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Issue and crisis management: Quicksand in the definitional landscape

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The broad field of public relations is plagued by difficulties of definition, none more problematic than the definitional challenges facing issue management and crisis management. After considering the need for commonly understood language as a basis for meaningful discourse, the paper identifies the particular reasons for ongoing ambiguity in issue and crisis management and charts some distinct approaches which have developed within each discipline. It then analyzes how these evolutionary changes are creating further difficulties for defining the interplay between the two, and identifies a more integrated process approach focused on characterizing clusters of activities.

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1. Defining the field

The broad field of public relations is plagued by difficulties of definition. In fact defining the term "public relations" itself has generated extensive scholarship, going back to the famous study by Harlow (1976), who reportedly identified 472 different definitions of public relations.

Over time such analysis has overall proved less than helpful. Cropp and Pincus (2001), for instance, observed that 25 years after Harlow's seminal work, definitions of public relations continue to proliferate with little common perspective, and that this decades-long confusion over the nature and applications of public relations has in fact seen a *deteriorating clarity* of its transcending purpose. Indeed, they went further and concluded: "The confusion has been exacerbated by the myriad definitions and terminology applied to the various specialties, activities and literature falling under the rubric of public relations" (2001, p. 191).

One such specialty area "under the rubric of public relations" is crisis management and issue management, where growing convergence and overlap between the two disciplines has created new quicksand on the definitional landscape, creating uncertainty and inexorably drawing in other activities and processes.

Unlike some other definitional disputes within public relations, motivated (inter-alia) by dueling academic schools and orientations (discussed by Reber & Harriss, 2003), crisis management and issue management began as distinct activities, thriving in both theoretical and practitioner contexts. But the commonly available definitions and terminology have failed to keep pace with their evolution.

2. The importance of common meaning

Although it is self-evident that language which communicates common understanding is needed as the basis for meaningful discussion, in many areas within public relations such agreed taxonomy is both elusive and illusory.

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The challenge was highlighted by the renowned scholar Quarantelli who conceded that after four decades working in the area of disaster he still struggled with how to define and conceptualize the term. "A major reason why we need clarification is because otherwise scholars who think they are communicating with one another are really talking of different phenomena" (1998, p. 3). He said he was not arguing for agreement on a single, all purpose definition, and he had no problem with different views. "However," he concluded, "in my view, for *research* purposes aimed at developing a theoretical superstructure for the field, we need greater clarity and relative consensus."

This runs counter to the common wisdom that debate over definitions is the norm in just about any field, and that experts "know" the meaning of key concepts without the need for formal agreement on terminology. Or as US Justice Potter Stewart famously opined on the subject of pornography: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced . . . But I know it when I see it."[1]

Yet, following on the work of Quarantelli, Rockett (1999) argued for *redoubled* effort to produce definitive language for meaningful discourse. In a discussion of risk, crisis and disaster he observed that effort to obtain a "definitive bounding of terms" had been limited in perception and unnecessarily divisive. "What is important is not what a term might have meant . . . but what we as practitioners or theorists of crisis management require of the words" (p. 45). "It does not for practical or theoretical purposes matter how we define the terms so long as we agree, at the point of definition, their meaning." He added: "To progress, both in definition itself and in our ability to converse and discuss meaningfully, we need to standardize what we mean" (p. 46).

Taking a somewhat different perspective, Shrivastava (1993) argued that research was moving away from establishing definitions and creating vocabularies towards building theoretical frameworks and models. Referring to the "fragmentation and idiosyncrasy" of research in the field of crisis management, Shrivastava said the attention of scholars from many different disciplines had resulted in what he called a "Tower of Babel" effect. "There are so many disciplinary voices, talking in so many different languages to different issues and audiences," he said. "This creates difficulties in communication of research results within the research community. It also impedes development of consensus over policy and practical issues" (p. 33).

Furthermore, the search for definitional understanding differs across international lines, varying between developed and developing societies, between democratic nations and authoritarian regimes. Curtin and Gaither (2007) examined failed international efforts to grapple with definitions in the field of public relations and concluded: "Definitions privilege world views, establish power relations, and affix names to communicative processes that are constantly in flux, shaped by global forces that include economic and cultural tides" (p. 14).

This concept of attempting to define processes which are in a state of flux is particularly pertinent to crisis management and issue management, which have both witnessed substantially evolving and expanding parameters and applications. In fact the definitional challenge here involves two related concepts where the dissimilarities and working interface help fully define them, with the focus more properly on their correlation than on individual descriptions.

It is important to note that there is a vital distinction between disputes over terminology and differences in definitions of the subject itself. For example, the atmospheric condition referred to as a cyclone in the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific is called a hurricane in the Western Atlantic and Eastern Pacific, and a typhoon in the Western Pacific. Yet the phenomenon is exactly the same irrespective of terminology (except, of course, that it rotates counter-clockwise in the northern hemisphere and clockwise in the southern hemisphere). With issue and crisis it is not simply such a difference in terminology, but a more fundamental difference in accurately characterizing each phenomenon.

3. The definitional challenge

While crisis management and issue management have been dubbed the "Siamese twins of public relations" (Jaques, 2002), this description refers to the inseparable way they have come to be linked in practice rather than to any idea of common birth. In fact the disparate origin of the two disciplines played a major part in the subsequent definitional challenge.

Of all the activities in public relations, issue management is unique in that its formal birth can be traced to an exact time and place – the first issue of the new publication *Corporate Public Issues and their Management* on 15 April, 1976 – which "nailed the issue management manifesto to the cathedral door" (Chase, 1984, p. 15. For a full description see Jaques, 2008). Most importantly, issue management was born virtually fully formed, not only on a known date, but with a newly coined name, purpose and language, to meet an acknowledged management need. Accordingly, early scholarship centered mainly on defining issue management, not defining an issue.

By contrast modern crisis management emerged only slowly after years of discussion about how to define a crisis, with very little debate about what constitutes crisis management. In this case the early scholarship centered mainly on defining a crisis, not defining crisis management.

Crisis management in a general sense emerged after World War II, taking its roots from crisis study, which expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the fields of behavioural science and disaster response (Booth, 1993; Milburn, Schuler, & Watman, 1983). The developing discipline also gained prominence as an international policy concept in the wake of the much-studied 1962 Cuban Missile crisis (Lagadec, 1993). But it has been widely accepted (including Fishman, 1999; Heath &

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[1] Jacobellis v. Ohio, 378 U.S. 184 (1964).