. Still others suggest that an organization is simply the coordinated behaviors of individuals. Communicative processes and outcomes may play roles in each of these views of organizations.

One of the widely used approaches to CCO is the concept of the four flows of communication introduced by McPhee and colleagues. The four flows include organizational self-structuring, membership negotiation, activity coordination, and institutional positioning. These are described as “flows” because they are interactive yet enduring, take many forms, and occur in many contexts by many participants (McPhee, 2015). Organizational self-structuring is a deliberative, reflexive process whereby the structuring processes, such as norms, rules, and hierarchies, are created and communicated. Membership negotiation concerns the ways in which individuals are recruited to become part of the organization, establish and maintain relationships, and are socialized into the organizational culture. Activity coordination involves the collective coordination of member activity. The activities of individuals in organizations are interdependent and must be coordinated and

assembled in a unified way. The final flow concerns the macro-level positioning of the organization in relation to the larger environment. This form of communication is necessary for organizations to have an independent and recognizable identity (see McPhee & Zaug, 2008; McPhee et al., 2014).

The CCO perspective may be especially relevant to crisis contexts because crises often disrupt these flows and the resulting organizational processes. Crises can change identity, disrupt patterns of coordination; shift roles, hierarchies, and responsibilities, and change membership patterns. In addition, crises often give rise to emergent organizations that respond to the crisis, such as volunteer and support groups and search and rescue groups. Crises are important forces in shaping and creating organizations and CCO can help explain these developments.

Finally, communication scholars have also described the functions of communication. These approaches, such as functional decision theory (Gouran, 1982) and media uses and gratifications theory (McQuail, 1983), emphasize the instrumental nature of communication; that is, communication allows for the intentional creation of certain outcomes. Functional approaches focus on the results or outcomes of communication behaviors and processes. This perspective sees communication as a tool senders and receivers use to accomplish goals, solve problems, make decisions, influence others, and coordinate actions. Communication may be more or less effective in accomplishing these outcomes depending on its structure, how it is used, what audiences it targets, and what channels are employed, among many other factors. Managing a crisis often requires the cooperation of various agencies, groups, and community members. In many cases, this cooperation requires communication; thus, communication is an instrument of cooperation.

Dance and Larson (1976) described three broad functions of communication: (1) regulating the behavior of self and others; (2) linking individuals with others and their environment; (3) developing higher mental processes and capacity. Regulating behavior primarily through persuasive processes is a fundamental communication function and represents an important tradition in communication inquiry extending back to the Greek rhetoricians. In fact, some views suggest that all communication is persuasive. Linking functions include both information exchange and linking to one's environment but also the development of relationships. Information about the environment is necessary to make choices about how to behave. Finally, Dance and Larson suggest that communication processes are closely associated with cognitive processes and capacity. In other words, communication is an epistemology, a way of knowing

and thinking. We have suggested that this functional approach may be particularly useful in understanding the communication activities associated with crisis management. These are outlined in Table 1.3.

These functions, critical to effective response, suggest that communication is associated with a wide range of instrumental outcomes during a crisis. For example, communication is necessary to persuade people to prepare a personal crisis plan. In fact, the website Ready.gov promotes preparedness through a public communication campaign. A successful communication of evacuation notice is necessary to manage the harm of floods, hurricanes, and some forms of toxic spills. Public health officials sometimes describe communication as a form of “social Tamiflu,” referring to the antiviral medication used to treat influenza.

Table 1.3 Functions of Crisis Communication.

Scanning	(Monitoring and maintaining external relationships: and Spanning collecting information, building relationships with external stakeholders) Sensemaking of information Issue management Spanning agency, organization, and community boundaries Risk communication
Crisis Response	(Planning for and managing crises) Uncertainty reduction, providing information and interpretations, warnings, evacuations notices, product recalls Coordination with key stakeholder and response agencies Information dissemination Promoting strategic ambiguity
Crisis Resolution	(Restructuring, repairing, and maintaining relationships after a crisis) Defensive messages Explanatory messages Image restoration Renewal Grieving and memorializing
Organizational Learning	(Emerging from a crisis with enhanced knowledge, relationships, and capacity) Dialogue Networks and relationships Understanding and norms

Communication is the primary way public health officials can influence the behavior of publics in ways that can limit the spread of this infectious disease.

Given this range of definitions, concepts, and complexity of communication, is it possible to fully define crisis communication? Crisis communication could simply be understood as the ongoing process of creating shared meaning among and between groups, communities, individuals, and agencies within the ecological context of a crisis for the purpose of preparing for and reducing, limiting, and responding to threats and harm. This definition points to the diversity of communicators – both senders and receivers – involved and the instrumental and functional elements of communication during a crisis. Beyond this definition, however, is the fact that communication processes are sensemaking methodologies allowing individuals, groups, communities, and agencies to co-create frameworks for understanding and action even within the highly uncertain, demanding, and threatening context of a crisis. These events shatter the fundamental sense of normalcy, stability, and predictability we all count on in living our daily lives. They are disruptive, confusing, shocking, and intense events and making sense of them and reestablishing some new normal requires communication. Crisis communication processes are also made significantly more complex by the diversity of audiences, cultures, backgrounds, experiences, new technologies, and forms of crises. In addition, effective communication in these cases can literally be a life and death matter. Understanding the role of communication in these events, therefore, is critical.

The effort to do so has been driven by dramatic crisis events and has involved several research traditions. In its earliest iteration, crisis communication practice was a subfield of public relations and was directed toward identifying strategies to protect organizations facing accusations of wrongdoing. One of the first professional practitioners of public relations, Ivy Lee, helped manage press coverage of the 1906 Pennsylvania Railroad disaster involving a passenger train derailling on a bridge in Atlantic City. The disaster caused more than 50 deaths (Hallahan, 2002; Heibert, 1966). The principles of crisis communication were drawn largely from anecdotal insights, “war stories,” and later more formalized case studies (Coombs, 2010, p. 23). Although these early principles of crisis communication were anecdotal and did not draw on any established theory, they laid the groundwork for subsequent investigations, which began to develop in the 1980s. More systematic case studies and the application of rhetorical theory added to the earlier principles of practice and a coherent field of crisis communication began to emerge

(Lachlan et al., in press). Erikson's (1976) examination of the Buffalo Creek disaster, Fink's (1986) analysis of the Three Mile Island Disaster, Seeger's (1986) analysis of the Challenger Disaster, and Snyder's (1983) and Benson's (1988) investigation of the Tylenol poisoning and subsequent responses helped develop the case study approach to crisis. Much of the work was still descriptive and critical and depended largely on descriptive and rhetorical methods (Benoit, 1995).

As the field developed coherence, investigators began employing empirical methods to study crisis communication. This included both field studies of crises and disasters using survey questionnaires and laboratory investigations. Investigations of Hurricane Katrina (Spence et al., 2007), the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (Lachlan et al., 2009) as well as investigations of organizational responses to crisis (Coombs & Holliday, 2010) were often grounded in more formal theories, utilizing approaches that could be replicated to confirm results.

Other fields, including management, sociology, political science, anthropology, and public health also explored questions of crisis and communication. Of these, the work of Quarantelli (1988), Mileti and O'Brien (1992), and Wenger (1985) was especially relevant, focusing on questions of communication, coordination, warning messages, and media coverage. Disaster sociology in particular has developed a comprehensive body of work in communication. Investigators in management and organizational behavior approached crisis as an issue of strategic management responses. This included Shirvastava's (1984) case study of the Bhopal Union Carbide Disaster, Perrow's (1984) analysis of Three Mile Island, and Weick's (1993) examination of the Mann Gulch disaster. Finally, the field of political science has explored government response to crisis. This includes Birkland's (1997) work on disasters and the subsequent development of public policy agendas and Comfort's (1994) examination of the Northridge earthquake resilience and coordination. Other fields, such as anthropology, public health, nursing, chemistry, tourism, agriculture, geology, and engineering have their own niche interests in crisis communication.

Today, crisis communication is a robust, interdisciplinary field with important areas for the application of research and theory. Crisis managers make use of the result of research and use theory to inform their decisions. Response agencies commission studies to answer specific questions. Researchers employ a wide range of methods and approaches to explore the preparation and planning, risk recognition, response, and recovery. An important part of this process has been the development of theories of crisis communication. Theory helps researchers organize

and make sense of observations and provides focus to investigations. Theory can help expand our understanding and conceptualization of crisis communication. Practitioners can use theory to help predict and control what is often a very uncertain crisis condition. Finally, theories can challenge assumptions about crisis and the role communication plays.

Plan for This Book

The following chapters present, describe, and critique a wide range of theories that have utility in explaining how communication functions before, during, and after a crisis. We include explanations of various communication channels, audience behavior and responses, agency coordination, image and reputational repair, and crisis management. This body of theory is highly diverse and interdisciplinary, taking many forms and coming from many disciplinary perspectives. Some are grounded in more general qualitative and social constructivist assumptions, while others are more specific and related to logical positivist epistemologies. This effort to represent a broad sampling of theory allows for a much more comprehensive understanding of the role of communication in crisis and also provides the researcher and the practitioner a broader array of tools. In addition, these theories comment on one another, providing and demonstrating how theory has developed within one particular area of focus. We have grouped these theories into nine chapters. Each chapter represents a family of theory in terms of similar focus or structure.

The chapters are presented roughly in a developmental system. We begin with Chapter 2, a discussion of theory. Chapter 3 presents theories of communication and warning as primary processes occurring when a crisis first emerges. Warnings, including evacuations, are central tools in limiting harm with many types of events. Theories of communication and crisis development are presented in Chapter 4. Failures of communication are closely associated with the onset of crisis, and specific communication processes are associated with each stage of crisis development. Theories of communication and crisis outcomes (Chapter 5) and theories of communication and emergency response (Chapter 6) examine efforts to explain, model, and respond to the post-crisis conditions. Communication is generally recognized as an essential tool for agencies and communities seeking to mount an effective response. Theories of communication and crisis (Chapter 7) describe efforts to characterize and explain the role of

legacy media. Chapter 8 focuses specifically on theories dedicated to explaining the role of social media in crisis communication. Chapter 9 explores theories of influence, including persuasion and rhetorical approaches to crisis communication. Theories of communication and risk management, covered in Chapter 10, draw on the very well-developed body of scholarship in risk communication. Theories of communication and ethics (Chapter 11) reflect our belief that crisis always involves questions of good and bad, right and wrong, and desirable and undesirable. Finally, in Chapter 12, we explore the ways in which crisis communication theory can be applied and expanded.

Conclusion

Crises are powerful forces of individual, organizational, community, and social disruption and change and communication plays an essential role in the ways in which crises emerge, are managed, resolved, and understood. Theory is an important tool for both investigators and practitioners. These events create high levels of uncertainty, confusion, chaos, and harm that theory and research can help explain, predict, and control. Communication is constitutive of the organizations responding to crisis and the organizations emerging from crisis. Moreover, communication is the way we come to understand and make sense of crises. As crises become more frequent and the impacts touch more people, the theories of crisis communication can help in avoiding crisis, mitigating harm, and recovering more quickly and completely.