Crisis Communication: The Public First/Organization Last Paradox

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Introduction

It is quite likely that our September, 2008 and ongoing world financial crisis is without comparison to any other time period in history. The United States is experiencing the impact of millions of home foreclosures because of high-risk mortgage loans and even riskier investment products, called credit default swaps, which investors purchased as a hedge, in case financial lenders did declare bankruptcies. Major investment houses have sought mergers with other banks or have gone to the United States government for “bailouts;” and global governments, including the United States, have found themselves taking over their own banking systems, insisting that bankers lend the money with the bailout tax dollars they’ve been granted.

At such a time, the general rule of public relations practice has been that public relations practitioners receive a major role in assisting their organizations because of resulting disrupted relationships with stakeholders, such as those that the financial crisis has caused. L. A. Grunig et al. cited “environmental turbulence is the catalyst for pushing public relations and communication management to center stage” (2002, p. 424).

However, there is yet little evidence to be seen of public relations practice in this financial crisis. Indeed, media have criticized the lack of public relations, as for example in a CNN report on the Detroit auto industry CEOs flying in private jets to request billions of dollars from the United States Congress in order to save the auto industry. The reporter wrote:
But don’t you CEOs get the optics? This was a PR debacle. You’re not talking to shareholders or staff members; you’re talking to Congress. And Congress doesn’t work for you; it works for millions of Americans who are struggling and getting pretty desperate for a way out. (Brown, 2008)

We are in, as Jim Lukaszewski, well-know crisis communication counselor and author, so aptly defined crisis, “a people-stopping, show-stopping, product-stopping, reputationally defining event, which creates victims and/or explosive visibility (2001, p. 203). In such a time as this, what if anything can public relations scholarship contribute? Do our theories have sufficient strategic and/or explanatory value for organizations, government and the global world to which we all belong? What should be the role of public relations and communication management in helping major social institutions and society relieve the economic upheaval that is jeopardizing all of us?

Jim Lukaszewski’s advice to corporate communicators in crisis events is to “respond to community values” (2001, p. 212). He argued: “organizations may operate on a day-to-day basis in their own best interests, but when a crisis occurs the company must respond to the community’s value system. If the company does not respond to its community, its ability to operate and possibly its future is threatened” (2001, p. 212).

Lukaszewski calls his conclusion a “powerful paradox” when community or public priorities must predominate over corporate priorities (2001, p. 212). This paper seeks to examine Lukaszewski’s observation of the powerful paradox of public over organizational priorities in crises, by discerning how we will know what public values are.

Lukaszewski is not without advice; stating that public priorities are fairly simple: “health and safety, natural environment, social environment, cultural environment,
technical considerations, financial considerations, and economic considerations.” (2001 p. 212). His advice is to do the following: “Solve the crisis, care for victims, involve employees, alert those indirectly affected and manage those who appoint themselves as part of the situation, such as the new media” (2001, p. 207).

Lukaszewski defined community as the “individuals directly involved in the crisis” (p. 212). “A community value is a personal protective belief. It is about something that cannot be changed without the participation and permission of the community or the individuals directly involved” he said (p. 212). Lukaszewski’s directives seem to be responsible ones, but how do we know what are public values without asking publics to tell us? Public relations practitioners can be of most help by providing their organizations with accurate accountings of public values, as their best help to repair and sustain strategic relationships for which public relations is responsible.

This paper summarizes briefly major strategic management and crisis communication theories, describes how these theories define publics, and centers publics in a crisis as they develop and are developed by discourse, which is through a meaning-making enterprise. I then advocate scenario building as the means to know what public values and priorities are so that organizational public relations will contribute most effectively to solving crisis situations.

Discussion

Public relations is defined as “the management of communication between and organization and its publics” (J. E. Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 6). This conceptualization of public relations is based in theory that organizations exist in an environment made up of many groups, call strategic constituencies or publics that can influence organizational
outcomes, either because they are supportive or because they are resistant to organizations and their goals. Public relations as a function of organizations helps organizations achieve their goals by building relationships with these strategic groups. I think of public relations as “strategic,” as defined by J. E. Grunig as “planned, managed by objectives, evaluated, and connected in some way to organizational objectives” (2001, p. 5).

Public relations scholars have provided several theoretical perspectives with regard to crisis management; including, strategic public relations management, rhetorical theory, situational crisis communication theory, symmetrical/Excellence theory, and contingency theory that also address the importance of those affected by organizational crises.

Strategic management scholar Kathleen Fern-Banks writes in her textbook on crisis communication, that the “essential role of crisis communications is to affect the public opinion process” (2007, p. 15). She takes a strategic managerial approach: to detect, prevent, contain, recover, and learn from crises (2007, p. 10). The concepts of publics and public opinion are defined to a limited degree as based on “individuals’ attitudes toward specific issues” (2007, p. 15).

Rhetorical scholars Heath and Millar view organizational crises from the lens of the “communication processes and efforts to co-define meanings that assist persons who are affected—or think they are affected-- to prepare for, accommodate to, and recover from the disruptive events” (2004, p. 6). Acknowledging that there are both technical/managerial and communication dimensions to a crisis, the rhetorical approach
to crisis, according to Heath and Millar, asks the question: “What needs to be said before, during, and after the crisis (2004, p. 6)?”

Advancing the communicative-centered perspective, Coombs has been developing a situational crisis communication theory, “a prescriptive system of matching crisis responses to crisis situation” based on quantitative experimental methods, and designed to gage the attributions assigned by publics in crisis situations (2006, p. 171).

The symmetrical/Excellence theories viewed crisis communication as an outcome of issues that were not resolved between organizations and their publics. J.E. Grunig argued that “most crises occur because management did not communicate with strategic publics about potential issues before the publics created an issue and eventually a crisis” (2001, p. 13). He argued that organizations could withstand crises better if they had good long-term relationships with publics (2001, p. 13), defined as “people who are affected by the organization or who have the power to affect the organization” (2001, p. 3).

Pang et al. (2007) believed that contingency theory has identified the organizational public relations range of stances and strategies toward publics in each situation, from accommodation to advocacy, and could be applied to crisis situations. Introducing the term “conflict positioning” (p. 21) Pang et al. wrote:

Favorable positioning in a crisis thus involved first understanding what factors, within and without the organization, which played critical roles in the organization’s ability to handle the crisis; second based on the influence of these factors, what stance the organizational was likely to adopt; and third, what strategies were likely to be used based on the stance. (2007, p. 22)

Factors within and without the organization to play a critical role, and grounded in quantitative research, included external public (group, individual, etc.) characteristics of “size, credibility, commitment, and power” (2007, p. 14).
In sum, the major strategic public relations theories regarding crises have focused on the choices that public relations communicators should consider in their counsel to organizations in crisis. These theories are grounded in research evidence that includes conceptualizations of the strategic groups who are affected by the crises; however, they provide little discussion of these publics’ values or priorities as recommended by Lukaszewski. Their definitions consisted of: “individuals’ attitudes toward specific issues” (Fern-Banks, 2007, p. 15); “persons who are affected” (Heath and Millar, 2004, p. 6); “people who are affected by the organization or who have power to affect the organization” (J. E. Grunig, 2001, p. 12); and, “size, credibility, commitment, and power” (Pang, et al., 2007, p. 14).

Discussion of Publics

Conceptually, the choice of term for those involved with organizations has been “publics” rather than community. Lukaszewski’s choice of the term “community” does not suggest any different meaning from the meanings ascribed to public in the public relations literature. A “public” has been typically linked to “public opinion” and the power of public opinion is according to J.E. Grunig “at the essence of the cause and effect of public relations practices” (1994, p. 2).

Scholars, including J. E. Grunig (1994) and Botan and Taylor (2004), use John Dewey’s definition of a public, as “groups that arise out of problems that affect them” (Grunig, 1994, p. 6). This conceptualization differentiates publics around situations or problems rather than as mass aggregates of opinions at any given point in time. Second, publics begin to have an identity, of organizing to do something. Botan and Taylor make the point that Dewey’s definition suggests that a public has “a kind of will of its own” (p.
Publics are neither passive nor reactive in their expressions of opinions or behavior. J. E. Grunig argued the publics become increasingly active in their behavior, defined by J.E. Grunig as “information seeking” or “information processing” behavior based on situations – problems or opportunities. J. E. Grunig’s situational theory of publics considered their behavior through the lens of three variables: problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement. Although J. E. Grunig argued that publics would change as groupings based on situations, his program of research over time did find more consistent kinds of publics: all—issue publics, apathetic publics, single issue publics and hot issue publics (1994, p. 9-10).

Researchers have confirmed the utility of the situational theory of publics over numerous studies. They have begun refining how problems are perceived differentially, by adding antecedents for consideration, such as the influence of culture and gender on whether or not groups or individuals even see situations as problems (Aldoory & Sha, 2007). Aldoory and Sha called for a “reexamination of the variables of the situational theory themselves, as well as the constructs that underlie them” (2007, p. 350).

In contrast to this economic worldview of publics is a social interpretivist stance; that is of conceptualizing publics as they are constructed and construct themselves through discourse. Social interpretists examine how participants of a public make meanings of messages as a basis for theories of public relations. Botan and Soto (1988) believed that a public is:

an ongoing process of agreement upon an interpretation, and that during this process a public may well develop an interpretation that is more sophisticated, insightful, and socially linked than the understanding with which the practitioner/client started. (p. 21)
Vasquez and Taylor (2001) similarly conceptualized publics as homo narrans, a perspective that views publics as a communication phenomenon (p. 150). They argue that “individuals participate in an evolving interpretation of a problematic situation, gaining knowledge and ordering their world as a result of the participation” (p. 150).

A third and contrasting conceptualization of a public comes from critical theorists. Chey-Nemeth (2001) repositioned how publics are defined through critical theory, a conceptual stance that addresses the ideology of constructed meanings at work in meaning making between publics and organizations. Through a case study, she argued that conceptualizations of publics should include the influence of political competition and competition for legitimacy among individuals and groups for material resources (p. 2001, p. 128).

Dozier and Lauzen (2000) introduced critical theory to “liberate” the views on publics in a piece arguing for extending the intellectual domain of public relations research to include societal and individual issues (2000, p. 3). Citing Trujillo and Toth’s (1987) critical theory definition, “publics are viewed as diffuse coalitions and constituencies with diverse needs, values, and perceptions” (p. 216). Dozier and Lauzen used the exemplar paradox of one type of public, the activist group, who did not want to negotiate for “mutually beneficial relationships” with organizations. Instead, critical theory could change the worldview to consider that publics could have irreconcilable differences with organizations, despite their seeming lack of “deep pockets” to exert influence. Dozier and Lauzen (2000) called for an examination of social movements that would illustrate the resistance and intractability of groups determined to create social change over long periods of time.
Critical theorist Murphy theorized that organizations were “complex adaptive systems in which individuals were both interdependent and autonomous“(p. 121). She conceptualized publics as complex adaptive systems in their own right: “They can be open to data from the environment, but they incorporate those data as their internal rules—their cultures—prescribe. In other words, they self organize new information around their existing identities” (p.124).

In sum, the public relations scholarly literature provides three different ways of conceptualizing publics: by an economic perspective, that is situational based on choices of problem recognition, level of involvement, and constraint recognition; by their co-creation of meaning through discourses with organizations; and by dialectical discourses that show tension and struggle over meanings. Theories of publics for the most part are based on specific situations and do not assume that public values and attitudes are fixed or constant. Second, publics have identities and resistances to organizational overtures. Publics are not powerless nor without means to persuade organizations to adapt or adjust their goals to community needs. Because of this more complex rendering of publics, I believe that public relations practitioners will have to engage consistently with strategic groups to understand their values and priorities. With this information in hand, then I think the role of public relations can become central in crisis communication.

How Can Public Relations Practitioners Know Public Values?

Postmodernist Stroh suggested that the focus of public relations should not be on outcomes of goals and objectives but on the relational processes: “that is of engagement and enrichment through constant dialogue, debate and discourse” (2007, p. 213). She
argued that it is in the dialogue with publics that “true values emerge, not only for the organization, but also its environment and ultimately society as a whole” (p. 213).

To be of constant engagement, Stroh proposes scenario planning with its consideration of all outcomes because the resulting information will go beyond merely financial considerations and forecasts. She said: “Scenario planning is about finding a balance between over-predicting the outcomes of strategic thinking and change and falling over the edge of chaos into total disintegration” (2007 p. 214). Stroh argued that modern strategic planning, such as goal and objective setting, will not work in identifying stakeholders who might be affected by organizational action. Knowing values can be attained through “strategic management as the process of actively participating in conversations around important emerging issues. Strategic direction is not set in advance, but understood in hindsight as it is emerging or after it has emerged (Stroh, 2003, p. 423).

Sung (2007) described scenario building as a process “which projects multiple environmental situations based on the analysis of a variety of environmental factors” (p. 174). Scenario building also is a learning process “that shares and explores different perspectives” (p. 178). She provides nine specific steps in the process: task analysis, environmental influence analysis (stakeholders and basic trends), issues analysis and selection; key uncertainty identification or problem areas for the selected issues; key public identification; scenario plot and component identification; final scenario development and interpretation, final decision scenarios and consequence analysis and strategy development. Scenario building should be an assessment tool that would permit
looking at publics from multiple directions to ascertain values and priorities through ongoing methods.

Conclusion

This paper proposes that the paradox of prioritizing public values over corporate values in crisis situations can be understood by a continual process of scenario planning and building. In thinking through organizational goals, or issues, the role of public relations could contribute to organizational leaders vital, thick, rich descriptions of the priorities and values of those constituent groups that give permission for their organizations to operate. In the world financial crisis before us, we have seen corporate leaders continue to resist public values, called “main street values” versus “Wall Street values.” If public relations practitioners counseled with evidence from engagement and dialogue with publics through scenario building, perhaps the disconnect we are seeing currently would not be so evident. Instead, the central role that public relations should play in crisis situations is of explaining public values, based on constant and continuing engagement. It is this role that would be more likely to help alleviate the crises faced by organizations and society.
References


