

Global Threats and the Significance of International Risk and Crisis Communication Research: Advancing Integration, Diversity, and Complexity

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Since the first edition of this handbook was published in 2016, global threats have continued to emerge and, depending on the type of hazard, have become more severe. Although experts caution against bias in disaster reporting (Ritchie & Rosado, 2024), there appears to have been a recent increase in global damage and fatalities caused by small- and medium-sized disasters. In particular, floods, earthquakes, storms, and wildfires have taken a severe toll on the world's population and were often attributed to climate change (Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), 2024). In 2023, the CRED reported 86,473 fatalities, 93 million people affected, and economic losses of US\$203 billion due to disasters. While progress has been made in reducing global hunger over time, levels of undernourishment have increased since 2017. For 2023, 735 million people were estimated to be undernourished, with South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa being the most affected regions. According to the World Hunger Index 2023 (Grebmer et al., 2023):

“This stagnation relative to 2015 largely reflects the combined effects of several crises. These include the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, economic stagnation, the impacts of climate change, and the intractable conflicts facing many countries of the world. Their compounding effects have led to a cost-of-living crisis and exhausted the coping capacity of many countries, especially those where hunger was already high before the crises [...] (p. 7).”

Armed conflicts, terrorism, and gun violence remain severe threats within countries and globally. In 2020, the US National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism reported a total of 10,126 terrorist attacks worldwide, resulting in more than 29,000 deaths, with Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia being the most affected regions, where perpetrators such as ISIS, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hamas, or the Communist Party of the Philippines are operating, with many of them being active transnationally and/or sponsored by foreign states (Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center, 2023). Their main tactics include shootings, improvised explosives, bombings, and kidnapping. 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 (2024) reported a growing number of state-based violence after 2012. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, war has returned to Europe, claiming more than 160,000 lives between 2022 and 2023 and leading to a re-militarization of the continent.

One of the most devastating transnational crises since the first edition of this handbook was undoubtedly the COVID-19 pandemic. By July 2024, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported more than seven million deaths worldwide, with Europe, the United States, Brazil, India, and Russia among the hardest hit at the country level (World Health Organization, 2024). Failures in crisis response and unethical, incomplete, and misleading risk communication by governments and/or individual political leaders, as in the United States, Brazil, Russia, and the United Kingdom, as well as the spread of misinformation through social media, had tragic consequences for citizens. COVID-19 also demonstrated the essential role of crisis and risk communication in global emergencies. Economic crises and inflation, which in part resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic and/or Russia's attack on Ukraine, but also several crises involving large corporations such as Boeing or Volkswagen have shaped the world and the news agenda since 2016. With the rise of extremist right-wing parties in many Western countries, often supported by foreign states (e.g., Russia's interference in elections, Brexit, etc.) and the possibilities of new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) (e.g., covert influence operations by Russia, China, and Iran using AI as reported by OpenAI (2024)), misinformation and disinformation tactics have increasingly destabilized democracy and political and social cohesion. Most of these right-wing groups, for instance in the United States, Latin America, and Europe, promote climate change denial, seek to defund environmental protection programs, spread disinformation about public health threats and vaccinations, reinforce racism, and oppose support for most minority groups or diversity in general. The political gains of these groups have aggravated the causes and impact of crises in many regions of the world.

Hence, the trends we outlined in the handbook's first edition, that risks and crises are becoming more international in terms of physical causes and consequences as well as symbolic effects through global (digital) communication, are still on the agenda of international risk and crisis communication research. Indeed, with the manifestations of anthropogenic climate change, global diseases, growing political instability, and the second-order effects of these developments (e.g., migration, crime, famine, etc.), the need for multidisciplinary cross-national comparative research on the role of risk and crisis communication has increased. A more recent development in this context is the rise of AI and more awareness of the impact of algorithms on global communication with positive and negative outcomes (Park & Park, 2024; Schwarz & Unselt, 2024). The use of machine learning and automation has also changed the research landscape and possibilities in the social sciences in terms of methodology, including risk and crisis communication research (see Chapter 46, Vogler).

To understand recent developments in risk and crisis communication research before and after the first edition of this handbook was published, we first report the results of a Scopus-based literature analysis of the last 15 years. We will then discuss the current trends and needs for studying risk and crisis communication internationally and how these trends relate to the goals and structure of the second edition.

The State of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research

Scholars have pointed to several limitations of the field, including a lack of integrating risk communication and crisis communication conceptually as well as empirically. In addition, the literature published in English is still largely dominated by authors with US and European affiliations (Diers-Lawson et al., 2024). To verify these observations, we conducted a

Scopus-based literature analysis of publications in the last 15 years (2009–2024). Being aware of several limitations, we searched the database for all journal articles, books, and book chapters in English, which included the terms “risk communication” or “crisis communication” in titles *or* abstracts *and* as one of their author keywords.¹ Although much of the research addresses risk or crisis empirically, authors often fail to relate it in a meaningful way to risk communication and/or crisis communication as somewhat important and explicit concepts or to the related body of literature, as found in studies of media coverage of COVID-19 (Schwarz et al., 2023). Using one of these terms in titles/abstracts *and* author keywords was therefore regarded as a useful indicator for a first quantitative review of the field. Within the search results, we split the sample in two parts by using Scopus’ exact keyword function to compare publications on “risk communication” with publications on “crisis communication.”

Altogether, we found 2,540 publications on crisis and risk communication between 2009 and early August 2024. The share of research indexed as “risk communication” was almost twice as high (n = 1,416) as the share of texts on “crisis communication” (n = 748). Over time, the research output steadily increased, especially after 2015, but even more significantly after 2019. However, a significant share of that growth between 2020 and 2023 may be attributed to a temporary impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a considerable number of publications related to risk and crisis communication (Figure 1.1).

Most publications either appeared in journals related to public relations, strategic communication, and management or in journals on risk and disaster research (Figure 1.2). Very few studies were published in more general mainstream communication journals such as *Communication Research* or *Communication Studies*. Altogether, the most relevant journals included *Public Relations Review* (6%), the *Journal of Risk Research* (4%), *Risk Analysis* (3%), the *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* (3%), the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2%), and the *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis*

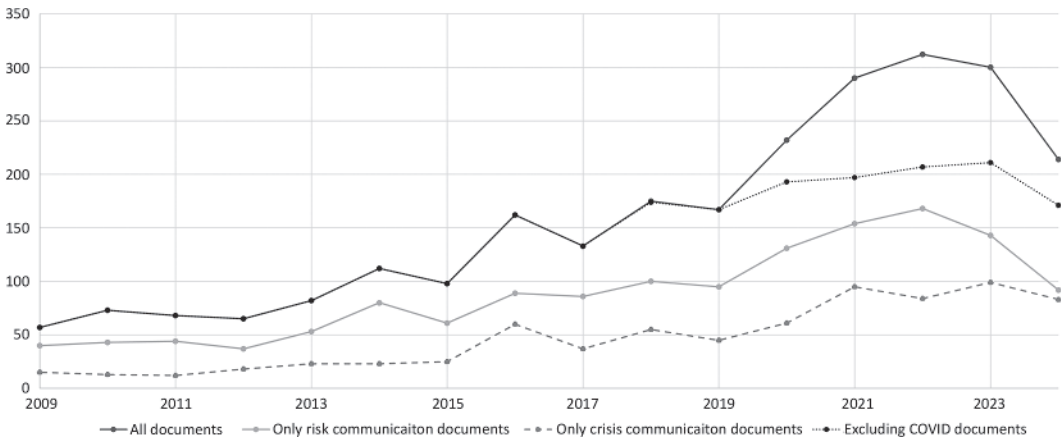


Figure 1.1 Number of publications in risk and crisis communication journals and books from 2009 to 08/2024. *Source:* Adapted from Scopus.

¹ Search string used on Scopus: (TITLE-ABS (“crisis communication”) OR TITLE-ABS (“risk communication”) AND (AUTHKEY (“crisis communication”) OR AUTHKEY (“risk communication”))) AND PUBYEAR > 2008 AND PUBYEAR < 2025 AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE, “b”) OR LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE, “j”) OR LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE, “k”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ch”) OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ar”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”))

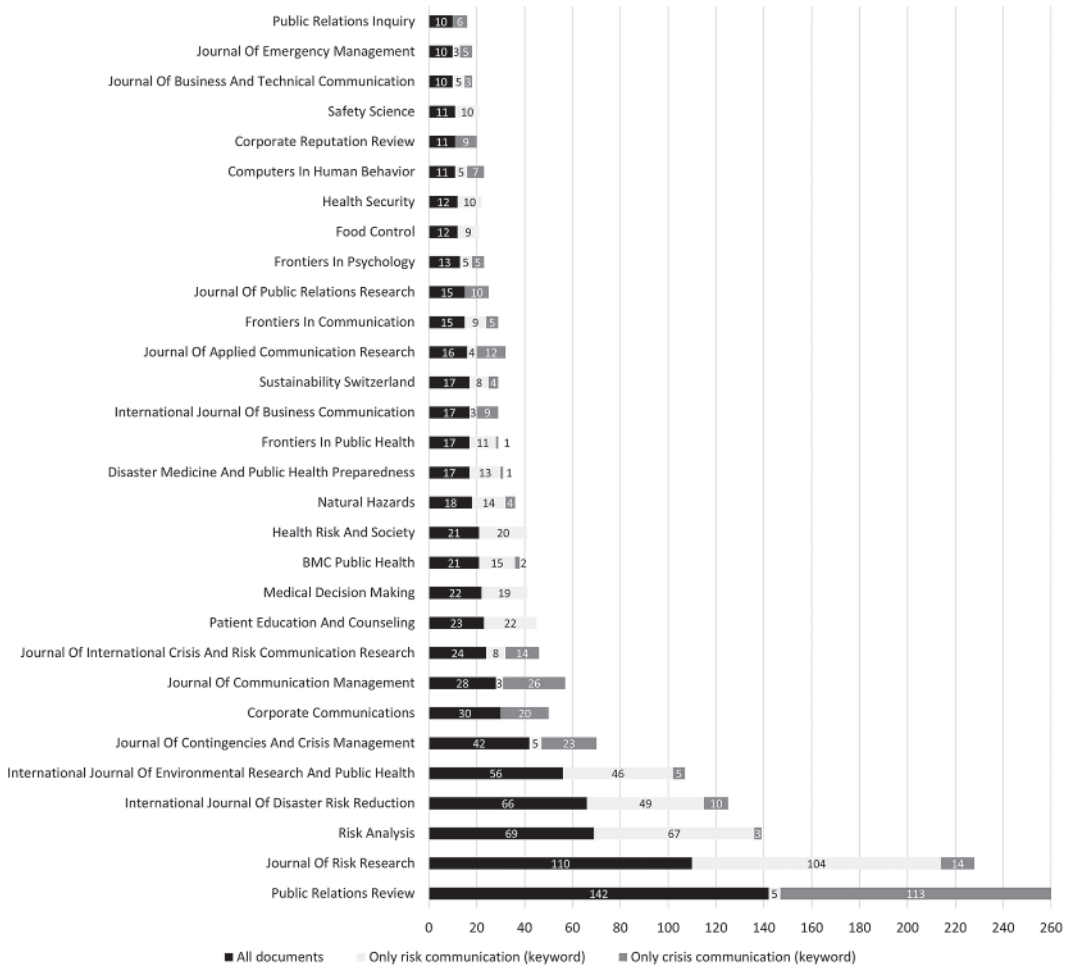


Figure 1.2 Number of publications in risk and crisis communication by journal and topic from 2009 to 08/2024 (sub-samples may overlap in a few cases). *Source:* Adapted from Scopus.

Management (2%). The comparison of risk communication and crisis communication suggests a disciplinary and/or conceptual divide between publication outlets since very few journals overlap in this regard. Most journals are either primarily dedicated to risk communication or to crisis communication. In crisis communication, journals with a PR or management focus dominate (e.g., *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *Corporate Communications*), while in risk communication, journals with a general focus on risk, environmental, and public health research stand out (e.g., *Risk Analysis*, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*). Journals with some but limited overlap were the *Journal of Risk Research*, the *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, or the *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*. Based on Scopus’ categorization of subject areas, risk communication research seems to be more multidisciplinary since most publications are scattered across medicine, the social sciences, environmental sciences, and engineering. Crisis communication research was mainly found in the social sciences and business/management research (Figure 1.3).

We also analyzed people and institutions producing risk and crisis communication research in the last 15 years. Among the most productive according to this database search were Yan Jin

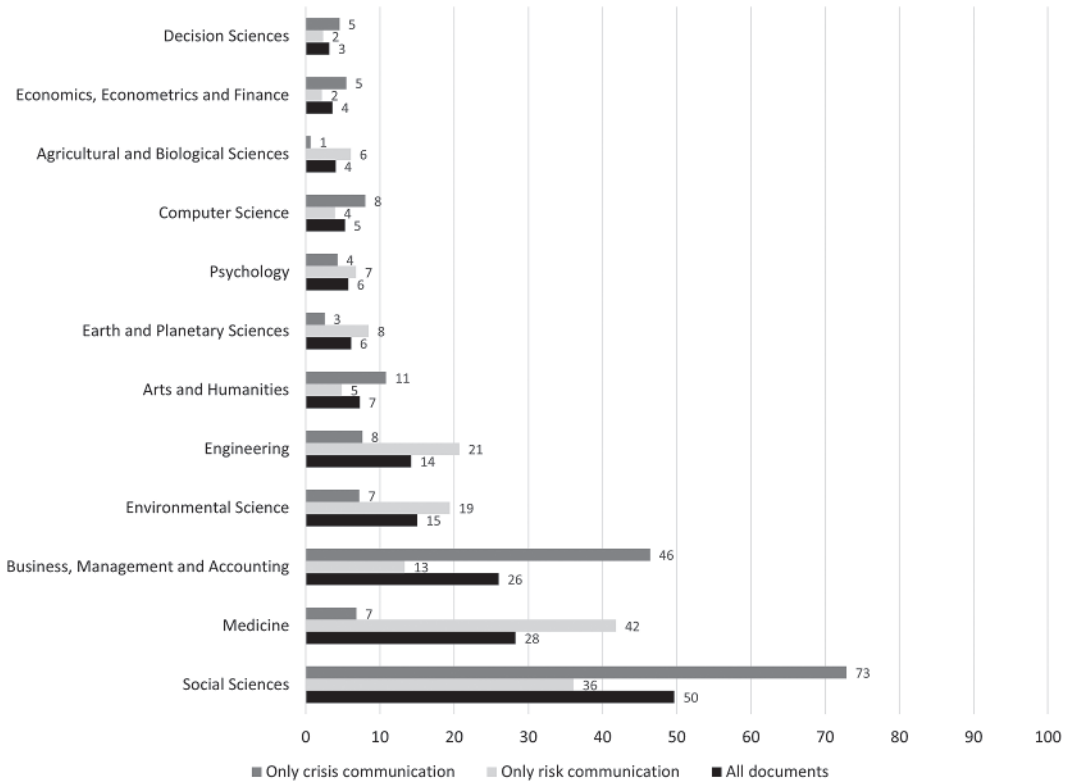


Figure 1.3 Number of publications in risk and crisis communication (in % of total sample or risk/crisis sub-sample) by subject area and topic from 2009 to 08/2024. *Source:* Adapted from Scopus.

(University of Georgia), An-Sofie Claeys (Ghent University), W. Timothy Coombs (Texas A&M University), Patrick R. Spence (University of Central Florida), and Timothy L. Sellnow (Clemson University). With the exception of Claeys (Belgium), these authors were affiliated to US-based institutions (Figure 1.4). Besides the United States, further prolific authors were based at European and Asian universities. Almost half of the authors in the top 40 have contributed to this handbook. A similar result was found for the publication output by institution, with the most relevant being based in the United States (U of Georgia, U of Central Florida, U of Maryland, and U of Kentucky) (Figure 1.5). The most important non-US institutions were King’s College London (United Kingdom), Aarhus University (Denmark), Ghent University (Belgium), two universities in Amsterdam, Kyoto University (Japan), ETH Zürich (Switzerland), Max Planck Institute (Germany), and the University of Ottawa (Canada). The breakdown by country shows the overwhelming dominance of US institutions (38%), followed by the United Kingdom (10%), Germany (7%), China (7%), Canada (5%), and Australia (5%) (Figure 1.6). In the long tail, we mainly found further European, Asian (e.g., Japan, South Korea, India, Malaysia), and a few African institutions (South Africa, Nigeria). Latin American countries were only scarcely represented. The funding sources of risk and crisis communication research that were listed most frequently were the European Commission and its different framework programs (n = 63), followed by the US National Science Foundation (n = 56), the National Natural Science Foundation of China (n = 53), the US National Institutes of Health (n = 40), and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (n = 37).

To get an impression of how much of that research was designed to study more than one country or to study transnational causes, processes, or outcomes of risk and crisis

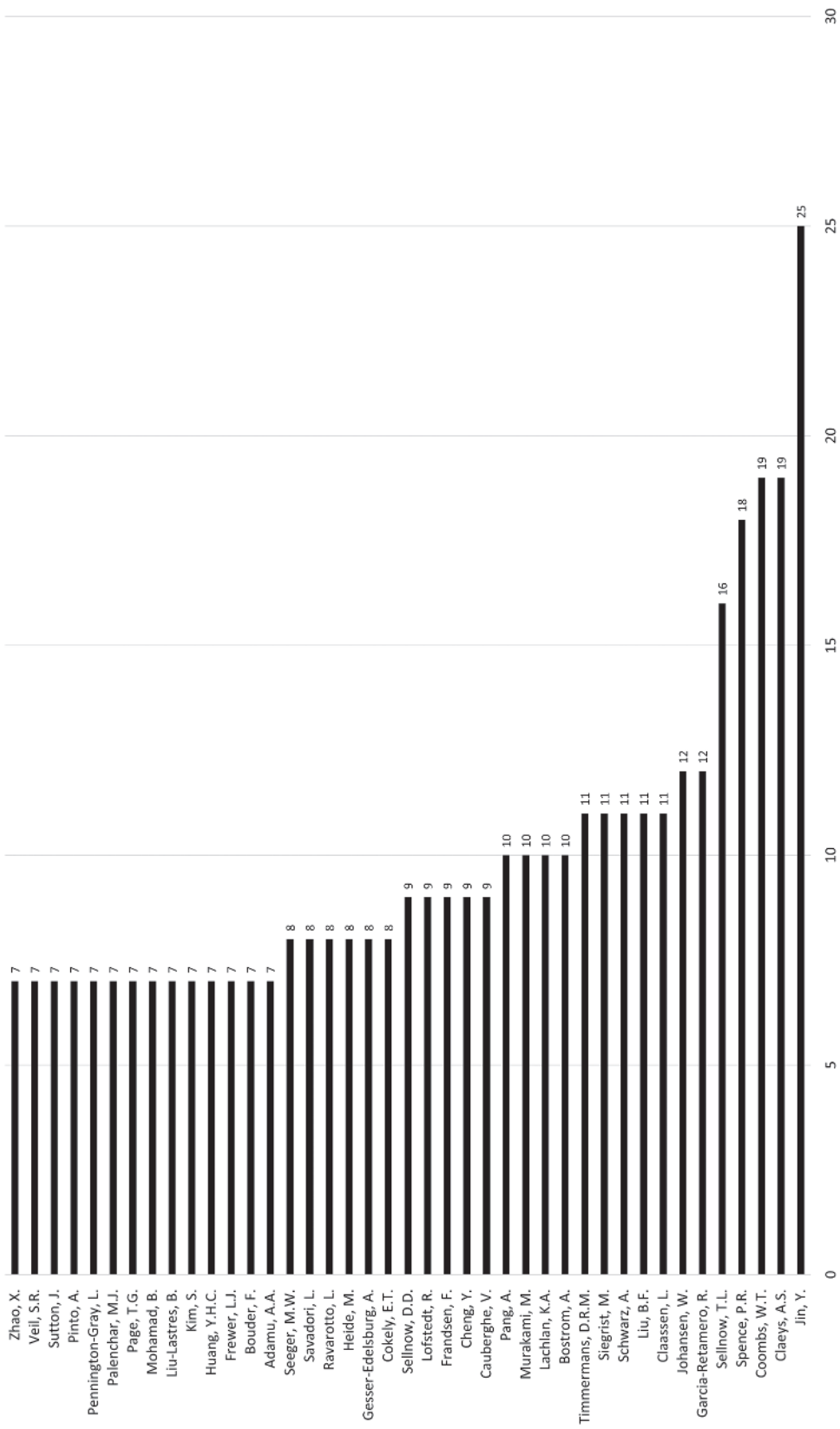


Figure 1.4 Number of publications in risk and crisis communication by author from 2009 to 08/2024. *Source:* Adapted from Scopus.

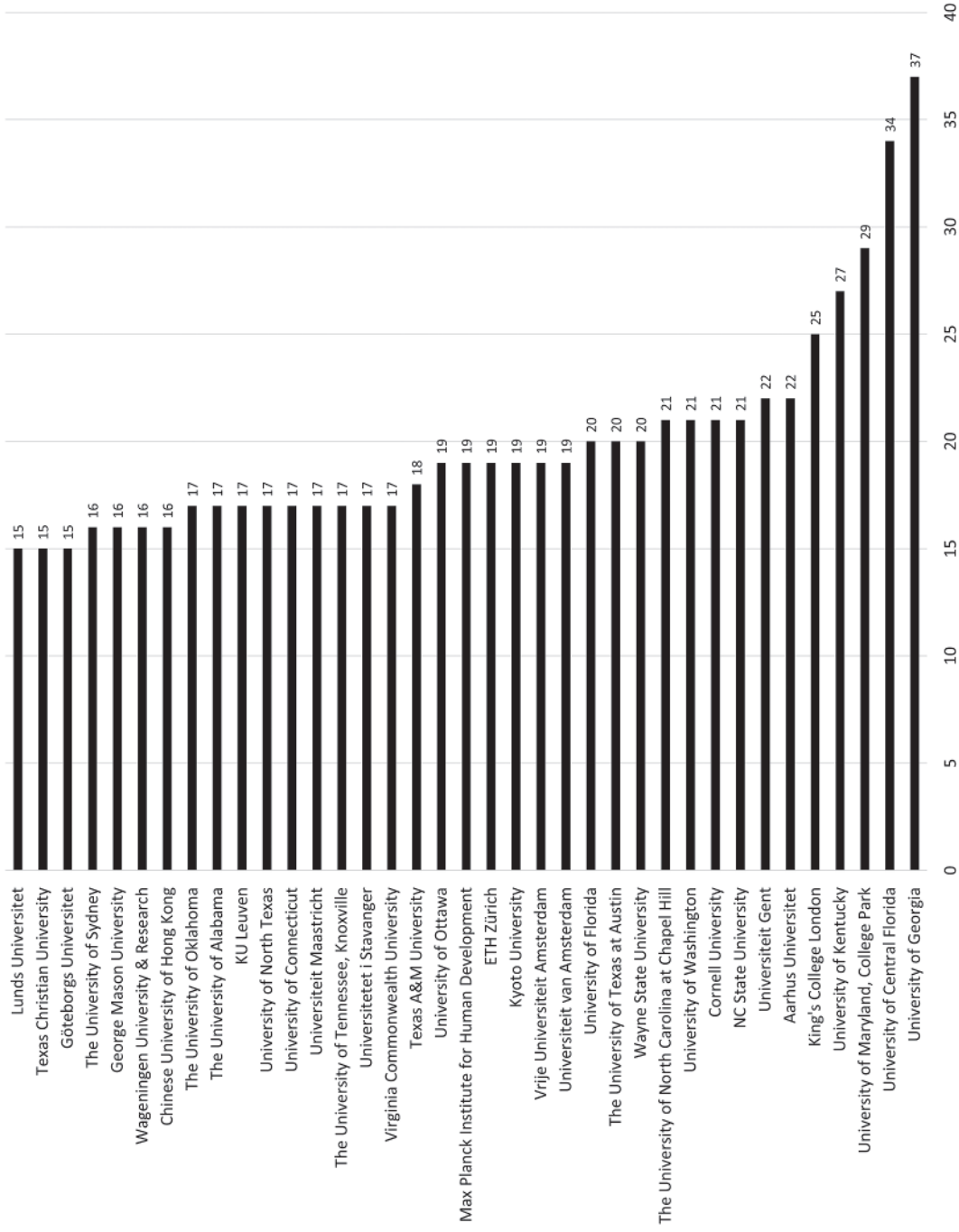


Figure 1.5 Number of publications in risk and crisis communication by affiliation from 2009 to 08/2024. *Source:* Adapted from Scopus.

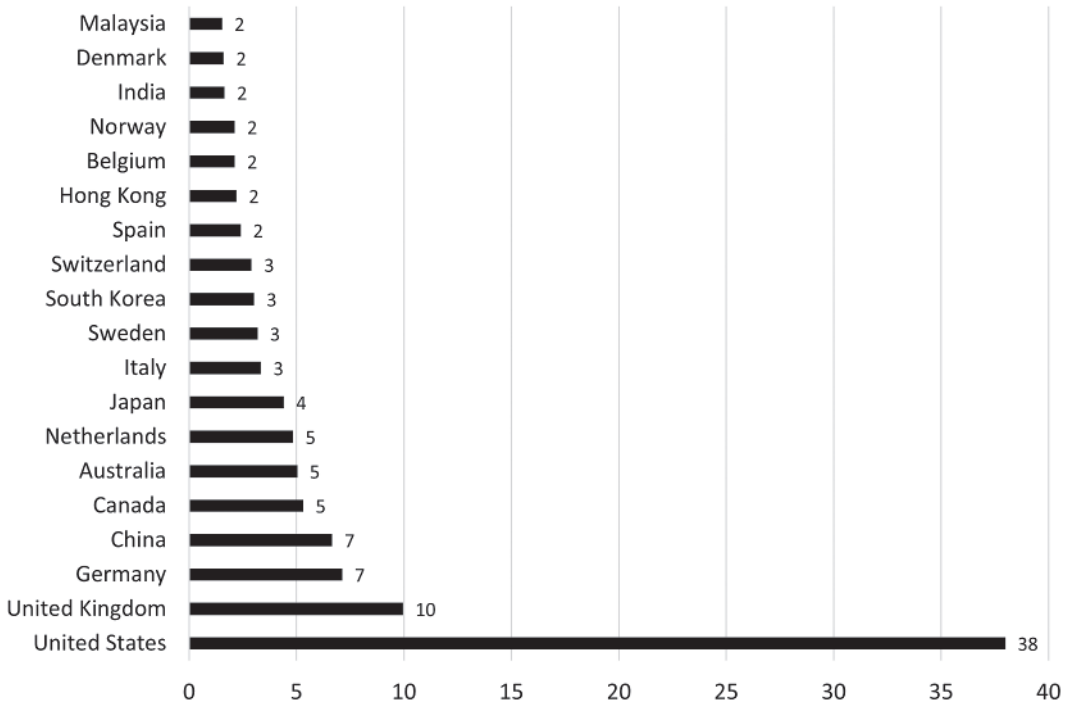


Figure 1.6 Number of publications in risk and crisis communication by country (in %) from 2009 to 08/2024 (N = 2,540). *Source:* Adapted from Scopus.

communication, we further searched the results for publications using the keywords *cross-cultural*, *cross-national*, *comparative*, or *transnational* in titles or abstracts. Only 82 publications were found (3%), a considerable number of which were indexed as comparative without collecting data across countries. Almost a third of them ($n = 26$) were published in 2022 and 2023. Based on titles and abstracts, most of that recent research dealt with different aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, including studies of public health communication (Cristea et al., 2022), political communication (Nicasio Varea et al., 2023), news media framing (Sørensen & Evensen, 2023), corporate communication (Parmelee & Greer, 2023), or internal instructional risk communication (Schwarz et al., 2024). Altogether, cross-national research was almost evenly distributed across risk communication ($n = 40$) and crisis communication ($n = 34$), as well as a broad range of publication outlets. The most relevant in that regard were *Public Relations Review* (6), the *Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research* (1st ed.) (4), *Risk Analysis* (4), *Corporate Communications* (3), and the *Journal of Risk Research* (3).

Despite database limitations and the occasional lack of appropriate indexing by journals or authors, this analysis of 15 years points to the following observations of risk and crisis communication as a field:

1. The international research output is still dominated by US institutions and authors, followed by European and Asian researchers. However, many authors from these institutions may actually come from different countries, as academic systems have become more international in the United States and Europe. The representation of the Global South in English publication outlets remains scarce, the regions of Africa and Latin America in particular.

2. The field is multidisciplinary, especially in risk communication research, while crisis communication research tends to have a PR or management focus. The disciplinary divide between risk communication and crisis communication persists and the two fields lack integration. Most journals stress either one or the other with little overlap.
3. Cross-national or cross-cultural research seems to remain rare in terms of publication output. Specific events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have the potential to trigger more efforts in that regard, which may be related to the global character of such crises, high levels of societal and political attention, as well as more funding opportunities (Liu et al., 2024).

Goals and Structure of the Handbook

Recent edited volumes on risk and crisis communication have contributed important overviews of the body of knowledge in the field (Coombs & Holladay, 2023; Diers-Lawson et al., 2024; Liu & Mehta, 2024; Sellnow & Sellnow, 2024). However, they either focus on a range of specific crisis types or lack a more global as well as interdisciplinary representation of scholarship. With the second edition of this handbook, we tried to take these limitations into account. In addition, we addressed some of the gaps that resulted from the literature review presented in this chapter.

A major concern is the still-lacking integration of crisis and risk communication scholarship. Although improvement is visible based on handbook and journal publications, the divide keeps being an institutional and disciplinary reality. There is, for example, little overlap in membership and collaboration between the specialty group for risk communication at the Society of Risk Analysis (focus on risk) and the Risk and Crisis Communication Section at the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) (somewhat focused on crisis). Although the first edition of this handbook already included chapters addressing both risk and crisis communication, the predominant focus was on crisis communication. Therefore, in the second edition, we asked our contributors to cover both fields more explicitly in their reviews of the literature and/or to address matters of conceptual and empirical integration in all sections of the handbook.

In the first section of this volume, we excluded the disciplinary foundations of the field (e.g., political science, psychology, anthropology) that were part of the first edition since they have not fundamentally changed. Instead, the editors give a condensed overview on risk and crisis communication research to deduce the field's significance and major gaps (Chapter 1, Schwarz), describe the historical development and structure of the field (Chapter 2, Seeger), and analyze the role of culture in international crisis and risk communication research (Chapter 3, Kim).

The sections two, three, and four follow a similar structure as in the first edition using a two-dimensional matrix of risk/crisis context (war, terrorism/shootings, disaster, public health threats/pandemics, organizational crises, political crises) and communication perspective (strategic/institutional risk and crisis communication, social/news media constructions of risks and crises, stakeholder/audience perspective of risk and crisis perception and communication). In the resulting 18 chapters, authors elaborate different perspectives according to their respective expertise. By largely maintaining this matrix, we were able to avoid one-sided emphases on specific objects of study (e.g., corporate crises and public relations), as we found them in many of the publication outlets in our previous analysis. We also incorporate different sub-disciplines to offer a comparative perspective of the multidisciplinary and in part fragmented field (e.g., strategic communication, political communication, scandal research, instructional communication, journalism, media effects, risk perception, etc.).

Three major changes were made in sections two to four. First, since the COVID-19 pandemic had significant global impact on societies as well as the publication output, we dedicated

additional chapters to the risk/crisis context of pandemics and public health crises (e.g., Chapter 7, Löffelholz & Xu; Chapter 13, Liu & Baur; Chapter 19, Wiedicke & Rossmann). Second, the role of misinformation and disinformation was given more room because of its increasing relevance in the context of public health crises, political crises, as well as armed conflicts (e.g., Chapter 6, Palenchar & Heath). In addition, the chapters on terrorism include more references to shootings (e.g., Chapter 11, Rothenberger & Verhovnik-Heinze) since the number of active shooter incidents (Gramlich, 2023) and mass shootings (Statista, 2024) has increased significantly after 2016, especially in the United States. Third, section three was no longer only focused on the role of traditional news media (journalism). The authors were asked to incorporate both the role of social media/algorithms and news media in their reviews of the literature (e.g., Chapter 14, Jin & van der Meer).

Scholars have repeatedly criticized the lack of diversity in approaches, countries represented in research affiliations, and/or empirical data, as it was also confirmed by our literature analysis. While the first edition already included a broad range of international authors and overviews on several regions, in this edition we increased global representation, for example by including more regional overviews on the Global South in section five. This includes chapters on East Africa (Chapter 22, Napakol et al.), Ethiopia (Chapter 23, Abas & Beyene), Nigeria (Chapter 24, George & Adamolekum), Latin America (Chapter 38, Arroyave & Erazo-Coronado), Brazil (Chapter 39, Soares et al.), and Argentina (Chapter 40, Fernández Pedemonte). We included additional overviews on Eastern European countries (Chapter 35, Buzoianu et al.; Chapter 36, Tsetsura et al.) and the Middle East (Chapter 31, Allagui). We also added Japan for the East Asian region (Chapter 29, Sakurai). The chapters in section five give international scholars, students, and practitioners insights into different national and cultural contexts of risk and crisis communication. They also facilitate an understanding of national research priorities and access to publications, which otherwise would not have been noticed because of language barriers. In many countries, scholars publish extensively on risk and crisis communication in books and book chapters in their respective language and are not necessarily represented in English peer-reviewed journals (Klingelhöfer, 2023). Hence, this handbook aims to raise awareness of these diverse contexts in order to facilitate cross-national collaboration among researchers and practitioners. Managing such global and/or multicultural teams has been identified as both a major challenge and opportunity for attracting and conducting funded research in global risk and crisis communication research (Liu et al., 2024).

Finally, section six includes several chapters that address current theoretical, methodological, technological, and practice-related trends in the field. In Chapter 42, for example, Soares and Sellnow present the results of a literature analysis of publications in two major journals of the field to assess the extent to which recent research has addressed international dimensions of crises and disasters. To do so, the authors discuss their findings in the context of mega-crises and wicked problems, as these concepts have gained importance with the increasingly severe manifestations of climate change, the occurrence of major pandemics, and the general overlap of multiple crises. In Chapter 44, Frederic Boudier reviews contributions from risk science and risk analysis to best practices in risk and crisis communication. Further conceptual innovations in the field can be linked to instructional communication theory and its increasing application in risk and crisis communication, as Deanna Sellnow points out (Chapter 43). Methodological trends and challenges were discussed in Chapters 45–47. Daniel Vogler (Chapter 46), for instance, discusses the opportunities and limitations of computational communication science for analyzing international risk and crisis communication with regards to the complexity of multilingual analysis or the adaptation of models to less widely spoken languages. Audra Diers-Lawson (Chapter 45) addresses epistemological challenges and limitations in diversity as well as alignment of theory and research designs in studying risk and crises cross-culturally based on an extensive systematic literature review. We also included a chapter on recent developments in technologies, which are applied in risk and crisis communication processes involving

public safety authorities and citizens (Chapter 48, Grace). The author analyzes developments and the potential of public warning systems, social media, monitoring systems, and common operational pictures, including the risks and benefits of artificial intelligence. Chapter 49 (Duncan & Diers-Lawson) elaborates on the structures, conditions, and challenges of international health emergency response from the perspective of practitioners and global organizations such as the WHO. In the final section (Chapter 50), the editors sum up the main insights from this handbook for cross-cultural and cross-national risk and crisis communication and draw conclusions for future research and practices.

In conclusion, the second edition of this handbook offers a substantial update of global research and addresses prevalent gaps in the literature to:

1. advance the integration of risk communication and crisis communication as fields with, in part, separate conceptual foundations, empirical foci, and institutional structures,
2. support the increase in diversity of global voices and international collaboration contributing to risk and crisis communication research and practice,
3. and to facilitate the conceptual integration and methodologically innovative exploration across risk and crisis contexts, including transnational and protracted crises, to overcome the still prevalent fragmentation of the field within and across academic disciplines.

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Author's Bio

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