



Aalto University
School of Business

Mikkeli Campus

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CORPORATE CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Final thesis

Joonas Salminen

Bachelor's thesis
Instructor: Mirjaliisa Charles
Date of submission: 10.4.2017

Declaration

By completing this cover sheet and declaration, I confirm that this assignment is my own work, is not copied from the work (published or unpublished) of any other person, and has not previously been submitted for assessment either at Aalto University, or another educational establishment. Any direct or indirect uses of material (e.g.: text, visuals, ideas...) from other sources have been fully acknowledged and cited according to the conventions of the Harvard Referencing System.

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Author: Joonas Salminen
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Supervisor: Mirjaliisa Charles

Objectives

This study aimed to find out how the emergence of social media and its various platforms have changed corporate crisis communication. It also aimed to look at how companies utilize social networking channels in their crisis communication. The final objective for the paper was to find out if the general guidelines of crisis communication apply to communication through social media networking channels.

Summary

The study was conducted as a combination of a literature review on current research about crisis communication, and interviews of crisis communication professionals. The literature review identified the key crisis communication theories and the interviews built on those by asking more social media specific questions from the professionals.

Conclusions

It was identified in this study that the nature of crisis communication has changed due to the emergence of social media. Crises can develop much faster in social media and often, communication must be faster too. However, the general guidelines and theories of crisis communication usually still apply, but the companies must consider the often-intensifying effect of social media. According to this paper, companies can utilize social media in their crisis communication by using it before a crisis arises, using Twitter to communicate quickly, and addressing crises in the channels where the audience is discussing it.

Key words: Communication, Business Communication, Corporate Communication, Crisis, Crisis Management, Crisis Communication, Social Media, Reputation Management

Language: English

Grade:

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Crisis communication is needed by organizations whenever a crisis arises. This crisis can be for example a traditional crisis such as an accident or fire at a factory, a reputation crisis such as the company getting caught for doing something illegal, or someone else claiming, sometimes untruthfully, that the organization has done something wrong. Recent examples of corporate crises are for example the Volkswagen emission scandal, Samsung's Galaxy Note smartphone issue, and Apple's fight against the US government after the San Bernardino terrorist attacks.

Social media has truly emerged during the last decade and today, it is part of everyday life for the majority of people in countries where internet penetration is high and most people have smart phones. Therefore, it is only logical that companies, especially in the consumer industries, need to be in social media channels as well. As the companies are still somewhat finding their feet in social media, they are more likely to make mistakes in their communication there compared to traditional media. When this is combined with people being more connected to the world than ever and, commenting on current affairs becoming possible for everyone, there is a potential for crises. In addition, as mentioned later in the paper, social media has its way of creating crises that did not exist before. These crises can result, for example, from consumer complaints that are followed by other consumers sharing their negative experiences in the comment section or consumers rating the company negatively on social media after a crisis.

1.2. Research Problem

The relationship between social media and crisis communication is a relatively new phenomenon, and therefore, it has not yet been extensively researched and theories do not yet exist specifically for social media. Hence, this paper will address that relationship and aims to find out, how exactly does social media affect crisis communication. In addition, it aims to provide recommendations on how companies could utilize social media in order to make their crisis communication more effective.

Lastly, as there is a limited amount of research regarding social media crisis communication, but extensive theories on crisis communication itself, this paper tries to analyze if existing crisis communication guidelines could be used also in social media.

This is done by combining a literature review that looks into existing research on crisis communication and social media with interviews conducted with crisis communication professionals.

1.3. Research Questions

The research questions for this paper are the following:

1. How has the introduction of different social networking channels changed corporate crisis communication?
2. How should companies utilize social networking channels in their crisis communication?
3. How do general guidelines of crisis communication apply to communication through social networking channels?

1.4. Research Objectives

Based on the research questions, the following research objectives arose for this paper:

1. To find out if the nature and requirements of successful crisis communication are different between social and traditional media.
2. To find out if the general guidelines of crisis communication also work in social networking channels.
3. To find out the threats and opportunities that the instant nature of social networking channels brings to crisis communication.

1.5. Definitions

1.5.1. Social media

According to Wright and Hinson (2009) cited in Austin et al. (2012: 189), “social media are digital tools and applications that facilitate interactive communication and content exchange among and between audiences and organizations.” This is further defined by Aula (2010) who suggests that social media consists of blogs, micro-blogs, forums, photo and video sharing, wikis, social bookmarking, and social networking.

1.5.2. Crisis

Crises are abnormal events. According to Heath and Palenchar (2009: 278), crisis is an event that “creates an issue, keeps it alive, or gives it strength”. Coombs (2007) says that it is something that provides people with reasons to think badly of an organization.

There are two main types of brand crises, performance-related crises and values-related crises. The first one usually involves certain products not functioning in a desirable way. A values-related crisis usually involves a broader issue when the values of a company do not meet their actions, for example in the form of social or ethical issues (Wang, 2016)

1.5.3. Crisis communication

Freberg et al. (2013: 2) define crisis communication as “the provision of effective, efficient messages to relevant audiences during the course of a crisis process.” In addition to that, Reynolds and Seeger (2005: 46) state that it “seeks to explain the specific event, identify likely consequences and outcomes, and provide specific harm-reducing information to affected communities in an honest, candid, prompt, accurate, and complete manner.”

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Corporate Crisis Communication: Overview

There are several comprehensive definitions of crisis communication in corporate communications research. For example, Freberg et al. (2013: 2) define corporate communication as “the provision of effective, efficient messages to relevant audiences during the course of a crisis process.” An earlier definition by Reynolds and Seeger (2005: 46) is on the same lines but goes more into specifics with stating that crisis communication “seeks to explain the specific event, identify likely consequences and outcomes, and provide specific harm-reducing information to affected communities in an honest, candid, prompt, accurate, and complete manner.” Both of these definitions suggest that crisis communication should be efficient and effective. This, of course, makes sense and sounds obvious. The question then is, how to make crisis communication efficient and effective and this paper will address that question.

Crisis communication can be used for different purposes. The creator of Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Timothy Coombs (2007), says that crisis communication is either used to repair the reputation after a crisis or during one to prevent damage to the reputation. Therefore, even though several authors (e.g. Coombs, 2007; Veil et al., 2011; Austin et al., 2012; Freberg et al., 2013) suggest that crisis communication plans should be made well in advance, crisis communication itself always has to be done in the moment when the crisis occurs and after it.

Coombs (2007) suggests that the first priority of crisis communication is to do everything possible to protect stakeholders from any harm. In other words, it could be said that the first mission is to provide them with information that they need to protect themselves from the physical threat of the crisis. Examples of this could include sirens if people need to take shelter or warnings not to eat contaminated food. These are the ethical responsibilities that companies have when they face a crisis.

This priority is also supported by earlier research by Sturges (1994). His research states that providing information quickly in a crisis helps people to cope with the psychological threat from it. This is because a crisis is an abnormal situation and

therefore, creates uncertainty. This uncertainty produces stress for the stakeholders and can be relieved by providing relevant information (Coombs, 2007).

After making sure that the stakeholders know what to do in order to protect themselves, Coombs (2007) says that it is time for an organization to communicate the corrective actions that are being taken. This is the phase of crisis communication when corporations start to either repair or protect their reputation. It could be argued that the faster the corporation communicates safety instructions to its stakeholders, the faster it can proceed to protect its reputation. Therefore, corporations should be as efficient as possible in their crisis communication.

When it comes to protecting, or repairing the reputation of an organization, many authors suggest that the right framing of the message is critical (Druckman, 2001; Cooper 2002; Freberg et al., 2013). Cooper (2002) suggests that people define problems, solutions to them, and attributions of responsibility based on the framing of the message. Druckman (2001, cited in Coombs, 2007: 167), on the other hand, says that “the framing effect occurs when a communicator selects certain factors to emphasize. The people who receive the message will focus their attentions on those factors when forming their opinions and making judgments.” Based on these findings, it could be suggested that communicators should form their messages to draw attention to either the good side or to the smaller problems caused by the crisis.

With traditional media, organizations may have had less control of the framing of their message than with social media. This could be due to the fact that in traditional media, the message is usually interpreted and reformatted by journalists. However, with social media, the company can publish the message themselves and potentially reach millions of people without the help of journalists. In addition, there could be an opportunity related to opinion leaders in social media. These are people who are followed by large audiences and can also influence the opinions of many people. They could be easier to affect and cooperate with than journalists who are typically somewhat neutral. This is also suggested by Veil et al. (2011), who propose that companies should identify bloggers before crisis situations because they could act as allies during a crisis.

Greyser (2009) and Freberg et al. (2013) also advice communicators on the message form. Greyser (2009) states that the best approaches in order to restore trust are directness in communications and concrete actions to correct the behavior of the organization. Freberg et al. (2013) gives more specific advice by suggesting that crisis messages are most effective when they are personalized to some extent and provide recipients with clear action steps to take. In this context, it is usually impossible to personalize the message to every single recipient. However, especially with the internet and the social media, it is possible to identify key target groups for different types of messages and reach them with personalized messages to each stakeholder group.

Social media is a relatively new phenomenon when it comes to crisis communication, but there has already been specific research also on its usefulness for corporate crisis communication. The obvious advantage of social media from crisis communicators' point of view is of course that it provides channels through which large audiences can be reached very quickly (Veil et al. 2011; Wang, 2016). In addition to organizations sharing information, the recipients can easily share that information to their networks (Aula, 2010; Veil et al., 2011).

As mentioned earlier, the framing of a message is vitally important for corporate communicators. In addition to this, there are suggestions that the medium used for messaging could be equally, or even more important than the message (Jin & Liu, 2010; Schultz et al., 2011). In one study, Twitter was found to be more effective in reducing negative crisis reactions such as boycotting and negative word-of-mouth than newspaper articles and blogs (Schultz et al., 2011). Moreover, Schultz et al. (2011) also found that Twitter users shared information more often than blog users and non-users of social media. This is not surprising given the nature of Twitter and the ease of sharing on most social networking and microblogging services. It could be argued that the importance of the medium does not come only from how the message is interpreted in that form, but also from how easily big audiences can be reached by using that specific medium.

There are several key theories to crisis communication with the most significant ones being the Situational Crisis Communication Theory by Coombs, and the Image

Repair Theory by Benoit. These will be discussed in the latter part of this literature review along with the more recent Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model by Liu et al. (2012).

2.1. Image Restoration Theory

2.1.1. Introduction to the Image Restoration Theory

Another key theory in the field of crisis communication is the Image Restoration Theory introduced by William L. Benoit in 1997. Benoit (1997) states that image, also known as reputation, is important to organizations. This is supported by multiple researchers such as Timothy Coombs (2007) and Pekka Aula (2010). Image is important to organizations even though it is to growing extent not a single impression shared by the whole audience (Benoit, 1997).

Usually, there are multiple audiences that organizations need to address and these audiences may have varying interests, concerns, and objectives. Therefore, the crisis communicator must prioritize the audiences (Benoit, 1997). Social media could help in addressing these audiences with differing agendas, because it increases the amount of different communication platforms drastically and makes it easier to address smaller individual groups.

An attack, which causes a problem to the organization, has two components. Firstly, the accused is responsible for the action. However, this does not have to be true, it is enough if the audience perceives the company responsible (Benoit, 1997). This comes back to what Seeger (2006) said about the public's perception being their reality.

The second component is that the act is considered offensive. In this part, what matters is the salient audience. If the salient audience disapproves the act, the other audiences do not matter (Benoit, 1997). Similarly with the first component, this does not have to be true either, it is enough if the salient audience perceives the act to be offensive (ibid; Seeger, 2006).

2.1.2. Crisis Response Strategies Based on Image Restoration Theory

According to Benoit (1997), message options are the key in image restoration discourse. This was also suggested by Coombs (2007), who based his theory on the assumption that communication can change people's perceptions of a crisis. However, Benoit's (1997) statement is in contrast with more recent research conducted by Schultz et al. (2010) who suggested that the medium is more important than the message. This could have changed after 1997 with the introduction of numerous new communication platforms.

The strategies that Benoit (1997) provides crisis communicators with, are largely similar with the ones that Coombs (2007) suggested ten years later. However, whereas Coombs (2007) divides the strategies into three primary response strategy groups and one secondary response strategy group, Benoit (1997) divides them into five groups. These five main groups are denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of event, corrective action, and mortification. Communicators can choose the strategy in accordance with the seriousness of the situation and they can often also combine different strategies listed. The groups and strategies contain are introduced more specifically in table 3 (Benoit, 1997).

Image Restoration Strategies		
Strategy	Key Characteristic	Illustration
Denial		
Simple Denial	Did not perform act	Coke does not charge McDonald's less
Shift the Blame	Act performed by another	Exxon: Alaska and caused delay
Evasion of Responsibility		
Provocation	Responded to act of another	Firm moved because of new state laws
Defeasibility	Lack of information or ability	Executive not told meeting changed
Accident	Act was a mishap	Sears' unneeded repairs inadvertent
Good Intentions	Meant well in act	Sears: No willful over-charges
Reducing Offensiveness of Event		
Bolstering	Stress good traits	Exxon's swift and competent action
Minimization	Act not serious	Exxon: Few animals killed
Differentiation	Act less offensive	Sears: Preventative maintenance
Transcendence	More important considerations	Helping humans justifies tests
Attack Accuser	Reduce credibility of accuser	Pepsi: Coke charges McDonald's less
Compensation	Reimburse victim	Disabled movie-goers given free passes
Corrective Action	Plan to solve or prevent problem	AT&T promised to improve service
Mortification	Apologize for act	AT&T apologized

Table 3: Image Restoration Strategies (Benoit, 1997)

2.2. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

2.2.1. Introduction to SCCT

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is a theory created by Timothy Coombs and published in 2007. It is a framework for understanding how managers can use crisis communication to protect reputational assets during a crisis. It divides crises into three different clusters to help managers understand what kind of

response is required to a crisis (Coombs, 2007). Based on the framework, Coombs (2007) comes up with evidence-based communication guidelines for responding to different types of crisis. Although this paper considers mostly corporations' crisis communication, Coombs (2007) claims that this framework is applicable also to different types of other organizations such as non-profits.

The theory is based on Attribution Theory. It claims that people are interested in and search for causes of events. This is especially true for negative and surprising events, such as crises (Weiner, 1985; Weiner, 2006). Weiner (2006) also states that people react negatively when a person is judged responsible and positively when a person is judged not to be responsible for what has happened. In addition, anger is evoked in the first case and in the latter, people feel sympathy for the person involved.

SCCT hypothesizes that the crisis managers can determine the most suitable crisis response strategy or strategies by understanding the situation and the type of the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

2.2.2. Crisis Clusters

According to Coombs (2007), in a crisis situation, there are three factors that form the reputational threat. These factors are initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior relational reputation.

Initial crisis responsibility refers to how responsible the organization is for the crisis in the eyes of the stakeholders (ibid). The more responsible the stakeholders deem the company, the more severe the reputational threat caused by the crisis (ibid; Claeys et al., 2010). As stated by Seeger (2006: 239), "the public's perception is its reality." Therefore, even if the company is not actually responsible for the crisis but the audience thinks they are, they should act as if they were responsible.

Crisis history addresses the case of the organization having experienced prior crises. This can be especially important if the prior crises have been of a similar nature. If this is the case, the organization may be deemed more responsible to the current

crisis because it will seem like they have not taken enough corrective actions in the past (Coombs, 2007).

Prior relational reputation on the other hand refers to how the company has or is perceived to have treated their stakeholders in general. If the company has a history of treating their stakeholders badly, they may be seen as more responsible for the crisis (Coombs, 2007). This could be an example of *Schadenfreude*, a phenomenon where people are happy when another party suffers.

As mentioned, there are three different crisis clusters. These clusters are the victim cluster, the accidental cluster, and the preventable cluster which can also be called the intentional cluster. In victim crises, someone else caused the crisis and therefore, the organization is seen as a victim. In accidental crises, the crisis was caused by actions by the organization, but these actions were unintentional. In preventable crises, the organization knowingly took a risk by for example violating a regulation or putting people in danger. Table 1 below explains the clusters further by dividing them into more specific types (Coombs, 2007).

Table 1: SCCT crisis types by crisis clusters

Victim cluster: In these crisis types, the organization is also a victim of the crisis.

(Weak attributions of crisis responsibility = Mild Reputational threat)

Natural disaster: Acts of nature damage an organization such as an earthquake.

Rumor: False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated.

Workplace violence: Current or former employee attacks current employees onsite.

Product tampering/Malevolence: External agent causes damage to an organization.

Accidental cluster: In these crisis types, the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional.

(Minimal attributions of crisis responsibility = Moderate reputational threat)

Challenges: Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner.

Technical-error accidents: A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident.

Technical-error product harm: A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled.

Preventable cluster: In these crisis types, the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation.

(Strong attributions of crisis responsibility = Severe reputational threat)

Human-error accidents: Human error causes an industrial accident.

Human-error product harm: Human error causes a product to be recalled.

Organizational misdeed with no injuries: Stakeholders are deceived without injury.

Organizational misdeed management misconduct: Laws or regulations are violated by management.

Organizational misdeed with injuries: Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur

Table 1: SCCT crisis types by crisis cluster (Coombs, 2007)

In his theory, Coombs (2007) presents a two-step process for assessing the reputational threat by using the three factors. In the first step, the manager should figure out the initial crisis responsibility attached to the crisis. Based on this, they should initially determine which crisis cluster the crisis belongs to.

The two other factors are intensifying factors. Thus, in step two, the manager should assess crisis history and prior relational reputation. If either of those two are negative, the manager should then act in accordance with the next more severe cluster. Coombs (2007: 169) concludes this by saying that “the more negative the reputation, the less likely stakeholders are to report behavioral intentions that are supportive of an organization.”

2.2.3. Crisis Response Strategies Based on SCCT

According to Coombs (2007), crisis response strategies have three goals: (1) shape attributions of the crisis, (2) change perceptions of the organization in crisis, and (3) reduce the negative effect generated by the crisis. To achieve these goals, Coombs (2007) provides organizations with three primary crisis response strategy types and one secondary response strategy.

The first main class of primary crisis response strategies is the deny strategies. These strategies try to detach the organization from the crisis or argue that there is no crisis. Normally, these are only useful if the crisis belongs to the victim cluster or if there is no crisis. Using a deny strategy with a more severe crisis might lead to adverse reactions from the stakeholders (Coombs, 2007).

The next class of primary response strategies is the diminish strategies. These try to diminish the seriousness of the crisis or argue that the organization had no control over what has happened. To use these strategies, the managers need strong evidence or otherwise the strategy could backfire and lead to negative publicity and stakeholder reactions. The diminish strategies aim to reinforce the frame that the crisis is accidental, because intentional crises are often more expensive and more difficult to manage than accidental ones (Coombs, 2007).

The last, and most accommodative, category of primary crisis response strategies is the rebuild strategies. These normally include claiming responsibility for the crisis and apologizing. Organizations might also provide symbolic or material forms of aid to the victims and remind people of past good works of the organization. Reacting well to a crisis with a well-executed rebuild strategy may even work in the organization's favor as it might generate new reputational assets. Because rebuild strategies usually involve more substantial corrective actions than other strategies, they are typically also the most expensive strategies to execute (Coombs, 2007).

In addition to the three primary strategies, there is a secondary crisis response strategy called bolstering. Bolstering is based on either reminders of past good work to counter the negatives or reminding stakeholders that the organization is also a

victim. More specific information about different crisis response strategies can be found from table 2 (Coombs, 2007).

Table 2: SCCT crisis response strategies

Primary crisis response strategies

Deny crisis response strategies

Attack the accuser: Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.

Denial: Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.

Scapegoat: Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis.

Diminish crisis response strategies

Excuse: Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.

Justification: Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.

Rebuild crisis response strategies

Compensation: Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.

Apology: Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.

Secondary crisis response strategies

Bolstering crisis response strategies

Reminder: Tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization.

Ingratiation: Crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization.

Victimage: Crisis managers remind stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too.

Table 2: SCCT crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007)

Although SCCT is one of the key frameworks in the field of crisis communication, it has also attracted some critique from other authors. In a 2010 study, Claeys et al. found that the crisis type does not make a significant difference in determining the best crisis response strategy, but rather, the rebuild strategy always leads to the most positive reputational restoration. This is in contrast with Coombs (2007), who suggests that the strategy should be selected in accordance with the crisis responsibility. However, it could be that even though rebuild strategy may always lead to the most positive results, it can be beneficial for organizations to use less accommodative strategies with accidental and victim crises because the more accommodative the strategy is, the more expensive it will be for the organization.

In addition, there is the personality trait called locus of control that could also affect people's responses to different crisis response strategies even though it has not been taken into account in Coombs' study (2007). According to Duffy, Downey and Shiflett (1977, cited in Claeys et al., 2010: 256-257), locus of control is "a personality trait that refers to the attributions that people make for behavioral consequences and reinforcements."

Interestingly, the locus of control seems to affect people's reactions to different types of crisis response strategies. In a research paper by Claeys et al. (2010), the respondents with an external locus of control reacted more positively to the deny strategy than those with an internal locus of control. In other words, people who believe that they are responsible for the consequences of their actions themselves, react more negatively to the deny strategy than those who tend to look elsewhere for a reason when they fail. However, according to Claeys et al. (2010), there is no difference between people with external or internal locus of control with the other two primary response strategies.

2.3. Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model

The social-mediated crisis communication model is a more recent crisis communication model published by Liu et al. in 2012. Whereas the two theories introduced earlier are generic theories related to crisis communication, this model focuses specifically on social media and different channels and therefore, is important for this paper.

Liu et al. (2012) provide organizations with five key considerations for a crisis situation. Some of these are adapted from other theories. The first consideration is crisis origin. This asks if the crisis is an internal or external crisis. An example of an internal crisis could be an accident at the company factory which raises questions about security at the plant. An external crisis could for example be an emission scandal where the company gets caught for manipulating their emission figures.

The next consideration is the crisis type. The crisis types suggested in this model are adapted from Coombs' (2007) work. Therefore, they are victim cluster, accidental cluster, and intentional cluster (Liu et al, 2012).

The third consideration is the infrastructure. This considers whether the crisis should be handled on the local level or needs to be addressed centrally. In the centralized approach, the company headquarters handle the crisis communication whereas in the localized approach it is handled by the local department involved in the crisis (Liu et al., 2012).

The penultimate consideration is the message strategy (Liu et al., 2012). Again, Coombs' (2007) work can be very useful when considering this issue. In addition to Coombs' work, the image restoration theory by Benoit (1997) could also be consulted.

The final consideration for an organization is the message form (Liu et al., 2012). As suggested by Schultz et al. (2010), the medium can sometimes be even more important than the message, thus it should be carefully considered. Different forms can be used to effectively reach different target audiences and multiple different channels may support each other with each one being ideal for different types of messages.

Other aspects to consider include whether the relationship between different parties interpreting and sharing information is direct or indirect. Liu et al. (2012), suggest that during the era of social media, third-party influence can be significant in a crisis and thus it can be beneficial to cooperate with influential social media creators. This is in line with the suggestion of Veil et al. (2011), that companies should cooperate with opinion leaders to have them act as allies in a crisis.

2.4. National Center for Food Protection and Defense (NCFPD) Guidelines for Crisis Communication

2.4.1. Introduction to NCFPD Guidelines

In addition to general guidelines based on the frameworks and models introduced earlier in this paper, there are the guidelines created by National Center for Food Protection and Defense (NCFPD). These are introduced and further analyzed by Veil

et al. (2011) in their article. Although the guidelines were created by the public sector, they also apply well for corporations. These guidelines will next be examined.

2.4.2. Establish Plans in Advance

The first point of these guidelines is to establish risk and crisis management policies and process approaches. Veil et al. (2011) state that this should be done in advance in order to be ready for crises when they hit the organization. This is supported by numerous other authors (e.g. Coombs, 2007; Austin et al., 2012; Freberg et al., 2013).

2.4.3. Plan Pre-event Logistics

The next step is to plan pre-event logistics. Veil et al. (2011) suggest that organizations should have hidden websites with crisis information ready to be published and shared on social media. Of course, this is not always possible but certain types of crises can be predicted. Crisis communicators should also identify employees skilled in graphic design, video, and audio in order to be ready to create multimedia information for social media (ibid). This applies mostly to smaller organizations as large corporations have specified departments for producing this kind of information. Companies should also develop an online contact list to be ready to distribute information to key stakeholders as fast as possible (ibid).

Part of pre-event logistics is monitoring the environment for warning signs. This is suggested by several crisis communication researchers (Veil et al., 2011; Austin et al., 2012; Freberg et al., 2013). This allows organizations to quickly learn what consumers are discussing and whether potential issues are arising (Veil et al., 2011). Social media is an excellent tool for this because organizations can almost limitlessly follow the conversations about them on platforms such as Twitter and online forums. Jacques (2009: 31) goes as far as to suggest that if companies do not monitor and engage social media they are basically thinking: "It's OK. We're going to outsource our reputation, and we're comfortable with our customers defining it for us."

2.4.4. Partner with the Public

The third guideline introduced by Veil et al. (2011) is to partner with the public. Their research claims that the public has the right to know about the risks they face. Thus,

organizations should give them as much information as necessary. In addition to this, organizations should also listen to the public because they can also provide essential information during a crisis. For example, photos and videos taken by consumers can be used by organizations to assess the situation. Therefore, the public can also be seen as a resource and not just a burden in a crisis situation.

2.4.5. Understand the Audience

The next step states that organizations should listen to the public's concerns and understand the audience. This resonates with the Seeger (2006: 239) quotation earlier in this paper stating that "the public's perception is its reality." Therefore, organizations should not ignore the public's perception even if it was not accurate, because it is the perception based on which the public needs to be addressed. In addition, that perception reflects the public's concerns (Benoit, 1997). This is another reason why organizations should monitor social media and comments on news websites.

It is important that the organization speaks the same language as the audience on social media. Therefore, to understand the audience and their way of communication, organizations should use social networks also before a potential crisis (Veil et al., 2011). It could be suggested that organizations should use a conversational voice on social media instead of just releasing official corporate statements.

2.4.6. Communicate with Honesty, Candor, and Openness

The guidelines introduced by Veil et al. (2011) suggest that crisis communicators should communicate with honesty, candor, and openness. According to both them and Stephens and Malone (2009), communicating with those qualities makes the public less likely to turn to less-credible, third-party sources for information. However, companies should also be honest if they do not have information about something, rather than coming up with false information (Veil et al., 2011).

In addition, Veil et al. (2011) claim that in an effort to seek information about a crisis, people often speak to each other on social media rather than navigate directly to a corporate website. Due to this, companies should also be present on social media as their stakeholders are using these platforms too.

Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) suggest that having a blog assures the public that an organization is not trying to avoid conversation about a crisis. Ten years later, the same could also apply to social networking channels in which many organizations act these days.

2.4.7. Collaborate and Cooperate with Credible Sources

This guideline was already covered in the earlier parts of this paper. Several authors (e.g. Veil et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2012) suggest that organizations should identify social media opinion leaders that could act as allies in a crisis situation and cooperate with them.

2.4.8. Meet the Needs of the Media and Remain Accessible

There is still a significant number of people who either do not actively use social networking channels or consider traditional media more reliable. Therefore, it is important that crisis communication uses both channels (Veil et al., 2011; Austin et al., 2012). That means that organizations should have a spokesperson and be always available to journalists who are covering the crisis in traditional media.

2.4.9. Communicate with Compassion, Concern, and Empathy

Not only should organizations communicate with honesty and openness, but it is suggested that they should also include compassion, concern, and empathy in their crisis communication. According to Veil et al. (2011), in addition to the need for information, crises also create a need for human conversation and compassion. Because social media connects people to others in a personal manner, it creates opportunities also for organizations to be more “human”. Several authors suggest that companies should communicate with empathy, passion, proficiency, and knowledge in the new media (e.g. Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Solis, 2009; Veil et al., 2011).

Veil et al. (2011) suggest that companies can speak directly without filtering to their stakeholders through blogs or other direct-to-audience social platforms. This also applies to newer and more current social networking channels such as Facebook,

Twitter, and Instagram. On the other hand, traditional media usually filters out the human voice and turns it into hard news (Veil et al., 2011).

2.4.10. Accept Uncertainty and Ambiguity

It is important for companies to accept a certain level of uncertainty which is always present in a crisis situation, and publish small and cautious, but at the same time truthful statements regularly as they get more information (Veil et al., 2011). This is something that Twitter is very useful for as it is based on short messages or “tweets” which consist of a maximum of 140 characters. This is supported by Johnson (2009: 24) who says that frequent updates provide organizations with “an excellent way to send out a brief, crisp message that will satiate whoever may be waiting for an answer, even though it may not illustrate the whole picture”.

2.4.11. Provide Messages of Self-efficacy

According to Seeger (2006), a sense of control in an uncertain situation can be restored by messages of self-efficacy. This means that the crisis communicators should encourage people to help in different ways such as volunteering. Sutton et al. (2008) found that individuals feel a need to contribute during a crisis and that contributing helps them to cope with the situation. This, however, is not particularly useful for corporate crises.

2.4.12. Acknowledge and Account for Cultural Differences

The last point is an addition that Veil et al. (2011) suggest for NCFPD’s guidelines. They say that new media such as social networking channels are widely fragmented and people tend to be connected with people with similar interests and social backgrounds. This means that organizations should use several different channels to reach all the different groups of people that they need to reach. However, this does not require a huge effort on social media because of the digital nature of it and the lack of middlemen such as journalists (Veil et al., 2011). Despite it being quite easy to reach these different audiences, it can be recommended that the different channels are identified already before a crisis (Freberg et al, 2013).

2.5. Crisis Communication through Social Networking Channels

2.5.1. Introduction to Social Networking Channels

Freberg (2012) claims that the emergence of social media is challenging the contemporary public relations practice and, particularly, crisis communication. This is partially due to the instant nature of social media and the number of people participating in it. For example, Facebook currently has over 1.7 billion users, Twitter over 300 million, and the Chinese equivalent of those two, Sina Weibo, over 280 million users (Statista, 2016).

Social media itself consists of countless different platforms and changes constantly. Some forms of social media are blogs, micro-blogs, forums, photo and video sharing platforms, wikis, social bookmarking, and social networking (Aula, 2010). The most notable services include the above-mentioned services and platforms such as YouTube, WordPress, Instagram, LinkedIn and Snapchat.

According to Wright and Hinson (2009) cited in Austin et al. (2012: 189), "Social media are digital tools and applications that facilitate interactive communication and content exchange among and between audiences and organizations". It is also characterized by everyone having the possibility to produce content. Unlike with traditional media, consumers of information can also simultaneously become sources of information (Aula, 2010; Veil et al., 2011).

Research conducted by Palen et al. (2007) shows that onsite and online crisis response activities are becoming increasingly concurrent and intertwined (Schultz et al., 2010; Veil et al., 2011). While this was true already in 2007, one can assume the concurrent and connected nature of crisis communication has become even stronger within the last ten years due to a growing number and popularity of different social networking channels such as Facebook and Twitter. For example, back in October 2007, Facebook only had 50 million active users and reached 900 million active users just five years later in March 2012 (Yahoo Finance, 2012).

A similar argument can also be made about an article by Lenhart et al. (2010) in which they claimed that these days individuals are increasingly using microblogging

and social networking sites instead of traditional blogs. Although this was stated in 2010, it is safe to say that this development has been going further because of the growing number of people using various social media channels, such as Facebook.

With social media, it is possible for organization to communicate directly with the audience without the involvement of journalists. This creates an interesting opportunity for corporate crisis communicators, because Austin et al. (2012) found out in their study, that participants were less likely to seek out more information about a crisis when the initial information came directly from the organization, rather than from a third party. However, this statement should be researched further, because Austin et al.'s study was done with only college students from one university, thus the test group was very limited and homogenic.

2.5.2. Social Media and Crisis Communication

Social media can be used in crisis communication “to educate the public regarding risks, encourage visible support of an organization or a cause, and establish a venue for open dialogue online” (Veil et al., 2011: 113). Social media makes it easier to introduce discussion during a crisis, and this could alleviate damages. In addition, it is often the timeliest platform for crisis communication with a wide reach. (Veil et al., 2011; Wang, 2016).

Social media allows organizations to be more immediate in their responses and enables them to interact better with their stakeholders both during a crisis, and outside crisis situations. This can be seen both as an opportunity and a challenge, because crises have a tendency to evolve faster and take less predictable turns online (Schultz et al., 2010; Austin et al., 2012). However, this cannot be a reason for an organization to stay away from social media because the crises will continue to develop in social media, whether or not the organization is present there because that is where many stakeholders are.

Research suggests that there are a few key reasons why people use social media during crises. The first two reasons, as suggested by Sutton et al. (2008) and Austin et al. (2012), are that people use social media to check in with people they know and to

get insider information. Traditional media, on the other hand, is used to find general information about the situation. Based on this, one could argue that organizations should aim to provide some additional value on their social media accounts compared to traditional media because by doing that, they can satisfy people's want for insider information and attract them to follow their accounts.

In addition, Austin et al. (2012) suggest that audiences use social media more during crises because they feel that information on social media is unfiltered and up-to-date. However, one could make the argument that no information is unfiltered, even though it may not come from the mass media. Information is always filtered because it is produced by people. Therefore, factors, like their personal view of the situation, affect what they produce, whether consciously or not. They also argue that another reason for increased social media use is that it provides information that cannot be found elsewhere.

Johnson and Kaye (2010) have made another interesting finding in their research from crisis communicators' point of view. According to them, blog users both list blogs as their most credible source of information and also perceive the blog more credible the more they have been reading it. This is interesting, because the same could be true for other social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter. Thus, the more people get exposed to a certain page or author, the more likely they are to believe them. This could be seen as another reason for organizations to be active on social media also before a crisis. This is also supported by Freberg et al (2013).

There are, however, some negative sides and challenges related to social media too. As noted by Aula (2010), the information posted on social media by different contributors is usually unverified. This can lead to a growing risk of reputation threats. Even though there is this negative side, added with concerns of hackers, technology failure, and potential to spread misinformation very quickly, organizations should still utilize social media. This is because the stakeholders will use it regardless of the organization. Thus, it is better to be there and stay in relative control, than not be there and not know what people are talking about (Veil et al., 2011). However, Aula (2010) argues that it is virtually impossible for organizations to control the conversations. Even

if this was true, it could be better to at least try to affect the conversations and know what people are discussing about instead of ignoring social media.

Aula (2010) also suggests that social media may grow the expectations towards an organization related to issues such as ethical business operations and transparency. And when it comes to ethical business operations, he claims that due to the nature of social media in which stakeholders can interact with each other and the organizations, it is not enough for organizations to just look good, instead, they have to be good. This, of course, is not necessarily a negative thing.

Overall, even though social media is a cost-efficient way to find information and to reach large numbers of stakeholders, it is not a solution to every problem, certainly not on its own. The content that is published through social networking channels still needs to be empathic, truthful, and conversational for it to be effective (Veil et al., 2011). After all, social is merely a tool that can help organizations and their crisis communicators when they follow the best practices of crisis communication.

2.6. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework given in Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between key stakeholders and the main points covered in this paper.

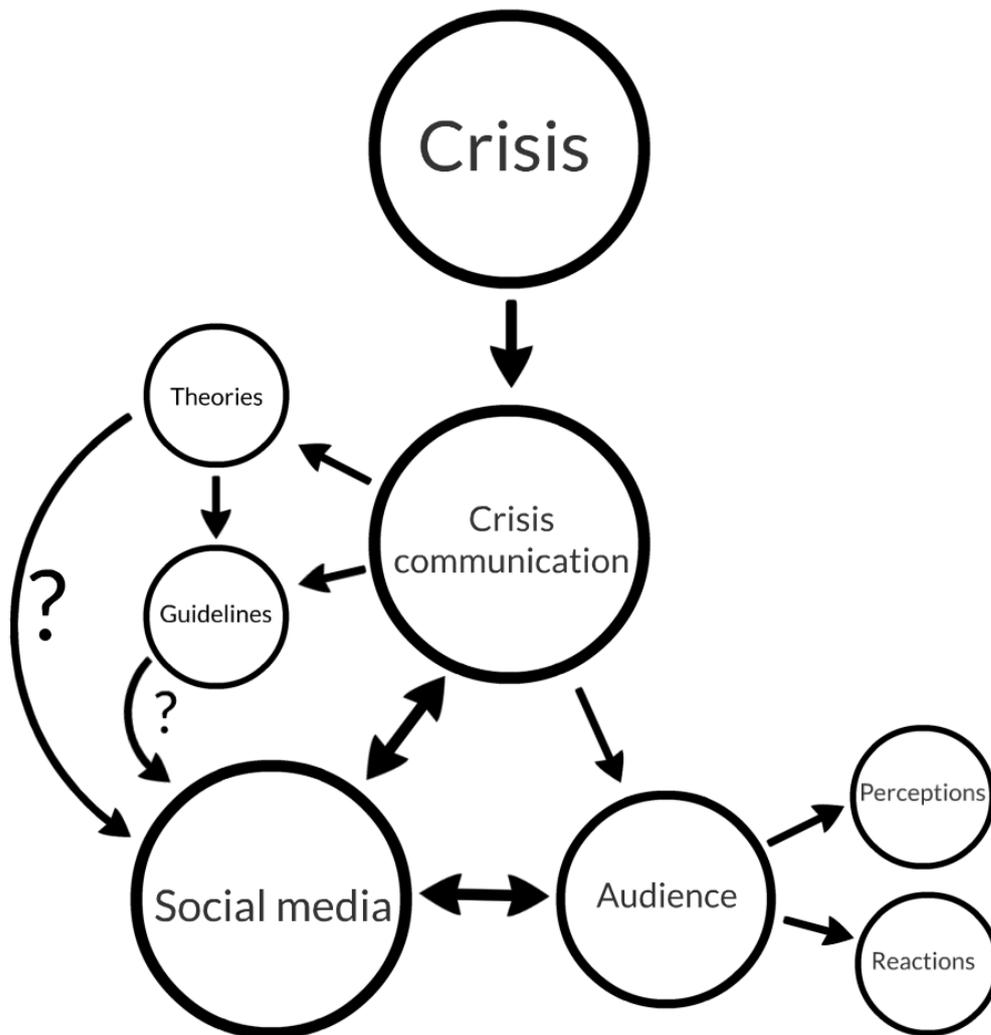


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

As the figure shows, a crisis – or a potential crisis is always needed for crisis communication. Crisis communication, on the other hand, is related to many different factors. This paper will focus particularly on the relationship between existing crisis communication theories and social media to find out if these theories are useful also when communicating via social media platforms. Furthermore, the audience is an important factor as the communication is aimed towards them to affect their reactions and perceptions.

3. DATA & METHODOLOGY

3.1. Qualitative Method: Interviews

The method chosen for this study was qualitative interviews. This method was selected because the study aims to find out, how, if in any way, the current views of corporate communication professionals differ from the existing research and the key theories of crisis communication.

Three interviews with corporate communication professionals were conducted for this study in February and March 2017. All three interviews were conducted face to face in Finnish due to it being the mother tongue and primary working language of all respondents. The interviews were recorded and lasted for 37, 47, and 64 minutes.

The topic of the interviews was given to the interviewees when requesting an interview, but the pre-planned interview questions were not revealed to them before the interview. In addition to the pre-planned questions, the interviewees were encouraged to elaborate on the themes of the interview and, in the end, to add anything that they found important to the topic that was missing from the initial questions.

3.1.1. How and why the interviewees were chosen

The interviewees were chosen by searching for communications offices in Finland on Google. After finding relevant offices, LinkedIn was used to determine, which employee in the office has the most relevant experience for the theme of the study. After that, emails were sent to the potential respondents and interviews were scheduled. In one case, the initially requested person suggested that another employee in his office is more suitable for this topic. This person was then approached and agreed to an interview.

Communications offices were chosen to act as the target audience for the interview requests for two main reasons. Firstly, employees of communications offices work as consultants and therefore, have worked for multiple organizations and in numerous different cases. That leads to them having a diverse experience that has accumulated from different situations.

Secondly, corporate communication is a relatively small field in Finland and thus, only the biggest companies have dedicated communications departments. Contacting small communications offices and identifying the right persons in them is significantly easier than trying to find the right people from big corporations.

3.1.2. Background of the interviewees

The respondents were promised anonymity and thus, they will be referred to as the Interviewee A, Interviewee B, and Interviewee C in the paper. Moreover, only basic background information will be provided in the paper, to both protect their anonymity and because it is not relevant for the study. To protect their anonymity further, they will not be individualized in the following background description.

All interviewees work as corporate communication consultants in Finnish communications offices. Two work in a national office, whereas one works in an office that is part of an international corporation. All of them have extensive experience of crisis communication working for numerous clients. One has worked most of their career as a consultant, one has background as a journalist, and one has previously worked for international Finnish corporations that are listed in the Helsinki stock exchange. All interviewees have more than 10 years of corporate communication experience.

4. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

4.1. The Effect of Social Media on Crisis Communication

The interviewees were asked, how they think the emergence of social media has changed crisis communication, if at all. In addition, they were asked if they see the change as an opportunity or as a threat. The answers of the interviewees varied significantly for this question.

Interviewee A said that the emergence of social media has affected openness which is these days one of the biggest consumer trends. Due to social media, she claimed that companies get caught for lying easily and therefore, it is more important than ever for them to be honest. This can be brought back to what Aula (2010) suggested, that companies need to actually be good instead of just looking good in the era of Web 2.0. Interviewee A also said that consumers will monitor if the company improves their actions after a crisis and will react more negatively if a similar crisis occurs again. This is in line with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and relates to the crisis history part of it where crisis history can act as an intensifying factor.

Interviewee B thought that social media has not changed crisis communication very much. He said that it has brought some crises that are specific for social media, but mostly affects only the need for monitoring and speed. According to him, social media acts as an intensifying factor in crises because it allows them to develop much faster. It could be argued that just the changes to monitoring and the intensifying nature of social media could be considered as significant changes to crisis communication.

Interviewee C focused mostly on the opportunities and challenges that social media provides crisis communicators with but she did mention the increase of openness that also interviewee A mentioned.

All respondents saw social media as both an opportunity and a threat for crisis communication. Both interviewee A and C mentioned the increased openness as a mostly positive change. Interviewee C highlighted the opportunity of communicating directly with stakeholders, without the filtering of traditional media, that social media provides crisis communicators with. This is supported by earlier research conducted

by Veil et al. (2011). Interviewees B and C also mentioned that frequent posts on Twitter during a crisis may decrease the amount of phone calls from journalists and other stakeholders during the situation and consequently allow crisis communicators to focus more on the crisis itself.

On the other hand, interviewee C said that openness and the interactive nature of social media can also be a challenge for companies. According to her, the reason for this could be that people's mentality has not changed enough for social media yet. That means that people are not ready to accept feedback and sometimes negative comments which are inevitable in different social media channels.

Another challenge which was highlighted by interviewee A is that it is easier than ever to create untruthful news and spread them effectively. As interviewee C mentioned, individual social media users are not affected by basic principles of journalism such as objectivity. Therefore, social media provides individuals with a platform for spreading negative rumors about companies which especially people who do not like that company may believe and share. Organizations need to allocate resources to find out if the rumors are true and then convince the consumers with facts to believe them rather than the people spreading those rumors.

4.2. General Guidelines for Crisis Communication on Social Media

Regarding the general guidelines for crisis communication, the interviewees were asked if they have some general guidelines that they would give a client regardless of the exact type of the crisis. The answers varied for this question as well, but some similarities could be found.

All of the interviewees recommended to start with analyzing the situation, what has happened and also, how the situation might develop. All of them also mentioned that when the situation arises, the first thing to do is to take a deep breath and to try to push emotions to the side. Interviewees B and C said that, for various reasons, the issue is often that the company representatives are annoyed by the situation itself; they may think that the audience is wrong about the situation and they usually have to rearrange

their calendar because of it. Therefore, they may make hasty decisions influenced by their emotions. This is one reason for why it is often good to use a consultant in a crisis situation because that person does not have a personal relationship with the situation.

In addition, all interviewees had some other ideas. Interviewee A emphasized the importance of company representatives not commenting on the situation anonymously in social media. Sometimes there could be a temptation to comment on it as a normal consumer, but doing this, companies face both an ethical dilemma and a risk of it backfiring if they get caught for doing that. She also said, that companies should not react to every minor social media crisis but rather monitor them and see if they catch attention of the press. They could prepare a holding statement in advance in case the crisis does develop into a serious one.

Interviewees B and C both highlighted the importance of speed. Interviewee B said that many crises can be blocked quickly before they gather major attention if they are properly monitored. Interviewee C added that in the era of Internet and social media, crisis communicators cannot afford to wait for the evening news or next morning's newspapers because situations develop much faster in social media channels. Therefore, crisis communicators do not have traditional office hours anymore but rather, they have to be ready to react to situations around the clock and also on weekends.

Interviewee B said that many communicators and managers underestimate the importance of Twitter in crisis communication because in Finland, there are relatively few active users compared to for example Facebook. However, he said that almost all Finnish journalists are on Twitter and therefore, it should not be underestimated in crisis communication.

4.3. Different Social Media Channels in Crisis Communication

For this theme, the interviewees were first asked how they perceive the role of different social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs in crisis communication. In addition, they were asked if they think that the crisis type affects the choice of channels used. For this question, crisis types were adopted from Coombs

(2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory and were therefore victim crises, accidental crises, and intentional crises.

The channels mentioned by the interviewees were Twitter, Facebook, blogs, Snapchat, Facebook Live, Periscope, and WhatsApp. All interviewees mentioned Twitter and Facebook, whereas the others were mentioned by one or two of them.

Regarding Twitter, interviewees B and C said that it is a suitable tool for crisis communication and interviewee C also listed it as the number one crisis communication platform on social media. According to them, Twitter excels in quick and frequent sharing of information. Interviewee B also mentioned that social media crises often start from Twitter and therefore, it is important to monitor Twitter constantly. Interviewee A highlighted that monitoring is different on Twitter compared to Facebook and it is important for companies to identify the key hashtags for their company and industry. Although interviewees B and C said that Twitter is an excellent tool, interviewee C noted that it is not the best tool for reaching big masses due to the limited number of users there.

Facebook was described by interviewee C as the one channel that has stabilized its position as the platform for the masses. Almost everyone is there and therefore, it is the channel for reaching a big and diverse audience. Interviewee A mentioned that monitoring Facebook can be easier than monitoring Twitter because the discussions often happen on the company's Facebook page. However, there is also a possibility that a discussion leading to a crisis develops in a closed Facebook group which the company does not know about and most likely does not have access to. Interviewee C also mentioned the potential of a crisis leading to negative public reviews on Facebook. She also said that Facebook can be a merciless platform because everyone can comment there and sometimes discussions can escalate among unsatisfied consumers. On the other hand, she said that it also encourages openness which is a positive factor.

Company blogs were another major platform mentioned by interviewees B and C. They both said that they can be an effective method for communicating with the stakeholders and they allow companies to communicate in a more relaxed way than

through the traditional media. Interviewee B said that it is sometimes difficult to write about crisis situations as a whole on Twitter because each Twitter update or “tweet” is limited to only 140 characters. Therefore, it can be useful for a company representative to write a blog post on the company website and then share it on social media. He suggested that a relaxed blog post by the CEO can be much more effective than an official company statement.

The last platform category mentioned by both interviewee B and C was live streaming services such as Periscope and Facebook Live. According to interviewee B, in some cases, streaming a live video from the crisis site can help shoot down false rumors. Interviewee C also said that press conferences are these days often live streamed either by the journalists or the company itself. Therefore, it could be argued that company representatives need to think about the target audience more than before because they are not only speaking to the journalists who filter the information, but also directly to a bigger audience. In addition, interviewee B likened Snapchat to live streaming services because it could also be used similarly to shoot down false rumors in real time.

Regarding the crisis type and its effect on the channels used, all interviewees thought that it is not very important in that regard. They said that the most important factor defining the channels that are used, is identifying the channels where the audience is present. If, for example the audience is discussing the situation only on Twitter, there is no point to address it on Facebook, but rather only on Twitter.

Interviewee B elaborated on the question more than other respondents and also briefly discussed the effect of crisis types. According to him, if the crisis belongs to the victim cluster, the company has to evaluate if they need to or should react to it at all. Moreover, he said that if the crisis belongs to the preventable or accidental cluster, then the company must act on it and communicate about it. In accidental crisis, he suggested that companies should always apologize and admit the mistake. This is in line with what Claeys et al. (2010) found out in their study. Interviewee B also said about the importance of proper apology:

No crisis is that bad, that it could not be made even worse with bad communication (translated from Finnish by the author).

Mikään kriisi ei ole niin huono tai paha, ettei sitä huonolla viestinnällä voisi vielä huonontaa tai pahentaa (original quotation in Finnish).

4.4. Communicating Uncertainty

Regarding uncertainty that is often present in crisis situations and communicating it to the audience, the interviewees were asked, how they would communicate uncertainty to the stakeholders.

All interviewees agreed that uncertainty should be communicated to the stakeholders during a crisis. Interviewee A said that an organization should always issue a holding statement about the situation as soon as possible and tell the stakeholders what they know, what they do not know, what actions they are taking to clarify the situation, and when they will inform them again. She also said that one has to be careful in communicating uncertainty, so that the organization does not make false accusations due to the lack of knowledge.

Interviewee B said that it is fair towards the stakeholders and acceptable to tell the stakeholders that the company does not know yet. He also said that it is hardly possible to build a reputation that the organization knows everything. This is because if the organization claims to know everything, then the question will be, why do you not tell us. This can be brought back to Aula's (2010) research and statement that in the era of Web 2.0, it is not enough for companies to look good, but instead, they need to be good.

Interviewee C mentioned that:

Even silence is a message (translated from Finnish by the author).

Hiljaisuuskinhan on viesti (original quotation in Finnish).

She also said that the empty space for messages is always filled with something, whether it is rumors posted by others or the company messaging uncertainty. Therefore, it can be argued that it is much better for a company to message uncertainty rather than other contributors filling the space with rumors.

4.5. The Relationship Between Social and Traditional Media

For this theme, the interviewees were asked, how they think that companies should combine social and traditional media, if at all. The answers varied significantly and it seems that either they had not thought about the issue between those two from the same perspective as Veil et al. (2011) and Austin et al. (2012), or they just did not find the same things important.

Interviewee A said that it depends both on the size of the organization and the size of the crisis. She argued that if the crisis is just a minor social media based crisis, then it can be addressed solely on social media. This makes sense because not all social media crises make it to the traditional media, especially if they are addressed early.

Interviewee B on the other hand, said that an emphasis on communication on Twitter also serves the traditional media. As mentioned before, he said that almost all reporters are on Twitter and many of them are likely to follow the situation also there. Therefore, the organization can decrease the amount of phone calls from journalists significantly by communicating effectively on social media, and indeed on Twitter.

Interviewee C commented mostly on the role and importance of traditional media these days. She suggested that as anyone can say anything on social media nowadays, journalists should be seen as an ally of the organization. This is because they follow the key principles of journalism such as objectivity, and are often seen as credible sources by the attendance. Therefore, good cooperation with the traditional media can lead to large benefits for both the company and the reporter. This is supported by Veil et al. (2011) and Austin et al. (2012) who suggest that some people trust the traditional media more than what they read on social media.

4.6. Utilizing Social Media Opinion Leaders in Crisis Communication

Both Veil et al. (2011) and Liu et al. (2012) suggest that social media opinion leaders could act as allies in a crisis situation. Therefore, this was also asked from each of the interviewees to find out the opinions of professionals on this rather interesting possibility. Interestingly, all three professionals that were interviewed for this paper considered it unfeasible.

All of the interviewees raised the ethical issue of using somebody who is paid by the company as an ally. Interviewee A said that, depending on the crisis, it could maybe be possible if there had been cooperation between the two parties in the past. However, she said that there is always the possibility that the opinion leader tells in social media that this company tried to get them to tell this. This would of course be a public relations catastrophe for the organization in a crisis.

Interviewee B considered it unconvincing because effectively, it is a paid opinion. He suggested in the event of a reputation crisis, a social media opinion leader who has a good relationship with the company, might even say something without direct instruction. However, he highlighted that at that point that person will have to make clear that they are linked with the company. He said that the best situation is, if the fans of the brand defend the company in a crisis situation because those are the most credible people. He also said that those people could be encouraged to do that as long as money does not change hands.

Interviewee C also highlighted the importance of money not changing hands. She admitted that the idea sounded interesting, but ultimately turned it down due to ethical concerns. She said that brand ambassadors can be important outside a crisis situation though, because they can be used to build a so-called reputation buffer, which can protect the company from the negative effects of a crisis.

Alongside the ethical issue, the interviewees mentioned the risk of getting caught for using a social media opinion leader to affect the public opinion. If this was to

happen, it could lead to a much bigger crisis than the original crisis that the organization faced.

4.7. Other Thoughts from the Interviewees

As mentioned earlier, the interviewees were also encouraged to add anything that they considered important regarding social media and crisis communication. Every interviewee had something to add and these additions are discussed below.

Interviewee A made suggestions regarding the overall management of a crisis. She said that when the situation arises, if the company has communication professionals, they should be invited to think about the situation immediately. If this is not the case, then the company should contact consultants for help. This is important because, a crisis that is managed well, can also improve the organization's reputation. She also said that when preparing a crisis communication guide for a company, social media has to be mentioned separately because of its growing importance.

Interviewee B said that, when used correctly, social media can be a useful tool for protecting organizations from a crisis. He mentioned the example of Helsinki Public Works Department. They have nearly 20,000 Twitter followers and they anticipate crises for example in the event of a heavy snowfall by tweeting about potential traffic issues in a relaxed way in advance. By doing this, they are already preparing people for possible problems and reduce the likelihood of people complaining about the situation by reassuring them that they are aware of the issues and are working on them.

Interviewee C thought that the borderline between advertisers and communication professionals is becoming less perceptible. She said that while communication professionals have always needed to think about how the message will be understood and potential misunderstandings, this is becoming increasingly important for advertisers as well. This is because in the case of someone being upset by an ad or considering it insulting, there now exists a platform for sharing those feeling effectively with the whole world. She also mentioned that social media provides crisis

communicators with a good platform for past-crisis communication and rebuilding of reputation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1. Main Findings

Summarizing the whole paper and the key findings, it is good to first come back to the research questions for this paper. They were:

1. How has the introduction of different social networking channels changed corporate crisis communication?
2. How should companies utilize social networking channels in their crisis communication?
3. How do general guidelines of crisis communication apply to communication through social networking channels?

Both the research for the literature review and the interview questions to the interviewees were based around these three questions. Regarding the first question, which asks how the emergence of social media has changed corporate crisis communication, there were three key points that were highlighted by multiple interviewees and existing research. These three key factors were the growths in speed and openness, and the increasing monitoring possibilities brought to the industry by social media.

Social media has changed the speed at which crises sometimes develop and therefore, it demands that crisis communicators monitor social media channels constantly and are always ready to respond quickly. On the other hand, social media itself and numerous tools developed by analytics companies provide communicators and managers with excellent opportunities for constantly monitoring the discussion. Because of social media, people are more connected with each other than ever before, and therefore, it is crucial that companies are open and honest about their actions, because there is always someone who will discover the truth, one way or another.

The second question asked, how companies should utilize social media in their crisis communication. This was covered in depth in the literature review with National Center for Food Protection and Defense (NCFPD) guidelines providing useful insight

to this. In addition, it was also asked from the interviewees who each are communication consultants.

To summarize this, a few key points arose from the research. These were using social media already before a crisis arises, using Twitter to communicate quickly and to help reporters, and addressing crises in the channel that the audience is discussing them in. It was highlighted in the research that companies must be active in social media before a crisis in order to be effective there during one. Otherwise, they will not be able to reach their audience through different social media channels because they will not have any followers.

Twitter was mentioned by all interviewees as a good tool for crisis communication because it allows the communicator to send short and frequent messages as the situation develops, and because almost all reporters are using it. One of the interviewees said that the importance of it should not be underestimated even though the number of users is not as high as for services like Facebook and Instagram.

The interviewees mentioned that the channel for crisis communication should be picked based on where the audience is discussing it. All of them thought that this consideration is more important than the type of the crisis when choosing the channels.

The third research question asked, how well do the general guidelines of crisis communication work on social media. This question is important at the moment, because crisis communication on social media is a relatively new phenomenon and it has not yet been extensively researched. Based on the research for this paper, the guidelines that have been published in key theories such as the Situation Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007), can often be adapted to social media as well. Therefore, guidelines such as, having a crisis communication plan in advance, using strategies such as rebuild strategies, and dividing crises into crisis clusters, are still relevant. Nevertheless, communicators must be aware of the special characteristics of social media, e.g. the growing demand for openness and honesty, and the faster nature of it.

5.2. Implications for International Business

Although the study was based around interviews of Finnish corporate communication professionals, it has some implications for international business. The majority of the literature that was consulted for this study was published outside Finland and therefore was relevant for many markets. Due to globalization and Finland being a relatively similar market to other western countries, this study can be useful for communicators and managers at least in the western world. Of course, the recommendations about the use of different channels should be adapted to the popular social media platforms in each country because these may vary from country to country, especially outside the western world.

5.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

There are certain limitations to this study. Firstly, the number of expert interviews conducted for the study was only three and therefore, the results cannot be generalized. In addition, all interviewees work in Finland and hence, the results could be very different elsewhere, especially outside the western business world.

At the moment, apart from case studies, there is a very limited amount of research available on social media's effect on corporate crisis communication. Therefore, further research should be conducted on the topic to create theories and frameworks for crisis communication in social media channels. The need for this is further supported by the growing popularity of different social media channels around the world and their constant evolution.

In addition, most crisis communication research seems to assume that the crisis is related to only one market. However, many crises especially in big multinational corporations, are situations that need to be addressed around the world. Therefore, further research could be conducted on how to effectively manage a crisis that affects several markets that the company is present at.

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7. Appendix

7.1. Interview Questions

The following questions were asked from all interviewees. The interviews were conducted in Finnish; thus, the questions are presented both in English and Finnish.

1. Tilanteet tulevat oletettavasti nopeasti, onko sinulla jotain selkeitä ohjeita valmiina tilanteen varalle? Muokkaatko ne asiakkaan mukaan?
 - a. Onko osa ohjeista spesifejä sosiaalista mediaa varten?
 - b. Millaisia ohjeita?
2. Miten sinun mielestäsi sosiaalinen media on vaikuttanut yritysten kriisiviestintään? Onko kriisiviestinnän luonne muuttunut? Näetkö muutoksen uhkana vai mahdollisuutena?
3. Miten vertailisit eri kanavia kriisiviestinnän näkökulmasta? Erot esimerkiksi Facebookin, Twitterin, blogien, Instagramin tms. välillä?
4. Miten (jos jotenkin) yritysten pitäisi yhdistää sosiaalista ja perinteistä mediaa kriisiviestinnässään? Riittääkö vain toisen hallinta nykyään?
5. Vaikuttaako kriisityyppi eri kanavien käyttämiseen (tahallinen/tahaton/muun tahon aiheuttama)?
6. Suositujen sosiaalisen median persoonien hyödyntäminen kriisiviestinnässä ns. liittolaisena?
7. Epävarmuuden viestintä tilanteen eläessä?

The following part has been translated by the author.

1. As the situations usually arise quickly, do you have some guidelines ready in case something comes up? Do you customize them for each customer?
 - a. Are some of the guidelines specifically for social media?
 - b. What kind of guidelines do you have?
2. How has social media affected corporate crisis communication in your opinion? Has the nature of crisis communication changed? Do you perceive this change as a threat or an opportunity?

3. How would you compare different social media channels from crisis communicators perspective? What are the differences between for example Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and Instagram?
4. How (if in some way) should a company combine social and traditional media in their crisis communication? Is it enough these days to know or use only one of those two?
5. Does the crisis type (intentional, accidental, victim) affect what channels are used?
6. Can popular social media persons be used as a so-called ally in a crisis?
7. How should uncertainty be communicated during a crisis?

