

Conference Paper

The Role of Public Relations in Crisis Communication Planning in Bahraini Organisations

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Abstract

In the age of globalisation, crisis management has grown to be essential for the sustainability of any organisation. Thus, this article aims to bring original qualitative data about the role of public relations in crisis communication planning in Bahraini organisations. The contribution of this article is that it is the first research that provides an in-depth analysis of the use of strategic crisis communication planning in governmental and private sectors in Bahrain. The researcher adapts an issue management theoretical framework to analyse the role of public relations in strategic communication planning. The article raises the question of the role of public relations in strategic crisis communication from the perspectives of public relations managers in Bahrain. The researcher conducted 19 in-depth e-interviews with public relations managers in public relations consultancies, governmental and private sectors in Bahrain. The research highlights the opportunities and challenges of the practice of strategic crisis communication planning in public relations departments. The article finds that the use of crisis communication planning should be improved and connected to public relations proactive communication strategies rather than reactive strategies in Bahraini organisations. In conclusion, the article offers an in-depth theoretical discussion and practical implications for the improvement of the role of public relations in strategic crisis communication planning in Bahrain.

Keywords: Public Relations, Strategic Communication Planning, Crisis Management, Issues Management, Proactive Communication

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1. Introduction

Crisis communication develops to be one of the significant areas in public relations scholarship. Coombs (2010a) stressed, "It is safe to say that crisis management has become the dominant topic in public relations research" (pp.61-62). Coombs (2014) defined crisis as "a perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important

expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental and economic issues, and which can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p.3). Crisis management has grown to be crucial for the sustainability of any organisation; therefore, it is significant to study the extent to which communication planning plays a role in crisis management in Bahrain. Heath (2010) explained that pre-crisis stage "should embrace concerns for prevention and preparation", while the crisis stage is "concerned with response: Process and content". The post-crisis phase gives "the opportunity for follow-up communication, perhaps, for instance, offering the lessons learned from the crisis that can reduce the likelihood of recurrence, mitigate it if it does, prevent recurrence, and prepare stakeholders for that event" (Heath, 2010, 8). Coombs (2010b) defined crisis communication as "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation. In pre-crisis, crisis communication revolves around collecting information about crisis risks, making decisions about how to manage potential crises, and training people who will be involved in the crisis management process" (Coombs, 2010b, 20). However, many organisations assigned pre-crisis management with planning operational procedures rather than developing proactive communication planning. This is stressed by Kádárová, Mihalčová, Kádár & Vida (2015) who argued that many crisis communication management plans have failed to address communication planning issues (p.1121). They suggested that "The contingency plans are in two parallel areas operational response and communications response" where "the operational response team is focusing on resolving the problem as quickly as possible" and "the communications team is responsible for informing the organizations key stakeholder groups to ensure their understanding and support can be maintained" (Kádárová, Mihalčová, Kádár & Vida, 2015, 1122).

2. Literature Review

Based on Grunig's excellence model (1992), public relations should be guided by strategic planning and should play a role in decision making through advising the CEO to improve their relationships with stakeholders. Claeys & Cauberghe (2012) explained that organisations in crisis face the challenge of reputational threats. Kádárová, Mihalčová, Kádár & Vida (2015) argued that "Companies are starting to focus on the proactive crisis management as one of the cornerstones of the crisis communication" (p.1119). They noted that "a strategy map of the crisis communication shows the achievement of corporate objective, which in times of crisis is the stability of the

company” (Kádárová, Mihalčová, Kádár & Vida, 2015, p.1122). Figure (1) suggests that crisis strategic plan should be based on coordination between management, operational and communication efforts.

Avery, Graham & Park (2016, p.74) claimed that “While crisis communication has received extensive scholarly attention over the past few decades, there is relatively little research that has addressed the level of crisis preparedness in public relations literature” (Avery, Lariscy, Kim & Hocke, 2010). Avery, Graham & Park (2016) stressed, “Prior to a crisis, and certainly during the early stages of a crisis or disaster, organisational preparation and strategic planning can reduce or limit the impact of the crisis”. (p.74). This goes along with Kitchin & Purcell’s (2017) argument that “A proactive approach has emerged from the literature; ‘Stealing Thunder’ allows an organisation to self-declare a crisis. The aim is to ensure the organisation’s reputation remains robust as the crisis response is determined already waiting to be implemented” (p. 662). Snoeijers & Poels (2017, p.65) claimed that “Following good practices in communication, when an organisation is the first to perceive an impending crisis, it has the advantage of having more time to gather information and to communicate proactively through organisational crisis communication” (Coombs, 2014; Williams, Bourgeois & Croyle, 1993).

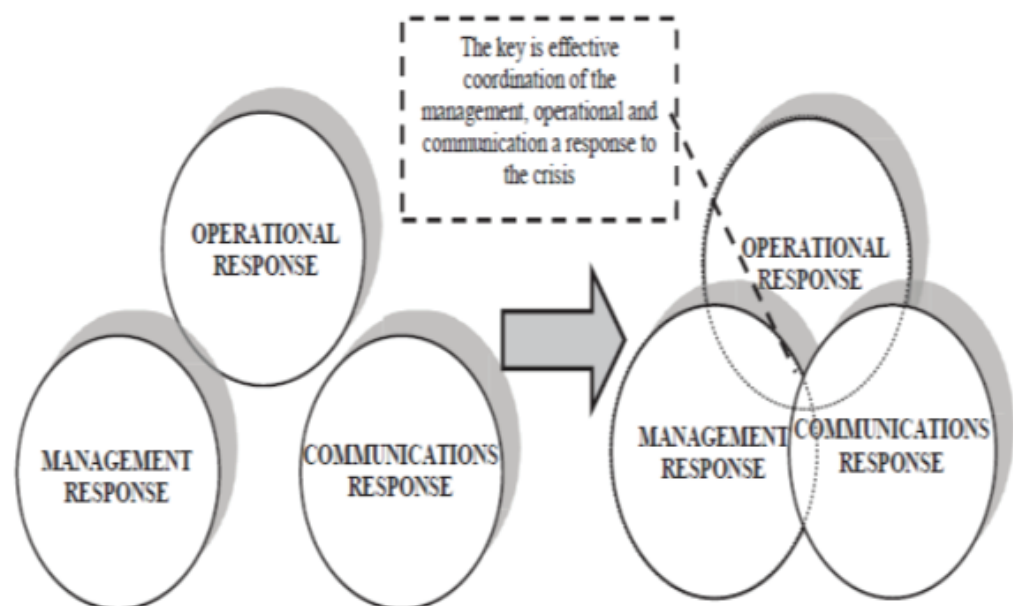


Figure 1: A strategy map based on coordination between management, operational and communication efforts (Mihalčová, Kádár & Vida, 2015, p. 1122).

Although Western literature emphasised the significance of proactive communication planning in crisis management, there is a lack of Arabic literature that focused on

the role of public relations at the issue management level. Most of the Arabic studies used case studies approach based on a quantitative methodology (i.e. Al-Ajami, 2011; Al- Mutairi, 2015; Al-Kaabi, 2014). Therefore, this paper aims to fill the gap in the literature through providing original qualitative data about the role of public relations in crisis management in Bahrain based on a proactive communication theoretical framework which will be discussed in the following section.

3. Theoretical Framework: Issues Management and Crisis Management

This research argues that crisis management starts from issues management. An & Cheng (2010) claimed, "Among the more dominant theoretical approaches in crisis communication research and practice, issues management theory (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer 2001) has received much attention" (p. 67). Heath (1997) defined issues management as the process that includes "the identification, monitoring, and analysis of trends in key publics' opinions that can mature into public policy and regulative or legislative constraint" (p. 6). Coombs (2010a) explained "Issues management is composed of efforts to identify and to affect the resolution of issues. An issue is a problem ready for resolution and typically involves policy decisions. The goal in issues management is to lessen the negative impact or to create a positive effect from an issue" (p. 54). Heath (2005) defined issues management as "a strategic set of functions used to reduce friction and increase harmony between organizations and their publics in the public policy arena" (p. 460). Coombs (2010a) explained that issues management and crisis management have a reciprocal relationship as issue can create a crisis or a crisis can create an issue (p. 55). The paper argues that crisis communication planning starts at the issues level as "clever organizations should identify the warning signs for the crisis and be prepared for various outcomes from the issues management effort" (Coombs, 2010a, p.55). Although PR practitioners can play a significant role in issues management, it is questionable the extent to which strategic communication planning is practiced in Bahraini organisations.

4. Methodology

In Western literature, Avery, Lariscy, Kim & Hocke's (2010) quantitative review of crisis communication research in public relations found that of published crisis studies, 47% focused on corporations and 26% on individuals. Only three of the 66 studies

in their sample had government agencies or departments as the contextual focus. These results illustrate the need for more research on crisis management in the public sector (cited in Avery, Graham & Park, 2016, 75). In Arabic literature, most of the studies used case studies approach using a quantitative methodology as discussed earlier. To overcome this gap in the literature, the researcher conducted nineteen long interviews that lasted 30 to 90 minutes using a purposeful sample of PR managers in governmental, private and PR consultancies in Bahrain. Some interviewees were selected by the researcher to serve the purpose of the research, while others were chosen using snowballing. Some interviews were conducted face-to-face while others were conducted by phone in the period from September 2017 to March 2018. Daymon & Holloway (2011) stressed that in-depth interviews are a trusted form of data collection in public relations research. For the reason of confidentiality, the participants preferred to keep their names anonymous. The contribution of this study is that it goes over the traditional case study approach (An & Cheng, 2010, p.81) to provide qualitative original data about the role of public relations in crisis communication planning in the cultural context of Bahrain.

5. Discussion of the Findings

5.1. The limited role of PR in strategic issues management

One of the challenging research questions is the extent to which public relations plays a role in issues management in Bahraini organisations. It is interesting that some PR managers were defensive when talking about issues management, "We don't have communication problems". A number of participants explained that research is not the responsibility of PR departments, "our role in PR is doing reports, while we have separate department for research". However, some participants showed awareness of the role of research in issues management, "market research is crucial to ensure that our programs satisfy the society's needs"; "We research the complaints and the effectiveness of our services and publics' satisfaction".

Several PR participants talked about the role of technology in crisis management at the issue stage: "We reply to the publics' complaints through the hot line"; "We conduct research through social media to know the society's needs". However, the use of social media was reactive to the issue, which raised the question of the strategic use of research in issues management. This might be attributed to the limited role of PR in taking decision regarding growing issues with the public: "We receive many

complaints from our public and we transfer them to the management". This goes along with Snoeijers & Poels' (2017) argument that "Communication professionals should have a better perception of a crisis, but they rarely find themselves in a position to have a substantial impact on the management decision to communicate during a crisis" (p.65). A number of interviewed PR participants attributed the reactive role of public relations in many governmental organisations in Bahrain to the top-management's lack of understanding of the strategic role of PR. In private PR agencies, PR participants stressed the important role of research, "We conduct research to measure the satisfaction of the public about our products and services"; "We conduct research and we have emergency plans that include public opinion and trust in the organisation". This might be attributed to the nature of PR private agencies that "are focused on helping organisations to improve in the performance of their duties, to anticipate the future and to respond in a timely manner and successfully to the demands of the environment" (Meintjes & Grobler, 2014; cited in Preciado-Hoyos, Nivia-Flórez & Correales-Rivas, 2017, p.407). However, most of the interviewed PR managers in PR agencies explained that research unit is separate from PR department in both governmental and private organisations.

5.2. The marginalised role of PR in crisis strategic communication planning

A number of studies recommended that proactive planning and issues management can reduce organisations' risks of crisis (Heath, 1998; Schwarz, 2008; Avery, Graham & Park, 2016). In their crisis management strategic plan, Kádárová, Mihalčová, Kádár & Vida (2015) stressed that "Effective crisis communication in the enterprise should be planned in advance and successfully managed, since every crisis has its life cycle, which can be influenced" (p. 119). In governmental organisations, the interviewed PR participants noted that the top-management conducted a strategic plan: "Strategic planning is important in our organisation relating it to Bahrain mission and vision to achieve strategic objectives". However, it is questionable the extent to which PR managers play a role in decision making at the crisis planning phase. Several PR managers explained, "There is a separate department for strategic planning in our organisation, while our role in PR is based on communication"; "Strategic planning is conducted by the top-management. It's not the responsibility of PR"; "We don't have strategic plan to manage crisis, but we depends on our experience in solving communication problems". In private sector, most of the participants explained that they do not have

crisis team and they stressed the role of top-management in strategic planning: “We are guided by the strategic plan arranged by the top-management”.

5.3. Limitation to reactive role of public relations in Bahraini organisations

Based on “stealing thunder” strategy, a number of participants claimed, “We have to deal with any problem quickly before media publish the news in a negative way”. However, some participants noted, “We don’t have proactive communication plans”; others argued that proactive plans are the top-management’s responsibility. A number of participants explained, “The top management guided a crisis management team constructed from all the departments”; “There’s a committee for crisis management in our organisation and there’s a representative from PR in this committee”.

It is noteworthy to highlight that most of the participants stressed the reactive role of public relations in crisis management: “Our role is to reply very quickly if any problem is raised through social media in cooperation with different departments”; “our role in PR is to restore the positive image of the organisation after crisis”; “Our role would start after the crisis in defending the organisation. We can manage any crisis without planning!”; “Our role is to “react” to any negative news and defend the reputation of the organisation”. This reactive role of public relations in crisis management in both governmental and private organisations in Bahrain marginalises the function of public relations to a mere technical tool in crisis management and impedes its strategic role in proactive crisis communication management. Therefore, it is crucial to highlight the key challenges in front of the role of public relations in strategic crisis communication planning in Bahrain in the following section.

5.4. Challenges of the role of public relations in strategic crisis communication

Several PR managers stated that corporate culture has been the most challenging barrier in front of the role of public relations in strategic crisis communication. They stressed, “We suffer from lack of information, few numbers of PR specialists, weak internal communication and the misunderstanding of PR role”. They explained that the culture of proactive communication planning is still limited in Bahraini organisations: “The management thinks that planning is costly and don’t understand the importance of planning, especially that we have many economic problems”; “There’s a lack

of understanding of PR role in crisis management and unclear crisis communication strategies". Some participants noted that routine procedures in governmental associations are one of the key challenges in front of crisis communication. They argued, "We need cooperation between all communication departments in governmental associations in Bahrain under the umbrella of national communication centre, besides arranging meetings with private sector's representatives"; "There's lack of budgets assigned to develop crisis communication planning in Bahrain".

Moreover, several participants highlighted the challenge of the limited role of PR in decision making: "Decision-making is central. PR doesn't play any role in decision making"; "In Bahraini miniseries PR's role is to execute the commands coming from the top-management". Some participants stressed that public relations suffers from "marginalisation its function" and "the negative stereotype and lack of credibility of PR in crisis communication". Besides, another participant in private sector claimed, "Management still doesn't understand the role of PR and marginalised it to a secondary, limited role in many organisations". Another PR manager emphasised, "The management still thinks that PR depends on communication skills rather than specialised qualification".

Furthermore, most of the participants explained that technology is one of the recent challenges of the role of public relations in proactive crisis communication, "Our challenge in PR is in updating our communication strategies with rapid technological developments"; "More training is needed to cope with communication technology". Some participants stressed the timing challenge when the crisis occurred: "It's challenging to publish the news from our perspective before others add rumours to the news. The challenge is to make strategic decision under the pressure of crisis". This goes along with thunder stealing strategy that stressed that "when an organization is the first to perceive an impending crisis, it has the advantage of having more time to gather information and to communicate proactively through organizational crisis communication" (cited in Snoeijers & Poels, 2017, p.65; Coombs, 2014; Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993).

5.5. Opportunities to develop crisis communication planning

Based on the interviews, PR managers highlighted a number of opportunities to improve the strategic role of public relations in crisis planning in Bahrain. To start with, several participants stressed the significance of improving the understanding of PR strategic role: "Our opportunities start when the top-management believes in the role of PR in strategic crisis communication management"; "The role of PR would be

enhanced when PR is given the chance to participate in decision making". Moreover, a number of participants explained that social media facilitated new opportunity in crisis communication in Bahrain as it helps to manage communication at the issue level: "Now it's easier to predict the crisis before happening because of the power of social media"; "Social media makes communication much easier with different publics and entities". They recommended constructing "governmental crisis team that should go through intensive constant training in crisis management".

Furthermore, conducting research plays a significant role in proactive crisis planning: "PR should develop research to develop its strategic communication role". To achieve that, both education and training are significant in crisis communication planning: "PR participants should undergo extensive training in crisis communication management". This can be achieved when corporate culture supports the role of PR in strategic communication planning. Another participant argued, "We can develop our practice through developing the strategic role of PR based on the young educated graduates". This process is based on "merging young graduates with the experience of old PR employees". This goes along with Snoeijers & Poels's (2017) argument that "the difference between a communication degree and additional training needs to be established so that organisations can benefit from more effective training programmes" (p.73).

6. Conclusion

The contribution of this paper is that it is the first paper that highlights the role of public relations in strategic crisis communication planning. One of the key theoretical findings is the importance of developing public relations research in the Arab cultural context within the theoretical framework of issues management. Although the interviewed PR participants showed awareness of the role of public relations in crisis management, public relations was limited to reactive technical function. According to Grunig's (1992) excellence theory, public relations can improve its practice through developing its proactive communication. This study finds that public relations in Bahraini organisations should develop proactive communication planning at the issue level in order to develop strategic crisis management. This requires developing supportive corporate culture starting from the top-management's understanding of the strategic role of public relations through activating the role of research in public relations to develop its function in decision making. This emphasises the significance of both training and education to improve the role of public relations in proactive communication planning.

One of the key practical implications of this research is the need for a larger national umbrella for crisis communication management in Bahrain that offers resources and training to governmental and private organisations in Bahrain. Moreover, the research finds that social media is a promising weapon to develop strategic communication at the issues management stage. Future research should study the role of social media in issues management stage in the cultural context of Arab Gulf and the extent to which it has developed two-way communication at the issues level. Moreover, there is a need for further quantitative and qualitative research to study crisis communication in the Arab Gulf from a cultural angle.

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