Synchronizing crisis responses after a transgression: An analysis of BP's enacted crisis response to the Deepwater Horizon Crisis in 2010

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Abstract

With the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil well in the Gulf of Mexico on April 20, 2010 and until the well was officially 'killed' on September 19, 2010, British Petroleum (BP) did not merely experience a crisis but a five-month marathon of sustained, multi-media engagement. Whereas traditional public relations theory teaches us that an organization should synchronize its messages across channels, there are no models to understand how an organization may strategically coordinate public relations messaging across traditional and social media platforms. This is especially important in the new media environment where social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) are increasingly being used in concert with traditional public relations tools (e.g., press releases) as a part of an organization's stakeholder engagement strategy.

The present study is a content analysis examining all of BP's press releases (N = 126), its Facebook posts (N = 1,789), and its Twitter tweets (N = 2,730) during the 2010 Gulf crisis (May 20, 2010 through September 20, 2010). Results demonstrate BP used a synchronized approach with press releases serving as the hub for their multi-media strategy.

Keywords: BP, crisis communication, message synchronicity, public relations, social media

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For more than a century, public relations relied on the traditional press release to drive its message to the media and ultimately its stakeholders; however, within the last decade the fundamental nature of public relations has changed with the growth in the importance of social media (Waters et al., 2010, Winchell, 2010). In fact, Smith (2010) argues that the power of communication has shifted from public relations practitioners to social media users. The field is recognizing the strategic value of institutionalizing the use of social media as a routine part of stakeholder engagement because they can reach broader audiences (Eyrich et al., 2008), allowing organizations to engage in a dialogue with stakeholders that will shape and form their relationships with them (Sung-Un et al., 2010). Taken together these changes necessitate a different model for analyzing and evaluating an organization's public relations efforts; one that is inherently integrated considering both traditional public relations tools and social media (Diers, 2012). This need for message synchronization is even stronger in the context of crisis response because organizations are expected to provide up-to-date, specific, and accurate information about the crisis (Sung-Un et al., 2010, Veil and Ojeda, 2010). Yet, there is little research analyzing message synchronicity in routine contexts let alone during crises. Therefore, analyzing an organization's multi-media response to a prolonged crisis would afford the best opportunity to initially identify a model for multi-media engagement.

The Case of the 2010 BP Spill in the Gulf of Mexico

On April 20, 2010 there was an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico killing 11 workers. Over the next five months, BP would have to manage its image in the face of an environmental catastrophe to a variety of multi-national stakeholders. As details emerged, it became clear that it was not merely an accident but an organizational transgression (Coombs and Holladay, 2002); one in a line of deadly BP transgressions within the last decade including explosions in Texas and Alaska (Maresh and Williams, 2007). The scope of the Gulf disaster meant that there was a significant focus on the situation and BP's response to it. In fact, from April 20 to July 28, 2010, the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism estimated that the oil spill received 22 percent of the US news coverage (Anonymous, 2010). One of the dominant themes was BP's poor public relations efforts, such as Tony Hayward's series of gaffes. Glenn DaGian, a retired BP public relations professional, summarized the point, "…The only time Tony Hayward opens his mouth was to change feet." (Besley, 2011).

Steve Marino, who worked for Ogilvy & Mather at the time, said of BP's social media strategy, "I think they did a great job, considering the pressure they were under on so many other fronts." (Shogren, 2011). Marino said BP used Facebook as a place for people to vent their frustrations and that Twitter allowed BP to get its news out quickly. However, Marino's trumpeting of BP's online strategy was not universally shared. Critics argued that the fundamental flaw in BP's social media push was that it failed to engage its stakeholders (Geoghegan and Monseau, 2011). In fact, Pew Research found that the spill story generated considerably less attention on blogs, Twitter, and YouTube, suggesting that BP's message did not go viral; an indicator of a failed social media strategy (Metzgar and Maruggi, 2009).

Instead of rushing to judge BP's 2010 crisis response as merely effective or ineffective as evidenced by the superficial assessments of "venting" and going "viral", we should be asking more fundamental questions like, "What does an integrated multi-media approach to crisis response look like?" or "Is this an effective model for engagement?" This would offer more analytical value than snap judgments and compartmentalizing our analysis by channel, tactic, or time period. Thus, this paper is important for two reasons. First, it reflects the transformation in how today's stakeholders engage with issues and organizations using traditional and social media (Stassen, 2010). Second, as Massey (2001) argues, scientific research has failed to investigate the relationship between message consistency and crisis management.

While ours is not the first analysis of the 2010 spill, previous research (Harlow et al., 2011) focused only on BP's immediate responses,[1] analyzed press releases alone, and limited its analysis to the five tactics identified in Benoit's Image Repair Theory (Benoit and Henson, 2009). Though valuable as an analysis of BP's early response to the crisis, it also fails to consider BP's multi-media approach along with a fuller range of response strategies. Given the duration of this crisis, it is an analytical opportunity that stands in contrast to most longitudinal studies that analyze image recovery after a crisis (Reierson et al., 2009, Seeger and Ulmer, 2002). Piotrowski and Guyette (2010) demonstrated the importance of such a study in their analysis of the evolution of the Toyota recall, identifying the crisis response role as one that significantly influenced the company's prospects for image renewal post-crisis. As such, the present study evaluates BP's integrated crisis response strategy, building a more scientific tool for analyzing multi-media stakeholder engagement.

Literature Review

There has been significant work in the field of crisis communication to build theory and analyze crisis response strategies (e.g., Image Restoration Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory). Yet, present theory and its application to multi-media crisis response fails to build an effective model that predicts how organizations might integrate messages across different channels. This section will examine crisis response and media synchronicity together in the context of crisis communication.

Message Strategies

While a perfect list of strategies may not exist (Coombs, 2007), there is a strong body of research identifying more than 40 individual tactics encompassed by eight broad tactic categories (Diers and Tomaino, 2010), giving academics and practitioners a set of effective tactics on which to base analyses, identify strategies, and compare the emergence of those strategies across crises, industries and time (see Table 1). We argue that beginning analyses from the categories or 'list' of identified tactics is a much stronger way to approach an authentic analysis of crisis

[1] Harlow, et. al's (2010) study focused on press releases issued by BP between May 20, 2010 and June 15, 2010.

communication than confining our analysis to a particular theory if we are to build more effective models for crisis communication.

Table 1
Taxonomy of Crisis Response Tactics Potentially Used By Organizations

Tactic Category	*Strategy Description*	*Example Key Author(s)*
Self-Enhancement	Emphasizes product/ company quality or provides information to make the organization look positive.	Heath (1994), Proto & Supino (1999), Scott & Lane (2000)
Routine Communication	Communication emphasizing organizational goals/ mentioning mission/ vision; reporting assets, liabilities, and interest in cooperation to increase market value	Fiol (1995), Heath (1994), Proto & Supino (1999)
Framing the Crisis	Development of dominant narrative, use of narrative to explain the problem; educating with the goal of increasing stakeholder empowerment; communicating the importance of the situation	Bennett (1998), Kauffman (2001), Martinelli & Briggs (1998), Massey (2001), Mohamed, et al. (1999), Rowan (1996) , Sellnow (1993), Slovic (1987), Williams & Olaniran (1998) Benoit (2004; 1997), Sturges (1994)
Framing the Organization	Efforts to create positive image by reminding stakeholders of past good works or qualities, presenting the organization as being highly competent in the face of the crisis; portraying the organization in a light to set the tone for the outcome of the crisis	Coombs & Schmidt (2000) Benoit & Czerwinski (1997), Benoit (2004), Coombs & Schmidt (2000), Kauffman (2001), Sellnow & Brand (2001),
Anti-social or Defensive	The organization cannot/ does not choose to act; using explanations that might ward off negative implications to the image; indicating actions are driven by compliance; non-cooperation; de-emphasizing the role in blame or even shifting the blame; minimizing the situation	Henriques & Sadorsky (1999) Benoit (2004; 1997), Benoit & Czerwinski (1997), Coombs & Holladay (2002), Coombs & Schmidt (2000), Henderson (2003), Ray (1999), Sellnow & Ulmer (1995)
Accommodative	Effort to 'correct' actions adversely affecting others. Can include announcements of recall or offers of compensation; Communication of contrition, admission of blame including remorse and requests for pardon, mortification; communicating concern for those affected; offering assurances	Benoit (2004; 1997), Benoit & Czerwinski (1997), Coombs & Holladay (2002), Coombs & Schmidt (2000), Henderson (2003), Martinelli & Briggs (1998), Mohamed, et al. (1999), Ray (1999)
Excellence/ Renewal	Emphasizing openness and willingness to engage about the issue; Portraying the organization as having integrity, social responsibility, moral worthiness; Engaging in actions to atone for transgression and persuade stakeholders of positive identity	Das & Teng (1998), Milliman, et al. (1994), Nielson & Bartenuk (1996), Williams & Olaniran (1998)
Interorganizational Relationships	Identifying either a positive or negative link to another; minimizing traits or accomplishments of a negatively linked other or bolstering the traits of a positively linked other; emphasizing a desire to work with others	Mohamed, et al. (1999), Sellnow & Brand (2001), Benoit & Czerwinski (1997), Coombs & Schmidt (2000), Henriques & Sadorsky (1999), Martinelli & Briggs (1998), Milliman, et al. (1994)

We could expect BP to employ one or more of the following strategies by pairing this heuristic with previous findings regarding crisis-prone organizations experiencing organizational transgressions (Coombs, 2004, Diers and Tomaino, 2010, Diers, 2009). First, crisis-prone organizations tend to focus on future-oriented strategies incorporating tactics like self-enhancement, excellence and renewal, or invoking inter-organizational relationships. Second, organizations experiencing transgressions have focused on a variety of strategies such as aggressive strategies, which incorporate tactics like framing the crisis and anti-social or defensive; defensive strategies that use anti-social or defensive and accommodative tactics; and affirming amplification strategies that focus on positive messages about the organization incorporating three or more tactics. In addition, organizations facing transgressions have used explanative strategies (i.e., efforts to create goodwill while explaining the crisis characterized by openness, engagement, and an appearance that the organization is sympathetic) and corrective strategies (i.e., those emphasizing accommodative, excellence, and often invoking inter-organizational relationships). The preponderance of research (Coombs and Holladay, 1996, Diers and Tomaino, 2010) suggests that organizations experiencing transgressions emphasize more pro-social or positive strategies rather than negative ones.

Media Synchronicity

By establishing the likely messaging organizations facing a transgressions use, we can then turn our attention to how those strategies might be implemented across platforms. Modern analyses of crisis communication ought to include social media channels because the impact of new media is undeniable (Greenberg and MacAulay, 2009, Moore, 2004). New media represent an interactive (or two-way) platform for organizations to manage both crises and the surrounding issues (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011). However, while a majority of organizations have turned to the Internet to communicate with stakeholders during a crisis (Perry et al., 2003), they often prefer more traditional (or one-way) models of crisis communication. For example, press releases remain the central driving force for an organization's messaging (Bennett et al., 2011, Wilson, 2011). Yet, if the press release is the primary vehicle delivering an organization's narrative (Vorvoreanu, 2009), the question of how the narrative is delivered across different media platforms still remains.

Media synchronicity involves the coordination of an organization's messages across platforms to produce a consistent strategy when responding to a crisis (Dennis, et al., 2008; Holladay, 2007; Massey, 2001). Synchronicity is important because it: establishes and builds credibility with audiences (Holladay, 2007; Massey, 2001); allows stakeholders to more effectively coordinate their behaviors (Dennis, et al., 2008); and ultimately helps organizations build (or rebuild) their legitimacy after a crisis (Massey, 2001). These elements allow a company in crisis to be able to drive its own narrative. If the narrative is consistent and credible, there is a greater likelihood that the messaging will be used as part of the media coverage of the situation (Veil and Ojeda, 2010), go viral (Metzgar and Maruggi, 2009), or create a community of engagement with stakeholders (Bennett, et al., 2011). In any case, the company's perspective is more meaningfully reflected in conversations because synchronized messages have strong central themes that can vary depending on the channel or audience (Greenberg and MacAulay, 2009, Healy and Griffin, 2004, Yang et al., 2012). For example, in a study of the Whole Foods through online press room, blog, and microblogging accounts, Gilpin (2011) found these channels overlapped on core themes but addressed different aspects of the organization's image.

Together these findings suggest that we should expect to see differences in messaging depending on channel. This underscores the need for more research focused on the role and purpose of message synchronicity across traditional and social media platforms, which is even more pronounced given our present reliance on assertions that social media are merely good places for stakeholders to vent (Shogren, 2011) and evaluations that going viral is the best measure of a successful social media effort (Metzgar and Maruggi, 2009). Thus, by analyzing a case like BP's, we hope to uncover a model for crisis response that focuses on engagement (Bennett et al., 2011, Geoghegan and Monseau, 2011).

Based on the previous research, we pose the following hypotheses and research questions:

Hypothesis 1: BP's messaging during the crisis in the Gulf of Mexico will differ based on platform (i.e., press release, Facebook, and Twitter).

Hypothesis 2: BP's response messages to the crisis in the Gulf of Mexico will predominantly employ positive/pro-social messaging.

Research Question 1: What message strategies did BP use across each of the platforms (i.e., press release, Facebook, and Twitter) during the crisis in the Gulf of Mexico?

Research Question 2: If BP's messaging during the crisis in the Gulf of Mexico differed based on platform (i.e., press release, Facebook, and Twitter), does a conceptual model of synchronized crisis communication emerge from those differences?

Methods

In order to analyze BP's response to the Gulf crisis, press releases, Facebook posts, and Twitter tweets were identified as the most viable sources of the overall BP strategy for several reasons. First, while BP has extensive website coverage for the crisis and branch websites for each of the states affected by the crisis, the number of unique messages was very low (n = 26) because information was duplicated. Second, BP launched an aggressive YouTube campaign in response to the Gulf (Shogren, 2011); however, these videos typically employed company leaders and as previous research suggests, the function and communicative messages from leaders during a crisis are substantially different from other public relations efforts during crises (Farmer and Tyedt, 2005, Griffin-Padgett and Allison, 2010, Hwang and Cameron, 2008, Lucero et al., 2009, Oliveira and Murphy, 2009, Pines, 2000, Sandler, 2009, Wesseling, 2008).

Additionally, because this research focuses on BP's crisis responses, it was most appropriate to exclusively look at BP controlled messaging because the media typically select and frame the information (or direct quotations) that they use from organizations during crises to serve their commercial and/or political ends (Aalbert et al., 2010, An and Gower, 2009, Andsager and Smiley, 1998, Berger, 2009, Crider, 2010, July 10, Duhe and Zoch, 1994, Iyengar and Curran, 2009). Thus, all press releases (n = 126), Facebook posts (n = 1,789), and Twitter tweets (n = 2,730) were collected and analyzed for this project.

Coding Scheme

The unit of analysis was operationalized as a single message (i.e., a single press release, post, or tweet) because previous studies of crisis response messages (e.g., Benoit and Czerwinski, 1997; Elsbach, 1994; Greer and Moreland, 2003; Henderson, 2003, Kauffman, 2001) emphasize that when studying crisis communication, examining the interplay of tactics within a message employed affords researchers more information about an organization's strategy.

The coding scheme was based on manifest content for each variable with operationalization reflected in Table 1 for crisis messages. Thirty-three members of a graduate course in Organizational Communication coded portions of the data as a part of a class project. The coders were each assigned data from a single channel. Each coder received a codebook and a 50-minute training session with coding examples and two follow-up virtual question and answer sessions on coding. Once trained, the coders independently coded the data and followed procedures to establish intercoder reliability as used by Molleda, et al. (2005). Ten percent of the sample was randomly selected and independently coded by the project leader finding the coding scheme to be reliable (α = .83). Coders noted whether each tactic was present or not.

Analysis Methods

To test the hypotheses and answer the research questions three analytical techniques were used: ANOVA, Exploratory Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation and Kaiser Normalization, and correlations. To evaluate the hypotheses an ANOVA with Scheffe post hoc analysis analyzing the influence of channel on the presence of each message tactic was used.

Because the ANOVA identified significant differences in the tactics used based on channel for all tactics (see Table 2), separate factor analyses were used to identify the strategies – that is the combination of tactics – BP used in response to the crisis for each platform (i.e., press releases, Facebook, and Twitter). Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, and McCroskey (2008) identify the primary functions of factor analysis indicating that it: (1) is a tool to establish construct validity that identifies mutually exclusive highly correlated concepts; (2) allows us to know if the correlations between concepts are meaningful; and that (3) exploratory factor analysis allows researchers to determine how many concepts the 'scale' is measuring. Therefore, while factor analyses are typically used to establish the relationship between survey questions, they are appropriate in identifying the unique message strategies emerging from a set of tactics because the goals in identifying strategies align with the goals of exploratory factor analyses. Thus, factors emerging with an Eigenvalue greater than 1 were included as primary strategies communicated by BP for each source.

Table 2

ANOVA Results for Source Influence on Response Tactics in the Gulf Crisis

Response Tactics	***df***	***F***	η^2	***p***	**Post Hoc I**	**Post Hoc J**	**I-J**	**Sig.**
Self Enhancement	2, 4625	117.74	.05	.00	Facebook	Twitter	.05	.00
						P.R.	-.39	.00
					Twitter	P.R.	-.44	.00
Routine Communication	2, 2625	6.41	.03	.00	Facebook	Twitter	.10	.00
						P.R.	.15	.00
					Twitter	P.R.	.05	.24
Frame the Crisis	2, 4625	190.52	.08	.00	Facebook	Twitter	-.27	.00
						P.R.	-.44	.00
					Twitter	P.R.	.17	.00
Frame the Organization	2.4625	535.16	.19	.00	Facebook	Twitter	.34	.00
						P.R.	-.35	.00
					Twitter	P.R.	-.69	.00
Anti-Social or Defensive	2, 4625	88.47	.04	.00	Facebook	Twitter	.00	.18
						P.R.	-.20	.00
					Twitter	P.R.	-.19	.00
Accommodative	2, 4625	53.45	.02	.00	Facebook	Twitter	.09	.00
						P.R.	-.30	.00
					Twitter	P.R.	-.39	.00
Excellence or Renewal	2, 4625	675.02	.23	.00	Facebook	Twitter	.39	.00
						P.R.	-.09	.02
					Twitter	P.R.	-.48	.00
Emphasizing Interorganizational Relationships	2, 4625	354.02	.13	.00	Facebook	Twitter	.16	.00
						P.R.	-.39	.00
					Twitter	P.R.	-.55	.00

Notes: P.R. represents Press Releases, the alpha for all tests was set at .05.

Results

Taken together, these data largely confirm previous research and reveal important information about BP's synchronization of messaging across platforms during the 2010 crisis in the Gulf of Mexico. These data reveal that source significantly influenced BP's use of tactics. Table 2 demonstrates that there are significant differences for all eight tactics based on the channel. The post hoc analyses reveal significant differences for each comparison except two.

Where the Routine Communication tactics are used, Twitter and press releases do not significantly differ and where Anti-Social or Defensive are used, Facebook and Twitter do not significantly differ. This offers general support confirming Hypothesis 1 that BP's messaging during the Gulf crisis will significantly differ depending on platform. Additionally, Hypothesis 2 is strongly confirmed by simply examining the descriptive statistics for the ANOVA (see Table 3). By simply comparing BP's use of defensive or anti-social tactics (n = 137) in different messages with the use of accommodative tactics (n = 1627) in different messages, the comparison is staggering. Across five months of owned media messaging, negative messaging was only used five percent of the time compared to the most positive or pro-social tactics (i.e., accommodative) being used in approximately 60 percent of all of BP's messaging.

Table 3
BP Response Tactics Descriptive Statistics

Response Tactics	Source	Mean	SD	Count
Self Enhancement	Facebook	1.14	.35	253
	Twitter	1.09	.29	251
	Press Release	1.53	.50	67
	Total	**1.12**	**.33**	**571**
Routine Communication	Facebook	1.18	.38	314
	Twitter	1.07	.26	194
	Press Release	1.02	.15	3
	Total	**1.11**	**.31**	**511**
Frame the Crisis	Facebook	1.33	.47	599
	Twitter	1.60	.48	1646
	Press Release	1.78	.42	98
	Total	**1.51**	**.50**	**2343**
Frame the Organization	Facebook	1.44	.50	784
	Twitter	1.10	.30	272
	Press Release	1.79	.41	99
	Total	**1.25**	**.43**	**1155**
Anti-Social or Defensive	Facebook	1.02	.14	33
	Twitter	1.03	.17	76
	Press Release	1.22	.42	28
	Total	**1.03**	**.17**	**137**
Accommodative	Facebook	1.40	.49	707
	Twitter	1.30	.46	833
	Press Release	1.69	.46	87
	Total	**1.35**	**.48**	**1627**
Excellence or Renewal	Facebook	1.44	.50	780
	Twitter	1.05	.22	137
	Press Release	1.53	.50	67
	Total	**1.21**	**.41**	**984**
Emphasizing Interorganizational Relationships	Facebook	1.18	.39	324
	Twitter	1.02	.16	67
	Press Release	1.57	.50	72
	Total	**1.10**	**.30**	**463**

BP's Crisis Response Messaging

Because of the significant differences previously discussed based on channel, strategies were identified for each of the three platforms separately. Overall, these data further confirm Hypothesis 2 — that BP's central response strategy to the Gulf crisis will employ positive messaging. In answering Research Questions 1 and 2, asking what message strategies emerge across platforms (i.e., press releases, Facebook, and Twitter) and whether those reveal a conceptual model of synchronized crisis communication, these data reveal that while there are different strategies employed across the three platforms, the strategies used on Facebook and Twitter are derivatives of the central messaging used in press releases.

Press releases. Three factors emerged from the factor analysis. The most dominant strategy emerging was an affirming amplification strategy (Eigenvalue = 2.85) including self-enhancement (.79), framing the organization (.79), accommodative (.74), and excellence or renewal (.76). Additionally, two single-tactic strategies emerged including routine communication (Eigenvalue = 1.09) and defensive (Eigenvalue = 1.07). Together, these factors account for 62.53 percent of the variance in the tactics for press releases.

Facebook. Three factors also emerged from the factor analysis (n = 1,788). The most dominant strategy emerging was an image-oriented Strategy (Eigenvalue = 1.63) including self-enhancement (.61) and frame the organization (.67) tactics. Additionally, two single-tactic strategies emerged with BP's communication on Facebook: an accommodative strategy (Eigenvalue = 1.32) and an excellence strategy (Eigenvalue = 1.21). In total, these factors account for 51.99 percent of the variance in the tactics on Facebook.

Twitter. Four factors emerged for BP's response to the Gulf of Mexico crisis using Twitter. The most dominant factor was a corrective strategy (Eigenvalue 1.89) including efforts to frame the organization (.64), accommodative (.79), and excellence (.61) tactics. Also emerging were three single-tactic strategies including self-Enhancement (Eigenvalue = 1.19), routine communication (Eigenvalue = 1.05), and defensive (Eigenvalue = 1.05). In total, these factors account for 64.58 percent of the variance in the tactics.

Discussion

The BP crisis is an analytically and theoretically rich case that demonstrates how an organization may develop a synchronized approach to its crisis communication. This section will therefore: (1) summarize these findings in terms of their implications to message synchronization across platforms; (2) identify the roles that different platforms may serve in a crisis, comparing these roles to previous analyses and assertions; and (3) finally propose a model for synchronized communication identifying areas for future research and model evaluation.

Message Synchronization

On the surface, the BP effort does not appear to be highly synchronized across its traditional and social media channels (see Table 2) because messaging significantly varied across the communication platforms. However, a closer examination of the message strategies reveals those emerging in the press releases served as the strategic hub for BP's response with the strategies emerging on Facebook and Twitter operating as the supporting spokes of the company's communication network.

The affirming amplification strategy was dominant in press releases incorporating self-enhancement, framing the organization, accommodative, and excellence tactics. This future-oriented, positive, and pro-social strategy confirms previous research on organizational transgressions. More importantly, components of this strategy were evident in the strategies for Facebook and Twitter. Thus, while BP employed substantially different response strategies on Facebook and Twitter, the dominant messaging pushed in the press releases meaningfully connects the messaging across platforms. Further, each of the additional strategies emerging in Facebook and Twitter are consistent with other strategies used in press releases throughout the crisis. Taken together, these findings suggest BP's message strategies were well-synchronized. Therefore, synchronization is not the same as message replication but should reflect the strengths and opportunities in each of the platforms.

Roles of Different Platforms

Though these data were analyzed in the context of a crisis and are most generalizable to organizational transgressions, they generally support previous research analyzing the contemporary purpose that different communication platforms serve in public relations. Because of the emergence and growth of social media, organizations are finding they need to diversify their channels of communication in order to reach an increasingly fragmented global mediascape (Greenberg and MacAulay, 2009, Piechota, 2011). As such, there has been a fundamental shift in the ways organizations communicate with their constituencies from one-way methods of selective information dissemination to two-way engagement models generating more open conversation (Greenberg and MacAulay, 2009, Piechota, 2011). Yet, crisis and general public relations theory fails to meaningfully predict relationships between message and channel – most focus either on describing responses (e.g., image repair theory) to crises or analyzing the situational variables that might influence crisis response (e.g., SCCT and contingency theory). This study is an analysis of BP's actual response to the crisis in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 and not its communicative intent. Thus, our goal is to address present weaknesses in theory and practice by developing a framework that explains how and when different strategies may be used on various platforms, better reflecting the analytical and practical needs of public relations practice in the current media landscape.

Press releases. Previous research suggests that press releases represent the driving force behind organizations' public relations endeavors (Bennett, et al., 2011; Vorvoreanu, 2009;

Wilson, 2011). Our BP findings confirm that during crises, the press release tells the story of the organization in crisis, supporting a more modern understanding of the roles and functions of press releases.

Though press releases are most typically viewed in one of two ways – with a goal of getting media coverage (i.e., press agentry model) or disseminating information with the public relations practitioner acting as the ‘advocate journalist’ (i.e., the public information model) – both are inherently one-way models of communication (Seletzky and Lehman-Wilzig, 2010). One-way approaches to public relations simply do not reflect the modern purpose of the press release, which is to create a conversation with a broader range of stakeholders, not just traditional media (Majstrovic, 2009, Vorvoreanu, 2008). In fact, in her analysis of the role of press releases in the Bosnia-Herzegovinian government, Majstrovic (2009) found that press releases were used as social relations documents communicating common goals, diversifying tools to communicate information, involving participatory mechanisms, and focusing on community-specific interests. In the case of BP, the press releases were used to communicate future-oriented, positive, and pro-social messages sharing these same characteristics. Thus, in the BP case, we find evidence that press releases reflect an emergent model where the ‘top down’ communication tools inform, focus, and shape an ongoing conversation (Greenberg and MacAulay, 2009).

Facebook. Where BP’s press releases created the narrative and opportunity for the emergence of a discursive community, BP’s messaging on Facebook supported the narrative by communicating the message that it cared about the Gulf Coast as evidenced by its emphasis on image-oriented or excellence and accommodative strategies. These findings support previous research analyzing messaging on Facebook suggesting that organizations will use the platform to create, foster, and nurture image-oriented engagement efforts with stakeholders (Greenberg and MacAulay, 2009).

In her analysis of political communication in Poland, Piechota (2011) found this type of messaging can be used over time to develop and promote communities of support for politicians because they focus on participation in on-going conversations. If Facebook is a tool for organizations to reach out to different stakeholders (Waters et al., 2009), then it supports Majstrovic’s (2009) argument for a ‘social relations’ view of public relations because Facebook is a participatory platform. Thus, organizations should think about Facebook as more than an outlet for unhappy stakeholders to vent during a crisis; instead, focusing on it as a venue for open conversation (Greenberg and MacAulay, 2009). By focusing its messaging on image-oriented, excellence, and accommodative strategies, BP seems to have tried to foster a relationship both with those affected by the crisis and those interested in the Gulf coast. In this case, BP’s problem was that it was creating the relationship in the midst of the crisis rather than engaging an existing virtual community because while the company had a Facebook page before the well explosion, it had posted nearly nothing before this event. During the crisis, they flooded their Facebook page with an average of almost 12 posts per day. Relationally, it may be like closing the barn door after the horses have already stampeded.

Twitter. Continuing a theme of too much too late for the 2010 crisis, BP created its Twitter account after the explosion in the Gulf and tweeted an average of 18 messages a day; messages largely focused on its work to correct the damage in the Gulf, promote its corporate identity, and defend criticisms of the corrective work it was doing. In this way, Twitter was used quite differently than Facebook, but still reflected the strong central narrative created by the press releases. These findings support Piechota's (2011) argument that diversifying messaging on different platforms is important because different channels speak to different groups.

Additionally, these findings also demonstrate a different supporting role that Twitter can play. While there are many creative uses of Twitter, such as publishing current events, fundraising, and thanking stakeholders (Greenberg and MacAulay, 2009), studies of Twitter's use across nonprofit, corporate, and governmental organizations have found that it is typically used as a one-way tool to communicate information, to educate, to network, and to engage with content on other platforms (Greenberg and MacAulay, 2009, Rose, 2009, Waters and Williams, 2011). During BP's crisis, it was used as BP's workhorse communicating the vital and sometimes challenging messages the company had to disseminate broadly. Because it was used as a one-way tool rather than a dialogic one, the defensive and routine messaging likely worked better because it did not invite conversation.

Conceptual Model of Synchronized Communication

The reality of public relations has shifted. Relational models have in many cases, superseded models emphasizing 'command and control' message dissemination. This suggests that crisis communication cannot be divorced from dialogue. The changing reality likely explains that while studied in a crisis context, these findings are parsimonious with previous research suggesting that regardless of situation, there is a predictable relationship between messaging and platform. These findings also suggest that well-coordinated and consistent messaging on different platforms need not overlap, but all demonstrate relationship management, common themes, and model the reality the organization wants to present (Majstrovic, 2009). Therefore, we believe that these findings allow us to propose a model of synchronized communication – applicable to both crisis and routine contexts.

The model is based on a simple conceptualization of a network with press releases serving as the hub at the center with stakeholders connected to the organization via one or more platforms of communication (see Figure 1). The more channels stakeholders and organizations use to communicate with one another, the more powerful the conversation and the stronger the opportunity for both to influence the other. This conceptualization is based on findings that relationships are stronger when there are more structural attachments connecting organizations and people (Pauleen and Yoong, 2001, Seabright et al., 1992). Very simply, an organization's ability to advance its material and relational goals with its stakeholders (i.e., its movement) is likely advanced, halted, or reversed based on the strategy articulated in its press releases. However, the organization's stakeholders may receive the messages through one or more of the channels the organization uses to communicate its central strategy – the spokes holding the hub and tire together. The present study analyzed three channels (i.e., press releases, Facebook, and

Twitter); however, there are many more traditional and social media channels through which the stakeholders may receive the organization's message. The model supports the emergent communicative environment because it recognizes the importance of the role of press releases to communicate the organization's narrative about issues, events, and even crises. Further, the model helps to explain that in a fragmented global mediascape, social media can reinforce the company's storyline or narrative while focusing on subplots relevant to different stakeholder groups.

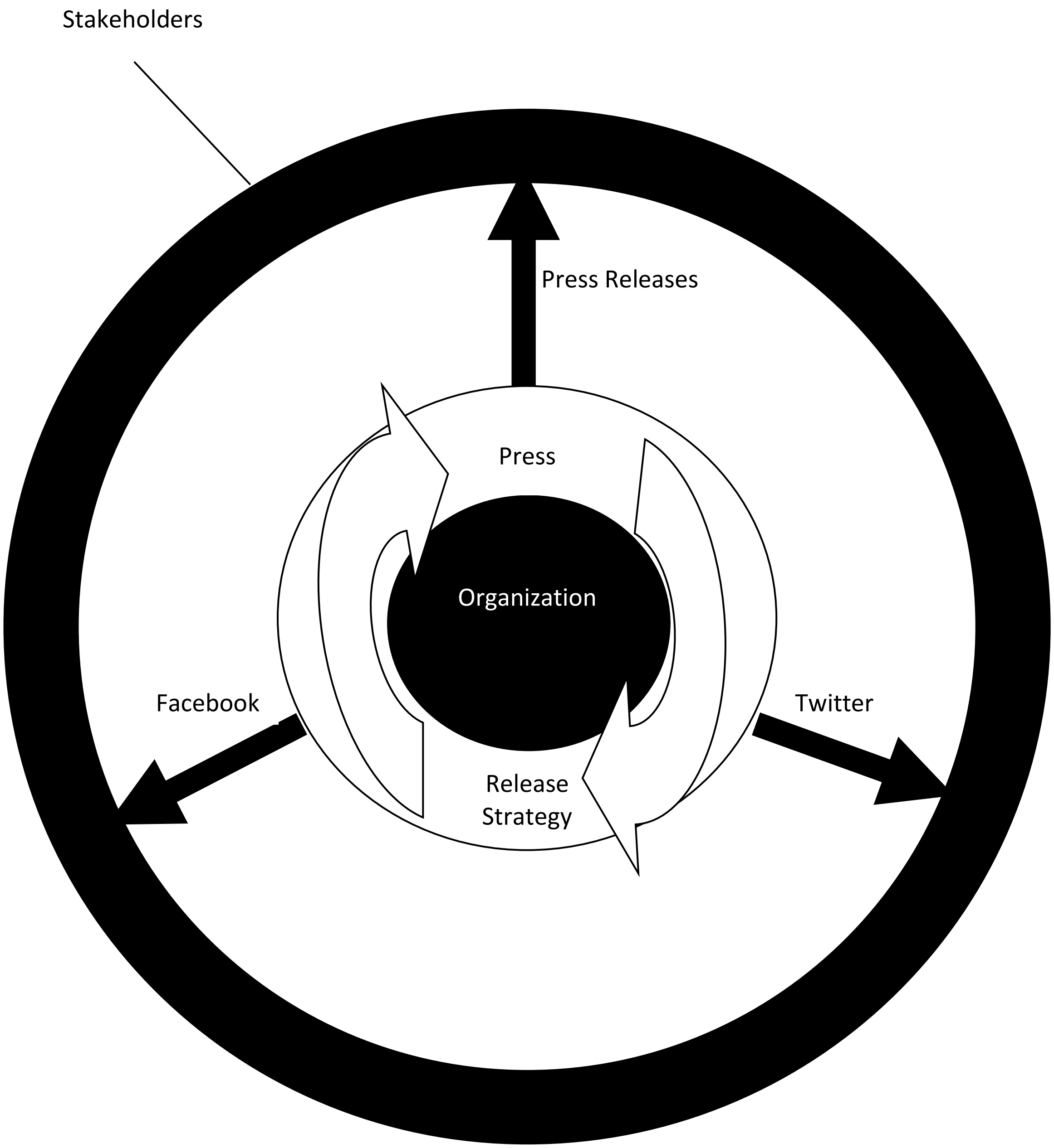

Figure 1. Synchronized Model of Crisis Communication

Applying the findings of the present study and previous research to this model, we can make predictions about the messaging and strategic use of different communicative platforms. First, we would still expect that organizations would develop narratives to address different situations, such as the narrative we identified with the BP study. However, once the story is told through the press release, it would be consistently communicated across different platforms. One of the assumptions that must be tested is the timing of the messaging – for the press release to drive the narrative, the talking points in the press release should precede their emergence on other channels. Additionally, message consistency among platforms should be tested in both crisis and routine contexts in order to determine the veracity of these findings.

Second, we argue that each platform plays symbiotic yet somewhat distinctive roles in creating and managing relationships between organizations and their stakeholders. Greenberg and MacAulay (2009) argue that in the new media environment that traditional and social media channels work together to build networks of collaborators, increase information, foster creativity, and increase two-way symmetrical communication. However, each platform represents one route to that same end. Our findings suggest predictable functions each platform serves. We have already identified the press release as hub of the narrative. Together our findings, along with previous research on the role of Facebook, suggests it is used to develop and promote a discursive community driven by image-oriented pro-social messaging from the organization to its stakeholders. Finally, our findings combined with previous research on Twitter suggests that instead of expecting to find meaningful two-way interactions, it is a platform for communicating more difficult messages – from the routine to the defensive.

Though grounded by other research drawing together analyses from across sectors and countries, these conclusions are still primarily based in the findings of a longitudinal case study; therefore, cross-sectional analyses should be conducted to determine the predictive validity of the roles for Facebook and Twitter as part of an overall synchronized communication strategy. Further, because this model assumes that the more connections between stakeholders and organizations strengthens the power and influence each may exert, future research should also investigate the role of other platforms of both social and traditional media including, for example, advertising, news media, and other visual mediums (e.g., YouTube).

Finally, as an inherent part of the model's development and testing, future research should evaluate the effectiveness of predicted messaging across platforms because, as Greenberg and MacAulay (2009) suggest, managing ongoing relationships across different media is challenging, time consuming, and fluid. Therefore, the model must be able to measure relational quality between organizations and their stakeholders. The central question left unanswered in the present research is whether BP's strategy met stakeholder needs. Ultimately, the question really is, was BP's strategy effective?

The present study highlights the influence of the choice of message and use of platform on the changing nature of public relations, particularly during a major crisis. BP demonstrated that it performed as expected – both in terms of its message content and synchronization across communication platforms. While we believe this model applies across different contexts, it needs testing and substantial development in order for it to reliably predict relationships between messaging and communication platforms. We also argue that in a modern view of public relations, stakeholder engagement must be evaluated as well. Though this study offers a strong foundation for the message and platform evaluations, it does not offer a mechanism for evaluating stakeholder engagement. Therefore, it is unlikely that most judgments about BP's success or failure have considered all three components – a clear driving narrative, platform-appropriate messaging, and stakeholder-appropriate messaging – needed to render a reasoned judgment about BP's effectiveness in responding to the crisis in the Gulf of Mexico.

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