

Public Relations in High Profile Family Crisis Situations

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Crisis management is an important public relations organizational function but families in crisis situations could also benefit from such assistance while they require a whole different approach to crisis management. This paper discusses the theoretical basis for merging crisis communication with family crisis literature, and from psychology and sociology as well. There have been a number of high profile cases recently where families going through situations of murder, kidnapping, legal allegations, illnesses etc. quickly catch and remain in the media spotlight. Most likely, these families have never received appropriate training for such media exposure.

In addition to theory this study is a multiple case analysis that follows such cases as the Laci Peterson and Lori Hacking murders, as well as Elizabeth Smart's kidnapping, and Terri Schiavo's legal controversy over life-prolonging measures and others. In several of these cases the family turned to a public relations professional, often pro bono, to get key messages out to the public through the media and seek some resolution to a particular tragic situation.

As a result of the multiple-case analysis a model, called the audience-interaction family crisis model, was developed for handling family crises communication that can help public relations professionals deal with similar critical situations. The author(s) believe that this is an important model that will help forward public relations theory and practice as it applies to crisis communication involving families in the media focus.

Introduction

When Elizabeth Smart finally returned to her family in March 2003, after having been missing for nine months, the tireless efforts of her family and friends as well as professional public relations representatives became widely known as an example of a new successful public relations function - family crisis communication. Among many other functions of public relations, one of the most important is preparation, mitigation and response to a crisis situation. Crisis management research has been developing through practitioner experiences, research on apologia and impression management. It has focused primarily on understanding and improving the public relations role as issues management and developing proactive crisis plans for organizations (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). Issues management is viewed as a proactive approach to organizational crises (Gaunt & Ollenburger, 1995; Heath, 1997; Sellnow, Seeger & Ulmer, 2001) and research on apologia adopted rhetorical approaches from individual to corporate situations since "the modern corporation is unique in the degree of audience diversity and nature of their [audience members'] interests" (Schultz & Seeger, 1991, p.51) and apologia is adopted from a single speaker to "rhetoric which is corporate rather than individual centered" (p.51).

High-profile family crisis communication requires a similar preparation and assistance as corporate crisis management. This research will be taking the well-established function of corporate communication in crisis and adapt it to the more private setting of family crisis

situations like Elizabeth Smart's kidnapping case. This study will develop a theoretical and practical basis for the management of crisis from a public relations standpoint for the families who are going through murder, kidnapping, legal allegations or extraordinary health and legal issues. Just like corporate crises, such family events tend to attract intense media attention that keep family members in medias' focus. In addition to internal stress, family members have to communicate to the public around the nation and sometimes, around the world about each development in the story. Most likely, such families never received appropriate training about media appearances, nor do they have access to professionals in crisis management. This circumstance adds to family stress while trying to deal with a crisis and public scrutiny at the same time. There are an increased number of instances where families find themselves in terrifying crisis situations because of the emergency nature of crisis events. Family crisis communications management should be a wide-spread pro bono practice among public relations professionals to help families in need to cope with their particular crisis.

Significance

There has been almost no theory related to family crisis situation developed in the field of public relations. The intensity of these situations expands the interest in the event, "when the magnitude of such harm is high or when the event is unusual, the media give the story front page treatment, which amounts to certification that a crisis is under way" (Lerbinger, 1997, p.3). Social sciences have already developed many strategies dealing with families that are going through such traumatic experiences but there is no theoretical base that prepares such families and their public relations representatives to face the media. Many of the families in such tragic situations never had to deal with such a great amount of national and international media and it becomes difficult for the family to find the proper way to face the media, while simultaneously, going through a period of pain, grief and uncertainty. Public relations professionals, who are usually experienced in corporate crisis management, do not have a specific crisis management plan for family crises and are usually not prepared to help the families with all their potential issues.

Corporate crisis management in public relations is a significantly developed discipline and a developing field of family crisis management can borrow from this knowledge base. Both of the fields have similarities as they strive to provide stability for a group of people who work or live with each other on a daily basis. Both types of crises have an unpredictable nature, causing the process in which "managers in all kinds of organizations are slowly-all too slowly- recognizing the likelihood that at some time they will face a crisis." (Lerbinger, 2007, p. 2) Usually corporate crises are defined by extensive media attention, negative publicity, stress and impaired judgment (Lerbinger). The same description can be applied to family-related crises.

A crisis situation can become more complicated in the atmosphere of high media involvement, where journalists are trying to continuously communicate with the primary sources. One of the established ways to provide stability and protection for the corporation in this situation would be to organize a media crisis center (Lerbinger, 2007). The same principles apply to family crisis communication when at the time of a high profile crisis, a family falls under extensive media scrutiny. As seen from cases such as the one dealing with Elizabeth Smart's kidnapping, the family turned to a public relations professional to get key messages across, and through the media build the agenda for the public to stay current on the issue that eventually led to the recovery of the Smart's daughter. In this case, media were important for the

progress of getting leads on the case and by continuously updating journalists with new developments, the Smart family increased its ability to keep Elizabeth in the news.

Literature Review

The following theories were selected for use in this multiple-case study: crisis communications, relationship formation, social exchange theory, role theory of public relations, agenda building, issue-attention cycles theory, models of public relations, and complexity theory, all leading to the development of the audience-interaction family crisis model. Selection of these theories was based on the theories' abilities to explain the following: how groups form and interact, how the media can influence the public, and how a group can account for unpredictability in crisis.

Crisis Communication

Fearn-Banks (2001) stated that "since the term public relations was coined early in the 20th century, the profession has been crisis driven" and most of the programs aimed on dealing or avoiding crisis situations (as cited in Heath 2006, p.479). Ulmer et al. (2007) included the working definitions of the general crisis describing that crisis is a "specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty or are perceived to threaten an organization's high-priority goals" (p. 7).

Considering the nature of the crisis as an unexpected event, crisis communication is a recommended part of proactive measures in the organizational process. Fearn-Banks (2001) defined crisis communication as "verbal, visual, and/or written interaction between the organization and its publics (often through the news media) prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence" (as cited in Heath 2006, p.480). The better an organization plans for such events and uncertainty, the more successfully its leaders will be in coping with dangerous or threatening situations. General communication strategies when dealing with crisis include "reducing uncertainty, responding to the crisis, resolving it, and learning from it" (Ulmer, Sellnow, Seeger, 2007, p. 15).

Each crisis situation is different but at the same time, they are similar because of an increased level of uncertainty a crisis brings. Crisis communication strategies are aimed to decrease the level of uncertainty by providing needed information. Ulmer et al. (2007) stated that to prepare for crisis, the managers in an organization need to realize the nature of the crisis. The crisis starts quickly and unexpectedly and most of the preparation has to be done ahead of time. After the crisis occurs, the crisis management team has a responsibility to communicate a consistent message early and often. The crisis team needs to be prepared to create these messages with little or no factual information about the nature and effects of the crisis and without relying on routine solutions. However, before sufficient information becomes available, it is important to avoid absolute answers to the public through the media and realize that in crisis situation it is permissible to state that there is no information available at the current time.

Ulmer et al. (2007) noted that in a case when an organization is not responsible for a crisis, it is much easier to regain the trust and recover from the crisis, than in an event of intentional crisis. The crisis communication team needs to incorporate into the message that the crisis was not caused by the organization and if possible, build the case about who is responsible and why. While managing the crisis, it is important to acknowledge the stakeholders of the organization, such as media, consumers, employees, and competitors since each of these stakeholders plays an important part in efficiently handling the crisis. Fearn-Banks (2001)

emphasized the importance of the public relations head as part of top management in dealing with a crisis situation, since such a public relations representative will be responsible for making decisions about the case using all available information (as cited in Heath, 2006).

The theory and norms of crisis communication in public relations practice serve as a base to family crisis communication. Similar to an organizational crisis, family crisis requires planning and preparation for each possible event where public relations professionals can step up and help coordinate the crisis management. The family needs to ascertain the facts of the crisis and be prepared to take or deny blame as the case may be. A family crisis deals with much uncertainty and risk of the reputation of family members where media can both help to resolve the case or deepen the crisis.

Relationship Formation

Public relations practice is built on a relationship perspective that balances the interests of organizations and publics' "through management of organization-public relationships" (Ledingham, 2003, p.2). This notion of relationship management substitutes traditional impact measurement based on the number of placed stories to how public relations initiatives influenced the quality of the relationship between an organization and its publics (Ledingham).

The relationship-formation theory suggests that organizations and key publics need to adapt to one another in order to establish a strong organizational relationship. The relationship formation theory "views all the parties of an organizational relationship as one holistic unit, which means that the relationship between the organization and its audiences can be studied as a separate entity from the organization or any one of its key stakeholder groups" (Baldwin, Perry, & Moffitt, 2004, p. 366). Basically, organizations and key publics should be considered as one entity, like a team or family of sorts. There are several different aspects of the organization or team but they should all be considered as part of one team (Bentley, Christiansen, Miller, Law, Sargent, & Tiek, 2004). These relationships between an organization and its key publics can become stronger and weaker, just as the relationships within an organization can also impact the relationship with key publics for better or worse (Bentley, et al.). This theory suggests that the "whole relationship can be studied to identify factors that impact it, factors and held images influencing each of the parties in the whole unit, and the ongoing interaction of all the parties within the unit" (Baldwin et al., 2004, p. 366).

Family crisis communication relies heavily on relationship theory, since in the event of the extreme crisis the family is not only looking inward for support in a difficult situation but also outward. At this time it is important to help the family realize that media and other stakeholders in the situation can contribute if strong relationships among the various key publics are built and maintained.

Social Exchange Theory

Along with the relationship-formation theory that explains organizational interaction as a whole, the social exchange theory can help explain the relationship interaction that takes place on the micro level, between the organization and each of its stakeholders. People are motivated by self-interests and attempt to maximize rewards and minimize costs that vary and change from person to person and also over time (Roloff, 1981). Since "the exchange of social and material resources is a fundamental form of human interaction" (Illman, 1996), the social exchange theory explains that a relationship can be built when one party provides something to the other party in exchange for something else (Baldwin et al., 2004). Self-interest and interdependence

are two of the central properties of the social exchange. This theory is a good example of the manner in which the media and a party involved work with each other (Widdison, Lehtikoinan, Jacob, DeHart, & Kane, 2004). For example, public relations professionals provide quality and timely information to journalists, while journalists use that information in their stories. However, it is important to remember that while relationships are built upon social exchange, there are no specific obligations that parties take from such an exchange. According to Blau (1964), “in contrast to economic commodities, the benefits involved in social exchange do not have an exact price in terms of a single quantitative medium of exchange, which is another reason why social obligations are unspecific.” (pp. 94-95).

Even in the event of high media attention during a crisis, a family might have a hard time understanding why the media would need continuous updates on the situation. It might seem to be an invasion of privacy and a family might want to withhold intimate information about family members. Social exchange theory helps the public relations representative keep a sufficient and appropriate exchange of information among family members, the media, law enforcement officials, and other involved parties for a mutually beneficial result the crisis situation.

Role Theory

Role theory in public relations began in the 1970s (Broom & Smith, 1978). Broom developed a typology that would account for the many roles of a public relations practitioner in day-to-day activities. This theory is included here because a PR practitioner as a family communications crisis consultant is yet another one of those many roles a practitioner can play. In 1984 Grunig and Hunt developed the model with two levels: the technician (writes press releases) and the manager (tells the technician what to put in the press release and where to send it) (as cited in Brown, J., Davis, J., Lee, B., Packer, M., & Skousen, T., 2004). Within two years it developed into a more sophisticated model when Broom and Dozier conceptualized four different leadership roles: Expert prescribers (strategists) communication facilitators (“go-between” the organization and key publics, problem-solving facilitators (do research) and communication technicians (create messages) (as cited in Brown, et al., 2004).

For this role of family crisis communicator, the communication facilitator role seems most appropriate because those individuals monitor and improve the flow of information both quality and quantity between a family and the media, and in turn the key publics interested in a particular family crisis case (Broom & Dozier, 1986).

Agenda Building

One prominent theory concerning limited, but powerful, media effects is the agenda-setting theory. The basis of this theory is Bernard Cohen’s statement in 1963 that “the media may not be able to tell audiences ‘what to think,’ but they could tell them ‘what to think about’” (Baldwin, Moffitt, & Perry; 2004, p. 196). According to these same authors, “at the macroscopic level, the issues people think are important for America to deal with will be correlated with the issues the media most often presents as problems for the society” (p. 196). In the stressful situation of family crisis that is displayed by the media, viewers usually have only media to make sense of the situation and therefore, they are vulnerable in front of media to form their opinions. Gavin Bentley, et al, (2004) stated the following:

Those who subscribe to agenda setting theory believe that the public opinion, when left alone, is nothing more than ingredients being mixed together and a catalyst is needed for

any type of action to ensue. The agenda-setting theory comes from a scientific perspective, because it predicts that if people are exposed to the same media, they will place importance on the same issues. The O.J. Simpson [case] was a historic event, and is an excellent example of agenda setting. The placement of full page, color articles and top stories on news programming made it clear that Americans should place these events as important issues. Some people believed O.J. was guilty, and others believed he was innocent. Therefore, the media wasn't extremely successful in telling us what to think on these issues, but most Americans did believe these were both important issues for a long period of time (as cited in Bentley, et al., 2004, p. 4).

However, just as in the case with the Elizabeth Smart kidnapping, it is not enough to just rely on the media for agenda-setting. The family and a public relations professional who is working with a particular family crisis needs to proactively plan the news coverage by agenda building. According to Johnson et al., (1996) this process means that media and those who are influenced by the media, are also influenced by one another. Corbett and Mori (1999) described the model of agenda building, stating that at first the issue raises in society, next, the interest groups pick the position and become involved with the issue, next, the positions of interest groups are influencing the news media and the public and lastly, the news media coverage is influencing interest groups.

Issue-Attention Cycles Theory

The issue-attention cycles theory discusses the reaction of society to major public events and scrutinizes the agendas spurred by these events. According to Chyi, the theory is made up of five different stages. The first stage is called the "pre-problem stage." This stage holds that there are always latent issues in society. While the issue exists, it is often not discussed and even unnoticed. The second stage in the issue-attention cycle is known as "alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm." This is the stage when the latent issues become forefront in the public's mind. This happens when violent tragedies, horrific accidents, natural disasters, or controversial events take place. These incidents are called triggering events. The public will notice and then dissect the issues, hoping to find some sort of solution to act on. Next, the public makes a "realization of the cost of significant reform." This is when the immensity of the issue and its inability to be solved is realized by the public. That stage is followed by a "gradual decline of public interest." Eventually, the issue goes back into a form of latency called the "post-problem stage." A new tragedy or controversy will soon spark a different discussion (as cited in Brown, et al., 2004, p. 4-5).

According to Kazoleas, tragedies, frequently linked with violence, are often the triggering events in the issue-attention cycle (as cited in Brown, et al., 2004). Brown, et al., (2004) state the following as examples of the issue-attention cycles:

The Columbine shooting steered the country toward gun control, media control, better parenting skills, etc. Likewise, the tragedy of 9/11 made the war on terrorism, national security, and Iraq top priority in the United States. Controversial events, such as the O.J. Simpson case, also trigger eruptions of discussion about items such as racism, civil rights, abortion, etc. Terry Schiavo's case where her husband took her off of life support involved numerous stakeholders from the political, religious and judicial authorities resulting in public debates, wide media coverage and a new law. Environmental disasters are also triggering events. All of these issues seem very important to society directly following the triggering events; however, the public soon

becomes overwhelmed or disinterested with the issue and lays it aside until some other triggering event sparks an interest. (p. 5)

Models of Public Relations

According to Grunig and Hunt in 1984, the models of public relations created four of them to use in public relations: publicity, public information, asymmetry, and symmetry. In the publicity model, corporations have no pressure to tell the truth, but rather tell any lie to the public about their company. The purpose of this model is to send as many positive messages to the public as possible. The public information model has the same purpose as the publicity model; however, truth telling is required. The asymmetry model's purpose is to communicate corporate messages to the public, but filter out all negative information through audience research, therefore limiting the amount of information to the public. The symmetry model includes equal communication between the corporation and the audience. The messages created using the symmetry model require careful research about the target audiences as well.

In a crisis situation, the ideal model in a corporate or family crisis would be the two-way symmetrical model above, where transparency and honesty remain paramount in the given situation, and information is shared with the media as soon as it is appropriate especially where criminal investigations are concerned

Complexity Theory

According to Murphy (2000), most public relations theories deal with strategically predicting and planning how to handle crises that may arise; however, the complexity theory does not focus on linear planning, but rather takes into account the unexpected events, public responses, and other such issues that are bound to take effect. Because of this, the complexity theory is one based on change or flux (as cited in Widdison, et al., 2004).

This theory focuses on the reaction of the individual players and how they react to their immediate circumstance. How each of those individuals act will eventually form a larger pattern that will affect the different communities (as cited in Widdison, et al., 2004).

Individuals who are in a crisis situation are going to react differently as different events come to their attention; therefore, you cannot plan how people are going to respond to the unexpected. Murphy states that we cannot predict the way that those directly involved in the crisis, those who reside in the community, or how the media will respond to different events as they arise. The purpose of this theory is not to strategically plan but rather to "aid intuition, and deepen our understanding of fundamental processes" (as cited in Widdison, et al., 2004). In other words, the purpose of this theory is to explain the workings in a crisis scenario and prepare for the unexpected (Widdison, et al., 2004). That would typically be the scenario in a family crisis situation.

The Audience Interaction Family Crisis Model

As previously mentioned, a few general themes arose upon examination of the family crisis models and other general crisis models. Each case-study model touched upon the following elements (the supporting theory/theories for each theme is/are in parentheses):

1. The plan presents correct and truthful information (crisis communication, agenda building).

2. The plan quickly generates interest and support (relationship formation/social exchange, agenda building, and issue-attention cycle).
3. The plan assigns and keeps specified roles throughout the crisis, especially a spokesperson (crisis communication, role theory).
4. The plan is flexible to different situations (interpersonal perception, models of public relation, and complexity theory).

The Audience Interaction Family Crisis Model was formulated based upon these criteria. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the model and displays the general flow of information and the physical structure of the model (King, 2005).

The model works around the following four categories of events that should take place throughout the life of the crisis: prepare, organize, execute, evaluate. Each one of these basic categories contains a set of actions that should guide the crisis team and the family through the tragedy.

On a basic level, the Audience Interaction Family Crisis Model begins with the formation of the crisis team. The crisis team *prepares* information and *organizes* itself into a spokesperson and groups assigned to handle key audiences. The crisis team and each key audience group then *executes* the management plan through contacting the key audiences and then *evaluates* based upon the reaction of each key audience. Evaluation can then determine if new courses of action need to be taken and each key-audience group can adapt a new plan if necessary (King, 2005). A more detailed description of the Audience Interaction Family Crisis Model and an explanation of how theory influences the model are as follows:

Prepare. When a family crisis arises, those dealing with the crisis should start in the preparation stage. *This stage must start immediately after a crisis occurs.* In figure 1, this stage is represented by the red circle in the center. The preparation stage includes the following actions:

1. ***Gather resources, facts, and information and make sure all information is correct and truthful*** (crisis communication, relationship formation/social exchange and public relations models). The interdependence of the crisis team, the media, law enforcement law, and the public becomes evident here as all facets are needed to gather all correct information and publicize it. Public relations models, specifically the public information model and the need for truth telling, also come into play as the information that will be released is gathered at this point.
2. ***Set goals and objectives*** (crisis communication, relationship formation and issue-attention cycle). By looking at a potential cycle for the whole crisis and the relationships that will be formed, the crisis team can better formulate goals and objectives and vice versa.
3. ***Identify key audiences*** (crisis communication, agenda building and relationship formation/social exchange). The crisis team will set agendas and call attention to issues through the key audiences. They should recognize the relationships that should be formed with these key audiences and how they can interact with these audiences to achieve the goals and objectives.
4. ***Decide on what information to release and stick to it*** (crisis communication, issue-attention cycle, public relations models, and agenda building). The information should relate to the goals and objectives but be truthful at the same time. If some information is not available at certain time, acknowledge it.

Organize. Immediately after preparation, a crisis management team must be formed. In figure 1 this stage is represented by the three circles labeled group 1, group 2, and group 3. The spokesperson is positioned in the center, where all the circles overlap. The crisis management team must contain the following elements:

1. **Name a spokesperson to represent the family** (crisis communication, role theory). The spokesperson will provide a consistent and unified representation of the family. While the entire family and members of the crisis team will provide consultation, the spokesperson is the only one authorized to speak publicly. The role of the spokesperson is vital to the success of crisis management as he or she is the face and the voice of the family and the crisis.
2. **Split the crisis team into groups that will handle each key audience and will direct the crisis team** (relationship formation and role theory). For example, if the selected key audiences are the media, the general public, and the law, then crisis team members should be assigned roles that will deal with the media, work with the law, and inform the general public. Each group should also include positions discussed in role theory, such as expert prescribers, communication facilitators, problem-solving facilitators, and communication technicians. While groups have specific responsibility with their respective key audience, the groups still function as a holistic unit and all information will ultimately flow through the spokesperson.
3. **Each group will “prepare and organize” for their assigned key publics** (role theory, complexity theory, and models of public relations). This will allow the crisis management team to micro-manage and customize plans for all the different key audiences according to research performed on each audience. The plans determined for each key audience should be in accordance with the set goals and objectives. Each role within the group will perform the functions of strategy, research, liaison, and technician.
4. **Recognize and account for the interactions that exist exclusively between key audiences** (relationship formation, complexity theory). The media, law, and the publics will interact with each other independent of the crisis team. The crisis team should be able to look at all the key audiences holistically as well to account for these interactions. Communication between groups and focus on the goals and objectives are important.
5. **All roles that are assigned should be maintained throughout the entire life of the crisis** (crisis communication, role theory). This will ensure the consistency and power of the message and help accomplish the goals and objectives.

While these groups are responsible for their assigned key publics, they still overlap in the center, which represents cross-group communication and representation by the spokesperson.

Execute. In the execute stage, all members of the crisis team must begin to implement the plans formed in the preparation and organization stages. In figure 1 this stage is represented by the arrows labeled group 1, group 2, and group 3. As the crisis management moves into the execution stage, the following should occur:

1. **Each group assigned to a key public will begin to implement the respective plans for each key audience** (issue-attention cycle, agenda building, and role theory). This can involve contacting the media, working with the law enforcement, or generally informing the public in order to set the agenda and create interest. The functions of strategy, research, liaison, and technician apply here as well.

2. ***All information released should be truthful, communicated through the spokesperson, and should be part of the information predetermined for release in the preparation stage*** (crisis communication, issue-attention cycle, public relations models, and agenda building). Successfully communicating this information will ensure generated interest and the ability to present the family's viewpoint.

Evaluate. The crisis team must then evaluate the success of the plans in relation to the goals and objectives. In figure 1 this stage is represented by the gray arrows labeled "reaction." Throughout the crisis all the key publics must be monitored in order to accomplish the following (interpersonal perception, models of public relation, and complexity theory):

1. *Determine the next step of action;*
2. *Ensure all information is correct;*
3. *Achieve the goals and objectives.*
4. *After evaluation, the "prepare, organize, execute, evaluate" can cycle through as many times as needed during the life of the crisis.*

Crisis team actions and key audience reactions should be evaluated in order to determine the perceptions that each party has of the other. From these perceptions the crisis team can assess the management of the crisis and make necessary adjustments. Also, because not all situations are predictable, the audience-interaction family crisis model must allow for unpredictability.

This dynamic element of the model is evident during the *evaluation* stage of the model when the rules and resources set forth in the *preparation, organization, and execution* stages create behavior and interaction that, after evaluated, can determine a change in the rules and resources. In turn, the duality of structure permits the adaptability required by the complexity theory, which calls for adaptability based on participant reaction even if the reaction is unexpected.

The holistic and adaptability ideas from relationship formation also influence the structure of the model as the crisis team is encompassed by one large circle that represents the interactions between all the key audiences. This allows the model to be viewed as a whole, as every part of the model must learn to adapt to the encompassing interactions. The interactions that take place in the organization as a whole then also affect the interactions that take place on a more micro level, between the crisis team and individual key audiences (King, 2005).

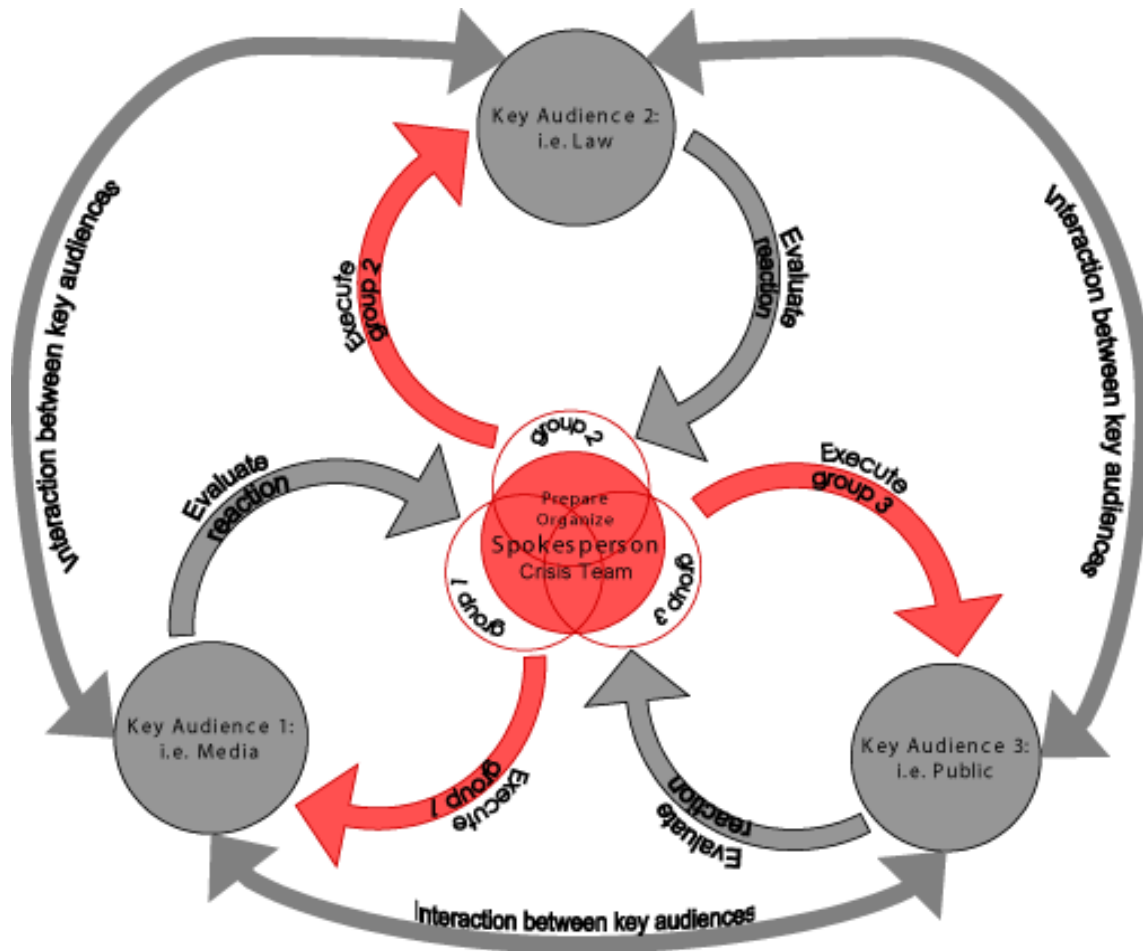


Figure 1. The Audience-Interaction Family Crisis Model

Methodology

Research for this paper came in the form of a multiple-case analysis, which is a form of research that involves a comparative examination of numerous case studies. In multiple-case analysis, data is collected and triangulated from multiple sources and the data can be analyzed through pattern-matching (Yin, 2009).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Multiple-Case Analysis and Meta-analysis

Multiple-case analysis and meta-analysis are similar in the process of research but differ in the type of data that is studied. Regardless, the advantages and disadvantages of each parallel the other. Mark W. Lipsey and David B. Wilson named four general advantages to meta-analysis. For purposes of this qualitative research we can focus on two of these:

1. “Meta-analysis procedure impose a useful discipline on the process of summarizing research findings; (p. 5)
2. “Meta-analysis provides an organized way of handling information from a large number of study findings under review” (p. 6).

As a disadvantage Lipsey and Wilson also found that meta-analysis calls for greater effort, expertise, and specific knowledge (2001). For purposes of this research we applied these same advantages and disadvantages to multiple-case analysis.

Common Criteria and Data Sources

Data was analyzed based on common criteria or themes which surfaced throughout the research process. Sources that were researched included family-crisis case studies, material written for crisis and family-crisis management, periodicals regarding family-crisis situations, and web-based news archives which included interviews, news-affiliated timelines for family-crisis situations, and statements from families involved in crisis situations as documented in press releases and periodicals.

Common criteria formulated based on this research concluded that family-crisis situations typically include the following:

1. Members involved take on specified roles throughout the crisis, in particular the role of a spokesperson.
2. Information disseminated throughout the crisis is truthful and accurate, at least to the involved members' knowledge.
3. Publicity of the crisis generates interest and support from the public.
4. The crisis centers on latent issues either within the family or within society as a whole.
5. In some manner, deception surfaces throughout the life of the crisis.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Data Sources

The data sources used have significant advantages because documentation is constant and provides a broad coverage while the interviews provide a more focused insight into the issue. While the sources have their advantages it would be unwise to fail to recognize that there are disadvantages as well. Documented sources raise the issue of biases created by that particular author's viewpoint as well as his selection of material. It is important to recognize the possibility of this bias and take it into account throughout analysis. Interview bias can surface because of interviewers' questioning techniques and the interviewee's particular perspective.

Results

This section documents the manner in which the selected theories relate specifically to the Hacking case. The application of theory to specific instances in the Hacking case can help identify the general themes that, in addition to the theories help build a family crisis model.

Relationship Formation and Social Exchange Theory

The relationships formed between the family/crisis team and various audiences were evident throughout the crisis. The media, law, family, and general public all had to adapt to one another in order to maintain mutually beneficial relationships. One example of the mutually beneficial relationship came in the early stages of the Hacking case. Over the first week of the search, the families did an excellent job of keeping the public informed so that they would be interested in the case and willing to volunteer. This is evident by the amount of people who showed up to help search for Lori Hacking. According to www.ksl.com, this search effort was "second only to the number of people who helped search for Elizabeth Smart two summers ago"

(as cited in Bentley, et al., 2004). As the family offered information, the general public offered assistance with the search which, as mentioned by the social exchange theory, formed an interdependent relationship. Looking at the situation holistically, this is also an example of relationship formation, as the family, media, law, and general public all had to exchange information and services and adapt to one another in order to release information and coordinate a volunteer search party.

Creation of Roles

This criterion was generated after examination of role theory and its place in all family-crisis case studies which were examined. Roles are important because it keeps consistency in the messages that are being conveyed to the public. A spokesperson is one of the most important roles that must be fulfilled. The spokesperson will provide a consistent and unified representation of the family. While the entire family and members of the crisis team will provide consultation, the spokesperson is the only one authorized to speak publicly. The role of the spokesperson is vital to the success of crisis management as he or she is the face and the voice of the family and the crisis. The creation of roles helps avoid confusion and displays unity in a family where a crisis may seem to be pulling everything apart. Giving one person authority to speak on behalf of the family helps achieve the second criteria of family crisis situations; information that is disseminated is true and accurate.

True and Accurate Information

This criterion generated after examination of the case studies as well as the majority of the theories researched, mainly issue-attention cycle theory and agenda building theory. This criterion builds public trust in the family and in the crisis. When it comes to the broadcasting or publishing of any information, it is in the public's interest to receive the truth no matter what the information entails. In a family crisis it then becomes the responsibility of the family members to ensure that this interest is filled. The public relations model emphasizes the need for truth-telling. All facets of the crisis (family crisis members, the media, the law enforcement, and even the general public) are needed to gather correct information. It is through disseminating correct and accurate information that public interest and support is generated.

Public Interest and Support

As is discussed in the issue-attention cycle, family crises involve the public's concern over the event and their hope to find a solution to the issue. This also ties directly into the agenda setting theory. Though the media may not be successful in telling the public what they should think they are incredibly successful at being responsible for what the public thinks about (Cohen, 1963). Therefore, this criterion is achieved by establishing an equally beneficial relationship between the crisis team and the media involved. Relationship formation theory describes this established relationship as one holistic unit that should be considered together.

The Lori Hacking crisis can be used to clarify this criterion. Over the first week of the search, the families did an excellent job of keeping the public informed so that they would be interested in the case and willing to volunteer. This is evident by the amount of people who showed up to help search for Lori Hacking. Similar examples are found in the crises involving Laci Peterson, Terri Schiavo, Hugh Nibley, Brooke Wilberger, and Elizabeth Smart.

Latent issues

This criterion was generated after careful examination of the first stage of issue-attention cycle theory. This stage is referred to as the pre-problem stage. In this stage it is discovered that there are issues in society that are unrecognized by the public but that still exist. These latent issues are always present in society, but go unnoticed until the second stage of the issue-attention cycle referred to as the alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm stage. This stage involves triggering events that move the latent issue into the forefront of the public's mind. These events are usually violent tragedies, extreme accidents, or disasters or otherwise controversial occurrences in society. As stated by Downs, the media involvement is key during this stage since it has been acknowledged that news coverage tends to move in issue-attention cycles (1972). It is when these latent issues surface that the crisis comes into full swing. In the example of the Laci Peterson crisis, the public learned that the couple's relationship was embedded with latent issues such as domestic disturbance and infidelity. It was these issues that, as the court concluded, set the stage for Laci's disappearance and death.

Deception

In research it was discovered that latent issues were typically linked with deception either to those involved in the crisis such as the victim or to the media and public. In many cases it was the presence of deception that kept public interest and support. In the Laci Peterson crisis the revealing of truth alarmed the public and spurred them to stay interested in solving the mystery of Laci's disappearance and death as the stage following the latent issues existence in the issue-attention cycle details. These revealed facts brought the public's attention to the element of deception in the tragedy. Similar revelations in the Lori Hacking case had the same effect on the public. Mark's [Lori Hacking's Husband] confession of the murder also triggered the media and public's discussion of the symptoms of a pathological liar, domestic problems, and murder scenarios.

Conclusion

Based on the results, several conclusions can be drawn among between the family-crisis case studies researched. There is a strong need for specified roles to avoid miscommunication and repetition of messages. These specified roles must include a spokesperson for the crisis. Many case studies cited the absence of this role as a source of complication throughout the crisis. This role must be developed early to have the needed effect. As demonstrated in the Elizabeth Smart case, the family acted proactively, involving Chris Thomas as opposed to Lori Hacking case where the Hacking family waited too long before appointing Scott Dunaway as their spokesperson.

A different conclusion was drawn concerning a spokesperson in the Laci Peterson case. An official spokesperson was never clearly established but Scott Peterson's mother Jackie took on the role of unofficial spokesperson in which she was only consistent in maintaining the opinion that her son was innocent. On March 16, 2005, Scott was found guilty of murder in the first degree and sentenced to death. Consequently, Jackie Peterson's role as a spokesperson was discredited and this also demonstrates the importance of crisis team disseminating truthful and accurate information.

A successful crisis management team must generate public interest and support. It is through the development of interest and support that family-crisis situations are able to receive

the attention necessary to ultimately establish a sound family-crisis management plan. At this point it is important for the crisis management team to have knowledge of the latent issues. Latent issues in family-crises are often revealed through surfaced deception including but not limited to lies, domestic abuse, and infidelity. These latent issues pose challenges for which the crisis management team must prepare.

While common criteria, through research and analysis, have been established it is important to realize that no case is alike, therefore, consequently, any crisis management plan formed needs to take into account each case's individuality and unpredictability. While taking this fact into account, this paper correlates case studies and concludes that family crises maintain the common themes of the creation of roles, dissemination of truthful and accurate information, generation of public interest and support, surfacing of latent issues, and embedded deception.

Only recently have the family-crisis and the need for public relations influence become a national issue and consequently, a current family-based crisis management plan has not officially been published. The establishment of common criteria among family-crisis situations has the potential to aid in the development of such a plan for today's society and help families in the complicated crises situations.

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