

Friend vs. Foe: Viewing the Media as a Partner in Crisis Response

Shari Veil
University of Oklahoma
shari.veil@ou.edu

Abstract

Prominent crisis communication researchers have suggested that practitioners should work with the media as partners when managing a crisis (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007), and yet little research exists to support the argument. This essay focuses on crisis cases in which the media were embraced as partners in the crisis response. Literature on crisis communication and establishing partnerships is reviewed and four key examples are provided to detail how the media can serve as a resource in a crisis.

The examples provide context for the argument for media to be seen as partners not adversaries in the crisis response. Specifically, the cases highlight examples of the media serving as an information resource, resource manager, public safety official, and public advocate.

In crisis communication literature the media are often portrayed as entities to try to control. After all, the media frame can greatly influence how an individual understands or experiences a crisis (Heath & Millar, 2004). Evans (1987) even contends “if the object is to present the company’s message to the public with as little distortion as possible, the press must be manipulated” (p. xiv). Trade publications are awash with articles depicting how to get the media to run the organization’s scripted message in a crisis. And yet, little research has focused on the essential role of the media in crisis response.

As the media embrace twenty-four-hour coverage, evolving crises fill up time and space quickly. Despite the exciting nature and public relations practitioners’ complaints, not all coverage of crises is sensationalized. “When journalists go to the scene, they join other first responders—police, firefighters, emergency medical teams, and others trained and equipped to go to a disaster” (Simpson & Cote, 2006, p. 71). The media are there to cover the story. “In the initial phase of a crisis or emergency, people want information—*now*. They want timely and accurate facts about what happened, and where, and what is being done” (Reynolds, 2002, p. 8). Oftentimes, the media deliver those facts, whether the organization approves or not.

Organizational leaders embroiled in a crisis often view reporters as nothing more than attack dogs out to get them. Media become the enemy. Schmidt (2006) suggests that management should view reporters not as enemies, but as filters through which carefully prepared messages pass before they reach stakeholders. Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2007) go a step further. They suggest practitioners should view “stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis” (p. 36)

Partnerships are equal communication relationships with groups or organizations that have an impact on an organization. Partnerships are established through honest and open dialogue about important issues for each group or organization. Partners may be advocates for the organization or they may be groups that are antagonistic toward the organization (Ulmer et al., 2007, p. 35).

Because the media provide instructing information to stakeholders in a crisis, reporters become part of the crisis response, not just the sieve through which manipulated messages must pass. Seeger (2006) posits that best practices of crisis communicators are grounded in effective communication with the media. “Rather than viewing the media as a liability in a crisis situation, risk and crisis communicators should engage the media, through open and honest communication, and use the media as a strategic resource to aid in managing the crisis” (p. 241).

This essay focuses on crisis cases in which the media were embraced as partners in the crisis response. Literature on crisis communication and establishing partnerships is reviewed and four key examples are provided to detail how the media can serve as a resource in a crisis. The examples provide context for the argument for media to be seen as partners and not adversaries in the crisis response.

Crisis Communication

Communication is a key aspect of emergency response (Veil, 2007). Emergency communication, most often associated with natural disasters, is designed to “protect health, safety, and the environment by keeping the public informed” (Mileti & Sorensen, 1990, p. 4). Rapid and clear communication increases the quality of decisions in a crisis (Kahai & Cooper, 2003). Without timely information in a crisis, people must rely on rumors for their information, increasing uncertainty and exacerbating the situation. Breakdowns in communication can also increase harm (Veil, Reynolds, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2008). Indeed the literature is filled with examples of miscommunication making a crisis much worse.

The purpose of crisis communication is “to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis and thereby protect the organization, stakeholders, and industry from harm” (Coombs, 2007, p. 5). The crisis response contains three key elements: instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation management. Instructing information includes messages on what stakeholders should do to protect themselves during a crisis (Coombs, 2007). This includes messages to increase physical safety and detail what happened, how it will affect stakeholders, and how business will continue. The immediate communication need is to reduce uncertainty so audiences may act appropriately (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). Adjusting information helps stakeholders cope psychologically with the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Adjusting messages should include what is being done to prevent the crisis from recurring and what stakeholders can do to move beyond the crisis. Reputation management includes messages designed to reduce damages to the credibility and legitimacy of the organization. Much of the research in crisis communication, particularly in public relations, has focused entirely on the reputation management response (Benoit, 1995a, 1995b, 1997, 2000; Coombs, 1995).

Crisis communication also concentrates on being the first to communicate. Coombs (2007) accurately describes crises as creating an information void. The void must be filled. If the organization is not ready to respond when the media is ready to run the story, the story will be run without the organization’s response. The void can be filled by rumor and speculation instead of facts (Caruba, 1994). When an organization does not respond it gives the impression that it is not in control and opens the door for others to control the situation (Hearit, 1994; Brummett, 1980). Following the Challenger accident, NASA took five hours to call a press conference. The media continued running coverage without NASA, getting comments on the accident from outside experts (Kaufman, 1988) and limiting the NASA’s ability to regain their expert credibility.

Organizations must communicate quickly and consistently by providing accurate information to maintain credibility. The organization is already at a credibility disadvantage for being involved in the crisis. Crisis communication derives from “the need for skilled communicators to strategically defend and explain the organization’s position in the face of crisis-induced criticism, threat, and uncertainty” (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005, p. 46). However, “As responsible members of the community, organizations have a right and, in some cases, an obligation to interact with their community” (Troester, 1991, p. 528). Media partnerships are needed, in most cases, as a conduit for that interaction.

Establishing Partnerships

Effective interaction with the media can be of critical importance in reducing losses. In disasters, information conveyed by the media can be decisive in preventing death and injury (Moreira, 2007).

The media can be used to convey instructions to the public, stimulate donations, reinforce efforts to gain broad public support for mitigating actions, engender confidence in community leadership, greatly reduce the number of enquiries from the public, and provide useful coverage that may facilitate future funding campaigns. (Moreira, 2007, p. 15)

Research has demonstrated there is value in inter-organizational linkages in public relations activities generally and in issues management specifically (Sellnow et al., in press). The benefits of establishing a partnership include the combining of resources and expertise, the sharing of good practice, and the spreading of costs and risks (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) suggest that “relationships represent the exchange or transfer of information, energy, or resources” (p. 94). If the organization can deliver its message more smoothly and the media can get the story without hassle, both entities are better off. These benefits constitute what Huxham (1996) terms “collaborative advantage” – positive outcomes not achievable by organizations working independently. The attributes of the resources exchange are what define the relationship (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997, p. 94). Inter-organizational projects can be risky, however, because, according to Newell and Swan (2000), they “are not governed by traditional hierarchical relationships [therefore] critical problems surround the development and maintenance of trust and the deployment of power amongst members” (p. 1288).

Trust is used to refer to the *expectation* that both parties will behave reliably and predictably (Tomlinson, 2005). Maguire, Phillips, and Hardy (2001) describe “identity based trust” as the strongest form of trust in which “trustees forgo opportunistic behavior not because of deterrents, penalties or rewards but because it is seen to be the ‘right’ thing to do” (p. 290). If trust is lacking in an inter-organizational partnership, power becomes the dominant quality in the relationship (Tomlinson, 2005). Hardy and Phillips (1998) highlight three aspects of power – formal authority, control of critical resources, and discursive legitimacy. Tomlinson (2005) explains that if one party in the relationships is better positioned to pursue self-interest, the risks will not be evenly spread in the relationship. In addition, if one party in the relationship can exercise greater control of the communications process, it can limit the participation of the other party, thereby privileging the interests of the more powerful party and restricting the opportunity for the marginal party to exercise their discursive legitimacy.

The media must still do their job. They will report the facts they discover in their reporting. Organizations cannot expect the media to overlook details detrimental to the organization because there is an established partnership anymore than a reporter can assume the organization will not provide information to other reporters. The goal of the partnership is to streamline, not inhibit, the communication process from the organization to stakeholders and from the media to the public. The partnership allows both entities to establish rapport and credibility before the crisis.

Credibility is based largely on the organization's performance during normal times (Hurst, 1995; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). Coombs (2000) asserts that "background is a part of initial credibility; hence, [organizations] are more believable during a crisis if there is a strong, favorable reputation prior to the crisis" (p. 82). A credible reputation creates a "halo effect" that extends to stakeholders during crises (p. 82). Relationships should be established with the media long before crisis strikes. But establishing relationships is not the same as establishing partnerships with the media. Knowing your beat reporter's name so you can call on him/her in a press conference is not the same expecting both parties to behave reliably and predictably (Tomlinson, 2005).

Sitting down with reporters during the crisis planning process allows for open communication in which both parties can ask questions to understand what will be expected in a crisis. Ulmer et al. (2007) note the battle over public access to information and privacy laws. Organizations can get a feel for the type of information reporters need while reporters can learn upfront what information must legally be withheld. Expectations can be set and uncertainty reduced as to how organizations will communicate and how media prefer to receive information from organizations (Ulmer et al., 2007).

Established partnerships create a protocol for communication. Utility companies often rely on the media to emphasize what customers can do to help them restore service as quickly and safely as possible (Brown, 2003). Partnerships also allow for a smooth process during the most chaotic times instead of a sudden onslaught of impersonal interactions and retroactive responses. Following Hurricane Katrina practitioners commented on the importance of media relationships.

Some practitioners fielded 100–150 media calls a day. For many of the practitioners, working with the local media was less of a challenge than working with the national and international media. The ease of working with local media appeared to be the result of working relationships built over time. Local media were also useful to practitioners for responding to rumors and misinformation. (Lundy & Broussard, 2007, p. 221)

Ropeik suggests that "Good risk and crisis communication should involve constant monitoring of the media, both to learn from what journalists have found (failure to do this played a role in FEMA's poor response to Hurricane Katrina) and to correct immediately mistakes or inaccurate information" (p. 256). As a partner in the crisis response, the media can be relied on as a resource. The following cases demonstrate how the media can be an essential partner to public relations practitioners in a crisis.

Media as a Resource

As the media become part of the first responder team (Simpson & Cote, 2006), they have the potential to play a variety of roles depending on the crisis type. The cases listed here detail

examples of the media serving as an information resource, resource manager, public safety official, and public advocate.

Information Resource

The most common role of the media in a crisis is as an information resource. Ulmer et al. (2007) detail how investigators partnered with the media to help catch the *D.C. Sniper* by reporting the description of the suspect vehicle. The media not only relay essential information to stakeholders, however, they can also provide information back to the organization. During the 2003 San Diego wildfires, the media proved to be a valuable resource. The city did not have the means to track the widespread fires. Fire Chief Jeff Bowman held up to five press conferences each day, not only to report progress to the public, but to also gain information from reporters who often had better information about the location of the fires.

Chief Bowman had spent the year before the fires working with the media to report on fire risks and inadequate funding for the fire department (Ulmer et al., 2007). The relationships established with the media before the fires allowed for comfortable, candid responses under intense pressure. Even more, the media's field reporters were able to provide the location of the fast moving fires, understanding that the department did not have the resources to track that essential information. Bowman explained that "without a positive precrisis relationship with the media, an effective response would have been impossible (Ulmer et al., 2007, p. 135).

Resource Manager

The media assisted in the response efforts following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 by reporting what supplies were needed. Truckloads of flashlights and batteries arrived in addition to booties for the search dogs clambering over broken glass. A feature of the Oklahoma City National Memorial focuses on the role of the media in bringing together massive resources (OKC Memorial, 2008). For example, following a call for work boots for the rescuers, a volunteer accepted a pair of slightly worn boots from a citizen. As the individual was getting back into his vehicle, the volunteer realized he was wearing only socks. The calls for supplies relayed by the media following the tragedy inspired people to donate the shoes off their feet. People waited in lines for hours to give blood until the media reported the blood bank could not take anymore. The media also reported volunteer requests, which encouraged an overwhelming community response. Similar experiences following 9/11 were also reported (Sellnow et al., 2008).

Public Safety

When the Interstate 35W bridge collapsed in Minneapolis, Minnesota reporters were part of the first responder team to the scene before the area was cordoned off. The media provided much needed accident details and traffic directions for emergency responders and citizens to respond appropriately. News stations even collaborated on information to assure the details of the warnings and response were accurately reported to save lives and minimize chaos.

"Normally, reporters respect each other's space...But in this emergency, most were accommodating to each other to help get the information out" (Report, 2007, para 16). In the acute phase of the crisis the focus was not just on what happened and who was to blame, but on public safety and how to minimize the affect of the crisis on citizens. The media provided the initial instructing information to minimize harm until the Department of Transportation could respond to the crisis.

Public Advocate

Journalists have long carried the reputation of being the watchdogs for citizens, monitoring government and corporate giants for power abuse. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the media coverage was so intense and illuminated so many failures and disparities in the response and recovery effort that legislation was introduced to change how communities prepare for crisis. While FEMA and the Bush Administration no doubt felt the media was representing their attack dog persona, organizations that reached out to the media, in particular those who already had established relationships with reporters (Lundy & Broussard, 2007), were able to advance their mission by filling the information void created by the crisis and left open by a slow government response to media concerns.

Conclusion

Researchers have suggested that practitioners should view “stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis” (Ulmer et al., 2007, p. 36), and yet little research has focused on this role of the media in crisis response. Literature on crisis communication and establishing partnerships was reviewed and four key examples were provided to detail how the media can serve as a resource in a crisis. The examples provide context for the argument for media to be seen as partners in a crisis, specifically, as an information resource, resource manager, public safety official, and public advocate. Further research is needed to document the nature of these partnerships and the outcome of crises in which media partnerships were used.

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