

Social Media and Crisis Communication:  
Theories and Best Practices

By

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### **Abstract**

Communication experts have argued that crises are no longer a matter of “if” but “when” in corporate life. Corporations must be ready to respond to a crisis with the greatest proficiency, for it can easily damage an organization’s image, identity, and reputation. It is for this reason that the field of crisis communications has developed theories and strategies to guide organizations through periods of crisis. However, most of these theories are based on traditional models of communications that emphasize a one-way flow of information from a single communicator to a mass audience. Social media has destabilized established frameworks for crisis communication. This thesis explores how experts in crisis communication conceptualize the disruptive effects of social media on crisis communication. The study presents findings that will contribute to both scholarship and professional practice.

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## **Introduction**

On April 20, 2010, the deep-sea petroleum-drilling rig Deepwater Horizon, a platform licensed to British Petroleum (BP), suddenly exploded off the coast of Louisiana resulting in the death of eleven workers aboard the platform and a ruptured pipeline releasing huge volumes of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. The spill affected the coasts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida and caused extensive damage to marine and wildlife habitats as well as the Gulf's fishing and tourism industries. By May 20, this spill surpassed the severity of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska, earning the dubious title of the worst environmental disaster in US history (Muralidhara, Dillistone & Shin, 2011; BBC News, 2010).

BP was in a serious crisis: its reputation and image suffered a major blow, and crisis communication strategies were put into action to reduce the mounting damage. However, from the day of the explosion to the day BP was able to successfully seal the ruptured well and fully end the leak, a period lasting 153 days, BP communicated clumsily, wavering through a range of strategies and never establishing any control over the media and public narrative.

BP denied responsibility, labeled the spill an "accident", downplayed the size of the disaster and the extent of the damage, attempted to increase positive public perceptions by placing greater emphasis on its clean up efforts than on the damage, and provided public statements to demonstrate their continued initiatives to stop the flow of the spill, clean-up the damage, and make up for economic losses to those industries in the Gulf that would be negatively affected.

Perhaps the company's most famous communications gaffe occurred during a May 30 interview, when CEO Tony Hayward famously stated, "We are sorry. We are sorry for the massive disruption it's caused their lives. There is no one who wants this over more than I do. I want my life back" (Climatebrad, 2010). The negative public response to Hayward's "I want my life back" comment was sharp and immediate. Waves of public anger and disbelief rippled across the social mediascape and online news sites. Given the deaths of employees aboard the Transocean, his comment was insensitive, crass, and inappropriate, and was judged publicly as such. On June 2, Hayward apologized for his insensitivity, posting the following comment on BP's Facebook page:

"I made a hurtful and thoughtless comment on Sunday when I said that "I wanted my life back." When I read that recently, I was appalled. I apologize, especially to the families of the 11 men who lost their lives in this tragic accident. Those words don't represent how I feel about this tragedy, and certainly don't represent the hearts of the people of BP – many of whom live and work in the Gulf - who are doing everything they can to make things right. My first priority is doing all we can to restore the lives of the people of the Gulf region and their families – to restore their lives, not mine" (Hayward, 2010).

The BP oil spill of 2010 was monumental and will remain a significant case study in the history of industrial accidents and corporate crisis. From the perspective of communication, the BP oil spill is significant because it is the first major industrial accident that played out within a new media ecology characterized by the influence of social networking sites. Social media played an integral role in the development and construction of the crisis. News of the spill spread across the globe instantly, bypassing boundaries and borders in a way never seen in previous industrial accidents. The spill became "knowable" around the globe within minutes. Consequently, there was no chance for BP's situation to remain within the borders of the United States, let alone North America; in this new ecology the spread of the event went well beyond the spread of the

oil itself.

BP, while the first of its kind, has certainly not been the only corporation that has experienced social media's impact on a crisis. Succeeding BP's 2010 crisis there have been other cases constructed and managed within social media. Indeed, Chick-Fil-A, an American fast food chain franchise found itself in a social media crisis July 2012 after releasing a statement to the Baptist Press stating, "We are very much supportive of the family – the biblical definition of the family unit... (Agnes, 2012)", forcing the corporation's stance on same-sex marriage into the spotlight. This statement sparked an overwhelming number of passionate op-eds and Facebook posts where the public was compelled to choose a side of the debate. Consequently, Chick-Fil-A lost control of its Facebook page where it was bombarded with comments from opponents and fans alike, lost loyal and future patrons, and lost long-standing partnerships (Grinberg, 2012). As an example, within days, Jim Henson's company announced it would no longer provide toys for kid's meals served at the restaurant (Johnson, 2013). However, when Chick-Fil-A caught wind of this backlash they quickly released a statement stating it was voluntarily recalling all Henson toys due a "safety issue" and backdated the announcement to the day before Henson's statement (Johnson, 2013): a dishonest and inaccurate act.

In an attempt to regain control and an attempt to counter negative comments overpowering its Facebook page, Chick-Fil-A misguidedly created a fake Facebook account to leave supporting comments on its page (Hill, 2012). This action inevitably became public knowledge and further shattered their credibility and trustworthiness.

On a positive note, Chick-Fil-A allowed the debate to take place on its corporate Facebook page, never hindering the public's voice and opinion and made a very strong



effort to respond to individual queries and comments of the public on its Facebook page. However, Chick-Fil-A completely neglected its Twitter account, where the other half of the crisis was unfolding (Agnes, 2012).

Even more recently, Paula Deen, an American celebrity chef and host of several Food Network cooking shows, quickly came under attack when revelations that she used racial slurs and subsequent damaging excerpts from a deposition went public June 19, 2013 (Anderson, 2013). In the realm of social media, mistakes by huge brand ambassadors, such as Deen, can quickly go viral. Social media offered a platform for a huge number of users to show their outrage, and it was no surprise that Twitter quickly exploded with condemnation as #PaulaDeen, #PaulasBestDishes, and a variety of attempts at jokes turning on faux Deen recipes trended. A few callous examples include Massa-Roni and Cheese, Klan Choweder, and Key Lynch Pie (Tobin, 2013).

Deen found herself in a high-profile crisis that threatened her reputation and her \$17 million-a-year empire. With the acceleration of news within social media, indeed, stories produced by both social and traditional media were being shared quickly and vastly across social media, it was only days later The Food Network announced that it would not renew her contract that expired the end of June (Jeffries & Washington, 2013) and Target, QVC, Walmart, and Home Depot all removed Deen's line of cookware from their shelves.

As a first approach, Deen cancelled an interview with The Today Show, allowing nearly a week between the leak and finally agreeing to an interview, a lifetime in our digital world, which allowed others to tell her story before she finally agreed to the interview. Deen released three apology videos to YouTube, the first of which attempted

to blame the discrimination on her southern upbringing and her age. This would be subsequently deleted from her YouTube account (Dietrich, 2013). In a second attempt at an apology video, one with awkward editing transitions, Deen stumbled through the apology with “uhhs” and “ums” and emphasized excuses (Agnes, 2013). In a third attempt, Deen released a video in which she denied the racist accusations and described herself as a victim. Paula Deen’s brand certainly took a huge public hit, swirling quickly out of control in a social media era, and only time will tell if the brand’s image can be restored.

This thesis attempts to make sense of the impact of social media on crisis communication. Although the cases of BP, Chick-Fil-A, and Paula Deen all illustrate the significance of this topic, the thesis is not a case study of any one specific crisis. Rather, it focuses on broader questions about how the advent of social media has ‘disrupted’ the field of crisis communications. Specifically, this thesis is guided by the following questions: “How do crisis communications experts view the impact that social media has had on how crises are defined?”, “Has social media changed how PR experts conceive of and respond to crisis in a social media age? If so, in what ways?”, and “How relevant are established crisis communication theories in the social media age?”. It is through interviews with subject matter experts that this thesis sets out to answer these questions with the goal of understanding how crisis communications experts are making sense of the implications of social media for how crises develop and are managed. It focuses specifically on an appraisal of key theories and an identification of best practices.

## **Overview of Thesis**

The first chapter examines the relationship between “new media” and crisis communication, and attempts to put current discussions about the transformative and disruptive nature of social networking sites into historical context. Specifically, this chapter examines literature that has begun the discussion of social media’s impact on crisis communications followed by a look at historical moments such as Ivy Lee, Mass Media, 24/7 News, and the Internet that have also affected crisis communications with the aim to highlight historical trends.

Chapter two provides an overview of the main theories and models that have been developed to account for how corporations respond to crises in order to reduce reputational harm and damage. This section outlines Grunig’s two-way symmetrical model of public relations, Benoit’s image restoration theory, and apology theory - dominant theories that were developed in the period preceding the growth of social media - discussed with the purpose of later exploring their continuing relevance today.

In order to address the research questions, the thesis conducts in depth qualitative research, in which experts in the field of crisis communications were interviewed for their opinion of social media’s impact on crisis communication. Chapter three outlines the methodology as well as interview and participant characteristics, recruitment style, analysis approach, and a definitional description of what constitutes best practices and how they can be achieved.

The final chapter of the thesis presents findings extracted from interviews with crisis communications experts explaining how experts conceptualize social media’s impact on crisis communications. Specifically, this section offers an examination of how

experts view social media's impact on how crises are defined and developed, how experts conceive of and respond to crises in the current mediascape, and how relevant established theories are now in a social media age.

Derived from interview data, this section ends with a discussion that offers a compilation of crisis communications best practices outlining strategies deemed problematic as well as strategies more relevant than ever within a social media ecology. Additionally, this section offers an examination into the possible challenges crisis communicators may face when attempting to apply the recommended best practices. This section ends by addressing limitations of this study and possible future research directions.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

### Crisis

Oil spills, food poisonings, cover-ups, security breaches, and transgressions of ethical behaviour are the stuff from which corporate crises are made. The Exxon Valdez oil spill, Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol poisoning, Maple Leaf's listeria outbreak, LinkedIn's security breach, Delta Airlines' tampered inflight meals, and Montreal, Maine & Atlantic Railway trail derailment: all suggest that crises are no longer a matter of "if" but "when" in corporate life (Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay & Johansen, 2010).

Charles Hermann (1963) developed one of the first and most widely used theories of crisis. Hermann defines a crisis as a "[threat to] high-priority values of the organization, presents a restricted amount of time in which a response can be made, and is unexpected or unanticipated by the organization" (1963, p. 64). Hermann argues there are three fundamental conditions that separate crises from other unpleasant conditions: for a negative event to reach the level of a crisis it must have come as a surprise, pose a serious level of threat to the organization, and need to be addressed immediately (cited in Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2007). Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger build on Hermann's notion that a crisis is unexpected and introduces an intense threat to the organization. They stress that a crisis is not simply a negative event, but one that is unique, or nonroutine in the sense that it cannot be managed by normal procedures, but, rather, requires unique and extreme measures. Crises also produce uncertainty, in both causes and effects. For Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger a crisis is "a specific, unexpected, nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization's high priority" (2007, p. 233).

Colin Hay rejects a view of a crisis grounded in objective, material characteristics, and instead focuses on the fluid, perceptual, subjective, and discursive features of a crisis. Indeed, Hay (1999) argues for a more dynamic or diachronic conception of crisis as a social construction. He argues that a crisis is not “an objective property of a system [but rather] a subjectively experienced and perceptually mediated moment of action and intervention in which the system itself is decisively reshaped” (1996a, p. 423).

Moreover, Hay (1996a) contends crises are brought into existence through communication. Hay states, “the discursive construction of a crisis is the product of a process of secondary mediation, abstraction, and meta-narration. Here the products of primary narration, the mediated events themselves, become the subject matter for further narration” (Hay, 1999, p. 333). In other words, crises become matters of concern, and thus an object of organizational attention, through narrative and discourse. Hay likens a crisis to a story constructed by actors with all the elements of a narrative: they include story-tellers, protagonists, key moments of plot development, setting, and climax. Furthermore, in the same vein, since a crisis is constructed through narrative, it can be constructed in a number of ways based on how the storyteller views the events (1996a), both perceptually and in relation to their interests and goals.

To indicate the depth in his concept of crisis, Hay distinguishes failure from crisis. For Hay, a failure is an accumulation or condensation of contradictions, a condition in which contradictions exist within a particular institution or system, whether they are identified as such or not. A crisis, however, is a moment of decisive intervention during which those contradictions are identified, in which contradictions are widely perceived, or misperceived: “by crisis I refer to a condition in which failure is identified

and widely perceived, a condition in which systemic failure has become politically and ideationally mediated” (Hay, 1999, p. 324). To reiterate, a failure involves a system in which contradictions and dysfunctional properties exist, however, it is only when these properties are identified that these properties become a crisis. Hay also differentiates crises from tipping points. Whereas a crisis involves intentionally decisive intervention made in response to perceived failure, tipping points involve decisive interventions made unintentionally. Hay states “a tipping point is thus a moment in which relatively minor intervention is made, which subsequently proves to be decisive in terms of the transformation of the system in question” (Hay, 1999, p. 325).

Importantly, not only is perception required for the classification of a crisis, it is also required for resolution and action. For Hay a crisis must be subjectively perceived as such, for without this perception there can be no remedy or course of action. Indeed, Hay argues if a conjuncture is to provide the opportunity for decisive intervention it must first be perceived as a moment in which a decisive intervention can, and perhaps must be made. Furthermore, it must be perceived as such by agents capable of making a response, or ensuring that such a response is made, at the level at which the crisis occurs, or is perceived to exist (Hay, 1996a, p. 423).

### **Crisis Communications**

Crisis communications also lacks a universal definition and has been the subject of considerable definitional contestation. Coombs and Holladay define crisis communication as “the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation” (2012, p. 20). Fearn-Banks adds a temporal dimension to this issue, defining crisis communication as “the dialogue between the organization and its

public prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence” (2007, p. 527). Other scholars define crisis communications as “strategies for managing the legitimacy problems that corporations and other powerful institutions face in a period of uncertainty and risk” (Greenberg & Elliott, 2009, p. 191; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990). Greenberg and Elliott (2009) argue that crisis communication is the attempt to control information and allay negative public reaction when sudden and dramatic change occurs in an organization’s environment that tarnishes its reputation and compromises its operational autonomy.

Throughout the literature, there are different conceptions as to the role of crisis communication. Allen and Caillouet (1994) argue that the role of crisis communication is to restore organizational legitimacy by making the actions seem less inappropriate or to convince stakeholders to not judge the organization as harshly (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 223). Benoit (1995a) defines its role as restoring reputation, while Coombs (1999) argues that crisis communication is important for “protecting organizational reputation, facilitating honoring the account, and increasing potential supportive behaviour” (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 223). Hearit (1994) argues the role of crisis communication is to reduce anger and hostility toward the organization, or to insulate the organization from accusations of wrongdoing. Massey (2001) articulates the role to be to change stakeholder perception in order to repair an organization’s image, to protect the organization’s reputation. Finally, Siomkos and Shrivastava (1993) define the role of crisis communications as allowing the organization to recover from damage to resources, objectives, and image.



## **A New Media Landscape**

We are currently situated within a media landscape where the development of social media has led to a new ecology of communication. As media plays an important role in crisis communications, and thus plays a key part of this thesis, it is necessary to first outline key aspects of the current media landscape, before turning to media's role in and connections to crisis and crisis communications.

### **The Social Web**

The term Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O'Reilly in 2005 (Ahson & Ilyas, 2010) and is understood to be the second edition of the World Wide Web. Where Web 1.0 was based on read-only, text-based, and static content, Web 2.0 is often described as interactive, decentralized, participatory, collaborative, and dependent on user-generated content (Barnes, 2006; O'Reilly, 2005a; O'Reilly, 2005b). Web 2.0 enables user-generated content which blurs the once-distinct producer and consumer paradigm, allowing Internet users to produce and share information and opinions in various forms, such as photos, videos, podcasts, ratings, reviews, articles, and blogs (Akar & Topçu, 2011).

Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define social media as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Indeed, recent innovations in Web 2.0 technologies such as AJAX, XML, Open API, Microformats, and Flash/Flex have enabled the development and use of social media (Reddick & Aikins, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). boyd and Ellison (2008) provide a broader definition and classify social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to construct

a public profile within a bounded system; articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. Social media takes on many forms such as blogs, wikis, podcasts, microblogging sites (Twitter), social networking (Facebook), video-sharing (YouTube), and photo-sharing (Flickr), as well as geographically specific social media platforms such as United Kingdom's Bebo, Poland's Nasza-Klasa.pl, Finland's IRC-Galleria, China's Renren and Kixin001, Brazil's Orkut, South Korea's Cyworld, Japan's Mixi, Russia's Badoo, and Habbo, popular in the United Kingdom, Japan, Sweden, Spain, Italy, and Finland (Jain, 2012).

Social media sites have rapidly become a major component of hundreds of millions of Internet users' everyday lives. A recent report revealed that as of January 2013 four in five active Internet users visit social networks (Nielsen, 2013). With one billion Facebook users, 500 million Twitter users, and over 800 million YouTube viewers, we have arguably entered a *new* media era, yet it is one that is built on the foundation of previous periods in which other communication technologies were dominant. Yet, the social media age has also developed its own qualities in both structure and form. Social media differs from previous media ecologies on multiple levels: content production, model of communication, interactivity, reach, target audience, and credibility.

First, traditional and social media differ in the production of content. That is, while production of traditional media content involves trained, experienced professionals, in the new ecology of social media the role of the producer can be occupied by almost anyone (Jordan-Meier, 2011), blurring boundaries and distinctions between audience and

producer (Phillips & Young, 2007). This is made possible by the fact that any person with an e-mail address, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, or YouTube account, can now be a content producer (Shirky, 2009). Indeed, through the technological foundations of Web 2.0, social media have increased the ability people have to participate individually and collectively in content creation (Breakenridge, 2008) allowing, and even encouraging, users to easily edit and share online information about companies, their products and the services they provide (Akar & Topçu, 2011; Flew, 2008). Shirky (2009) argues that this decade shows the largest increase in expressive capability in human history. Citizens and consumers can now actively participate in content creation by posting news stories and links on their social media pages, voicing their opinion, their support, their disapproval, and their eyewitness accounts on an event from their social media page. With no limit to the amount of video one can upload to YouTube, they can even become their own broadcaster. The nature of the audience has also changed. Given the affordance of social media for content creation, audiences have the ability to take on a more active role than was often the case with traditional media. Mediums prior to social media enabled the audience to dynamically engage with the media. Indeed, in the case of television, the advent of the video recorder allowed a user to watch at various speeds, forward through segments of no interest, or re-watch the entire program a second or third time (Cover, 2006), or, in the case of magazines, public commentary allowed public participation with published articles or issues. However, social media has altered the quality of audience engagement. This medium offers the audience an active role in which it not only encourages the audience to engage in its narrative, the medium is dependent on this

participation (Cover, 2006), and as such, the consumers have a bigger voice than they have ever had before (Smith 2010).

Second, traditional and social media differ in their model of communication. Traditional media primarily offers a one-way communication model (from the producer to the audience) whereas social media offers both one way-and two-way models of communication (from producer to producer). Consequently, this two-way communications blurs the boundaries between organization insiders and outsiders, organization members and consumers (Stephens & Malone in Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Third, due to its affordance of user-generated content, social media has turned communication into interactive dialogue among organizations, communities, and individuals (boyd, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Stephens & Malone in Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Sweester & Lariscy (2008) in Waters, Tindall & Morton, 2010). In fact, interaction, sharing, and feedback are critical elements of all social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Through comments, retweets, and posts (O'Reilly, 2013), social media networks allow individuals to engage and connect with others (boyd & Ellison, 2008), and as such, offer new opportunities for interactivity (boyd, 2010; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Mossberger, 2013; O'Reilly, 2013). That is, while Web 1.0 and other traditional media had interactive aspects<sup>1</sup>, social media, affording ease for users to engage with one another

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<sup>1</sup> The World Wide Web was developed with the goal of interactivity. Web 1.0 provided functionality such as forms, links, and some basic level of bi-directional interactivity. For example, Amazon.com allowed users to write reviews and consumer guides since its launch in 1995, prior to Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2002). Content creators were few in Web 1.0; the majority of users were acting as consumers of static content (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). Web 2.0, on the other hand, extended interactivity through a

online, creates a greater interactivity and bi-directionality in a greater way than traditional media (Baym & boyd, 2012).

Fourth, though traditional mass media was first to obliterate the constraints of time and space, social media has accelerated this ability by providing instant and vast connections among producers and public alike. This capability has offered the opportunity for organizations to communicate instantly to a seemingly limitless audience. Indeed, with millions of people armed with smartphones, information is flowing faster and farther than has ever been possible before (Gonzalez-Herrera & Smith, 2008; Jordan-Meier, 2011).

Fifth, traditional and social media differ in their target audience. While traditional media, such as newsletters or magazines, does target specific audience niches, traditional media predominately employs mass communication where one message is distributed to a mass audience in a typically linear, predictable, and homogeneous manner (Jordan-Meier, 2011). On the other hand, social media has taken this approach to a more specific level at which communication is often personalized to the individual.

Finally, traditional and social media differ in their credibility. Traditional media presumably provides independent, third party views of what is assumed to be high quality content, while social media is often an outlet for people to express emotion and experiences, often riddled with bias, inaccuracy, and rumours (Jordan-Meier, 2011).

Consequently, traditional media maintains a higher degree of credibility among audiences

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stronger emphasis on user-generated content and web development techniques such as AJAX, allowing for a wider ability of dynamic user engagement and participation.

for its presumed independence (Utz, Schultz & Glocka, 2013). With that said, social media's influence on the public should not be underestimated (Matthee, 2011).

In other respects, this new ecology is quickly changing the consumption and production of news. Traditional media, which once served as the preferred source of news for the public, is increasingly becoming second to social media. Findings from a 2013 PEW public opinion survey found that nearly one-third of the respondents (31%) have deserted news outlets (Enda & Mitchell, 2013). Additionally, another report found that most Americans (69%) say that if their local newspaper no longer existed, it would not have a major impact on their ability to keep up with information and news (Rosenstiel, Mitchell, Purcell, Rainie, 2011).

Additionally, the emergence of various new formats of media, such as news aggregators, blogs and, more recently, social networking sites, has changed the ways readers consume news by offering an alternative with more choice (Grunig, 2009) that is more efficient, updated, convenient, specialized, and is less costly to produce (Águila-Obra, Padilla-Melendex & Tarres, 2007; Downie & Schudson, 2009; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012).

Social media has also impacted news production. Social media is increasingly being used by traditional media as a first indication of events to cover (Baron & Philbin, 2009). Now traditional media tracks Twitter accounts, blogs, YouTube, and other platforms to gather first-hand accounts and gauge reactions to major events as they unfold (Baron & Philbin, 2009). For example, the famous landing on the Hudson River of US Airways Flight 1549 in 2009 broke first with a photo posted to Twitter by US Airways passenger Janis Klum. News of the landing was reported all over Twitter before any

mainstream news were even aware of what occurred. Only after 7,000 Twitter users had seen this story did mainstream media eventually pick it up, mainly broadcasting information already provided by Twitter feeds (Jordan-Meier, 2011). This event is one of many incidents in which social media was the first to break news, with traditional media trying to catch up. This occurrence continues at an increasing rate. Indeed, there are even traditional media segments that summarize events occurring and being displayed on social media. For example, CNN's I-Report, Fox News Channel's U-Report, among others, encourage ordinary citizens to upload pictures, stories, and videos to be aired on television and cable and broadcast news websites (Potter, 2007).

### **Social Media's Impact on Crisis Communications**

Arguably, social media has initiated a change in the functioning of corporations that impacts the development of crises and crisis communications. Though a new topic within academia, some have set out to identify how social media has changed the landscape. The literature highlights social media's impact in following ways: speed, engagement, control of the message, interactivity, authenticity, boundaries, visibility and transparency, and crisis facilitation and triggers.

Social media has facilitated the flow of real time information (Fink, 2002; Fearn-Banks; 2011). Information travels faster than has ever been the case before, which inevitably has an impact on how crises develop and are perceived. The sense of urgency associated with a crisis is heightened due to the advent of new technologies that allow information to reach a global scale in a split second (Fink, 2002). This rapid pace of information dissemination results in a shortened window of response for organizations. Organizations that wish to provide their own perspective must respond with a greater

speed (Liu, Austin & Jin, 2011; Ward, 2011). Some studies have shown that organizations, which fail to deliver responses quickly, leave themselves vulnerable to attack (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008).

The literature also suggests that social media dynamics have created an increasing demand by the public for constantly updated content (Gonzalez & Smith, 2008; Laad & Lewis; Matthee, 2011), which is likely to be amplified in an emergency or crisis situation. As Matthee (2011) argues, the era of waiting for anything is in the past. We live in the age of instant gratification and, thus, practitioners need to recognize this change and adapt it to their online strategies.

Other studies show that audiences are more able to use their own voices to express their opinions through social networks, thus shifting the nature of information and message control (Gartner, 2011; Grunig, 2009; Shirky, 2010). Organizations that may have once been able to control the narrative in a crisis situation now often find themselves in the position of participant, a key actor among many, in the abundant flow of information (Grunig, 2009). In fact, Phillips and Young (2007) attest that the era when the wide spread dissemination of information was more easily controlled by the organization or even traditional news media is long past. Social media sites provide ordinary citizens with the ability to become key players in the construction and framing of crises (Phillips & Young, 2007), which poses a threat to organizations which may have previously depended on information control as paramount to successful crisis management (Wigley & Fontenot, 2010).

Consequently, it has been argued that this new producer role has afforded audiences greater power than before (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith (2008). That is, the



public has greater potential to be watchdogs, citizen journalists, and photojournalists who can constantly survey the world around them and share what they find online (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008).

Social media has created a space in which people are increasingly able to publicly and anonymously express dissent, creating and exposing issues requiring a corporate response (Stephens & Malone in Coombs & Holladay, 2012). For example, individuals can create parody or hate sites that are designed to deliberately harm a corporation by generating negative opinions that will gain widespread public traction (Grunig, 2009; Jordan-Meier, 2011).

Another shift within the crisis communication landscape that has been generated by the rise of social media, is the increased expectation of dialogue and engagement (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Grunig, 2009; Laad & Lewis, 2012). Corporations are advised to abandon their traditional one-way, message-oriented, command-and-control paradigm of practice (Grunig, 2009) for two-way interaction with the public, giving the public the opportunity to respond to the crisis situation at hand (Taylor & Perry, 2005). This shift is argued to be provoking a major review of how enterprises of all sizes and sectors must approach crisis communications management (Baron & Philbin 2009; Gonzales & Smith, 2008). Baron and Phillbin (2009) argue that the consensus among communication professionals is that engagement is crucial in times of crisis. Organizations need to understand that social media must be used as an arena for conversation rather than merely a channel for directing messages (Baron & Phillbin, 2009).

Encouragingly, authors highlight that engagement in dialogue is beneficial for organizations before and during difficult and nonroutine situations. Taylor and Perry (2009) suggest interactivity during critical times helps to rebuild consumer trust in the affected organization (Taylor & Perry, 2005; Yang & Lim, 2009). In an earlier study, Taylor and Perry (2005) found that using a question and answer format on the corporate website during a product recall allowed the public to respond and interact with the corporation, ultimately leading to greater trust. Likewise, Yang, Kang & Johnson (2010) found that perceived interactivity and engagement is linked to positive post-crisis attitudes. Moreover, some researchers have found that when organizations use new technologies such as social media in their crisis management plans, it gives the perception that they are trying to supply timely information to as many publics as possible, leading to a more positive image of the organizations during and after the crisis (Sweetser & Metzgar 2007). These authors suggest one reason for this may be that establishing and regularly updating social media gives the impression that an organization is not shying away from discussion of the incident in question (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007).

Corporate communication should no longer involve inauthentic corporate speak; instead, corporations are advised to adopt an authentic, conversational, human voice. Organizational social media sites can aid in employing the conversational, authentic, human voice. Indeed, according to Searls and Weinberger (2000) one of the most important characteristics of online communication is to offer an authentic, natural, human voice. It is argued that conversational, human communications are positively correlated

with trust, satisfaction, and commitment among the public (Kelleher, 2009), all of benefit to a corporation, especially during and after a crisis.

Social media has afforded information a seemingly borderless reach. Consequently, organizations can communicate immediately to a seemingly limitless audience, bypassing the constraints of not only time but also space to a greater extent than ever before (Gonzales-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Jordan-Meier, 2011). This increased spread of communication has serious implications for crisis communications. In the case of a crisis, social media likely escalates the speed at which the crisis is discussed and shared, which increases, exponentially, the spread and magnitude of the crisis (Jordan-Meier, 2011; Shirky, 2008). Crises are increasingly uncontainable within community or even country borders; crises are now global phenomena. Indeed, crises in recent years are impacting people globally, where with new developments in technology, people around the world are able to watch as a major disaster unfolds (Coombs, 2009).

Literature suggests another impact, as a result of social media, is an increased visibility for corporations. That is, social media provide the opportunity for people to post photos, videos, and comments about corporations. It increases the public's ability to watch over the corporation and share what they have experienced, increasing the awareness of events ensuing world-wide (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). When these experiences are unfavorable, and negative videos, photos, and stories are shared, forming a powerful, virtual collective perception of the crisis, it can have an adverse effect on the organization (Jordan-Meier, 2011). Indeed, image- and video-sharing websites, such as Instagram, Flickr, YouTube, and Facebook can play a major role in crises since social media increases the corporation's social visibility and, when corporate behaviour is

inacceptable, visibility may increase scrutiny (Shirky, 2008) and likely exacerbate the crisis.

Consequently, some authors has argued that social media now pressures corporations to be more transparent (Ward, 2011). Sutton (2009) defines transparency as giving the public an honest, non-biased perspective in relation to a particular topic. This is particularly required in a crisis (Gonzales & Smith, 2008) and some argue transparency is a vital component that every public relations practitioner needs to take into consideration when dealing with social media because it leads to credibility and trust (Phillips & Young, 2007), which may help prevent crises or at least minimize the resulting damage (Gonzales-Herrero & Smith, 2008).

Other researchers have observed social media's ability to facilitate or trigger a crisis. Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith (2008) explain how social media can accelerate the crises cycle and break geographical boundaries, exaggerating the crisis to a level previously unreachable. The crisis would have existed without the existence of social media, however it would have occurred at a slower rate or to a lesser extent.

On the other hand, social media can act as a trigger. That is, social media itself could cause a crisis, often ignited by rumours, hacking, shadow or copy-cat web-sites, web security breaks, and all forms of cyber-terrorism (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). For example, Domino's Pizza experienced a social media triggered crisis when two-employees in its Conover N.C. franchise uploaded a video to YouTube of themselves performing unsanitary acts to a sandwich before it went out on delivery. The video went viral and Domino's quickly found itself under attack. The key here is, without social

media's sharing capacity the public would never have been alerted to this event and there would be no such crises (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008).

### **Historical Impacts of Crisis Communications**

Though these impacts are often seen to be monumental, social media is not the only media that has impacted crisis communications. It is important to not lose sight of the fact that there have been other moments or media benchmarks that have had an impact on crisis communications.

#### **Ivy Lee**

Impacts on crisis communications can be traced back over 100 years to a time considered as the beginning of public relations and to the pioneer of the field, Ivy Lee (Harrison & Moloney, 2004; St. John, 2006). Importantly, Lee's influence was his determination for an open, honest, and transparent relationship between organizations and the media (and public).

It was the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in a media landscape where a sensationalized, affective form of journalism, often referred to as "everything that journalism should not be" (Ornebring & Jonsson, 2004, p. 289), dominated. This was a period that corporations and media remained very separate, and, consequently, corporations faced hostile and critical journalists known as muckrakers.

Having come from a background in business journalism (employment history included the *New York America*, *The New York Times*, and *New York World*) where he aimed to explain the complicated workings of business in a way readers could understand (Harrison & Moloney, 2004), as a public relations practitioner, Lee believed he could help businesses and the general public better understand each other (Hiebert, 1966). He

developed a publicity policy of keeping the public informed, which contrasted with past practice, in which the media was kept completely in the dark. In 1906, Lee inscribed his philosophy into the “Declaration of Principles” signaling a new model of public relations practice (Rodgers, 2010) where PR practitioners were expected to meet a broader public responsibility that extended beyond obligations to the client (Bates 2002) and that was based on factual and timely information given gladly to the press and public (Russell & Bishop, 2009). The “Declaration of Principles” stated, “In brief, our plan is, frankly and openly, on behalf of our business concerns and public institutions, supply the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which are of value and interest to the public to know about” (Nelson, 1996, p. 31).

In 1906, Lee was employed by the Pennsylvania Railroad and by 1912, he became the executive assistant to the president of the Pennsylvania (St. John, 2006). Herein lay an opportunity to apply his principles. The railroad had a policy of refusing access to the press at accident sites and refusing to grant interviews (Harrison & Moloney, 2004). As a result, reporters distrusted the railroad, which manifested itself in print and led to distrust on the part of the general public (Harrison & Moloney, 2004). His first task was to convince management that the policy of operating in secret and refusing to talk with the press was a bad strategy for nurturing goodwill and public understanding and, instead, convince them to adopt an open approach between corporations and the press (Bates, 2002). When an accident occurred near Gap, Pennsylvania, he immediately invited reporters to the scene, provided factual information on the accident, and answered all questions (Harrison & Moloney, 2004) even if those facts placed the railroad in an unfavorable light (Newsom, 1963). This approach was novel for corporations, indeed,

after a similar accident around the same time, the New York Central Railroad maintained the policy of avoiding the press and remaining silent. Predictably, the press was infuriated by this approach and chastised the New York Central within their articles (Harrison & Moloney, 2004). Conversely, Lee's open, honest, and transparent approach, resulted in positive publicity (Aronoff, 1997).

### **Mass Media**

The rise of mass media, with the peak of newspaper circulation in 1910, commercial radio stations in 1920, and popularized television in 1950 (McGaughey, 2005), meant a change for crisis communication. That is, by the 1950s, crisis communications incorporated newspapers, radio and, increasingly, television (Planet Pictures, 1997). As a result, corporations had to understand media's role in a crisis and learn how to best address and handle the media during a crisis situation for an optimum crisis communication outcome.

A major impact for corporations was media's control over information production (Ball-Rokeach, 1988). That is, corporations had no direct control over which portions of a news release would be reported to the public (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002) but, instead, the media, acting as gatekeepers and agenda setters, controlled when, where, and how the issue would be framed (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Singer & Endreny, 1993).

Additionally, with the rise of mass media, crisis communications practitioners were met with more time limitations than previously enjoyed (Ray, 1999; Seitel; 1983; Sen & Egelhoff; 1991). Corporations had to meet media demands and production needs, for ignoring such demands could result in the prioritization of alternative information sources (Holladay, 2010) or a framing in a way unflattering for the organization in crisis

(Gray, n.d.). Moreover, such absence often left the organization looking evasive, unresponsive, or unconcerned about the community (Holladay, 2010), not optimal characteristics in the case of a crisis. Consequently, crisis communications adopted as best practice with mass media, a quicker, more accurate, open, and consistent response to inquiries (Ray, 1999; Seitel; 1983; Sen & Egelhof; 1991).

Moreover, mass media, first radio but then television, became the public's preferred source in times of crisis (Ball-Rokeach, 1988), a trend that remained for several decades (Carey, 2003; Spence, Lachlan, McIntyre & Seeger, 2009). As such, a key impact of mass media on crisis communication was the ability to reach a wider audience (McGaughey, 2005).

### **24/7 News Cycle**

In 1980, an all-day news cycle was introduced with the emergence of cable television channels dedicated to delivering news around the clock. The first channel to do so was Cable News Network (CNN) (Cushion & Lewis, 2010), though many others followed suit around the globe. This form of news brought with it a much faster pace of news production with an increased demand for stories that could be presented as continual news with constant updating, a contrast to the previous day-by-day pace of the broadcast news cycle. Networks such as CNN forever changed the notion that the news could only be reported at certain times of the day and instead created a period of immediacy, of rolling news (Cushion & Lewis, 2010). Though, for several years, conventional early/late evening bulletin style news remained the most popular format, increasingly significant numbers of people began to abandon scheduled news for on-demand, flexibly delivered, content (Young, 2009 in Cushion & Lewis, 2010).



The emergence of the 24/7 news cycle created what media experts call the CNN effect in which “always on” news brought major world issues and crises into the living rooms and the forefront of American consciousness, while framing it as a spectacle (Cushion & Lewis, 2010).

Consequently, this shift to the 24/7 news cycle, changed the playing field during a crisis (Ten Berge, 1988; Young, Flowers & Ren, 2011). As the need for speedy production of up-to-date information, to be aired almost immediately, and repeated non-stop, the time that organizations once had to respond to a crisis situation diminished (Young, Flowers & Ren, 2011). As Eldeman (1980) attested, this is a new generation where the immediacy of the news allows for no grace period designated as response time in a crisis situation.

### **Internet**

The development of the Internet was also an area of impact on crises and crisis communications. James (2000) argued crisis management in the 21st century is a different ballgame, changing the way crisis communication operates. Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith (2010) contend that the Internet introduced major changes in the way businesses and communicators should respond to crisis situations. The literature points to the Internet’s impact on speed, spread, direct access to stakeholders, active audiences, and two-way dialogue.

The design of the Internet changed the pace within crisis communication, allowing an increased rate of information flow, driving an accelerated requirement to respond that did not exist prior to its development (Edelman, 1998; Fjeld & Molesworth, 2006; Ihator, 2001; James, 2000). There was now less opportunity for organizations to

prepare their own versions of reality (Ihator, 2001) and an expectation from stakeholders to issue information quickly (Ihator, 2001; Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2001), for anything less would be seen as stonewalling (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2001).

With the development of the Internet, there was a new ability afforded to crises in that they were able to spread globally in the absence of geographic barriers (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2010). For example, with the help of the Internet, in addition to traditional modes of communication, a major story, such as the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in the United States (11 September 2001), was aired globally within five minutes (Mathee, 2011). Additionally, this Internet dynamic impacted the ability to control the narrative of the crisis (De Bussy et al., 2000). As Hu (2002) explained, the Internet and its disregard of national boundaries, made it an extremely difficult, if not impossible medium to control. Optimistically, the Internet's ability to disseminate information internationally was beneficial for organizations as well. For example, Heath (1998) argued that the Internet allowed corporations to connect with otherwise hard to reach publics and allowed engagement of geographically diverse individuals to participate in dialogue.

Moreover, the Internet afforded corporations the ability to reach stakeholders directly and ultimately impacted crisis communications. Corporations were now able to post media releases and statements on the web for both the public and media's needs (Witmer, 2000). That is, the Internet allowed practitioners to potentially reach a mass audience directly without interference of the mass media (Edelman, 1998; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; James, 2000; Witmer, 2000) or without the message being filtered by media gatekeepers (Haig, 2000; Hill and White, 2000; Holtz, 2002; White and Raman,

1999). In a crisis, this meant that organizations could theoretically provide their own accounts of events directly to their audiences (Fjeld & Molesworth, 2006; Holtz, 2002).

The Internet allowed audiences to take on a more active role in communication. As Hearit (1999) explained, new technology enables audiences to move from a passive stage to an active one, playing a dynamic role and having an opportunity to be heard. The Internet's major impact on crisis communications was believed to be the change in information flow, an allowance for the development of two-way communication between organizations and stakeholders (De Bussy, Watson, Leylan & Ewing, 2000; Ihator, 2001; Perry, Taylor & Doerfel, 2003; Schultz, 2000). Consequently, research began emerging to demonstrate the need for corporations to take dialogue with their stakeholders more seriously (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Jo & Kim, 2003; Kent, Taylor & White, 2003). Taylor and Kent (1998) encouraged organizations to engage in a dialogic communication with their stakeholders through comment forms on the Internet as well as e-mail to foster a relationship among organizations and their stakeholders.

Some literature suggests that this dialogic approach was met by practitioners with some resistance. According to Fjeld and Molesworth (2006), practitioners felt that two-way online communication allowed the organization to communicate with a number of different stakeholders, and had the potential to reveal stakeholders' true perceptions and to generate fewer questions than in offline conversations. However, the practitioners they interviewed were also skeptical of the two-way approach because it could foster criticism and speculation, had the potential of escalating a crisis, failed to reach those who really should be communicated with, and had the potential for aggressive and/or irrelevant online communication.

Therefore, the emergence of the Internet impacted crisis communications by allowing information to flow much faster and on a wider scale than it was able to previously; corporations were able to contact their stakeholders directly by posting their own messages on their webpage as opposed to relying on the media and its gatekeepers; audiences were given the ability to take on a more active role; and there was an emergence of an ability for two-way dialogue, though practitioners had mixed feelings about its usefulness.

Historically, there have been technological advancements and insightful figures that have impacted crisis communications. This section served to demonstrate that social media is by no means the first to demand changes in crisis communications; Ivy Lee, mass media, 24/7 news cycle, and the Internet have all brought with them changes to the crisis communication landscape. Moreover, this section demonstrated that even some of the impacts on crisis communications argued to be as a result of the development of social media have actually been in progress for more than a century. Social media's call for greater transparency can be traced back 100 years to Ivy Lee's appeal for truthful, accurate information, open, and candid communications with the media and public. The expected window of response time for corporations has been shortened and corporate communication reach has broadened with every technological advancement, from mass media through 24/7 news cycle and the Internet to social media, and corporate control over the messages has been diminishing thanks to gatekeepers and agenda setters and now powerful producer-audiences.

However, though there have been other impacts on crisis communications, arguably, social media has accelerated and amplified impacts in the works for a century

while also impacting crisis communications in novel ways. Specifically, this thesis proposes that social media dynamics such as user-generated content, interactivity, a two-way flow of communication between the consumer and the corporation, vast and instantaneous connections, and corporate visibility and transparency have influenced how crisis emerge and take shape, and are likely provoking a change in how corporations approach crisis communications. Before exploring such conclusions, there must be an examination of some of the established theories and strategies within crisis communications.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework**

Given that corporate crises are now more a matter of “when” than “if”, corporations must be ready and able to respond to a crisis with speed and efficiency, for it can easily damage an organization’s image, identity, and reputation. It is for this reason that the field of crisis communications has developed theories and strategies to help guide organizations through nonroutine periods of disruption that threaten their organizational autonomy and call their identity, brand, and reputation into question. Indeed, the pressure for effective crisis communication has led to a veritable growth of theories and models in both the professional and academic community over the past decade (Coombs & Holladay, 2012) for responding to and managing crises. The two-way symmetrical model of public relations, image restoration theory, and apology theory - dominant theories that were developed in the period preceding the growth of social media - will be discussed with the purpose of later exploring their continuing relevance today.

### **Two-Way Symmetrical Model**

A model within the field of public relations is James Grunig’s two-way symmetrical model. According to Grunig, before the 1970s, public relations scholars rarely tried to explain the behavior of PR practitioners. Until that time, he contends, scholars typically accepted the behaviour of practitioners as given and looked for ways in which to describe, evaluate, and improve what practitioners did in the name of public relations (Grunig, 2001). Grunig wished to change this, and starting in 1976 he began leading many studies to identify how public relations is and should be conducted in its ideal practice. His first study identified two patterns of PR that he described as diachronic and synchronic, terms borrowed from Thayer (1967). Where synchronic meant

synchronizing the behaviour of a public with that of the organization so that the organization could continue to behave in the way it wants without interference, diachronic meant negotiating a state of affairs that benefits both the organization and the public (Grunig, 1992). However, Grunig was unsatisfied with the terms synchronic and diachronic and, instead, replaced them with asymmetrical and symmetrical, where asymmetrical communication is unbalanced in that the organization tries to change the public and symmetrical communication is balanced in that there are adjustments by the organization and its stakeholders (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Grunig and Hunt later extended these concepts into the four models of public relations (Grunig, 2001).

The four models of public relations are each located in history and incorporate different forms of communication between organization and its stakeholders in its direction, purpose, and nature of communicated messages (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The models include press agentry/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Although Grunig and Hunt (1984) acknowledge that there were public relations-like activities previously, they claimed that the press agents of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century were the first full time specialists to practice public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). The press agentry/publicity model is characterized as a one-way asymmetrical model of communication, traveling from the organization to the public (Carden, 2005), primarily through the mass media, used as a way of persuading and manipulating a desired audience to act as the organization wishes (Grunig, 1992). The purpose of public relations efforts under the press agentry/publicity model is to catch attention and interest, and to convince the audience of an idea and make the organization look good, using any

means necessary (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Often this involves communication that is distorted, incomplete, flashy, sensationalized, embellished, and at times completely devoid of the truth (Grunig, 1992; Waters & Lemanski, 2011). Indeed, truth is not at all a priority (Carden, 2005; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Matthee, 2010) and communication in this model is often characterized as pure propaganda (Grunig, 1992). Research, too, is not a priority, for it is seldom, if ever, used within this model (Carden, 2005; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Grunig and Hunt (1984) argue that at the beginning of the 20th century a second model of public relations, the public information model, developed as a reaction to attacks on large corporations and government agencies by muckraking journalists. Leaders of these organizations realized they needed more than the propaganda of press agents to counter the attacks in the media (Grunig, 1992). As a solution, these organizations opted for hiring their own journalists as public relations practitioners, termed journalists-in-residence, who issued press releases and other one-way communication products to distribute organizational information (Grunig, 1992). The public information model is also a one-way asymmetrical model of communication, traveling from the organization to the audience, with mass media as its primary channel (Grunig, 1992). Grunig and Hunt (1984) identified Ivy Lee as the primary historical figure whose work characterized the public information model (Grunig 1992).

The purpose of the model is informing key publics about the organization, with a responsibility to provide society with accurate information (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Fact-finding, truth, and accuracy achieved greater levels of importance (Grunig, 1992). Though the nature of the information is considered objective and truthful, the ultimate



goal is to make the organization look good, and, therefore, only favourable information about the organization was released (Grunig, 2001), though not necessarily with a persuasive intent (Grunig, 1992). As in the case of press agency, this model does not rely on research or strategic planning (Grunig & Grunig, 1992) and, if research is conducted, it is most likely for the purpose of preparing materials and involves no feedback from the public (Grunig, 1992).

During World War I, some public relations practitioners began to base their work on the behavioral and social sciences, and, as a result, to give more credence to examining audience behaviour: PR practitioners both sought information from and gave information to the public (Grunig & Grunig, 1992) and, as such, two-way models of communication between the public and the organization developed. According to Grunig and Hunt, the two-way asymmetrical model was developed in the 1920s and dominated professional practice until the 1980s (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Here, the key is to persuade publics to accept an organization's point of view. To this end, the nature of the communication is persuasive and manipulative (Waters & Lemanski, 2011). Unlike the first two models, feedback generated through scientific research became more important, but ultimately this was carried out to advance and secure the interests and needs of the organization ahead of its publics (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Indeed, research conducted in this model focuses on the wants, interests, and needs of public in order to formulate messages (Carden, 2005; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) that would persuade the public to behave in the ways their client organizations wished (Grunig, 2001).

The end of World War II is identified as the historical beginnings of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations (du Plessis, 2000; Grunig & Grunig, 1992). The

purpose of the two-way symmetrical model is to use communication to create and maintain a mutual understanding and respect between an organization and its publics (Grunig, 2001). The two-way symmetrical model of public relations focuses on a balanced dialogue, where the organization listens to the concerns of the public to encourage an open and honest, mutually beneficial relationship (Grunig and Grunig, 1992; Turney, 1998). This model is based on a free exchange of information that is used to alter attitudes in both the organization and its public rather than the public changing to suit the organization (Grunig, 2001). Given that communication is a balance between senders and receivers, both the public and the organization can, in theory, be persuaded to shift their thinking and/or practice (Grunig, 1999). A goal of this model is to create policies and actions that are beneficial to both parties (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006) and, consequently, emphasis lies in negotiation and willingness to adapt and make compromises (Turney, 1998).

Within this model, practitioners use both research and dialogue to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes, and behaviours of both the organization and public (Grunig, 2001). This model uses formative research to learn how the public perceives the organization and to determine what consequences organizational actions/policy might have, and it uses evaluative research to determine whether a public relations effort has enhanced public understanding of an issue or problem.

Although Grunig and Hunt (1984) identify these four models as stages in the history of public relations, they contend that all four models continue to be practiced today (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Additionally, though Grunig and Hunt (2001) attest that organizations can engage in practice corresponding to each model, they advise strategic

communicators interested in cultivating lasting relationships with their stakeholders to utilize the two-way symmetrical model (Waters & Lemanski, 2011). Grunig and Hunt conceptualize two-way symmetrical communications as a normative model, which outlines how public relations should be practiced (see for example, Grunig, 2001; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Grunig's research (1991) finds that so-called excellent public relations involves using the two-way symmetrical model more than the other three and, in the long run, organizations will cultivate the strongest relationships with the public when they use this dialogic approach (Grunig, 1992).

Although the two-way symmetrical model is held up as the ideal model for public relations practitioners, Grunig and Grunig (1989) found that few organizations apply this model in practice because their way of thinking does not correspond with the characteristics and they lack the required personnel and expertise to implement it (du Plessis, 2000). To be sure, many organizations do practice two-way communication at times, but it is often used in combination with more traditional modes of persuasion (du Plessis, 2000). Grunig (1992) acknowledged that this practice of using mixed models can be applied to achieve excellent public relations, however, practice must be more symmetrically than asymmetrically oriented.

Recently, Grunig considered some of the implications of social media to his normative model of two-way symmetrical public relations. Grunig outlines how digital media fit into a respective model. Grunig explains, static web sites can be used to implement the press agency model, frequently updated web sites the information model, blogs with comments the one-way asymmetrical model, and open corporate social media sites, with interactive online community contribution, the two-way symmetrical model

(2009, p. 7). Importantly, he argues that social media will inevitably make public relations practice more global, strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical, and socially responsible. Further, Grunig (2009) believes social media will help organizations achieve their goals through dialogue and interactivity, cultivate relationships in societies as well as reduce conflict. It is likely that not only can social media foster the two-way symmetrical model but that, with social media's dynamics, the need to apply such a model is more important now than ever.

### **Image Restoration Theory**

William Benoit (1995; 1997) developed a theory of image restoration to understand how corporations recover from crises. The process of image repair is most often framed as apologia, or a genre of public apologetic discourse (Benoit & Lindsey, 1987; Benoit & Brinson, 1994). However, Benoit held that previous rhetorical approaches for image restoration discourse were too independent from one another and were merely descriptive. Benoit aimed to make a more useful and applied image restoration that emphasized prescriptive possibility for rhetorical analysis (Condit & Benjamin, 2009) detailing the post crisis communication strategies organizations use to repair the damage done by some perceived wrongdoing (Seeger & Padgett, 2010). Image restoration has developed into the most widely applied typology of image restoration strategies (Seeger & Padgett, 2010), remaining the most comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding post crisis communication (Seeger & Padgett, 2010).

Image restoration theory is based on the assumption that image and reputation have both symbolic and economic value, that threats to an organization's image can occur (sometimes frequently), and that communication can help repair the damage. Benoit

contends that corporations have reputations and images that are valuable and warrant protection from attack (Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay & Johansen, 2010). For Benoit (1997), an attack on one's image has two components: 1) an offensive act and 2) an accusation of responsibility for the act. If there is no offensive act or no accusations of responsibility for the act, there is no reputational threat (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). In this theory, the organization determines what is threatening its reputation or image and determines which publics must be addressed and persuaded to restore and maintain a positive image. Benoit's theory is founded on two key assumptions: 1) communication is a goal-directed activity; and 2) maintaining a positive reputation is one of the central goals of communication.

In his theory of image restoration, Benoit organizes strategies into five distinct categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Strategies are subdivided into variants. These strategies are grounded in a belief that communication (words and actions) affects how stakeholders perceive the organization in crisis (Coombs, 1999).

The strategy of denial has two variants. In simple denial, the corporation denies that the act occurred, was performed by the company, or was harmful to anyone. For example, Tylenol successfully denied that it had been responsible for deaths of its customers in a poisoning episode<sup>2</sup> (Benoit & Lindsey, 1987). The second form of denial involves shifting the blame, whereby a corporation acknowledges that something

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<sup>2</sup> In 1982, a malevolent person replaced Tylenol Extra-Strength capsules with cyanide-laced capsules, resealed the packages, and deposited them on the shelves of at least six pharmacies in the Chicago area. The capsules were purchased and resulted in the death of seven people (Berge, 1990).

undesirable has happened but that another party is responsible. For example, during the Valdez Oil Spill, Exxon shifted the blame of the spill to an intoxicated Captain Hazelwood (Benoit, 1995). More recently, in July 2013, an unattended freight train carrying crude oil, owned by Montreal, Main & Atlantic (MMA), derailed in the town of Lac-Mégantic, Quebec and resulted in the fire and explosion of multiple tank cars causing 42 deaths and destroyed more than 30 buildings in the town. Immediately following the disaster, MMA's crisis communication approach was to shift the blame to other actors, first volunteer firefighters and then the engineer (Willis, 2013). This strategy may well be more effective than simple denial, for two reasons. First, it provides a target for any ill will the audience may feel, and this ill feeling may be shifted away from the accused. Second, it answers the question that may lead the audience to accept a simple denial: "who did it?" (Schuetz & Lilley, 1999). Apologists assume a posture of denial because they are not guilty, they are in a position to deny that their actions were intentional, or they choose a defensive strategy for fear of liability regardless of the evidence. All three rationales have, as a guiding principle, the belief that a strategy of denial will assist organizations in distancing themselves from wrongdoing (Heath, 2000). When using a denial posture, companies in effect profess that "we're not guilty" or "we want to make it clear that it never was our intention for anything bad to happen" (Hearit, 1994). However, the use of the denial strategy has potential ramifications. Indeed, individuals are skeptical of corporate speech and, therefore, are unlikely to believe the denial without corroborating evidence (Schuetz & Lilley, 1999).

Second, Benoit (1997) offers the strategy of evading responsibility, which attempts to reduce the accused's perceived responsibility for the act. Benoit notes that

those who are unable to deny performing the act in question may be able to evade or reduce their apparent responsibility for it (Schuetz & Lilley, 1999). This strategy consists of four variants. The first variant of responsibility evasion is provocation, (i.e., the act in question was performed in response to another wrongful act, which, understandably, provoked the offensive act in question (Schuetz & Lilley, 1999)). A second variant of responsibility evasion occurs when the corporation declares the act occurred by accident. For example, after charges of auto repair fraud, Sears' Chairman Edward A. Brennan, characterized the auto repair mistakes as "inadvertent" rather than intentional (Benoit, 1997). A third variant of evading responsibility is defeasibility, which occurs when the corporation alleges a lack of information or control over the act, or the accused corporation claims that events really were beyond its control (Heath, 2001). The final variant of responsibility evasion involves the corporation claiming that even though the outcome was undesired, the offensive act was performed with good intentions (Hearit 1994).

Third, Benoit (1997) provides the strategy of reducing the offensiveness of the act. It is possible for the accused to convince the audience that the negative act is not as bad as it might first appear, and thus, reducing the amount of ill feeling associated with the act (Schuetz & Lilley, 1999). This strategy has six variants. Corporations can attempt to offset or make up for the damage by strengthening the audience's positive feelings towards it; they can try to minimize the magnitude of the event or minimizing the negative feelings associated with the wrongful act; they can distinguish the act from other similar, yet more offensive, actions; they can attempt to place the event in a more favourable context to lessen its perceived offensiveness; they can attack or otherwise

undermine the credibility of the accuser to reduce the public's sympathy for the injured party; or they can provide compensation to injured parties to reduce the perceived severity of the act.

Organizations accused of wrongdoing can also promise to correct the problem, restore the state of affairs to what existed before the offensive act occurred, and make changes to prevent the act from reoccurring. For example, after Sears' auto repair fraud crisis, company executives provided four amendments in the company, which would guard against the reoccurrence of the event (Benoit, 1995b). This strategy is critical because it provides reassurance that the problem was isolated, has been resolved, and the chances of its return are remote (Hearit, 1995). Benoit observed that an organization can draw on this strategy without admitting guilt (Benoit, 1995; Benoit & Lindsey, 1987).

Finally, companies that are accused of wrongdoing can admit responsibility, beg for forgiveness, and issue an apology to seek forgiveness. For example, in November 2011, JetBlue offered a complete apology to its customers after a series of events that left a plane filled with passengers stranded on the tarmac in Connecticut (Ward, 2011). JetBlue's apology read: "At no point was safety ever compromised. But let's face it, you count on us at JetBlue for a lot more – and we promise a lot more – and we know we let some of you down and we are truly sorry" (Ward, 2011).

### **Apology**

Apology research first focused on individuals, such as church leaders (Ryan, 1982) and politicians (Ware & Linkugel, 1973); more recently, it has focused on how apologies can restore a damaged corporate image (Benoit, 1995a; Benoit 1995b; Benoit, 1997; Brinson & Benoit, 1999; Benoit & Lindsey, 1994; Hearit, 1994; 2006; Patel &



Reinsch, 2003; Coombs, 2007b; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Nadler and Liviatan, 2006). For example, Hearit (2006) argues that when an organization is in a crisis, it can offer an apology in order to admit wrongdoing, show contrition, publicly address guilt, and request a return back into the social community. Some argue that apologies are the most widely researched crisis response strategy (Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, Johansen, 2010). Much of apology research has focused on the components of an effective apology.

### **Components of an Effective Apology**

An effective apology is imperative for personal relationships as well as public images of multi-million dollar corporations. Several factors have been identified that increase an apology's putative success. According to Olshtain and Cohen (1983), an apology will be effective if it contains five components: (1) an Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID), i.e., the word "sorry" or "apologize"; (2) an expression that shows acceptance of responsibility and/or blame; (3) an explanation or account of the event/behaviour; (4) an offer of reparation; and (5) a promise of future forbearance, (i.e., that the event/behaviour will not recur and that steps have been taken for prevention). Lazare (2004) suggests additional criteria for apology such as an explanation for the offense, an expression of shame and/or guilt, the intention not to commit the offense again, and reparations to the offended party (Cohen, 2002; Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay & Johansen, 2010; Hearit, 2006).

Further research highlights sincerity as a pivotal aspect of an effective apology. It has been found that apologies increase reconciliation and forgiveness toward offenders especially when the apology is considered sincere (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Darby & Schlenker, 1989; Hearit, 2006; Risen & Gilovich, 2007; Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki,

2004). However, sincerity may not be such a critical element for public apologies. Lazare (2004) states that, ideally, apologies are sincere; yet, unlike private apologies, insincere apologies can partially succeed as long as other elements are included, such as acknowledging the offense, using remorse, empathizing, and offering reparations.

Research outlines required apology elements such as correctly identifying the offending behaviours in adequate detail, recognizing the impact on the victim, confirming that the grievance was a violation of the social or moral contract between the apologies, demonstrating remorse, shame, and humility, and offering reparations (Lazare, 2004). Additionally, it has been argued that naming the victim personally in the apology improves the success of the apology (Smith, 2008). Smith (2008) argues that this identifies the victim as an individual, sensitizes the offender to the particular harm they endured and aids in empathizing and sympathizing. Additionally, Hearit (2006) argues a successful apology is voluntary in appearance, satisfies public expectations, and the apologist adheres to the values that were broken.

Finally, there are necessary conditions for apologizing, outlined by Goffman (Smith, 2008). Goffman requires that at least one of the parties believes that the incident occurred, at least one of the parties involved believes the act was inappropriate, someone is responsible for the offensive act, the apologizer has an attitude of regret with respect to the offensive behaviour and a feeling of remorse in response to the victim, and the victim believes that the offender will try to refrain from similar offenses in the future (Smith, 2008).

As, with effective apologies, research has focused on ways an apology can be ineffective. The literature identifies eight different ways that apologies can fail: 1)

providing a vague and incomplete acknowledgement, for example, “I apologize for whatever I did”, 2) using of a passive voice, for example, “mistakes have been made”, 3) making the offence conditional, for example, “if mistakes may have been made...”, 4) questioning the injury to the victim, for example, “if anyone was hurt”, 5) minimizing the offense, for example, “there is really nothing to apologize for...”, 6) apologizing to the wrong party, 7) apologizing for the wrong offense, a self-serving tactic whereby the offender chooses an offense for which they share the blame or make themselves shine in a positive light, 8) being unaware of the victim’s needs and, therefore, not satisfying them in the apology, 9) apologizing without humility, 10) expressing arrogance, which transforms the intended apology into an insult, suggesting a lack of remorse and a belief that the person making the apology is superior to the receiving party and 11) not including an explanation (Lazare, 2004). Additionally, the apology will likely be unsuccessful if the apologizer’s communications seems dishonest, arrogant, manipulative, or an insult to the intelligence of the victim (Lazare, 2004).

However, in defense of some of the ineffective apologies offered, it may not be due to the aforementioned causes but rather the media may be the culprit of unsuccessful apologies. The media can reproduce apologies in brief clips unable to capture the subtleties, rewarding public figures who provide sound bite apologies and tuning out those who take time to develop the substance of their gesture. The media can also tear offenses from the contexts, leaving the accused in delicate situations, which could have been avoided with fuller explanation (Smith, 2008) that would have increased a positive reception of the apology.

Though much research has been invested in pinpointing the required components of an apology, or specific ways an apology could disappoint, each apology is unique. Lazare (2004) states that apology uniqueness is created by variables that precede and influence the apology itself, and characteristics and conditions that affect how the apology process unfolds. These factors include whether the event was personal or impersonal, if the event was committed by individuals or groups, the culture, the nature of the damage, what the victim and the offender want and need from the apology process, the motives of the offending process, and the willingness to accept apologies and forgiveness by the victim. In any given apology, any one or combination of these components can contribute to its success or failure (Lazare, 2004).

Likely, the abundance of research devoted to apologies is a result of the ever-increasing public use of this strategy among individuals and organizations over the past decade or so. Indeed, it seems, nearly every day there is an apology demanded or offered for some act (consider apologies from Royal Bank of Canada, Rick Ross, Joe Fresh, and Apple and those were just in the past few months). It has been suggested that we are in the age of apologies (Brooks, 1999).

### **Age of Apology**

Lazare (2004) speculates that the increase in apologies in the public arena may be a result of several overlapping explanations. First, the millennium caused people to view the year 2000 as a time for new beginnings, for soul searching, and moral reckoning, a belief that began the trend of apologizing for past or current sins. A second explanation of the increase in apologies can be attributed to the increasing globalization of the world: a world described by Marshall McLuhan (1967) as the global village, a world where,

through our technological extended senses, such as high-speed travel, television, cell phones, and Internet, time has ceased and space has vanished and where we share events, as far away as the other side of the world, as if in the same physical space. In this global village, for example, it matters greatly to Canadians if the United States were to spill oil near its borders. For Lazare (2004), globalization has increased the importance of apology in three ways. First, neighbours who interact continuously, require better settlement of disputes than those who live separately. Second, the nature of instant global communications, where everyone is constantly exposed to the world, diminishes the possibility that private offences are kept quiet. Finally, the increasing rate of apologies could be as a result of the power shift among groups and nations over the past several decades. This is a time where formerly powerless groups, such as women, have gained the right to be treated equally and have increasingly been emerging as leaders in corporations, political office, and other forms of leadership, bringing with them very different perspectives on the apology process (Lazare, 2004).

Hearit (2006) links the rise of corporate apologies to the success of various social movements in putting corporations on the defensive for alleged violations of environmental standards or human rights, and to corporations learning the importance of responding to criticism in order to manage public opinion (Hearit, 2006; Heath & Nelson, 1986).

The rise in corporate apologies likely positions corporations which wish to use this strategy as a way to rebuild a tarnished image at a disadvantage. As the occurrence of apologies increase in contemporary society, there is the potential of the audience

becoming cynical, questioning the apologist's intentions, and, as a result, a declining value in public perception about the sincerity of any given apology (Nick, 2008).

Returning to Benoit's image restoration theory, recall that his aim was to offer a prescriptive model for managing and recovering from crisis. As such, Benoit provides five general themes that relate specifically to the effectiveness in persuasion of strategies implemented by the corporation: 1) an entity who is at fault should admit this immediately, 2) denial can be an effective strategy when those accused of wrongdoing are innocent, 3) it can be extremely important to publicize plans to correct and/or prevent recurrence of the problems, 4) bolstering will probably be more effective when it relates directly to the charges or accusations against the accused, and 5) in some cases the use of multiple image repair strategies can be ineffective (Benoit, 1995b). For example, companies that use mortification should couple it with a corrective action strategy to assure customers that any potential for problems has been rendered safe (Benoit, 1995; Heath, 2001).

Crisis communications theories and models are available for corporations to utilize in the event of a crisis to restore its image, identity, and reputation; three have been outlined in this section: two-way symmetrical model, image restoration theory, and apology. Grunig offers corporations the two-way symmetrical model as an ideal model of public relations where the corporation creates and maintains a balanced dialogue, where the organization listens to the concerns of the public and encourages an open and honest relationship based on mutual understanding and respect. According to Grunig, it is through this approach that the organization will create a valuable relationship with the

audience granting favour when it comes to the perception of the corporate image and reputation.

Benoit's image restoration theory offers corporations, which enter a crisis state, rhetorical strategies to exit the situation with as little damage as possible to the valued corporate image and reputation. Benoit organizes strategies into five distinct categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Strategies are subdivided into variants. The strategy of denial has two variants: simple denial and shifting the blame. Evading responsibility has four variants: provocation, accident, defeasibility, and good intentions. Reducing offensiveness consists of six variants: offset the damage, minimize, distinguish from a more offensive act, place the event in a more favourable context, attack the accuser, and compensate the injured parties. Two final options include corrective action, where the corporation restores the state of affairs to what existed before the offensive act occurred, and mortification where the corporation can admit responsibility, beg for forgiveness and issue an apology to seek forgiveness.

An apology is often used to restore a damaged image and restore a corporation's reputation to a previous state prior to an offensive act. Apology tactics have been used so much so it has been argued we are in the midst of an age of apology. As such, the apology has become the most widely researched crisis response strategy. Components of an effective apology have been identified as an inclusion of an Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID), an expression that shows acceptance of responsibility and/or blame, an explanation or account of the event/behaviour, an offer of reparation, a promise of future forbearance, a demonstration of sincerity, an accurate identification of the

offending behaviours, a recognition of the impact on the victim, a confirmation that the grievance was a violation of the social or moral contract between the apologies, a demonstration of remorse, shame, and humility, and an offering of reparations.

While these theories, models, and practices remain relevant and highly valuable, they were developed within an era of traditional models of communications that emphasized a one-way, linear, top down flow of information, which involves homogeneous messages sent from a single communicator to a mass audience. Currently, the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and many others, is generating a new ecology of communication that has afforded user-generated content, interactivity, a two-way flow of communication between the consumer and the corporation, vast and instantaneous connections, and corporate visibility and transparency. It is likely this new media has provoked a change in the relevance of these theories among crisis communications experts. To gauge this perceptual and practical shift, and to understand how experts conceive of the change social media has generated in the field of crisis communication, in both crisis development and crisis communication strategies, interviews were conducted with subject matter experts.



## **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the role of social media in the construction and management of crisis, and how subject matter experts account for its impact on corporate communications. My thesis sets out to explore the following questions:

RQ1: How do crisis communications experts view the impact that social media has had on how crises are defined?

RQ2: Has social media changed how PR experts conceive of and respond to crisis in a social media age? If so, in what ways?

RQ3: How relevant are established crisis communication theories in the social media age?

### **Expert Interviews**

To address these research questions, this thesis adopted a qualitative approach in which in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key subject matter experts to explore the impacts of social media on crisis communications.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were conducted between November 2012 and January 2013 and ranged from 40 minutes to 2 hours, with an average length of one hour. Almost all the interviews were conducted in person to optimize the quantity and quality of data, observe rich social cues, minimize time delay, and encourage participant comfort (Kvale, 1996). Face-to-face interviews were carried out in Ottawa, Toronto, and Hamilton. However, to reach a highly diverse and well-informed sample, some participants were located outside of driving distance. Interviews with research participants in other parts of Canada and internationally were conducted via Skype, with one interview conducted by telephone.

There were no significant differences in the quality or quantity of interview data from the interviews conducted on Skype to those done in person.

### **Participants**

The sampling strategy entailed a target of 15 interviews, however saturation -- the point at which no new information or themes were observed (Guest, 2006) -- was reached after eleven interviews. The sample was balanced between male (n=5) and female (n=6) participants. Research participants were selected based on a combination of professional and scholarly expertise. Participants included university and college professors and PR practitioners with a mix of research and consultancy experience. Participants were between 27-61 years of age; eight were Canadian and three were American. Participant occupations were also diverse, although all worked in the area of public relations broadly (see Appendix C for the full list of participants and their occupational characteristics).

The interviews with crisis communications experts explored a number of themes relating to the impact of social media on crisis communication, from how crises are constructed to the role of audiences and challenges facing organizations in responding to and managing both crises and the social media environment in which they are nurtured.

### **Recruitment**

Six pre-selected participants were initially contacted via their professional e-mail. In cases where e-mail addresses were difficult to find, participants were also recruited via Twitter. To demonstrate that their time would be well spent, I introduced myself and the project, tapping into their desire to aid in research or being published as an expert. (See appendix A for full recruitment script.) If participants agreed, an interview date, time, and location were agreed upon. At times these dates were changed to accommodate their

schedules. Though most participants approached were recruited, some participants declined. Overall, the response rate was 85%. The rest of the research participants were recruited using snowball sampling in which confirmed participants recommended others whom they believed to be knowledgeable and influential thinkers in the field (Merriam, 2009). This allowed me to reach populations that I would not have without a referral and helped provide assurances that I was contacting highly qualified participants.

The snowball technique runs the risk of a sampling bias possibly limiting the diversity of my sample. That is, the participants are highly likely to nominate a participant they know well and, thus, likely share the same traits, characteristics, and opinions (Castillo, 2009). This leads to the concern that the obtained sample may only be a small subgroup of the entire population of crisis communications experts. However, to address this sampling bias, pre-selected participants were chosen to be diverse in their field and location, likely keeping the participants fairly varied, with different conceptions and expertise, and thus, providing me with a diverse set of research findings.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The research questions which inform this thesis helped in the coding and analysis of interview transcripts. Thematic analysis is a commonly used qualitative method to identify, report, and analyze data for the meanings produced in and by situations, and events (Aronson, 1994; Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clark, 2006; Patton, 2002; Riessman, 2008). A defining feature of thematic analysis is identifying key themes in text, which are then transformed into codes and aggregated in a codebook (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012) argue that thematic analyses focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within data. Codes are then

applied or linked to raw data as markers for later analysis which may include the following: comparing code frequencies, identifying code co-occurrence, and graphically displaying relationships between codes within the data set (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012).

### **Best Practices**

As aggregation of best results was a goal of this thesis, it is important to now define its parameters. Best practices can be described as a method or technique that has consistently shown superior results to those achieved with other means and has improved the results of the entity (Maire, Bonet & Pillet, M., 2005). Best practices serve to maintain quality (Bogan & English, 1994), present useful guidelines for action to help companies achieve best results (Davies & Kochhar, 2000), improve the performance of the organization (Davies, A.J. & Kochhar, A.K. (2000), and obtain competitive advantages, whether internal, external, or generic (Murray & Sixsmith, 1997).

While best practices can be discovered in numerous ways (assessments, benchmarking, etc.) (Bogan & English, 1994), this thesis will identify best practices for crisis communications in a social media era based on collective advice obtained through interviews with crisis communications experts.

## Chapter 4: Research Findings & Discussion

### Impacts of Social Media on Crisis Communications

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the role of social media in crisis communications, how subject matter experts make sense of its impact, and establish best practices for crisis communicators in the social media era. My thesis sets out to explore the following questions:

RQ1: How do crisis communications experts view the impact that social media has had on how crises are defined?

RQ2: Has social media changed how PR experts conceive of and respond to crisis in a social media age? If so, in what ways?

RQ3: How relevant are established crisis communication theories in the social media age?

These questions were explored and convergence data was derived from the interviews. In what follows, I outline the prevalent positions of major themes offered by crisis communications experts.

#### **Research Question 1: How do crisis communications experts view the impact that social media has had on how crises are defined?**

To address this research question, participants were first asked how they define a crisis. Crises have been defined in myriad ways, and definitions of crisis are equally diverse among experts in the field of crisis communications. Indeed, definitions of crises emphasize a range of components from a negative impact on the brand to an incident that is merely a threat or has *potential* for damage. The most common component of a crisis as defined by the experts interviewed for this study is the existence of negative impact on the corporation's brand or reputation; this separates it from an issue or unfortunate event. The following excerpts highlight this condition:

“Any situation that is causing, or could cause... serious damage to reputation” (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

“Anything that impacts your brand: it could be really small, or really massive” (Mat Wilcox, December 7, 2012).

“Something that is very significant, very big, but that is more in terms of scope. I would say it is something that would have a severe or profound impact on our brand or reputation” (Keith McArthur, December 7, 2012).

“A crisis is something that really jeopardizes the brand you are working for” (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2013).

The second most commonly identified component of a crisis was that the event had to produce a significant monetary impact on the corporation. Numerous experts attested that a crisis negatively affects a corporation’s bottom line or financial position:

“...crisis is a situation or a potential situation online that risks damaging your brand’s bottom line, now or in the future for the long term” (Melissa Agnes, November 22, 2012).

“Any situation that is causing, or could cause, harm... or have a negative impact on organizations or individuals on a financial bottom line” (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

“I think the hallmark of a crisis is something that can affect the organization’s earnings, revenues, and donations” (Anonymous interview, January 15, 2013). Crisis communications experts interviewed for this study also argued that part of

what defines a crisis is that it causes harm to individuals outside of the organization.

Several experts highlighted that a crisis situation needs to produce harm to individuals outside the organization as opposed to harm coming only to the organization. Seen in this way, harm can be reputational, physical, emotional, or financial. Below, excerpts from expert definitions explain this requirement of a crisis:

“The sort of ways I look to define it are one, is there anyone outside the organization damaged or hurt, whether by reputation or financial position or in the worst-case physical circumstance? If the damage is only to the brand, you have a couple of other decision trees to think about; if someone outside the brand is actually hurt, this is a crisis. Whether, again, financial performance, or

stockholders are losing money or somebody is injured, whatever it is, if it is affecting someone on the outside, that is a crisis” (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012).

“Any situation that is causing, or could cause, harm to people and property” (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

“Jeopardizes either the health or security of the customers” (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2013).

“To me a crisis is people or things being harmed, and quite often it is financial, sometimes it is environmental; the worst case, of course, is sickness or death” (Judy Gombita, December 7, 2012).

For some experts, this harm must reach serious injury or death. Those experts felt that, without this extreme level of harm, it is not a crisis but rather an issue for a corporation to address. One expert attests the following:

“Involves life or death matters. So significant that they involve life or death issues, in which case, that is sort of my litmus test for a crisis” (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012).

In addition to having a negative reputation and monetary impact, and causing harm to those outside of the organization, crises are also significant enough that they prevent organizations from completing their everyday requirements. Specifically, a crisis inhibits organizations from completing everyday functions because of the demands of crisis management. Experts outlined this factor in the following ways:

“Any event, large or small, that immediately disrupts a corporation’s ability to efficiently and effectively achieve its mission” (Terry Flynn, December 10, 2012).

“A crisis is something that has the potential to affect the operations of an organization” (Bob LeDrew, November 27, 2012).

“It is an issue that threatens an organization’s ability to function” (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012)

“A crisis is basically something that takes the organization out of its normal, everyday functions” (Anonymous interview, January 15, 2013).

For some experts, a crisis need not actually cause damage; it is just the threat, or potential of damage that constitutes a crisis. The threat of damage to the organization, its brand, its reputation, or its bottom line, is serious enough that it, in itself, can be a crisis:

“For crisis, a general definition is a situation or a potential situation online that risks damaging your brand’s reputation or bottom line... anything that has the potential to hurt the brand in the long term in a short period of time” (Melissa Agnes, November 22, 2012).

“A crisis is something that has the potential to affect the operations of an organization. The potential for a serious impact, it doesn’t have to have a serious impact, just the potential, a certain likelihood of an impact” (Bob LeDrew, November 27, 2012).

For experts, there is no one definition of a crisis, nor is there even one agreed upon requirement for a crisis to be defined as such. Properties of a crisis, in order from most to least agreed upon criteria, comprise a negative impact on the brand or reputation, monetary impact, harm to individuals outside of the organization, for some, this must include injury or death, prevention of daily functions, and threat or potential of damage.

### **Social Media’s Impact on the Development of a Crisis**

To further address the question of how crisis communications experts define the impact that social media has had on how crises are defined, participants were asked if their definition of a crisis changed with the rise of social media. In every case, participants answered that the definition had not fundamentally changed. However, many of the experts explained that social media has modified the dynamics underlying the development of a crisis. They argued that social media amplifies events, increases the likelihood of a crisis occurring, and can offer a platform to create a crisis.

The crisis communications experts interviewed for this thesis all argue that social media amplifies otherwise discrete events into potentially large-scale crises. Some of



these events may have faded quickly without the existence of social media. Consider “United Breaks Guitars” and Dave Carroll’s use of social media to place United Airlines under public scrutiny. After a bad experience with United Airlines in 2008, Carroll, unable to receive compensation for a damaged guitar through traditional means with customer service, turned to YouTube to broadcast his story. Carroll’s YouTube video became widely viewed and his negative experience became known to millions across North America. What would have otherwise been a private issue between Carroll and United Airlines had become a very public incident, and ultimately a corporate crisis. One expert explained, “social media has (sic) made mole hills into mountains” (Judy Gombita, December 7, 2012), and another said “social media has helped to intensify scrutiny of organizations” (Anonymous interview, January 15, 2013). As a demonstration of social media’s impact of events, one study participant described the difference between a negative customer experience before and since social media as lying in the degree of awareness, amplifying the situation beyond what it might otherwise involve in raising the level of public awareness:

“The biggest thing with that is the virality or amplifier effect where, 20 years ago, if I had a crappy customer service experience, I would tell you while I am having coffee. Now I can go on YouTube; I can write a blog post; I can tweet about it; I can point people right at the offender. And all of a sudden I have 2 million behind me, and it becomes a giant deal for the organization. That is the difference: the amplifier effect” (Bob LeDrew, November 27, 2012).

Another research participant raised similar observations, reflecting on two oil spill cases, the 2010 BP oil spill and the 1979 IXTOCI Gulf oil spill, similar in its severity:

“People died in that one and it was as big. So what did social media do? It amplified it. What happened 15 years ago, it was localized and shorter in terms of its period of newsworthiness. Once the immediate issue was dealt with, then it became a local story. It didn’t have national or international impact. What happened with BP was because of the ability to use social media to continue to

amplify. The level of the concern was heightened, and the breadth of the concern was widened because of social media. And, probably, fines are a function of the magnitude or amplification of social media because I don't think the fines were any where near the same level" (Terry Flynn, December 10, 2012)

Social media also increases the probability of a crisis occurring because of the much broader range of prospective complainants - consumers, activists, journalists, and others - monitoring the corporate environment for minor to serious transgressions. As one expert explained, "the likelihood of something becoming a crisis is probably greater. The tendency to overreact is probably greater" (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012). Other experts explained this greater likelihood of a crisis as a result of social media as follows:

"I think we have more crises because of social media because all of the information is out there... Now people can talk about it, they can retweet the information, and other people will retweet it with their opinions... I think the possibility of having a crisis has doubled" (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2013).

"The one thing that has changed with social media, is that social media can initiate a crisis... Farm Boy, Dominos, United Breaks guitars, those things happened because social media is there. They would not be able to share that video were there not the distribution channels that exist based on the Internet" (Bob LeDrew, November 27, 2012).

With social media, the public now can influence the transformation of an event into a crisis, based on their reactions to certain organizational behaviours. This was explained by Christopher Barger as follows, "so this ability to have an individual's bone to pick or an individual's crisis to become a bigger deal, that is probably the bigger change, not the definition of crisis, just who can influence whether something becomes a crisis" (Personal interview, December 19, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

To answer the question, “How do crisis communications experts view the impact that social media has had on how crises are defined?” participants were first asked to define a crisis. As expected, experts in the field of crisis communications have diverse understandings and definitions of a crisis which include components such as a negative impact on the corporation’s brand or reputation, an effect on the corporation’s financial position, harm, serious injury, or death caused to those outside the organizations, a disruption of everyday functions, and a mere potential of damage to the organization.

When asked if social media changed their definition of a crisis, all the experts interviewed for the study stated it had not, however they explained that social media has altered the crisis landscape by amplifying events that can lead to a crisis, increasing the likelihood of an event achieving “crisis” status, and changing who has the ability to spark the construction of a crisis.

### **Research Question 2: Has social media changed how PR experts conceive of and respond to crisis in a social media age? If so, in what ways?**

Overwhelmingly, participants claimed that social media dynamics are changing the need for certain strategies and theories implemented in the case of a crisis. Indeed, many principles reflected in Grunig’s two-way symmetrical model of communication are believed to be even more vital for organizations to abide by if they wish to repair the damage to their image. Strategies include immediate response; commitment to two-way dialogue with public; listening to the audience; building a relationship with the consumer prior to a crisis; being accountable, reacting to the situation, being honest, open, transparent, and credible; being human, authentic, and compassionate; using video technology; and monitoring communications.

### **Social media dynamics: speed and spread of (mis)information**

Social media has changed the landscape of crises and crisis communications. According to the experts interviewed for this study, the biggest change brought about by social media is undoubtedly the speed at which information travels. No other communication platform allowed for information to move with such immediacy. When asked how social media has affected crisis communications, participants overwhelmingly emphasized the notion of “speed”. This means, when a crisis enters the media sphere, it can now literally escalate to a major scale within days, hours, or even minutes. As one expert explains, “online communication is getting faster and faster. Literally in an hour social media can do the same amount of damage that might have taken a week to accomplish in pre social media days” (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

In illustrating the importance of speed, interview participants were probed to reflect on the 2010 BP oil spill, one of the examples used to open this thesis, and to imagine how it might have unfolded before the rise of social media. All participants described the main difference as one determined by the speed with which information travels. Prior to the emergence of social media, information about the spill would have come to light, but it would have been paced in a way that the company would have some degree of control:

“It would have been in the major news media, but there would have been serious lags as we learn of each phase and what is happening” (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

“It wouldn’t have been as quick, it wouldn’t have been as massive, like everyone was talking about it. It would have been more giving out details slowly on exactly what happened, people that died, maybe the reason for it... So whereas here, what happened today was, simultaneously, this company was under fire from the drill rig guys, from the guys at Deepwater Horizon, to the duck people. They had

simultaneously 2000 issues. Whereas 15 years ago, they would have been parceling it out one at a time, slowly” (Mat Wilcox, December 7, 2012).

“[BP] just happened at an incredibly accelerated rate because of the speed of the Internet. I think it just sped it up” (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012).

To the extent information moves at such a rapid speed, all research participants reflected on how broadly news of a crisis can flow through the social networks that make up the Internet today. Additionally, through social media, information can travel vastly, less impeded by regional boundaries. That is, social media is a decentralized networked structure that, through sharing, linking, and posting, permits wider flows of information. In the case of a crisis, this means a crisis can be revealed publicly, globally, making containment of the crisis and its impacts (real and imagined) difficult, if not impossible. Reflecting again on the case of the BP oil spill research participants considered the expanded reach of information in the social media age:

“I think there would have been a lot less information to the public, and a lot less sharing of information” (Mat Wilcox, December 7, 2012).

“Not that it would have stayed local, but it would have stayed more local, more regional, not as global. The world would have known about it, it was a big deal, just not as much” (Melissa Agnes, November 22, 2012).

“Now people can talk about it, they can retweet the information, and other people will retweet it with their opinions... I think the way it used to be, it would have been a little more contained” (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2013).

If information can travel rapidly and broadly, research participants also acknowledged that social media affords opportunities for the spread of misinformation. Social media allows any information to be published without the requirement of truth. In an era when traditional news media ruled the day, corporations were able to correct misinformation or demand a retraction in the event of inaccurate coverage. Today, can false information can be released that will further damage a company’s reputation and

brand, and impede its crisis communications efforts. Moreover, it can also become the origin of the crisis. In some cases, individuals or activist groups will intentionally publish incorrect information to negatively affect a brand, and in some cases to start a crisis. As one expert illustrates: “There are people out there that like to be brand bullies, people who don’t mind misinformation as long as it gives them attention” (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012). Many of the participants for this study described the effortless spread of false information as a new challenge that has the potential for causing harm to an organization by negatively depicting its identity and brand, and requiring more time and resources to respond to and manage the misinformation and fallout. As Bob LeDrew explains: “You will have information sent out all over the place, you will have people sending out inaccurate information, people misinterpreting, people sending out malicious information, adding fuel to the fire, making the fire bigger and bigger. So people like me, our job is to stomp out false fires” (Personal interview, November 27, 2012).

***Strategy as a result of speed and effortless dissemination of (mis)information:  
Immediate Response***

Social media dynamics, which have increased the speed and spread of information, have led to an increase in the requirement for corporations to communicate immediately at the onset of a crisis in order to reduce the negative impact to their image. As one crisis communications expert explained, the speed of response has arguably emerged as the biggest change brought on by social media: “the speed of response, or lack of time to be able to communicate...today it is instant. You don’t have a weekend, you don’t have 24 hours...With social media, it is instantaneous” (Terry Flynn, December 10, 2012). Another study participant describes the impact of social media on the rate and pace of information flow in similar terms: “social media has shifted the

whole idea of ... a very structured news cycle that no longer is sustainable in an era of immediacy” (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012). Meanwhile, Christopher Barger explains the change in pace as follows:

“The emergence of Twitter and Facebook, and some of the other digital platforms, [means] we have even less time to respond than we used to... it gives you even less time to construct your response. You used to have, when something was going on, even if it was breaking like a plane crash, for example, you had time to collect all the right information, call a press conference, whatever you had to do. Now when I say you had time, you had a matter of hours; we are not talking about an extended period of time... That means instead of having a couple of hours to get everything right, we have twenty minutes” (Personal interview, December 19, 2012).

In summary, the crisis communications experts interviewed for this study argue that social media has changed the current landscape by increasing the speed with which accurate and inaccurate information can travel. These dynamics have led to a crisis communications paradigm in which there is an even greater demand and requirement for immediate response from the organization in the advent of a crisis.

#### **Social media dynamics: Audience producers, parody, power, and organization accountability**

Social networking sites are populated by user-generated content. The recasting of the audience from only a consumer to also a producer of content has changed the media landscape and raises interesting dilemmas for organizations that find themselves in nonroutine and threatening situations. No other medium enabled audiences to as easily create their own content that had the potential of being viewed by millions of people worldwide. One of the experts interviewed for this study describes this new environment as one characterized by “drive-by opinionating” (Judy Gombita, December 7, 2012), to refer to the ease with which ordinary people can throw accusations in a highly visible

way at organizations. Others acknowledged the importance of this shift in content production for how organizations plan for, respond to, and manage crisis situations:

“Everybody has their voice, and their voices can be heard...and it is so public, people’s opinions and questions, and when they don’t like something they will just tell it to the world” (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2013).

“It is conversational, partly it is that everyone has a voice and everyone has a tool to publish their voice, partly it is the real time nature of it, and I think it is also that people tend to use it for things that either make them really happy or really upset” (Keith McArthur, December 7, 2012).

Importantly, given that social media is user friendly, free, and only requires a device that can connect to the Internet, it is a platform that almost anyone can use to share their information, opinions, and accusations. Additionally, ubiquitous technology such as smartphones are always on hand to help produce written, video, or audio content.

According to Bob LeDrew, “[there is an] ability to communicate no matter where you were or in what situation, and in a multitude of ways... we are so penetrated by mobile that anything that happens can very well be reported in some way” (Personal interview, November 27, 2012). These traits result in billions of daily users worldwide producing unimaginable amounts of content.

This shift in production associated with the rise of user-generated content has led to the creation of parody, anti-corporate, and spoof sites that potentially increase public power and has increased demand for organization accountability. For example, during the BP crisis, a fake Twitter account, @BPGlobalPR, was created to look similar to BP’s verified Twitter account but generated content that painted the corporation in a very unflattering light. For example, tweets included “We are starting a movement to fix the oil leak. Just mail your garbage to New Orleans and we’ll take it from there. The bigger the better!”, “The ocean looks just a bit slimmer today. Dressing it in black really did the



trick!”, “If we had a dollar for every complaint about this oil spill, it wouldn’t compare to our current fortune. Oil is a lucrative industry”, and “Thousands of people are attacked by sea creatures every year. We at BP are dedicated to bringing that number down. You’re welcome!”. These tweets impeded BP’s crisis communications efforts by constantly reminding other Twitter users, including journalists and politicians, about the negative events unfolding daily. As Bob LeDrew explains:

“The potential for mockery, satire, and parody and mean spirited imposterism is also there in a way that wasn’t before. For example, in the BP crisis there was someone who created @BPglobalPR Twitter account. They began a series of mocking satirical tweets about BP, and you couldn’t do that in 1995, because the medium didn’t exist. You could have put out a fake newspaper if you were extremely resourceful, but that would have required an enormous amount of time and resources that most would not be willing to undertake. Now it is 30 seconds on your computer and you have a fake account and you can mock the organization until the cows come home” (Personal interview, November 27, 2012).

Additionally, this satire served to disrupt the banality of the images of the constant oil flow and refresh the narrative and remind the public not to become complacent and indifferent to what was happening in the Gulf, all impeding BP’s communication efforts.

Arguably, the era of user-generated content enables the public to have greater power and influence on organizations. Where once organizations held power over consumers, consumers are now better able to push back. Crisis communications expert Melissa Agnes describes the shift in this way:

“Every single individual has a voice today. We take to online to vent and praise whatever we experience. Not only do we have a voice, but we demand that voice, as consumers, as individuals. Every single person, not just has a voice, we do have the right to the voice, but we have empowered ourselves with that, and everyone is aware of that, even kids are aware of that” (Personal Interview, November 22, 2012).

The ability for people to publish their own arguments and opinions has intensified demands for corporate accountability. That is, when the public believes a corporation has

committed wrongdoing, they have a platform and an audience to demand that the perceived injustice be resolved. For Melissa Carroll, social media enables people to “actually demand justice; they want it and they want it fast” (Personal interview, January 22, 2013). Caroline Kealey describes this shift as an “accelerated cultural expectation for accountability” (Personal interview, December 17, 2012), and Christopher Barger argues that the affordances of new technology for creating “social media fire” can pressure organizations into making amends or addressing problems more quickly and directly than before: “it is forcing a more active or accountable ownership than perhaps used to be here...the consumer side of me thinks this is actually pretty good because we actually have a little more accountability and candour, and a little less positioning” (Personal interview, December 19, 2012).

The crisis communications experts interviewed for this thesis describe several strategies as increasingly important for managing crises in the social mediascape: being committed to ensuring a constant two-way communication between organization and the consumer, listening to the audience, putting the concerns of the audience over the organization’s, building a relationship with the consumers before the event of a crisis, and taking accountability before it is demanded.

***Strategies as a result of audience producers, parody, power, and accountability: commitment to two-way dialogue with public, listening to the audience, putting the concerns of your public first, building a relationship with the consumer before the advent of a crisis, and being accountable***

A media landscape that enables consumers to be producers and problematizes the power relations between corporations and consumers, affords the audience greater power. Crisis communications experts endorse the increasingly important strategy of being committed to dialogue with the public especially in the event of a crisis, a concept

reflected in Grunig's two-way symmetrical model of public relations but now increasingly important. This involves the organization maintaining a direct engagement with consumers in an open manner, and on an ongoing basis, demonstrating their commitment to dialogue and interaction. As one expert explains: "There is a flattening of the communications environment. Maintaining two-way communications prior to, during, and after a crisis is vital to successful crisis communications" (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012). Experts illustrate the shift toward a two-way dialogue:

"I think commitment to dialogue, communication, to be a communicative organization... it is just the mindset that this is an important way of engaging with your stakeholders... social media does facilitate more open, direct conversation with stakeholders... you can put more effort and opportunity into communicating directly with stakeholders, creating your own community of stakeholders and even activist groups and having a dialogue within that... If you want to use [social media] to achieve the goals you set out, of trust and credibility, then you have to be able to engage in multi-directional form" (Terry Flynn, December 10, 2012).

"People expect that if you are on social media you are not there just as a PR stunt you are there to actually interact with them and give them information" (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2013).

"[Social media] changes the expectations of the market, the audience, are different today. It's all about two-way communications... opening it up to two-way communication, keeping the lines of communication open" (Melissa Agnes, November 22, 2012).

While there is great emphasis placed on the importance of constant communication with the public to demonstrate an awareness of their concerns and commitment to two-way conversation, it is also beneficial for organizations to maintain a positive conversational arc. That is, the public has a platform it can use to discuss the organization, and if the organization is not a part of this conversation there is no way to ensure the conversation moves in a direction that will be favourable to the organization. The experts interviewed for this study warn of the dangers of ceding control over

conversations about your brand and reputation to others, and advise corporations to assert themselves in the new media ecology to reduce the production and flow of negative content:

“So you have two choices, you join the conversation and try to manage best you can, or you let people say what they want to say, and that doesn’t work. It is a conversation, it will take place, you are either part of it or not” (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

“If you are an organization and you aren’t on social media to take part in the conversation and see what has been said about you, it will be hard for you to adjust your communications afterwards regarding that. You have to know what is going on. You need to be participating, you just don’t have a choice... Just to calm them down, calm the rumours, and let them know we are taking care of it” (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2013).

A key element of two-way communication and an increasingly important element of effective crisis communication in a social media era is “active listening”. Social media has provided the public a platform to produce content, express their opinions and their concerns, and it is vital that organizations take the time to read and acknowledge this content. That is, if organizations wish to come out of a crisis with minimal damage, rather than issuing communications with no consideration to the public’s comments/concerns, demonstrate a caring disposition by encouraging deeper discussion on the topic to show they are willing to listen and respond to the public’s concerns. Christopher Barger and Keith McArthur provide examples of times when their organizations allowed the public an opportunity to express their concerns during a crisis and to engage in a discourse. Both situations resulted in positive perceptions of the corporation by the public. Christopher Barger, who was running social and digital communications for General Motors during the bankruptcy and governmental bailout of the North American auto industry, where

billions of taxpayer dollars were provided from the U.S. and Canadian governments, used what he described as an 80/20 communications strategy:

“So the balance we struck was somewhere in the range of 20% of everything we put out was our information proactively being pushed out, 80% of it was [answering audience questions]. Because we realize, in a crisis, people want to know how it impacts them, more than anything else, that is the information they are trying to get out... the best thing we could do was being as responsive as possible to what the outside world wanted to know from us” (Personal interview, December 19, 2012).

While he states this allowed much of the conversation to be determined by the public, he suggested that this approach was both appreciated and respected: “people genuinely thought we were really engaging with them, and that earned positive attention.” Further, to his surprise, he received comments such as “Hey guys, I know today was a bad day, hang in there, it will get better, we are cheering for you”.

Keith McArthur, Vice President of Social Media at Rogers Communications, described a situation where a promoted hashtag during a “Rogers One Number” campaign ended up being a platform for unsatisfied consumers to voice negative experiences and impressions of Rogers. For months, Rogers had thousands of customers broadcasting only negative content concerning Rogers and linking it to the hashtag Rogers was promoting. While Rogers could have removed the promoted hashtag, McArthur states that it remained to allow the consumers a chance to express their opinions and an opportunity to demonstrate that Rogers was listening to their customers. While this event might have caused damage to the reputation of the organization, McArthur confirmed that showing the public that you are listening to their concerns is more important in the long run for reputation.

Related to the strategy of active listening is the importance of putting the concerns of the public before those of the corporation. The research participants interviewed for this study expressed the importance of demonstrating acknowledgement for the public's concerns in several different ways:

“Too many times we miss that and we get into protect the organization mode rather than serve the audience mode. And I think the companies that handle crises by keeping the audiences foremost in mind are those who will weather it better... be committed to providing the information people are looking for rather than thinking about positioning” (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012).

“Try to make sure that your own messages, your own public response, you are speaking to what people are actually concerned about, instead of just what you think they are concerned about” (Keith McArthur, December 7, 2012).

“Put the victims of the crisis and the public first” (Melissa Agnes, November 22, 2012).

“That is a big part of the crisis, you have to help the people who are worried and concerned” (Mat Wilcox, December 7, 2012).

Given the public's ability to speak directly to the corporation through social media channels, there are now more opportunities to form relationships between organizations and their public. Social networking sites enable corporations to communicate directly with consumers, shareholders and others, to develop an online presence, demonstrate a commitment to fulfilling the needs, interests and concerns of their customers, and in general terms showing that they possess good moral character. This opportunity to create a relationship with the public is an important element of successful crisis communications. Interview participants almost universally agreed that the organization's relationship with the public potentially creates a cushion of goodwill, a sense of trust, and a notion of credibility that will assist the organization in minimizing damage to their reputation and brand, and rebuild their image once the period of crisis has

passed. However, this relationship must be fully established before the onset of a crisis.

The importance of the establishment of a pre-crisis relationship is expressed by interview participants in several ways:

“You participate in the conversation before you even have a crisis. You create a cushion of good will, online, so when you have a crisis, people already have a good opinion of you. If the first time people hear about you, or hear about you in any depth, is when you have a crisis, your reputation will take a greater hit than if you had a cushion of good will. Once again, it is easier to create a cushion of good, thanks to the Internet, than it was pre-social media times” (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

“This is about relationship building and your credibility through the strength of that relationship... the halo effect. An organization, based on its past action, the credibility that has been earned by the organization. When stuff hits the fan, when everything is going down, when the organization has completely messed up, the organization is still seen as a good organization because of its prior action, because it was credible in other actions” (Anonymous Interviewee, January 15, 2013).

“Have that history of credibility, giving back to the community, being part of the community, because when a crisis happens, people are going to look at what happened in the past, how responsible you were, how good” (Mat Wilcox, December 7, 2012).

“If you haven’t begun to establish a relationship with an audience you can’t really ask them to listen to you when you have a crisis going on.... Establish my presence so people know when something said is not me, and I have begun to earn some credibility in these networks” (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012).

“You can’t just start it up when a crisis hits, you have to have an engagement, a relationship and the competency in-house to do it. Twitter, Facebook, these are sites that can easily be sites to connect with stakeholders, but if they wait until after the crisis starts to get into the game, it is over” (Terry Flynn, December 10, 2012).

Building a relationship with stakeholders before the onset of a crisis can create “brand advocates”, people who, due to the relationship they have with the organization, will come to its defense in the event of a crisis. Communication from brand advocates is arguably more important in a crisis than the direct communications from the corporation

because outside party testimonials are typically seen as unbiased and more credible.

Keith McArthur supported the development of relationships with brand advocates and

drew from his own experience to highlight its import for the corporation as follows:

“Over time, we built the relationships and got to the point where they were giving us the benefit of the doubt and were participating in our marketing materials, like in our blog posts they wrote blogs how Rogers is good for Android and would come to our defense in social media... It is important for [organizations] to have brand advocates for when things like that happen that can understand their position and help them share it, so it isn't just the other side... You will see more brands finding allies in social media, people who will give them the benefit of the doubt or help explain their position when there is a crisis” (Personal interview, December 7, 2012).

When organizations are guilty of wrongdoing, consumers can voice discontent in such a public manner that many organizations have little choice but to own up to their misdeeds if they wish to alleviate damage to their identity, reputation, or brand. With this increased ability by the public to demand organizations take responsibility for offenses, crisis communications experts advise that corporations assume ownership of their misdeeds, accept blame, responsibility, and be accountable to the public. Taking ownership of the act likely reduces the damage to the image in the case of the crisis since this allows them to look more responsible and honest. For many of the research participants in this study, the open, highly visible nature of the current social media landscape has increased the importance of accountability:

“You could get away with mistakes made before social media, now you pretty much have to say ‘I have screwed up’ or ‘we have messed up’. There is an accountability” (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012).

In summary, experts argue that social media's affordance of user-generated content, which has allowed for a growth in parody sites, public power and influence on organizations, has led to a greater import for two-way communication from the



organization and the consumer, listening to the audience, putting the concerns of the audience over the organization's, building a relationship with the public, and taking accountability.

### **Social Media Dynamics: Lack of Control**

Social media has changed the terms of engagement between content producers and consumers: organizations are no longer the sole producers of content, and thus they no longer control the messages or the meanings of those messages that are generated during a crisis. They may have a privileged voice in a crisis, but it is a voice and an opinion among many. As a result of the ways in which social media has challenged the barriers between organizations and publics, it has become increasingly problematic, if not impossible, for organizations to control crisis narratives. As one study participant explains, "today, anybody who has any kind of information can just go online and give it to the world, and you can't control that" (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2013).

All of the expert interview participants attested to the argument that prior to social media, crisis communicators had much greater ability to control the narrative than they do today. This loss of control is highlighted when participants were asked again to consider the possible dynamics in BP's 2010 oil spill had it occurred in a pre-social media era:

"They would have been able to control the messaging, or hide facts, whatever they wanted to do; it would have been easier to do prior to social media" (Melissa Agnes, November 22, 2012).

"I think the way it used to be, it would have been a little more contained. There wouldn't have been as many images that went out. BP would have been able to control a little bit more of the information that came out, the images and things like that. Now you have so many whistle blowers who can just do it on social media, anonymously, and those images were pretty bad for BP too, videos, whatever. Let's just say they would have been able to contain their messages a bit

more, and contain their crisis. Today, anybody who has any kind of information can just go online and give it to the world, and you can't control that" (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2013).

This shift is highlighted as Bob LeDrew describes a mining crisis in Nova Scotia in 1988 in which the company was able to round up all the family members of the missing miners in a community center, and to keep them out of the reach of journalists. In the current media landscape this would have been infeasible. Indeed, LeDrew points out, "this would be an impossible tactic today, everyone would have a smartphone ... [this means] that communication goes on totally out of control of the organization and beyond control of the journalists" (Personal interview, November 27, 2012).

Another participant explained the moment she knew that crisis communications practitioners were no longer in control of crisis communications and instead control lay in the hands of the public, the witnesses to the events. For Mat Wilcox, that moment was the 2009 crash of US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River: "the public was in control of the whole situation. We were seeing real time photos, people on the ferry, people inside the plane, what was happening. I was watching this, and for the first time we were taking the back seat, whereas before we always had the front seat" (Personal interview, December 7, 2012).

***Emerging Strategy from lack of control: Reacting to the situation***

In a context where control has been called into question, organizations are expected to operate with greater flexibility and adaptability. Various experts interviewed endorsed the new requirement of being able to react to the situation. Given that consumers can produce content that can spread very quickly, it is all but impossible to control the situation or have an entire plan that can be executed with no alterations

required due to unforeseen situations. As one expert stated, “come up with an action plan for the next twenty-four hours. You can’t plan more than twenty-four hours” (Jonathan Bernstein). Experts endorsed this new necessity to react to whatever situation the corporation finds themselves in as follows:

“When I started it was very much more what I call the command and control approach to communications, that we are going to think about the message. And so, now, my sense is that in the context of social media, communicators and organizational leaders have had to cope with the fact that we are no longer in control” (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012).

“With social media, it’s not even a 24/h news cycle it is like a 24 minute news cycle. With those things changing, you see companies reacting quicker, they are on their feet quicker; they are more flexible, more adaptable” (Anonymous Interview, January 15, 2013).

Though experts argue that reacting is a required approach for crisis communications planning given the inability to control the narrative or situation, some still assert the importance of being proactive for successful crisis communications. One participant said, “you have to be ready at all times for something to happen” (Terry Flynn, December 10, 2012) while another participant endorsed the importance of scenario planning when stating “we need to practice and not just have a crisis plan but do active scenario planning to poke holes in what didn’t work in the plan and to identify what did and how we can improve” (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012).

While these experts attest to the importance of advanced planning, they certainly do not disagree that corporations must always be prepared to react quickly to unforeseen situations.

### **Social Media Dynamics: Visibility**

A major change in the landscape of crises as a result of social media is heightened visibility. In an era of ubiquitous media, everyone has the potential to be watchdogs and

citizen journalists. As a result, the misdeeds and transgressions of an organization become immediately more public, allowing very little to remain unnoticed. The experts interviewed for this study reflected on this increased visibility in a number of ways:

“You can’t hide behind once a year reports or shareholders meetings, it is out there all the time” (Judy Gombita, December 7, 2012).

“With social media, there is no place to hide, you are right out there...this radical transparency is the biggest shift” (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012).

“Smart organizations are still going to assume they are going to get caught doing bad things. You can’t assume you are going to escape anything” (Bob LeDrew, November 27, 2012).

“Our mistakes become much more visible” (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012).

Consequently, this increased level of visibility has created new pressures on corporations to commit to principles of honesty, openness, transparency, credibility, humanity, authenticity, and compassion in all of their communications -- in the good times and in the bad.

***Strategies as a result of increased visibility of corporations: Honest, Open, Transparent, Credible, Human, Authentic, and Compassionate***

With the increased public awareness of corporations and their conduct, little remains private. While this visibility may not negatively impact the corporation, the problem occurs when their conduct is improper. Indeed, given this increased visibility, mistakes, misdeeds, or miscommunications are unlikely to go unnoticed and more often than not quickly become public knowledge. As a result, these events can either cause crises or exacerbate existing crises. Either way, instead of attempting to hide their misdeeds, a highly endorsed strategy among crisis communications experts involves being honest, open, transparent, and credible. As one expert interviewed for this thesis

advised, “[social media] will increase the risk for those who are trying to hide things, which they shouldn’t hide” (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

A commitment to honesty, openness, transparency, and credibility is reflected in Grunig’s two-way symmetrical model of communication; in the current media landscape, however, with heightened visibility, experts believe it is even more vital for organizations to abide by these principles if they wish to repair the damage to their image in a crisis. Mat Wilcox advises companies to “own your story, tell the truth... you are going to get caught, so don’t be dumb. It is absolutely number one. There are too many people who know too many things, and people with cell phone cameras and stuff. Don’t even try to go there” (Personal interview, December 7, 2012). Further, being open, transparent, honest, and credible earns organizations trust and strengthens their “relational capital” (see Barney & Hansen, 1994; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schroder & Dawn, 2001). One expert explained best practices as follows:

“The more honest, transparent, and sincere you are with your audience, the more you will appeal to them on a human level and gain their trust and forgiveness...responding to the public’s inquiries and demands for updates in real time, with an understanding and sympathetic tone, while being as open and honest as you possibly can” (Melissa Agnes, November 22, 2012).

Openness, transparency, and honesty can actually shorten the lifespan of a crisis. That is, releasing all available information in a timely and detailed manner will reduce the damaging trickle of negative information for days, weeks, or even years. The slow-release of information in a crisis can erode corporate image and reputation over time. Experts interviewed for this research argue that this is likely to be more damaging in the long run:

“The number one strategy is tell the truth, and what I find is so many CEOs and boards are reticent to tell the whole truth, up front, because they are scared. But,

frankly, you can take a nine-day media story and make it a one-day media story if you just come out and say it. Just spill, get it over with. Don't do this death by a thousand cuts because death by a thousand cuts to a corporation is the worst thing. As scary and awful and painful it might be, it is way better than being reactive down the road" (Mat Wilcox, December 7, 2012).

"Share as much information as you can at any given time. When I say as much information as you can, that means, as much relevant information that you can release that you are convinced is accurate" (Bob LeDrew, November 27, 2012).

Internalizing these goals during the crisis is beneficial for avoiding damaging speculation and rumour-mongering. If the corporation is not open and honest, the public will take this time to speculate reasons for their secrecy; this is often more damaging than the real reasons for withholding information. As Terry Flynn explains:

"The public expects the companies to be transparent. I think the stance of not saying anything leads to more speculation and concern than really is necessary... Not saying anything tells us the company is, first, not ready and were in fact covering something up" (Personal interview, December 10, 2012).

As proof of the effectiveness of openness, honesty, transparency, and credibility, one expert drew on her experience as head of social media for the Montreal Police during Montreal's Occupy Movement demonstration. She stated "people really appreciated what we were trying to do, with telling them, with transparency what was going on, during the intervention... But it is always because we wanted to be transparent, we wanted people to know what was going on really" (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2013).

While being honest, open, transparent, and credible helps reduce the negative impact on a corporation during a crisis, they are attributes that all organizations should strive to abide by every day. Indeed, being open and honest is ideal for preventing crises from arising in the first place. As Judy Gombita puts it, "If you have regular and honest communications, why should you be afraid?" (Personal interview, December 7, 2012).

In the past, crisis communication messaging was expected to be formal in both substance and style. As Christopher Barger explains, “Before the emergence of social networks, I don’t want to say CYA [cover your ass], but, well-meant communications professionals weren’t necessarily just covering your butt, but there was always the reputation management” (Personal interview, December 19, 2012). As a result of social media’s affordance of heightened visibility of corporations, as well as its informal platform where organizations and the public appear to be equal contributors to the conversations, crisis communications experts advise corporations to be human, authentic, and compassionate in their crisis communications. All of the experts interviewed for this research attested to the importance of authenticity and the human voice for crisis communication. Organizations that wish to exit a crisis situation with minimal damage to their image are advised to engage in conversations that are driven by human actors (e.g. CEO, Director of Communications, etc.), sound human, and are conducted in a style that is typically open, natural, accessible, engaging, uncontrived, and demonstrative of compassion, warmth and empathy, particularly to those who may have become victims of corporate misdeeds. Corporations should avoid being seen as ‘spin doctors’ using ‘corporate speak’ or legal jargon. One expert advised there be “greater focus on empathy rather than formal corporate speak that one could hide behind” (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012). Other experts offered the following as evidence for the new requirement of humanity, authenticity, and compassion:

“The good [corporate communicators] are the ones who speak from the heart and aren’t scripted, the really bad ones are the ones who are petrified and are reading from a script... If we have a problem, how are we going to handle it; who’s got the most human voice to do that, because it is hard to be human, it is hard to come across as human... You see, in a crisis management, the guys who come through really, really, well; the reason is because they speak like normal people. They are

not trying to corporate speak, through lawyers or anyone else, this is from the heart. Yes things happen, and that is how you have to be on social media” (Mat Wilcox, December 7, 2012).

“... Sincerity and compassion... It has always been important to your effective crisis communication to speak naturally, not in a stilted way, to speak in a manner that sounds like this is me talking” (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

“Across any of these channels the key is to have the savvy and the deliberate effort of coupling the emotive with the intellectual message because the emotive part tends to get under-treated, which doesn’t work in social media at all” (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012).

“You have to now lead with just ‘my job is to be direct, candid, and authentic’. If there is a perception on the part of the audience that I am trying to position, or I am covering my butt, or talking in corporate speak, that is going to be reflected much more negatively than it used to be” (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012).

Given the importance of transparency, openness, honesty, humanity, and compassion in crisis communications as a means to exit a crisis with minimal damage to the corporation, the majority of participants endorsed the use of video. According to experts, video is the best platform to demonstrate compassion and openness:

“More now, I encourage clients in serious situations to definitely include video in their communications because no communication can communicate caring and compassion better than a video... These days, if I don’t see a video, I assume a lawyer is controlling communication” (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

Specifically, experts endorsed the use of YouTube to broadcast their video due to its informality and low production level, creating a more seemingly authentic, personal message with less corporate control and manufacturing, all elevating its reception by the public. One expert attested the following:

“If you are trying to come across as being very apologetic, demonstrate transparency and responsibility, then there is no more transparent way, where else would we go but YouTube that has that sense of *cinéma vérité*. It isn’t a highly produced thing, it is just a flip cam with someone speaking without the high production value and the packaging that people no longer want to hear. Which is actually contrary to their very objective, which is to come clean in that kind of



framing in full accountability and transparency, without the packaging that immediately erodes trust” (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012).

Experts offered advice for success in demonstrating these traits on camera: use colloquial language, small words, no legal words, no weasel words, speak right to the camera, do not use a script, know key messages (Bob LeDrew, November 27, 2012), show empathy, sincerity, make the connection with your audience, and show the whites of your eyes (Melissa Agnes, November 22, 2012).

As a result of the heightened visibility afforded by social media, the actions of an organization have become much more public, thus allowing for very little to remain unnoticed. Experts stress the importance of being honest, open, transparent, credible, human, authentic, and compassionate as a crisis communications strategy but also as a code of conduct in how corporations should communicate at all times.

**Social media dynamics: Audience producers, speed, spread, and false information**

Recall the dynamics within the social media landscape where in the audience is a producer, there is an accelerated speed of information, a vast spread of information, and an easy dissemination of false information. According to the communication experts interviewed for this project, it is these characteristics afforded by social media that have led to the requirement of monitoring communications, directed to and concerning your organization, on all mediums, prior to and during a crisis.

***Strategy as a result of audience as producers, increased speed, spread, and capability for false information: Monitoring***

Monitoring public communications is a strategy widely endorsed by the interview participants in this study for understanding how an organization is perceived in the public arena and for reducing the possibility of reputational damage by allowing the

organization to anticipate problems if/when they arise. That is, monitoring can be used to get a general sense of public opinion, can be a warning of an emerging crisis, and can be a tool to monitor communications during a crisis. To be sure, monitoring all communications gives the organization a sense of where it lies in public opinion. As one expert described “monitoring is playing a sensory role to help organizations understand the things that can impact their ability to achieve their goals and objectives... My view is that organizations must be in tune with their internal and external environments all the time” (Terry Flynn, December 10, 2012).

Monitoring the environment has always been important, even before social media. Sherry Devereaux-Ferguson (1993) attended to the importance of monitoring in engaging in long-range strategic planning, offering credible and useful advice to those in decision-making positions, and making appropriate choices in managing communications. At the time, monitoring relied heavily on print media in addition to television and radio sources, and even survey results, court cases, conference proceedings, and newsletters (*ibid*). Some of the experts interviewed for this study recalled previous monitoring practices: “we used to cut articles out of the newspaper and stick them on a piece of paper and photocopy them” (Mat Wilcox, December 7, 2012) and “the olden days where you go through your media clippings in the morning and figure out what to do” (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012).

Now, with the dominance of social media there has been a veritable explosion of public discourse and a constant flow of information. As a result, experts now advise corporations to monitor communications in real time, particularly in times of crisis. All of

the crisis communications experts interviewed for this study attested to the importance of real-time issues surveillance:

“There is a need that didn’t exist, to monitor what is going on online on a 24/7 basis” (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

“It is even more important to have an online program in place than it used to be, because of the speed at which information can be passed around. So the investment in online monitoring tools, or real time monitoring tools is more critical than it used to be” (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012).

“You need to know on a daily basis and, more realistically, in real time, what is being said about your brand online, continuously... You need to be monitoring... Google Alerts, twitalert, so you know what things are being said about you” (Melissa Agnes, November 22, 2012).

“Today [consumers] have Twitter, Facebook; they have whatever, their blog, and it can be really damaging. So that is why monitoring is so important” (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2012).

Monitoring can serve to warn organizations of impending issues and can allow an organization to avert an issue on track to escalating into a crisis, and, thus, is an invaluable tool for all corporations. Expressly, if you do not know about the emerging issues, how can they be dealt with? As one expert explained, “the sooner you detect an online crisis, the greatest potential you have at regaining control and not having a damaging impact on your brand” (Melissa Anges, November 22, 2012). If an organization’s monitoring practices make it aware of developing issues, they are in a much better position to respond before those issues turn into crises. Other experts attested to this sensory role of monitoring as follows:

“Companies are monitoring all of the social media conversations and using it to anticipate and prevent crises, and to deal with them better when they do break” (Keith McArthur, December 7, 2012).

“I am not at all convinced that organizations broadly have not gone beyond the first primitive steps in monitoring analysis of communications, even in non-crisis times. And what that leads to is an absolute scramble, when something blows up,

there is a scramble of ‘oh my god, what is going on, we need to monitor’. If there were systems in place, organizations would be in a far more secure situation” (Bob LeDrew, November 27, 2012)

Monitoring remains important after an event has developed into a crisis since a key strategy in crisis communications entails monitoring discourse concerning the organization and its crisis to stay current with public sentiment and concern:

“If you are in the crisis management business you know the trends of where a situation is going. By the time it hits the media, hopefully you know the facts before it does because you are monitoring and know where it is going” (Mat Wilcox, December 7, 2012).

Monitoring also provides corporations with rich data that can be used as feedback for their communications and to inform their responses. As Christopher Barger explains:

“There are more potential sources of input to know how something is being received, what people are saying about you, how effective you have been at getting your message out. If you have a good solid monitoring program in place, what messages that you have just sent out are resonating, what are people saying, how are they receiving them, are they positive or negative. Monitoring tools are telling me that it isn’t working, that gives me sort of real time, I can fix this, or I need to change tactic, or this isn’t working” (Personal interview, December 19, 2012).

Though all participants endorse the requirement for monitoring communications in real time to avoid, or reduce the negative impact of a crisis, some participants questioned the legitimacy of monitoring and its future. Some stressed the importance of gaining a better understanding of what can be achieved from monitoring. One expert said, “we need to get deeper in understanding how this all ties together and what is the effect of this communication from the individual tweeters, especially those who have the influencers on the messages the organizations put out” (Anonymous interview, January 15, 2013). Another questioned the difficulties in understanding what to do with the monitored material as follows:

“Monitoring social media right now is crazy, like 50,000 comments an hour on an issue, and which ones count, how do you respond, how do you know, how do you do this? And measurement is terrible, how are you going to measure? It is complete and utter bull shit, and you can quote me on that. Every PR agency is making it up and (you know I had an agency for 20 years so I know exactly and it is bullshit) no one knows how to measure. And clients don’t know how to pay for it. So there is a real problem of where the PR agency crisis world is going, compared to what the clients actually need” (Mat Wilcox, December 7, 2012).

Given the shift to abundant user-generated content, the accelerated speed of information, a vast spread of information, and easy dissemination of false information, crisis communications experts universally agreed that continuous monitoring has become increasingly important for gaining a handle on the tenor and tone of public opinion, particularly in the context of a crisis, to help limit the spread of misinformation and the negative impact on the organization’s image and reputation.

## **Conclusion**

Has social media changed how communicators respond to periods of crisis and uncertainty? The crisis communications experts interviewed for this study describe new dynamics afforded by social media that have changed the landscape in which crises develop, which subsequently led to new, and existing but increasingly endorsed, crisis communications strategies that corporations must follow to minimize damage to their image, reputation, and brand. Social media dynamics and the ever important strategies derived from these dynamics include the following: increased speed of information, the wide spread of information, and easy dissemination of misinformation has led to the requirement for immediate response from corporations in a crisis; social media’s afforded platform on which the public can produce their own content, which increased the creation of parody sites and audience power and influence, has led to a required commitment to two-way dialogue with the public, listening to the audience, putting the concerns of the

public first, building a relationship with the consumer before the event of a crisis, and being accountable; social media serving as everyone's soap box, which has reduced the control of communication by corporation, has led to need to react and adapt correctly and quickly to the current situation; social media's increasing of corporate visibility has led to the necessity of being honest, open, transparent, credible, human, authentic, and compassionate, which can be achieved through the use of video technology, namely YouTube; and finally, social media's affordance of audience as producers and the speed and spread of information has led to the need to continuously monitor all communications.

**Research Question 3: How relevant are established crisis communication theories in the social media age?**

Research participants were asked to outline key crisis communication strategies they currently use and to reflect on strategies they used before the rise of social media. It became evident that, the practice of crisis communication has been influenced significantly by the emergence of social networking sites. New strategies have been endorsed and some existing strategies became more important than ever, however, certain strategies that may have once been prominent in repairing or restoring a damaged image or reputation no longer hold merit in the contemporary media environment.

Benoit's image restoration theory, detailed in chapter 3, offers five major strategies for handling a crisis: denial (simple denial or shifting the blame), evading responsibility (provocation, claiming accident, defeasibility, or good intentions), reducing offensiveness (bolstering, minimizing, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, or providing compensation), corrective action, and mortification. In what

follows, I review the value of Benoit's theory in light of changes occurring in the media landscape and based on the interviews with crisis communications experts.

### **Denial and Minimization**

Both minimization and denial are rendered more problematic in the realm of social media and are, thus, no longer approved for crisis communications.

#### ***Denial***

Benoit argues that corporations can apply the strategy of denial by refusing to acknowledge that the crisis exists, or passing the blame for the crisis to another party as a way of reducing negative public perception and restoring the corporation's reputation and image. In a previous media landscape, the strategy of denial could have aided the corporation in restoring a damaged image by alleviating blame; in the current social media landscape, where there is a heightened visibility, denying the truth is dangerous, if not impossible. Corporations which have denied involvement in a crisis, only to later be proven culpable, face a greater risk to their image than if they had admitted to the incident up front. That is, deceitful denials, once less likely to be exposed, are now, in a social media era, quickly spotted by the community and likely further inflame the issue. The strategy of denial is now widely panned as undesirable. As one of the research participants in this study explained, "we can't deny that there is a crisis when there is a crisis" (Bob LeDrew, November 27, 2012).

A common denial technique is to simply shut off the flow of communications with the public. Yet, in a social media age defined by networked flows of information and marked by expectations of dialogue and interaction, this is likely to generate blowback. The social media era involves a "requirement to respond, because not

responding is not an option anymore” (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012). This shift away from the denial strategy was explained by another interview participant in this way:

“Smart organizations are still going to assume they are going to get caught doing bad things. You can’t assume you are going to escape anything... Share as much information as you can at any given time. When I say as much information as you can, that means as much relevant information that you can release that you are convinced is accurate” (Bob LeDrew, November 27, 2012).

### ***Minimization***

Benoit argued that public discontent associated with an organizational crisis can be minimized by downplaying its magnitude (Schuetz & Lilley, 1999). The aim of the approach is to convince the public that the event was less harmful than it may have appeared initially, and, thus reducing the negative impact to the corporate image (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). While this may have been possible within a landscape of television, radio, and newspaper, whereby corporations and their behaviour were not as public or visible, arguably, within a media landscape where there is a heightened visibility of corporate actions, this strategy is considered infeasible. As one of the study participants explained, “with social media, there is no place to hide, you are right out there” (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012). Now, with countless witnesses, citizen journalists, and a platform to easily and widely share their experiences, observations, and displeasure, “anybody can be a whistle blower and post it to social media” (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2013). This has challenged the ability of organizations to control the nature and flow of information. In the past, corporations at the center of a crisis had greater control over the production of imagery, access to the media, and the type of content that circulated publicly: “they would have been able to control the messaging, or hide facts, whatever they wanted to do; it would’ve been easier to do prior to social media” (Melissa Agnes,



November 22, 2012). As a result of social media dynamics such as user-generated content, which allows for public whistle blowing and heightened visibility of crises, there is a higher likelihood that all facts will surface eventually. Consequently, the experts interviewed for this thesis attested to the danger of minimizing strategies since they risk creating more damage, particularly to an organization's reputation and credibility.

Research participants expressed their concern over the use of minimization in the following ways:

“No one is hiding. If there is a perception on the part of the audience that I am trying to position, or I am covering my butt... that is going to be reflected much more negatively than it used out be... Whatever you have to say, I will listen and try to respond; I will not shy away from the negative stuff” (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012).

“[Social media] will provide more raw data on a crisis, it will increase the risk for those who are trying to hide things which they shouldn't hide” (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

Denial and minimization are no longer optimal crisis communication strategies.

Setting aside the question of ethics, given the ubiquitous nature of social media, its emphasis on visibility and networked information flows, corporations are less able to ignore problems, hide from facts, minimize or deny the situation but rather, in consideration of the overall brand and reputation, offer up factual information as soon as it becomes available. In this context, denial and minimization have been replaced by a great emphasis on the importance of honesty and transparency:

“The more honest, transparent you are with your audience, the more you will gain their trust and forgiveness” (Melissa Agnes, November 22, 2012).

“The number one strategy is tell the truth. I think that is the biggest trend in crisis management you will see over the next two years. People are actually going to tell you way more information than what you wanted to know. They are going to say ‘ok as a public company we are just going to suck it up and we are going to do it right the first time’”. So is honesty more important now with social media?

“Absolutely. Number one! You are going to get caught, so don’t be dumb. There are too many people who know too many things, and people with cell phone cameras and stuff. Don’t even try to go there” (Mat Wilcox, December 7, 2012).

### **Mortification**

Unlike the strategies of minimization and denial, Benoit’s strategy of apologizing has not been as easily discredited. For Benoit (1995), an apology can be strategically useful for restoring one’s image, alleviating guilt, and promoting reconciliation after wrongdoing has occurred. Crisis communications experts interviewed for this project universally endorsed the value of apologizing after a transgression has occurred, and in the case of a crisis in particular. As one project participant reasoned, “it is very important to make the apology, show you’re contrite” (Anonymous interview, January 15, 2013).

Another expert expressed support of apology as a strategy for crisis communication:

“It is almost the standard thing you counsel anybody... An apology is a way of getting out in front of consumer outrage” (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012).

Evidently, experts still endorse Benoit’s strategy of mortification to reduce damage to an image in the case of a crisis. However, given that Benoit’s theory was developed before the rise of social media, new communicative dynamics now exist that change the importance, value, and application of this strategy. Specifically, dynamics afforded by a social media landscape have led to increased pressure on corporations that commit wrongdoing to apologize.

Social media has developed and brought with it new social and cultural dynamics. Social media offers a platform for the public to voice their experiences, their concerns, and their demands in a very public manner. This has arguably provided greater power over how issues rise and fall, and which events become crises, than ever before. Using

this platform the public can now demand that organizations be held accountable and apologize for the transgression and any subsequent harm. As one study participant explained, “All of a sudden you don’t just have four reporters calling you and asking you if you are going to apologize, you have 150,000 people on YouTube liking a video saying they should apologize. It makes it so much easier to organize boycotts and campaigns against the organization. This increases the pressure” (Bob LeDrew, November 27, 2012). Another expert described it similarly: “social [media] is a factor in driving an apology, people want to see organizations and leaders take accountability... So I think it is forcing a more active or accountable ownership of an apology than perhaps used to be there” (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012).

Additional pressure for organizations to apologize originates from the two-way flow of communication afforded by social networking sites. This increases the perception that organizations are not soulless bodies, but instead, are made up of humans who listen and respond to comments and concerns, and who can form a relationship with the public. With the availability of social media, the public expects that corporations will abide by human conventions and, in the case of a transgression, the appropriate human behaviour is to apologize. Indeed, “social media puts a human face on a company and so apologizing or expressing remorse and sorrow, those are human traits. So I think, yes, when a brand does use social media and takes on more human qualities, we expect it to act more human” (Keith McArthur, December 7, 2012).

According to the crisis communications experts interviewed for this study, this augmented pressure for an organization to apologize for wrongdoing has increased the frequency of apologies that are offered. When asked if social media is a factor in the

increase of public apologies, one expert stated, “in my mind, it is the only factor” (Mat Wilcox, December 7, 2012). Moreover, this frequency with which corporations offer apologies will only increase in the future. Another research participant described this trend as inevitable: “I think we will see more and more apologies because you just don’t have a choice at that point, you have to show your human side, either your company or public organization, or whatever. And I think that is what is scaring all those companies, is to show your human side” (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2013).

As a result of this pressure, there is also an accelerated response time for the issuing of an apology, as corporations are pressured to request forgiveness sooner in hopes of saving their reputation, or at least minimizing further damage to their image, reputation, and brand. As one research participant explains, “the speed to which you come to that point is greater. Because of the pressure social media exerts” (Bob LeDrew, November 27, 2012). The luxury of time to assess impact and to weigh the strategic value of issuing an apology is also no longer available; experts interviewed for this research believe that apologies must be offered before the public makes its demand.

A final change among crisis communicators of the mortification strategy in the current landscape stems from the audience’s ease of voicing their opinions, which increases the requirement for the apology to be received effectively. That is, social media offers a platform for public commentary on everything organizations do, from the actions that lead to crises to the strategies they use to manage them. One expert described this as “drive by opinionating” (Judy Gombita, December 7, 2012). However, negative comments attached to the apology may also hinder the advantages an apology can offer. Thus, it is even more critical that an apology that is offered be well crafted. Indeed, one

expert explained, “when you do a bad job now, it gets talked about a lot” (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012), while another expert agreed, “social media makes people pour over the actual words more ‘oh I don’t think he sounded contrite’, or ‘you know I guess she kind of did it’” (Judy Gombita, December 7, 2012).

Given the importance of a well-crafted apology, experts advise corporations of the importance of demonstrating human qualities when expressing their contrition for committing wrongdoing. Indeed, one expert explained that, “an apology has to be real and human. Whereas before it could be a three-line statement, now it has to be from the heart, it has to be real or else people won’t believe it” (Mat Wilcox, December 7, 2012). Further, experts argue that corporate speak, legal jargon, and other formal discourses must be removed from the apology, leaving only human qualities to produce a desired effect. “There is a greater focus on authenticity, transparency, empathy, rather than formal corporate speak that one could hide behind” (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012).

### ***Social Media as an Apology Platform***

Social media not only changes the context in which organizations are required to apologize; it also provides a valuable apology platform. Specifically, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook offer a different approach, feel, and connotation to the apology than other, traditional, mediums. Indeed, as Bob LeDrew explained, “[social media] changes the ways you deliver that apology” (Personal Interview, November 27, 2012). Importantly, the experts interviewed for this thesis attested that the social media platform can afford an apology with advantages and a higher degree of success.

There are several reasons why social media provides an advantageous platform on which to apologize, in comparison with other mediums. For some, social media provides a transparent, candid platform, affording the apology and the corporation a sense that they are being open and authentic. For example:

“If your strategic objective is to come across as being very apologetic, transparent and responsible then you will want to do so in the most radically, authentic, and transparent way possible, which is going to be on social media and probably, out of all those things, I would say, YouTube will float to the top in a hurry” (Caroline Kealey, December 17, 2012).

Others believe social media’s advantage as an apology platform is due to its personal, individual manner: “social media allows you to have a more personal apology where you can apologize to individual customers or stakeholders where traditional media you would be apologizing to a group” (Keith McArthur). Some contend that it is the humanity of social media apologies that lend a greater chance of acceptance: “personally, I think social media, an apology on social media, has a little more human value, human interest value, to it... It doesn’t look as much like a PR stunt than if you did a press conference, or something like that” (Melissa Carroll, January 22, 2013).

Social media apologies are advantageous because of the amplification effect, where the consequences of events are intensified either positively or negatively. As Jonathan Bernstein argued, “Apologies have always worked, if they are done well. So anything that works well can be magnified by social media, just like anything that works poorly can be magnified by social media” (Personal interview, December 4, 2012).

Other experts attest that social media is a more suitable platform for apologizing because it offers a corporation the ability to produce, to control, their content. That is, prior to social media, traditional media would crop and alter an apology, reducing the

apology to a sound bite, tearing the apology from its context, adding their own framing, background information, and opinions. One expert explained:

You don't know how much of your apology will be used by traditional media. By definition, a balanced story is only 50% of your side, and if you are in a negative situation, you won't even get that. So your apology may appear on traditional media, along with quotes from your critiques. But if I put my apology up on YouTube, I can control it (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

While social media has destabilized corporate control over the surrounding narrative during a crisis, social media offers the organizations a guarantee that for those minutes of the video, or post, it is their voice entirely, void of any competing opinion. Indeed, one expert explained, "I think social media is better accepted because, in the moment at least, you don't have immediate competition for another opinion. You are dealing with your side of the story, which is uniquely strong" (Jonathan Bernstein, December 4, 2012).

Not all experts agreed that social media offers an advantage as an apology platform. Some believe traditional media offers a more credible and trustworthy source. Indeed, one expert attested, "there definitely still is the credibility that mainstream traditional media has" (Anonymous interview, January 15, 2013), which can lend an apology delivered on this platform these qualities of trustworthiness and credibility, resulting in a better reception. According to another study participant:

"When there is someone doing a broadcast interview in 60 minutes here in the States and they say 'we have made some mistakes and I am personally sorry, and as an organization we are sorry' that carries almost a little more weight than just a tweet. I think people still see an added layer of seriousness, when they did it on the traditional media. So going to the traditional media feels to me at this point a little bit more serious of an apology than not" (Christopher Barger, December 19, 2012).

Perhaps the best practice may be in a compromise whereby the apology is offered on many different platforms, gaining advantages afforded from each medium. Experts agreed with this multi-platform approach as follows:

“You need to apologize via traditional media and then also apologize on social media too so they both work in tandem” (Anonymous interview, January 15, 2013).

“[Use] all channels available to make sure the message is communicated effectively to all their stakeholders” (Terry Flynn, December 10, 2012).



## **Discussion**

The crisis communications experts interviewed for this research universally agreed that social media has impacted how crises emerge and how organizations respond to and manage them. Crises and crisis communications are now situated in a social media landscape defined by different kinds of relations and effects: audiences are both producers and consumers; there is a heightened expectation for authenticity, transparency, and human contact between organizations and consumers; information and misinformation spreads instantly and more widely than in the past; and decision-making about how to respond to a crisis or an otherwise destabilizing set of events is dramatically faster than at any other time in history.

Effective crisis communication is important for managing organizational relations and protecting organizational identity, as one of the crisis communications experts interviewed perceptively explains, “the public understands that corporations have crises, what they don’t forgive is a bad response” (Terry Flynn, December 10, 2012).

Consequently, this thesis aims to provide practitioners with a set of best practices offered by crisis communications experts on how to manage nonroutine, threatening events in an increasingly complex, hyper-visible media environment. Indeed, experts interviewed outlined strategies to be used in the case of a crisis within this social media landscape.

A revisiting of crisis communication theory and practice is important in the context of a media landscape in which the public has a platform to express and share their experiences, both positive and negative, with corporations, governments, nonprofit organizations, and other actors. Consequently, certain existing strategies were deemed more problematic while others have gained an enhanced value. Indeed, certain strategies

offered in Benoit's image restoration theory are more problematic within the social media era. Interviews showed that the visibility of organizational wrongdoing has never been so great. Bad behaviour will eventually be recorded and ultimately released, by someone. It is thus undesirable, if impossible, to deny that a negative act has occurred, to pass the blame on to others, to shut off communication entirely, or to minimize the extent of the damage. Organizations which do so are vulnerable to more negative impacts on their identities, reputations, and brands. Conversely, Grunig's two-way symmetrical model of public relations is arguably more relevant than ever (Grunig, 2001).

Based on interviews with a broad sample of crisis communications experts, the following practices have been identified as crucial to effective crisis management in the social media age. Each strategy is briefly identified and explained using the cases of the BP oil spill, Chick-Fil-A, and Paula Deen for illustrative purposes.

***Respond immediately to your public at the onset of a crisis***

Immediately upon notification of a crisis, corporations must react and respond in real time in order to reduce negative impact to the brand. The corporation must release a statement, on both traditional and social media platforms, with as much detail and accuracy as available. This approach offers the opportunity to appear credible and responsible, while aiding in counteracting or extinguishing speculation and rumours.

BP's first Twitter and Facebook post after the spill was April 27<sup>th</sup> and May 2<sup>nd</sup> respectively while Paula Deen allowed nearly a week before releasing a statement, extensive amounts of time in this media landscape in which immediacy is the expected speed of information. Without immediate, informative statements the public would, and

did begin speculating and filling the information void on its own, at a rapid rate, which in this environment spread vastly without borders.

***Be committed to maintaining open two-way dialogue***

Throughout a crisis, organizations must maintain a dialogue with their public. Social media is not a platform for releasing official, top down announcements and syndicated one-way messages. Instead, two-way conversations and direct engagement with the public must be maintained in which the corporation and the public hold equal power over how events and their significance are constructed. This commitment offers corporations the best chance at directing the narrative towards a positive end.

While Chick-Fil-A made a concerted effort to respond to public comments and inquiries and maintain a two-way dialogue with its public on its Facebook page, BP failed to adopt this approach. Recall, BP did not respond to the comments or tweets during the crisis. In fact, BP did not communicate much at all via its own Twitter account, @BP\_America, and when it did it was not in a two-way mode but rather a one-way communication channel whereby the corporation simply pushed out press releases found on its website.

***Listen to your audience's concerns and place them over the concerns of the corporation***

During a crisis, it is important for an organization to understand the public's reactions to and concerns about the event, and deal with these concerns above those of the corporation. While up-to-date information is very important, approximately one quarter of the communications released is typically pushed from the corporation while the remaining communication is determined by the public and their concerns. This

communication ratio demonstrates the corporation is mindful of the effect the crisis has had on the public and is intent on rebuilding the damaged relationship.

Understanding and addressing the concerns, demonstrating public voices are being heard and considered should have been the priority in BP's crisis communications, however, BP emphasized corporate messaging with little acknowledgement of the public, leaving the public to believe they, or the environment were not a concern of BP.

***Build a relationship with your public prior to a crisis***

Corporations must make a concerted effort to form relationships with their public prior to a crisis, a task made very achievable through the conversational nature of social media. In doing so, corporations can establish their voice, morals, and character, which may afford them a cushion of good will, a sense of trust, a notion of credibility during a crisis, and even brand advocates coming to defense of the organization in the midst of a crisis.

BP had not been active on social media for months prior to the spill and only after the crisis was in full swing did they it to social media, leaving the public completely unaware of BP's image, character, voice, and morals, and more vulnerable to negative impact.

***Be accountable before the public demands you be accountable***

When organizations are guilty of wrongdoing, they must assume ownership of their misdeeds, accept blame and responsibility, and be accountable to the public, prior to its demand. This approach often allows the corporation to appear responsible and honest and reduces the negative impact on the brand or reputation.

Unfortunately, BP opted to pass the blame to their contractors and employees, only accepting blame months after the spill when legal action demanded it. This approach made BP seem very untrustworthy, secretive, and callous, causing more harm to their already damaged brand. Paula Deen also failed to accept full accountability. Instead, Deen blamed the discrimination and racial slurs on her southern upbringing and age. Her team released the following statement “she was born 60 years ago when America’s South had schools that were segregated, different bathrooms, different restaurants and Americans rode in different parts of the bus. This is not today” (Messer, 2013).

***Be flexible and adaptable***

While planning and proactivity certainly remain beneficial as a crisis communication strategy, corporations must now master flexibility and adaptability given that consumers produce their own content, whether true or false, which can spread very quickly, calling control into question. It is all but impossible to control the situation or have an entire plan that can be executed with no alterations because of unforeseen situations. Corporations must always be prepared to react as quickly as possible to unforeseen situations.

BP, unable to cope with the lack of control of not only the spill, but also the narrative, failed to demonstrate that they could adapt to the current situation and provide solutions to the spill or appropriate statements in a timely manner that would reduce the public’s discontent and dismay.

***Be honest, open, transparent, and credible in all corporate behaviour***

With the social media surveillance environment today, corporations must abide by the principles of honesty, openness, and credibility. Social media has proven effective at

exposing the gap between what the company states and the truth. Therefore, corporations must ensure all communications be accurate, with as much detail as possible, released on both social and traditional outlets.

Chick-Fil-A failed to be honest, transparent, or credible when it opted to falsify reports for the reason behind ending the partnership with Henson's toy company, blaming the separation on a fabricated "health reason", and creating a fake Facebook account pretending to be a member of a public in order to release positive information about the company. When these events were publicly revealed, the company lost public trust.

Additionally, BP should have released all the details as forthrightly as possible, resulting in one very bad story as opposed to regular bad-news features with a trickle of new, unfortunate information being released everyday. Indeed, a steady release of small amounts of bad news causes more damage to the image than one terrible story with all the horrifically accurate details presented at once. While honest accounts of the incident may have shone a negative light on BP, it was the best approach given that the public, in today's environment, are ever more critical of dishonesty, stonewalling, spinning, minimizing, and denying the truth. Additionally, BP failed to use social media to demonstrate how it estimated the flow of oil into the ocean, how employees were working to fix the spill, how the clean-up was progressing and with what strategies, and what new equipment was being developed for preventing this kind of incident in the future. This approach would have presented the corporation as credible, honest, and responsible, all invaluable characteristics for a smooth image recovery.

### ***Apologize***

Organizations which have transgressed must now offer an apology for almost every wrongdoing, and must do so almost immediately and effectively. The apology for the crisis and its damage should be delivered to traditional media channels and shared across the social mediascape. The source delivering the apology should be unscripted, use eye contact, avoid corporate or legal jargon, acknowledge responsibility, express compassion for the damaging effects, highlight human qualities of the corporation, and outline the ameliorative actions to be taken to correct this situation and limit the potential for its reoccurrence.

Paula Deen's camp released three apology videos, however, they were full of excuses and denials where Deen herself was painted as the victim. Consequently, not one of the apology videos served its repairing purpose.

BP also issued an apology, however, it was received poorly, likely because of the late delivery (one and a half months after the commencement of the spill), its high production level, the apologizer's highly scripted, stiff speech and his perceived insensitivity and insincerity, and its very public scrutiny on social media creating a feedback loop whereby poor reception was fueled by public criticism.

### ***Be human, authentic, and use compassion in all communications***

Organizations that wish to exit a crisis situation with minimal damage to their image are advised to engage in conversations that are driven by human actors, sound human, and are conducted in a style that is typically open, natural, accessible, engaging, uncontrived, and demonstrative of compassion, warmth and empathy, particularly to those who may have become victims of corporate misdeeds. Human aspects of the

corporation must be emphasized in all communications from updates on Facebook to CEO addresses. This can be achieved through emphasizing the employees and by avoidance of corporate speak and instead the adoption of informal communication that was widely understood. Humanization is also achieved through two-way communication and relationship building with the public, personalizing every response, and responding directly to the individual, a requirement now in an era where customers are increasingly expecting personal attention.

BP was unable to effectively emphasize that it was not a soulless corporation but, rather, made up of individuals, just like its public. BP could have used flip cameras with their employees getting dirty, helping to clean up the mess on the Gulf, and then posting it on all social media sites. The employee-made videos avoid the high production feel and emphasize the personal, human nature of the company. Additionally, BP might have accented its human qualities through communicating directly with their stakeholders instead of releasing impersonal mass messaging.

### ***Monitoring***

Throughout the entire course of a crisis, organizations must be monitoring all communications directed to and referencing their organization, in real time, in order to understand how the organization is being perceived, anticipate problems if/when they arise, quash false rumours, or modify communications accordingly, all aiding in reducing the damage to the organization's image and reputation.

While Chick-Fil-A applied a concerted effort in monitoring the communications on its Facebook page, it neglected to monitor and address the communication on Twitter. BP was also neglectful in its monitoring requirements. BP should have been monitoring



all communications, in real time, including relevant hashtags on Twitter (#BP, #Oilspill, #GulfCoastdisaster, #Greedyoilexecs), to get a sense of public opinion, keep current with the narrative, and respond to false rumours and negative statements as they appeared, in particular the parody site BPGlobalPR.

**Challenges: Easier said than done**

The advice accumulated by experts for organizations in a crisis would undoubtedly lend the organization the greatest chance to exit a crisis situation with minimal damage, or perhaps even prevent a crisis from developing. However, when put into practice, practitioners are likely going to encounter barriers. That is, though the strategies offered now for the social media ecology are certainly ideal, they may be unrealizable or may even negatively impact the future of crisis communication, so, it is important to consider these concerns.

Let us first consider two-way communication. It has been argued that organizations must maintain a two-way, open, honest communication pattern and relationship with their public. While this would inevitably be best to resolve a crisis situation, this may be impractical or even impossible given that the strongest allegiance that practitioners have will always be to the corporation, and, as such, they may not always be able to authentically entirely serve public needs. That is, communications professionals must represent the interests of all parties while being paid by only one. Indeed, it has been argued that public relations practitioners readily accept persuasion and advocacy as their major function and as such, the paramount interest served is that of the corporation (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). While practitioners can aim to be completely open, honest, and willing to engage in two-way conversation, with commands from

organization leaders this may be a utopian model given there may be situations that just cannot be completely transparent, and in those situations, crisis communicators will likely decide to remain silent or be dishonest.

Let us now turn to the strategy of apologizing for transgressions. It has been argued that corporations should apologize early on, at the onset of a crisis, not after the public has demanded it, to apologize effectively, and to use both social and traditional media platforms. This advice is highly valuable, however, perhaps this has led to a considerable increase in apologies within a time that has already been marked as an “age of apology”. Given the advice, corporations do and will continue to apologize for almost any transgression, big or small, in fear of a destructive result from avoiding an apology. This could lead to a decrease in the effect of the apology since the audience, arguably already growing cynical of the serial apologies, may no longer believe the sincerity of corporate apologies. It may become just another apology, in a long line of apologies. This has major consequences for organizations that need to apologize to amend a damaged image with the public because an apology, when successful, is the valuable approach a corporation can take when in a crisis, and to have this option reduced in impact could leave corporations extremely vulnerable. Perhaps as a way to keep the sanctity of the apology for times when this approach is truly needed, corporations could attempt to discern between times that necessitate an apology and times when a simple expression of regret may be all that is required.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Though this study has broad implications and practicality for the field of crisis communications, no study is perfect. In this case, although I was able to conduct eleven

interviews in total, only two interviews were with academics specializing in the field of crisis communications. My intent was to interview about four academics, however, recruiting academic participants was harder than anticipated and, as a result of time restrictions, I could not wait any longer for responses and instead settled for an academic sample smaller than desired. That said, saturation was reached and with eleven interviews, I am confident that I obtained valuable results. Future research is encouraged to seek out a unique sample of practitioners and academics who specialize in crisis communications since more interviews would only provide a richer understanding of this new landscape and its impact on crises and crisis communications. Additionally, further research could focus on comparative analyses to determine distinctions between government, corporate, or NGO communicators, distinctions between academics and professionals, or distinctions based on political, economic, or geographical characteristics.

Interviews were conducted for this thesis and, while this method served to obtain rich, original data, methodologically, interviews have limitations. Interviews are time consuming and can be quite expensive, which again inevitably impeded my ability to obtain a larger sample. On another note, interviews have the potential of ambiguousness, and, therefore, the question or answer may not be understood as desired, affecting the end result (Fontana & Frey, 2005). To reduce this limitation, I used consistent phrasing, which was pre-determined and carefully worded, and which was unlikely to be ambiguous.

Another possible limitation results from the networked community of those in the field of crisis communications. That is, those in crisis communications are part of a

networked society; articles and opinions are published and shared among those professionals on the Internet. The implication for this thesis is that the interview responses may have all been influenced by similar secondary sources that potentially result in similar answers from all participants. However, this network is the reality of the field; professionals share insights and experiences with others and, therefore, there is no way of controlling for the root of participant understanding. In fact, I do not think it is a problem that insights are generated from others, for that is how practitioners and academics generate greater knowledge in the field. However, as a way to reduce this effect, the participant sample was purposefully diverse, ranging across North America, to ensure distinct answers and less cross contamination among participants. That said, with a borderless Internet, there were likely still network effects.

Future research is urged, using this study as inspiration, towards a greater understanding of crisis communications. This study acknowledged the weak understanding of monitoring as a crisis communication strategy. Future research is recommended to gain a better understanding of how best to monitor and what can be achieved from monitoring prior to and during a crisis.

Additionally, given the increase in corporate apologies, and the great success apologies can achieve and afford corporations, future research is urged to focus on how the continuing offering of apologies can impact the outcome of the strategy. That is, what effect is a continuous flow of public apologies having on the audience, and, consequently on the corporations that rely on an apology's ability to amend a damaged image after a crisis? Relatedly, research could address when an apology is needed and when the public does not feel there one is needed. This research would be highly valuable in order to

maintain the apology's validity. I believe there should be a narrower window of opportunity where an apology should be offered in order to preserve the sanctity of the strategy for times when corporations truly need to use this powerful instrument. In addition, future research is recommended, through the use of audience research as well as network analysis, to explore how social media apologies are shared, what impact they have on their targets, and why do some apologies are successful while others fail.

## **Conclusion**

Corporations which find themselves in a crisis must now manage it within a social media landscape characterized by an accelerated speed and spread of information, with audiences now also assuming the role of producer. This has led to the easy creation of parody, anti-corporate, and spoof sites, and has afforded the consumer power and influence over the corporation and compromised corporate control over the narrative surrounding a crisis. Through interviews with crisis communications experts, this thesis sought to understand how these dynamics have disrupted the field of crisis communication in crisis development and communications strategies and theories.

This thesis has revealed that social media has impacted how crises emerge and take form. Indeed, experts confirmed social media has altered the crisis landscape by amplifying events that can lead to a crisis, increasing the likelihood of an event achieving crisis status, and offering individuals a platform to ignite a crisis. Additionally, experts reveal that social media has impacted the strategies and requirements of crisis communications. However, this thesis by no means argues that social media is unique in impacting crisis communication. Historically, technological advancements and insightful figures have influenced the field of crisis communication. Indeed, a call for greater transparency and truthful, accurate, open, and candid communications can be traced back 100 years to Ivy Lee's appeal for an improved relationship between the corporation, the media, and the public. Technological advancements, such as mass media, the 24-hour news cycle, and the Internet, have all contributed to a shortened expected window of response time for corporations and broadening the reach of both crises and corporate communication, and corporate control of the narrative has been diminishing. Social

media's impact to the field of crisis communications is one of acceleration and amplification of existing expectations about effective crisis communications, expectations and requirements in existence for a century. Consequently, this acceleration has led to a re-emphasis or disruption of established strategies and theories for crisis communication, from Grunig's two-way symmetrical model to Benoit's image restoration theory, and theories of apology. These theories were developed prior to the development of social media and are due for re-examination.

This thesis provides evidence that with social media's dynamics, the application of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations is more important now than ever. In the realm of social media, where the audience expects two-way communication flows, corporate adoption of the two-way model of communication -- a sustained balanced dialogue where the organization listens to the concerns of the public and encourages an open and honest, mutually beneficial relationship between the corporation and the stakeholders -- is now increasingly more valuable to adopt, especially in the case of a crisis. No longer can Grunig's plea for excellent public relations be ignored or partially adopted, this must now become the standard of crisis communications if corporations wish to operate ethically and to escape a crisis with as little damage as possible.

Conversely, certain strategies, once prominent and effective in repairing or restoring a damaged image or reputation have become more problematic in the contemporary media environment. In Benoit's image restoration theory, the strategies of denial and minimization are no longer tenable, given the ubiquitous nature of social media and the demands for visibility and accountability. Corporate misdeeds rarely stay private, and corporations are less able to ignore problems, hide from facts, minimize or

deny the situation or its severity, or even shut off the flow of information altogether. Consequently, these approaches to crisis communications have become ineffective and frankly more dangerous to the corporation's reputation and image in the long run. That is, the truth is usually revealed and, when it is, corporations who find themselves in a lie will take an even more severe hit to their image.

An additional shift in the theories and strategies available for corporate crises involves the use of an apology to repair a damaged image. While this strategy of mortification remains highly endorsed to reduce damage to an image in the case of a crisis, dynamics afforded by a social media landscape have affected how apologies are practiced. Indeed, social media has led to increased pressure on corporations to apologize when things go wrong; pressure derived from an increasingly vocal and arguably more powerful public that demands accountability for misdeeds and transgressions, whether real or perceived. Social media has also shortened the appropriate response window to issue an apology due to an ever increasing demand for immediacy by the public; and it has increased the importance for a well-received apology in great part due to the public's ease of expressing its discontent.

### ***Best Practices***

Given that escaping a crisis with as little damage as possible is very important for an organization's short term and long-term prosperity, this thesis, through understanding how crisis communications experts are conceptualizing the change in crisis development and management in this social media era, served to compose best practices to exit a crisis with the least amount of damage. Best practices include: immediate response in the event of a crisis; commitment to two-way dialogue; listening to the public, putting public



concerns over the corporation's; building a relationship with the public prior to the onset of a crisis, allowing the public to get an understanding of the character, morals, and voice of the corporation; being accountable for corporate wrongdoing, before the public demands it; reacting and adapting quickly and effectively to the situation; maintaining honesty, openness, transparency, and credibility, avoiding minimization or denial of the truth; demonstrating humanity, authenticity, and compassion in all communications; performing real time monitoring, particularly in the event of a crisis; apologizing immediately upon offense and doing so effectively by demonstrating human qualities when expressing contrition for committing wrongdoing and avoiding corporate speak, legal jargon, and other formal discourses, using both traditional and social media distribution.

I now return one last time to three crises that developed and were managed within this era of social media: BP's 2010 oil spill crisis, Chick-Fil-A's equality rights crisis, and Paula Deen's discrimination crisis. These crises did not abide by the best practices that this thesis derived from crisis communications experts. Instead, these corporations denied, cut off all communication, minimized, lied, made excuses, blamed others, and butchered apologies, tactics which only aggravated their situation.

Unquestionably, these corporations transgressed, as corporations will continue to do so, but by following the best practices their crisis likely would not have been amplified to the degree they were; the impact would not have been so detrimental to their reputation and image. These corporations could have maintained credibility and trust, maintained a good relationship with their public, stakeholders, and consumers, gained respect and allies among the public, and experienced a shortened lifespan of the crisis

where the public would have moved on to the next issue more quickly. To paraphrase a quote from an expert: the public understands that crises occur, what the public does not forgive is a bad corporate response (Terry Flynn, December 10, 2012). It is for this reason that this thesis set out to offer corporations and crisis communicators recommendations that will aid in exiting a crisis with as little damage as possible. Recommendations that could be the difference between the end of a crisis and the end of a corporation.

## Appendices

### *Appendix A. Recruitment Script*

Interviewees will be contacted via e-mail.

Recruitment Script:

Hello \_\_\_\_\_, my name is Tegan Ford. I am a second year masters in communications student at Carleton University. I am currently working on my thesis entitled “#Crisis Communications: Social Media’s Role in Crises” with the supervision of Communications Professor Josh Greenberg. With Professor Greenberg’s recommendation, I am contacting you in the hopes that you will be a subject matter expert to inform my research.

The purpose of my study is to determine social media’s impact on crisis communication and specifically, how public relations practitioners and academics theorize its immediate and long-term impact on corporate communications.

This research has been approved by Carleton University Research Ethics Board. You may contact the chair of the research ethics board, Dr. Antonio Gualtieri, at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca).

In order to examine social media’s impact, I will be conducting several interviews with experts such as yourself. Interview content will be based on your professional experience in the field of crisis communications. The interviews will be 45 minutes to an hour in length, at the time and the location of your choosing.

If you wish to remain anonymous, I can provide you with a pseudonym for the entire process of my thesis, ensuring your name will not be linked to your answers or the research at all.

Participation in this interview is completely voluntary and, if you do agree, you have the right to refuse to answer any question, can end the interview at any time, and can withdraw your answers up to two weeks following the interview.

If you are willing to be interviewed, to advance crisis communications research to include this new ecology of social media, and, if you wish, to be published as a subject matter expert, please e-mail me at (email). If you have any questions and would prefer to speak directly, please call 613-851-3673. If you prefer, provide me your contact information and I will call you at a time convenient for you.

I look forward to having your expertise inform my thesis. Thank you for your time.

Tegan Ford  
MA Communications Candidate

## ***Appendix B. Informed Consent***

### Informed Consent

*The purpose of an informed consent is to ensure that you understand the purpose of the study and the nature of your involvement. The informed consent must provide sufficient information such that you have the opportunity to determine whether you wish to participate in the study.*

**Study Title:** Social Media and Crisis Communication – Theories and Best Practices

**Research personnel:** The following people are involved in this research project, and may be contacted at any time if you have questions or concerns:

Dr. Joshua Greenberg (Faculty Supervisor: (e-mail))

Tegan Ford (Masters Student: (e-mail))

This study has been approved by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any concerns about this research please contact Dr. Antonio Gualtieri, REB chair, at 613-520-2517; ethics@carleton.ca.

**Purpose:** The purpose of the thesis is to explore the role of social media in crisis communications, and how public relations practitioners and academics theorize its immediate and long-term impact on corporate communications.

**Task Requirements:** As practitioners and academics in the field of crisis communications, you will be asked to participate in an interview, which will have you draw upon your expertise and experience in order to describe social media's impact on crisis communications. The interview will be approximately 45 minutes in length.

**Potential Risk/discomfort:** There are no risks to participating in this study.

**Anonymity/Confidentiality:** The content gathered from the interview will be published in this thesis. Your name will be associated with your content throughout the analysis process and publication processes. The expected audience of your content includes: Prof. Joshua Greenberg (Supervisor); Prof. Mary Francoli (Second reader); thesis defense committee members; and potentially future students of Carleton University. However, if you wish to remain anonymous, I will identify you with a pseudonym that will be linked to your answers and used for the entire process of this thesis.

**Right to Withdraw:** Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. At any point during the interview you have the right to withdraw. If you decide to withdraw your responses will be destroyed. After the completion of the interview you will have two weeks from today to withdraw your content from the thesis. After the two weeks, if you have not notified me by telephone or e-mail, your content must remain in the thesis.

**Storage of Data:** With your permission, interviews will be recorded on a personal recording device. Recorded information will be kept in a locked drawer and used only by research personnel. Interview data will be used primarily for the purposes of this thesis but may also include any future research relating to the study of social media, public relations and crisis communication.

*With my signature, I declare I have read and understood the present Informed Consent form and that I voluntarily take part in this research:*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of participation

*I give my permission for this interview to be recorded; to be used solely for the purpose of this research:*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of participation

### *Appendix C. List of Participants*

1. Melissa Agnes  
Location: Montreal  
Melissa Agnes is a social media crisis manager, consultant, and speaker. She helps organizations prepare and protect themselves with a solid social media crisis plan.  
Age: 27  
Citizenship: Canadian  
Interview conducted via Skype (as per her request) on November 22, 2012 from 11:00 am to 11:30 am.
2. Bob LeDrew  
Location: Westboro, Ottawa  
Bob LeDrew is a principal consultant at Translucid Communications where he provides communications strategies using both traditional and social media. In addition, Bob LeDrew is a professor at Algonquin College where he teaches courses in social media strategies. Bob LeDrew has twenty-five years of field experience.  
Age: did not disclose  
Citizenship: Canadian  
Interview conducted in a café in Westboro on November 27, 2012 from 2:00 pm until 4:00 pm
3. Jonathan Bernstein  
Location: Sierra Madre, California, United States  
Recommended by Melissa Agnes and Bob LeDrew  
Jonathan Bernstein, is a crisis management consultant. He is the president of Bernstein Crisis Management, Inc. and has more than 30 years of experience meeting clients' needs in all aspects of crisis management - crisis response, vulnerability assessment, planning, training and simulations. Prior to launching his firm in January 1994, Bernstein created and served as the first director of the Crisis Communications Group for Ruder Finn, Inc., one of the world's largest public relations agencies. Bernstein is the author of *Manager's Guide to Crisis Management* and *Keeping the Wolves at Bay*.  
Age: 61  
Citizenship: American  
Interview conducted via Skype December 4, 2012 from 2:00 pm until 2:50 pm.
4. Judy Gombita  
Location: Toronto  
Judy Gombita is a Toronto-based independent consultant and public relations and communication management specialist, with more than 20 years of employment and executive-level volunteer board experience, primarily in the financial and lifelong learning nonprofit sectors. She is the co-editor and Canadian contributor (since 2007) to the international, collaborative blog, *PR Conversations*.  
Citizenship: Canadian  
Age: 51

Interview conducted in Courtyard Marriott in Toronto on December 7, 2012 from 9:00 am until 11:30 am (with breaks for food).

5. Mat Wilcox

Location: Toronto

Mat Wilcox founder and CEO of Wilcox Group, one of Canada's largest national corporate communications, social media, and crisis management firms.

Citizenship: Canadian

Age: Did not disclose

Interview conducted in a private residence in Toronto on December 7, 2012 from 2:00pm until 3:00pm

6. Keith McArthur

Location: Toronto

Keith McArthur is the Vice President of Social Media for Rogers Communications since 2009. Keith dealt with a social media crisis where #Rogers1Number trended on Twitter, which was meant for a celebration of Roger's new service "the only number you'll need" instead, the search term had become a rallying cry for customers to gripe publicly about Rogers' customer service. Before joining Rogers Communications, Keith was a journalist for the Globe and Mail where he wrote about brands making the transition to social media.

Age: 40

Citizenship: Canadian

Interview conducted at Rogers Communications in Toronto on December 7, 2012 from 3:30 pm until 4:10 pm.

7. Terence (Terry) Flynn

Location: McMaster University, Hamilton

Terence Flynn is a communications professor at McMaster University where his research interests include crisis communications, public relations/communications management, and corporate reputation management. Prior to his post at McMaster he was an active practitioner in the fields of crisis communications.

Age: 53

Citizenship: Canadian

Interview conducted at McMaster on December 10, 2012 from 12:15 pm until 1:15 pm.

8. Caroline Kealey

Location: Ottawa

Caroline Kealey is the founder and principle of Ingenium Communications. Caroline has developed over 300 strategies for a range of clients in the public, association/not-for-profit and private sectors. Caroline has also published nationally and internationally on topics such as measurement, social media and results based strategic communications planning.

Age: 41

Citizenship: Canadian

Interview conducted in a private residence in Ottawa on December 17, 2012 from 3:00 pm until 4:00 pm.

9. Christopher Barger  
Location: Detroit, United States  
Recommended by Bob LeDrew  
Christopher Barger is the senior vice president of Global Programs at Voce Connect. Before this he was the social media director for General Motors during their bail out/bankruptcy. Additionally, Christopher is the author of The Social Media Strategist.  
Age: 44  
Citizenship: American  
Interview conducted December 19, 2012 via Skype from 1:00 pm until 2:05 pm.
10. Expert A  
Requested to remain anonymous  
Interview conducted via telephone January 15, 2013 from 7:00pm until 7:45pm.
11. Melissa Carroll  
Location: Montreal  
Recommended by Caroline Kealey  
Spoke at the IABC Canada Conference about a case study on the Montreal Police's use of Twitter to manage the crisis of the Montreal student protests this past summer. Has been working as a communications specialist at Service de police de la Ville de Montreal (SPVM) for 8 years now.  
Age: 34  
Interview conducted via Skype January 22, 2013 from 6:30 pm until 7:20 pm.



## *Appendix D. Interview Script and Questions*

Hi *name*, thank you for meeting with me. As I mentioned in my e-mail, I am a second year communications masters student at Carleton University working on my thesis with Professor Greenberg as my supervisor.

My thesis aims to explore the role of social media in crisis communications, and determine how public relations practitioners and academics theorize its immediate and long-term impact on corporate communications.

How I came to be interested in this topic: I have always been interested in public apologies, indeed, my undergraduate thesis studied verbal vs. nonverbal apologies to determine which had greater effect (nonverbal was better received and no apology control was better received than the verbal). I have focused my research on crisis communications and have been interested in how social media may have had an effect on the field. Specifically, BP's oil spill in 2010 made me question social media's impact on the development of the crisis and consider the crisis communications involved in fixing the crisis.

*Hand them informed consent.* This interview aims to explore social media's impact on crisis communications. If you could read this over and let me know if you have any questions. If you are willing to participate please sign the bottom. I would like to record the interview so I can transcribe it for my analysis; if you allow me to do so, please sign the second line on the bottom.

*Begin recording*

### **Interview questions:**

- 1) *Warm up:* What can you tell me about your career and changes you have encountered in the field of crisis communications?
  - a. *Probing questions:*
    - i. how long have you been working in the field/researching the field?
    - ii. What crises, or types of crises have you been involved with/researched?
    - iii. How has social media affected your day-to-day professional work (*for practitioner*)?
    - iv. How has social media affected the day-to-day operations of public relations practitioners (*for academics*)
      1. What are some changes in monitoring communications from and concerning the organization as a result of social media?
        - a. How and how often must corporations monitor crisis related conversations on social media sites?
    - v. What are the key principles crisis communications practitioners must abide by now in the case of a crisis? How is this different

from a time prior to social media where traditional media was dominant?

1. What are your go-to strategies in the case of a crisis/What are the go-to strategies for public relations practitioners?
  2. How is this different from a time prior to social media where traditional media was dominant?
  3. How has this changed with social media?
- 2) How do you define a crisis?
- a. Has this definition changed with the rise in social media? How so?
- 3) To take BP's crisis as an example, say it had occurred 15 years ago, prior to the widespread of Internet, and especially prior to social media's development, how do you think the crisis would have developed/unfolded and how would it have been dealt with?
- a. *Probing questions:*
    - i. How do crisis communications messages vary depending on the outlet?
    - ii. What would have been the strategies? How would they be different today?
    - iii. How would the crisis develop?
  - b. *Follow up:* What is it about social media that has led to these changes in crises and crisis communications?
- 4) CEO (former) of BP Tony Hayward apologized for the spill. If the spill occurred 15 years ago, would he have apologized?
- a. *Probing questions:*
    - i. What is it about social media that may in fact drive corporations and CEO's to apologize for transgressions?
    - ii. There seems to be an increase in public apologies, why is this? Is social media a factor in the increase? How so?
    - iii. How have corporate apologies changed with social media's presence?
    - iv. Does apologizing on social media have the same meaning as an apology on traditional media outlets?
- 5) What do you anticipate as social media's long-term impact on crisis communications?

I am looking for a few more participants, do you know any expert that would be beneficial to my project?

*If yes* – What is their contact information? Could I let them know that it was you who suggested them?

Will you be willing to be contacted again for a follow up in case I need clarification or elaboration on your answers?

### *Appendix E. Interview Coding Scheme*

Social media –general statements of how social media has changed the field [SM]

Social media not a game changer [SMNAGC]

Speed, immediacy of communication, required instant response, but also the crisis [S] No longer 24/h news cycle but minutes [S24]

Monitoring [M] Monitoring – real time, always be aware of what is happening because you need to respond asap [Mrt] the only way to get ahead, prepare the little bit you can [Mrta]

Two-way communication, flatness in hierarchy of communication [2] Commitment to dialogue [D]

Audience expectations [AE] speed of response [AEs] must respond / no more denial [AEr]

False information [Fi] Can't ignore the crisis, must respond or the story will be about you [cI]

No boundaries of crisis/spread/wide reach [BS] Wide reach of audience [Wa]

Intensification, amplification – negative and positive [I]

Increased Criticism/scrutiny [C]

Sincerity [Sin] credibility [Cr] Authentic/ from the heart/human/no corporate speak/sincere [Au] Use social media to be human, authentic, credible [Sma]

Relationship with influencers/build good will/build rapport [Rr] have social media presence before a crisis, use social media to build relationship before crisis [RrSM] Relationship leads to credibility, which helps in a crisis [Rrc] (related to [Sma]) Brand advocates, find people who will defend you in a crisis [BA]

Compassion [Ca]

Open/transparency/honesty/no hiding [OT] Don't shy from the negative stuff [Sn]

Visibility (can see corporations more clearly, closer) [V]

No more minimizing [nM]

Lack of control [IC] Reactive instead of proactive [R]

Need to be proactive [/R] Be prepared for a crisis, it will happen Prep]

CEOs now actors/social media savvy [CEO] Who represents your company in a crisis in important/CEO/Spokesperson [CEOS]

Audience owns the content/message/producers [A] Social media's ability to create audience, voice, power, ability, force, increase one's influence, able to hold corporations accountable [Ap] Parody [P]

Constant communications by people (audience can take pictures and tweet about anything) [CC] More sources, more volume, more ability to know if you are being effective [ms]

Social media as first source of information for audience [Sou]

Social media as a first signal detector (of a crisis, issue, trend) [Sd]

Social media messages must coincide with strategies/key messages [SMk]

Don't push out own message, listen to what they want answered and answer that best you can [Dow] Put the audience first, not your own butt [Af]

More flexible, adaptable companies [Fa]

Do not delete audience posts, unless completely unacceptable [dd]

Organization understanding of message, spokespeople, issue [Ou]

Dark site [Ds]

Use all mediums to contact as many people as possible [Ce]

Use of video messages [Vd]

Apology [Apo]

Search is forever, everything stays on the Internet. Your previous conversations, mistakes are there forever [SF]

Negative key word search – people look up what they think and so you have to use their vocabulary to reach them [Nks]

So much noise, so much stimuli coming at us, smaller attention span, crises is likely to blow over when the next thing pops up [N] Repetition of message/facts with social media [Rf] Lack of attention by audience (good and bad) [lack]

Choosing your own media leads to polarization, more extreme points of view making it hard to break that opinion in the case of a crisis [Pol]

Legal no longer the authority [L]

Corrective action [CAc]

Definition of the crisis remains the same [Sa]

Definition of a crisis has changed [/Sa]

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