Understanding power in public relations in the age of digital natives and citizen journalists

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Abstract

Public relations has long been considered a powerful profession because of its ability to build and set agendas and to sway public opinion. However, with the advent of the citizen journalist and the rise of digital natives, practitioners are becoming increasingly dependent on acceptance from the general public. Therefore, with the increased complexities resulting from changing technology and ever-mounting sources of information, practitioners will be more successful in utilising tactics deemed powerful by stakeholders. This research details a four-condition quasi-experiment that empirically examines trust, competence, goodwill, and credibility of a press release, CEO speech, organisational blog, and CEO personal blog for an organisation in the midst of a sustained crisis. The ability to reach stakeholders in order to dispel rumours and provide accurate information is never as paramount as during a crisis. Therefore, the study privileges practitioners' empirical data for choice and implication of tactic usage. Results indicate new technologies may be more trusted in times of crisis. Theoretical and pragmatic implications are discussed.

Introduction

Public relations is often considered a profession of power (Berger, 2005) because practitioners are instrumental in influencing public opinion and in proposing and implementing solutions in a host of situations (i.e., routine, crisis), arenas (i.e., non-profit, for-profit), and industries (i.e., financial, health, public affairs, etc.). Additionally, public relations efforts lead to agenda building and agenda setting, indicating the profession's effectiveness in influencing tangible, business outcomes (Kiousis, Popescu, & Mitrook, 2007). It has also been suggested that public relations is essential in managing corporate reputation (Carroll & McCombs, 2003), preserving and repairing image in crisis situations (Benoit, 1995, 1997), and in helping to procure stakeholders (Grunig, 2006). Given this, the impact of the profession is hard to underestimate; however, it is also crucial to consider a more contemporary view of power and public relations.

Ready access to cameras coupled with the prevalence and ease of use of social media sites has created the ubiquitous citizen journalist (Good, 2006; Tilley & Cokley, 2008). While public relations practitioners would traditionally only answer to clients and/or management, they now also directly serve stakeholders. That is, jubilant or dismayed consumers may shoot a video or take photos and post them directly to an organisation's Facebook page. While a negative post may appear somewhat benign, social media allows consumers to unite and organise efficiently (Van De Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004), with big businesses such as Verizon (Verizon, 2012) and Bank of America (Lozano, 2011) yielding to consumers' viral protests and abandoning proposed fees. Therefore, while public relations practitioners are still pivotal to the success of organisations (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002), they must also recognise public relations is only as powerful as stakeholders acknowledge. Thus, in order to be most effective, practitioners need to know how

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impactful popular public relations tactics are in the eyes of stakeholders. This research offers pragmatic recommendations for practitioners regarding the link between popular public relations tactics and stakeholder perceptions of the tactics. Practitioners will attest that times of crisis are not meant to serve as laboratories for experimenting with methods for reaching stakeholders, but rather situations where messages must be carefully crafted and quickly disseminated. The uncertainty sparked by crises further accentuates the importance of understanding the relationship of power in public relations so practitioners and organisations may work to reduce stakeholder uncertainty (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007; Berkes, 2007) and restore the organisation's reputation (Coombs, 2012; Weiner, 2006).

Crises often send stakeholders to an organisation's website in order to increase their understanding or the depth of their understanding regarding a particular issue. With the increased complexities resulting from changing technology and ever-mounting sources of information, voices, and opinions, public relations experts must determine how best to break through the clutter of channel and competing views to connect to their stakeholders in a meaningful way. That is, in a manner that allows them to tell their story, to provide the commentary that surrounds and positions their message – and most importantly, in a way that is most acceptable to their audience. If they fail to do so, someone else will provide the framework through which stakeholders interpret an organisation's message. In times of crisis, stakeholders expect that organisations will create and disseminate messages geared at reducing their uncertainty (Benoit, 1997; Ulmer et al., 2007; Stephens, Malone, & Bailey, 2005), While immediate crises—those lacking forewarning—present the most pressure in terms of expectations for speed and quality of information, organisations enduring sustained crisis are held to a varied set of expectations. During sustained crises—where an organisation is often the subject of rumours that persist for months or longer—public relations practitioners must labour to create frequent and consistent messages directed to stakeholders to reduce uncertainty and maintain the relationship (Ulmer et al., 2007; Stephens et al., 2005).

This article presents a four-condition, quasi-experimental study where participants are exposed to a particular public relations tactic detailing a sustained organisational crisis and then asked for their perceptions regarding message competence, goodwill, trust, and credibility as well as organisational trustworthiness. Traditional public relations tactics, the press release and a CEO speech, are examined, as are two contemporary tactics, the organisational blog as well as the more recent CEO personal blog. These were selected for study as all are commonly accessed through an organisation's website or available via links from an organisation's website.

Uncertainty reduction in crisis

There exists no time where communication and perceived credibility is more significant to an organisation than in times of crisis (Seeger, 2006). During a crisis, organisations are subjected to non-routine events that induce heightened levels of uncertainty where goals and operations are threatened (Ulmer et al., 2007; Reynolds, 2006). Such tribulations impact on organisational reputation (Coombs, 1998; Coombs & Holladay, 2008), profit (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001), stakeholder relationships (Ulmer, 2001), and overall longevity (Wang, 2008). In immediate crises—such as workplace shootings or natural disasters—events happen so suddenly that there is little to no time for research or planning (Ulmer et al., 2007). Organisations experiencing immediate crises are assessed on how quickly and accurately they communicate about the event, their ability to articulate actions that stakeholders can enact to stay safe, as well as forecasts regarding clean-up or restoration (Spence et al., 2005). Sustained crises—those where rumours or other inaccuracies persist despite the organisation's best efforts to clarify or deny the misinformation—present unique challenges for public relations practitioners. In such instances, organisations may develop carefully crafted messages regarding the situation and proclaiming their innocence, but due to incessant rumours and continued negative attention, stakeholder uncertainty lingers (Larosa, 2003; Murphy, 1996).

In sustained crises, like the scenario utilised in this study, stakeholder needs vary. Stakeholders receive contradictory information during sustained crises where the organisation under scrutiny provides one message and a varied perspective is touted from another source. This prompts stakeholders to seek immediate and in-depth information often times from online sources (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007) in order to reduce their uncertainty. Uncertainty reduction theory (URT) (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) is based on the assumption that by nature individuals are motivated to reduce uncertainty to whatever extent possible. In today's media-saturated environment where consumers have a multitude of alternative sources and channels through which they seek, receive, and validate competing voices, public relations practitioners must be keenly attuned to the combination of communication variables that best alleviate, or at least assist individuals in managing uncertainty. Thus, when stakeholders seek relevant information, it is important for public relations practitioners to understand which tactics are viewed as most powerful to stakeholders so that they may utilise these channels to reach their stakeholders, accelerate the clarification of rumours, and help the organisation return to routine operation.

While public relations is typically viewed as a powerful profession that is able to influence public opinion and sway preferences (Edgett, 2002), practitioners are becoming increasingly dependent on the general public. That is, if stakeholders perceive particular tactics to possess more credibility or trust, for example, then that tactic is more powerful than one the general public deems to demonstrate less competence or goodwill regardless of the practitioner's opinion.

Derivatives of power: Trust, credibility, goodwill and competence

Scholars have long debated the concept of power and its relation to public relations (Berger, 2005; Cutlip, 1994; Cottle, 2003; McKie & Munshi, 2005). Some (Edwards, 2009) highlight the profession's role in augmenting globalisation while others question if stakeholders have been as well attended to as economic producers (Motion & Leitch, 1996; Weaver, 2001). Regardless of the particular take on the interplay of power and public relations, larger questions regarding definitions or derivatives of power still exist.

Practitioners, management, and clients are likely to subscribe to different meanings of power and further look for different cues to discern power than do external stakeholders. By example, research indicates that for the practitioner, power may be defined as membership in the dominant coalition—essentially a seat at the decision-making table (Berger, 2005). While such a position may allow a practitioner to exert power and exercise influence either in 'right' ways or those that are more self-serving (Grunig, 1993), the general public is largely unaware of this status marker. That is, whether stakeholders are advocated for or against, the public is absent from such meetings and therefore unable to ascertain any assessment of power regarding the profession or its practitioners. However, the general public has ready access to organisational messages and practice at assessing such messages (Yang, Kang, & Johnson, 2010; Kent, 2008; Martin & Johnson, 2010; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Thus with the transition from a traditionally public relations/management-led endeavour to one where stakeholders are empowered through use of organising and social media (Taylor & Kent, 2007; Taylor & Perry, 2005), stakeholders are largely responsible for defining and assessing power. The recomposition of power relations between practitioners and stakeholders suggests a two-way symmetrical relationship where there is give and take between an organisation and its constituents. To the general public, power can be assessed by reading organisational messages and discerning source credibility (i.e., competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness), subsequently influencing their view of organisational trustworthiness. Knowing that savvy stakeholders consume organisational messages and are quick to offer their opinions or invoke a call to action, suggests now more than ever, practitioners and scholars alike need empirical evidence regarding perceptions of trust, credibility, goodwill, and competence embedded within common public relations tactics.

Trust. A relationship of trust between organisation and stakeholder is not only paramount for an organisation's long-term viability but proves especially significant during organisational crisis (Reynolds, 2006). There is no time in an organisation's existence where the need to influence stakeholders is more apparent than that of a crisis when an organisation's reputation and legitimacy is at stake. Consequently, there is neither a time when an established relationship of trust is more critical.

Scholars (Kazoleas & Teven, 2009; Yang & Lim, 2009; McKie & Munshi, 2005) have recognised the importance of being in a position where stakeholders believe the organisation and its messages – where stakeholders are willing "to take a risk (or to be vulnerable or to rely on the other party) in the confidence (or beliefs or expectations) of the relational partner's benevolence, honesty, reliability, and integrity" (Yang & Lim, 2009, p. 343). Trust is therefore foundational for power to exist because trust involves stakeholders taking a risk to be influenced by practitioners. As Brehm, Kassin, and Fein (2005) and Reynolds (2006) assert, trust is the foundation to persuasive communication. Taken together, in order to cultivate a reservoir of goodwill (Coombs, 1998; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000) and maintain a relationship with stakeholders in turbulent times, it is necessary to create messages and engage in conversations that help to establish and foster a trusting two-way relationship. Closely related and also vital in cultivating strong organisation-stakeholder relationships are perceptions of credibility.

Credibility. Promotion of two-way, reciprocal relationships with stakeholders is necessary to establish credibility—and can be particularly salient in times of crisis (Seeger, 2006). The credibility of the source of a message and the credibility of the actual information contained within the message is difficult to separate (Isaksson & Jørgensen, 2010; Martin & Johnson, 2010). Subsequently, when information is presented that is incorrect, the credibility of the source has the potential to be diminished. An error in a message prompts the audience to question the source's intelligence or expertise, one of the primary dimensions of credibility. Or contrarily, an error leads one to consider whether the message source intended the error (i.e., deception), which implicates the character of the source and his or her care, or lack thereof, for stakeholders. Crisis communication scholars (Seeger, 2006; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000) suggest messages appearing excessively reassuring in ambiguous or turbulent times may also decrease source credibility.

In addition to source credibility, the medium through which a message is delivered contributes to message credibility. There is no conclusive agreement among communication scholars on the media type garnering the most credibility. Some scholars contend traditional media provides more credibility (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007) whereas others cite the opposite – online, uncensored media offers the most credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Jo (2005) asserts most studies assessing the credibility of various communication media do so through content analysis of messages on various media (i.e., Ho, 1997; Hoffman, Novak, & Chatterjee 1995; Liu, 1997) or interviews with public relations experts (i.e., Hill & White, 2000; White & Raman, 2000; Kent, 1998) as opposed to the perceptions offered by the public.

Goodwill. Another important aspect of source credibility is goodwill. Goodwill refers to the extent to which an individual perceives another as being concerned about his or her welfare (McCroskey, 1992). Goodwill is thought to be composed of the three interrelated constructs of understanding, empathy, and responsiveness. To have understanding, one must feel that a communication partner knows his or her ideas, feelings, and needs. Furthermore, when someone shows us that they have understanding, we feel closer to them because we believe they care about us. Subsequently, demonstrating understanding also allows organisations to enhance their reservoir of goodwill (Ulmer, 2001; McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Empathy refers to an emotional response to another and has been thought of by some as a vicarious matching of another's affective state (e.g., Feshbach & Roe, 1968) and by others as concern for another's position or as experiencing an affective response congruent with the other's wellbeing (e.g., Batson & Coke, 1981). Responsiveness, according to McCroskey and Teven (1999), is judged by how quickly someone responds and how attentive they seem, and forms a general feeling of acknowledgement. Taken together, understanding, empathy, and responsiveness form perceptions of goodwill.

Goodwill has been long recognised as an instrumental resource for public relations practitioners to draw on, particularly during times of crisis with many arguing for the purposeful development of goodwill reservoirs to be drawn upon as needed (e.g., Ulmer, 2001). In times of crisis, stakeholders want to know that not only is the organisation resolving the issue at hand, but also that it is doing so with the stakeholders' best interests in mind indicating to the public they are seen as a legitimate partner (Seeger, 2006).

Competence. Competence is regarded as the general belief that a communicator has the background and information necessary to provide factual information. Also described as authoritativeness (McCroskey & Young, 1981) and expertness (Hoveland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953), perceived competence of a communicator is commonly held as a precursor to being viewed as credible. Persuasion literature posits that perceived expertise of a given source is a peripheral cue to persuasion; that is, audiences rely on the perceived competence of a communicator, on a particular topic, in order to know whether they should accept a message as factual. Vital in times of crisis, an organisation's competence is what encourages stakeholders to take the prescribed course of action (Seeger, 2006).

Power is a conversation

The power to influence is not inherently in the hands of even the most astute public relations expert. Rather, to a notable extent, power resides with the stakeholders–the information consumers who have the ability to influence the success or failure of an organisation (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). To that end, understanding how one's audiences ascribe power is critical for practitioners interested in the longevity of their organisation, cause, etc. While public relations practitioners are positioned to create and disseminate organisational messages, stakeholder perception of message form and content dictates the overall impact of the message.

Means of influence

Trust, competence, credibility and goodwill are precedents of power; however communication in and of itself does not mandate action. Reichertz (2011) asserts the recipient of the message must choose whether to act, and he or she makes the determination based on power. Considering this as well as the evolution of the stakeholder in terms of influence, it is important to contemplate the impact of several public relations tactics.

Traditionally, practitioners relied on tactics such as the press release or a CEO speech in order to position their organisation or cause. These tactics were considered effective means of informing and persuading stakeholders as such messages were easily communicated through newspapers, radio, and television. Such tactics are still useful in the dissemination of information and are commonly posted on an organisation's website for community members to access (Kelleher, 2006; Kent & Taylor, 1998). However, recent research (Johnson & Kaye, 2004) demonstrates traditional media is only rated as moderately (46.5%) to very credible (43.7%). Examination of corporate social media is particularly important as American adults now view the Internet as the most reliable source for information and news (Zogby Interactive, 2009). It has also been suggested (Davis, 1997) that traditional tactics may appear too filtered or too finessed by public relations practitioners. Moreover, with the coming of age of digital natives (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008)—those who were born and raised in the digital world—younger stakeholders may not have the skills necessary to discern trust, credibility, goodwill, and competency in more traditional media because they have never had to develop these abilities. Therefore, it is important to begin to look more critically at the use of organisational and CEO personal blogs.

Blogs. Throughout the past decade growing attention has centred on the benefits of incorporating online technology in an organisation's communication with stakeholders (Scott, 2007). Specifically, interest centres on those channels that foster a dialogic communication environment where an organisation hears stakeholders' concerns, understands their expectations, responds quickly, builds credibility, maintains relationships, and subsequently can leverage those relationships to mitigate crises (Fearn-Banks, 2001; Ulmer et al., 2007). One such technology gaining increased attention among practitioners and the academic community is the 'blog' (Yang & Lim, 2009) due in part to recent research that indicates that information seeking is a primary motivation of blog use (Austin, Fisher Liu, & Jin, 2012; Kaye, 2005).

Kent (2008) notes communication scholars began their study of blogs by examining their utility and practicality as an information dissemination and collection tool. However, scholars are shifting their focus to recognise that corporate blogs offer organisations far more than the convenience of disseminating information quickly or the opportunity for prompt feedback; corporate blogs have the potential to inherently wrap a message in trust, credibility and authenticity (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Yang & Lim, 2009; Yang, Kang, & Johnson, 2010). These qualities make a message powerful particularly during times of crisis (Schoenberg, 2005) as social media may provide stakeholders unique information they cannot ascertain elsewhere while also privileging needed emotional support (Choi & Lin, 2009; Stephens & Malone, 2009). During times of organisational crisis when the stakes are heightened, the need for credibility and trust in the sender of a message is essential if an individual is going to be influenced to a given end (Heath, 2006). Therefore it is proposed that:

H1a: Blogs will be seen as more credible in times of crisis than traditional tactics.

Further considering the rise of digital natives and their preference to digitised information, it is hypothesised that:

H1b: Blogs will be seen as more trustworthy in times of crisis than traditional tactics.

While blogging among individuals in the general public continues to explode (Martin & Johnson, 2010), the adoption of personal blogs by CEOs and other corporate officials is slowly gaining traction. There is a hesitance among corporate officials as to what information can and should be disclosed versus that which should remain private from both a legal and strategic standpoint. Subsequently, corporate officials approach blogging cautiously, and in doing so, to some extent, lesson their effect. "Most Fortune 500 corporate blogs still do not maximize blogs as a participation tool. Instead, most are designed and written in a unidirectional way, mainly as advertising channels" (Esteves, 2008). However, hesitance by CEOs is somewhat justified. A blog by a CEO, whether classified as personal or corporate, is tied to the organisation he or she leads. Nonetheless, despite leadership hesitance, strategists heavily endorse the use of blogs as a communication must for organisational leaders.

> Corporate blogging is about leadership, visibility, and conversation in the digital world. It is an excellent way for CEOs to express their opinions and visions about their companies and about topics such as corporate social responsibility, diversity, market sector evolution – even crisis management. Corporate blogging is also about establishing trusting relationships […] the intangible benefits come from creating global

> conversational networks about new ideas and innovations. Thus, it's a new metric for corporate leadership, now at the same level as the latest increase of your market share or how substantial your corporate return on investment is. (Esteves, 2008, p. 67)

Stakeholders may also be drawn to blogs as they are often presented in narrative form (Yang et al., 2010). Yang and colleagues (2010) found the use of narratives as a communication style during organisational crisis increases audience engagement with the message and reduces negative emotions toward the message. Further, the accepted writing style of blogs promotes the use of powerful language – language that presents as more raw and emotional than other formal, communication modes (Martin & Johnson, 2010). Thus, it is predicted that:

H2: Organisational blogs will be more credible than CEO personal blogs

One reason that blogs are positioned as effective crisis management tools is because this message style also appears authentic. However, scholars (Seeger, 2006; Witt & Morgan, 2002) suggest that if practitioners acknowledge issues, apologise for mistakes, and publicly explain how stakeholders can protect themselves as well as the steps the organisation is taking to remedy the issues, then it is likely that they will mitigate damage to both their reputation and their relationships with stakeholders. Considering this, it is proposed that:

H3: Tactics (press release, CEO speech, organisational blog, CEO personal blog) will not differ in terms of goodwill.

Finally, while several predictions have been forwarded regarding credibility, there is also one research question posed regarding message competence:

RQ: Which tactic (press release, CEO speech, organisational blog, CEO personal blog) will be perceived as being most competent?

Methods

Study design

A quasi-experimental design was employed to gauge relative power associated with four popular public relations tactics: the press release, CEO speech, organisational blog, and CEO personal blog. Participants were randomly assigned to one of these four conditions. As noted, messages reflected an organisation in the midst of a sustained crisis. The Centers for Disease Control (Reynolds, Galdo, & Sokler, 2002) recommend those tasked with communicating an organisation's message be familiar with the life-cycle of a crisis, particularly the pre-crisis planning phase, so that in the case of a crisis practitioners are not experimenting with responses but rather enacting pre-formed plans. Therefore, this study utilised messages from an organisation experiencing a simulated sustained crisis so that public relations practitioners charged with communicating during similar situations have empirical data rather than having to go through a process of trial and error when the organisation's reputation is at stake (Reynolds, 2006; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003).

A scenario depicting potential dangers in consumption of fruit juice was utilised to mirror the recent claims by popular U.S. television personality Dr Oz that numerous brands of apple juice possess heightened levels of arsenic (FDA, 2011). The case is one where stakeholders would be inherently motivated to seek additional information in order to reduce their uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) regarding continued or future consumption of apple juice. Questions surrounding one's health or the health of family members prompt unique emotional and cognitive concerns and often generate the swiftest and most in-depth information gathering experiences (Brashers, Goldsmith, & Hsieh, 2002).

Messages were forwarded from fictional apple juice producer, Apple Grove. Each message utilised the following statements, "Since 1904, Apple Grove has committed fully to harvesting and delivering the freshest apple juice to you and your family"; "After popular television personality Dr Jack and his research team completed a test of 80 brands of apple juice, he announced that many brands, including Apple Grove, contain dangerous levels of arsenic. We would also like to inform you that subsequently, other independent agencies have found similar results"; and "While it is not our wish to discredit Dr Jack or the other agencies, we would like you to know that Apple Grove is compliant with the levels set forth by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)." Except where slight word changes were necessary for consistency with the condition for which each participant was assigned, the specific messages were held constant across the experimental conditions. While the messages remained consistent, formatting of messages varied to simulate differences among the conditions. Therefore, the press release, for example, was formatted, as a typical organisational press release would be.

Participants and procedure

Participants in the study were 125 undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses from a large Midwestern university. This sample was selected as research suggests that young adults are often the catalyst for trends in use of electronic information and emergence of new technologies (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Of the participants, 69% were female (N=86) and 31% were male (N=39) with the sample demonstrating typical undergraduate age (M=22.28, SD=4.07). 80% (N=100) of the sample identified themselves as Caucasian, followed by 12% (N=15) as African American, 4% (N=4) Asian, 3% (N=4) multi-racial, and 2% (N=2) Latino/Hispanic. In terms of class standing, the majority of participants were either juniors (50%, N= 62) or seniors (46%, N=58), followed by 4% (N=5) of sophomores.

Students were recruited in communication classes and offered a nominal amount of extra credit for completing the online survey. Students were given a link to the study where they were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions where they would read similar information, though it was presented in various formats. Once participants read the organisational message and completed the measures, they were redirected to an outside survey where they provided their name in order to receive extra credit. This was done in an effort to preserve anonymity.

Instrumentation

Perceptions of the message and medium. Immediately after reading the message (i.e., press release, CEO speech, organisational blog, or personal CEO blog) participants were asked two open-ended questions. The first question asked participants for their immediate reactions to the message (i.e., what are your thoughts on the message you just read?) whereas the second asked about the medium. (i.e., what are your opinions regarding organisational blogs?)

Source credibility. McCroskey and Teven's (1999) source credibility scale was used to measure competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness of each particular message. The semantic differential scale utilises polarised adjectives (i.e., Intelligent/Unintelligent; Insensitive/Sensitive) and a 7-point scale to gauge participant perceptions of source credibility. The closer the number is to an adjective (i.e., 1 or 7), the more certain participants are of their response. In accordance with previous use of the scale (Cole & McCroskey, 2003; Paulsel, Richmond, McCroskey, & Cayanus, 2005; Teven, 2007), internal reliability was sufficient with the following Cronbach alphas: competence α=.86; goodwill α=.89; and trustworthiness α=.89.

Competence. Eight additional items were used to examine perceptions of message competence. These were drawn from the work regarding assessment of web credibility completed by Fogg et al (2001). Items such as "How credible is this message?" and "How unbiased is this article?" were measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Means and standard deviations for each item and condition are provided in the Results section (see Table 1). The composite measure (combination of all eight items) indicated high reliability with a Cronbach alpha of .91.

Results

Normality and homogeneity of variance assumptions were assessed by examining histograms and the skewness and kurtosis for each of the dependent variables indicating normal distribution. Hypothesis 1a sought to test the credibility of blogs over other more traditional (i.e., press releases and CEO speech) tactics. The mean for the press release condition was 3.91 (N=32, SD=1.53), 4.67 (N=36, SD=1.60) for CEO speech, a mean of 5.03 (N=30, SD=1.40) in terms of credibility for the organisational blog and 4.31 (N=27, SD=1.57) for the CEO's personal blog. A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to explore differences in terms of credibility between the four conditions, demonstrating that there was at least one significant difference between groups (overall F=3.01; p <.03). Post hoc testing using Tukey's HSD showed that credibility was significantly higher in the organisational blog condition than in the press release condition, where η2=.07.

It was also suggested that blogs would be viewed as more trustworthy than traditional tactics. This hypothesis was forwarded as digital natives were the targeted participants of this study. However, support for this hypothesis was not supported. A one-way ANOVA for trustworthiness (overall F=.75, p=.53) indicated that while there are mean differences (reference Table 1) among the experimental groups, they are not significantly significant.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations for source credibility sub scales per condition.

Sub scale	Press release	CEO speech	Organisational blog	CEO personal blog
Competence	4.45 (1.33)	4.64 (1.05)	4.73 (.99)	4.66 (1.15)
Goodwill	4.29 (1.31)	4.37 (1.14)	4.27 (1.10)	3.91 (1.41)
Trustworthiness	4.07 (1.36)	4.51 (1.08)	4.26 (1.26)	4.18 (1.09)

The second hypothesis predicted organisational blogs would be viewed as more credible than CEO personal blogs. While mean credibility for organisational blogs (M=5.03, SD=1.40) is greater than that of the CEO personal blog (M=4.31, SD=1.59) an independent samples t-test indicated that there were not significant differences [t (55) = 1.81, p=.07] between the two conditions. However, a medium effect size (*r* =.25) was found.

Hypothesis three forwarded that the four conditions would not differ significantly in regard to goodwill. In order to investigate differences in goodwill, a one-way analysis of variance indicated there are not significant differences (overall F=.76, p=.52) among the four conditions on goodwill. Means for goodwill were as follows: press release (M=4.29, SD=1.31); CEO speech (M=4.37, SD=1.14); organisational blog (M=4.27, SD=1.10); CEO personal blog (M=3.91, SD=1.23). This was consistent with predictions forwarded.

In addition to the three hypotheses, a research question was also forwarded. The research question sought to uncover which tactic would be perceived to be the most competent. In order to examine overall perceived competence, a one-way analysis of variance was run. In terms of competence two significant differences were found: In regard to credibility a significant difference (F=3.01, p <.05) was found so post-hoc tests were completed. Utilisation of Tukey's HSD test revealed a significant difference between organisational blogs (M=5.03, SD=1.60) and press releases (M=3.91, SD=1.53), with a small effect size (η2=.07). Significant differences were also found in regard to informativeness of messages (F=2.82, p <.05) with organisational blogs (M=5.13, SD=1.17) perceived as better (η2=.07) sources of information than press releases (M=4.09, SD=1.65). Means and standard deviations for remaining competence items are available in Table 2.

Table 2: Means and standard deviations for competence items per condition.

Item	Press release	CEO speech	Organisational blog	CEO personal blog
This message is credible	3.91 (1.53)	4.67 (1.60)	5.03 (1.40)	4.31 (1.60)
This message is believable	4.44 (1.64)	4.72 (1.57)	4.9 (1.49)	4.33 (1.78)
This message is informative	4.09 (1.65)	4.5 (1.38)	5.13 (1.17)	4.37 (1.55)
This message demonstrate integrity	4.00 (1.55)	4.69 (1.28)	4.63 (1.35)	4.22 (1.45)
This message is accurate	4.19 (1.40)	4.44 (1.40)	4.57 (1.17)	4.22 (1.42)
This message is unbiased	2.97 (1.73)	2.91 (1.48)	3.40 (1.65)	2.56 (1.71)
This message demonstrates expertise	3.81 (1.40)	4.39 (1.84)	4.67 (1.41)	4.19 (1.55)
This message demonstrate competency	4.19 (1.49)	4.78 (1.38)	4.87 (1.22)	4.63 (1.24)
Overall	3.95	4.39	4.67	4.10

Discussion

While those within the field of public relations recognise the vital link between trust, goodwill, competence, credibility, and power, we contend that public relations professionals approach stakeholders via methods deemed most appropriate by the public relations professional without empirical evidence of which message and form the stakeholder finds most impactful. This study provides practitioners with data suggesting some commonly utilised tactics are perceived as more credible and trustworthy than others. In times of crisis, practitioners utilise pre-existing channels they believe to be effective in reaching stakeholders. Thus if a practitioner believes a press release or a CEO speech are most effective, it is likely he or she will devote his or her energy to delivering messages through such channels. However, stakeholders seeking information in efforts to reduce their uncertainty may be disappointed at the organisation's message if it is not presented in a way they deem credible, therefore leaving the site in search of more credible information. In this instance, the public relations practitioner relinquishes control over the content of the message, meaning that stakeholders could likely be exposed to additional inaccuracies that perpetuate the sustained crisis. Thus, the aim of this research was to provide evidence for highlighting the benefits of selecting certain communication tactics over others during times of organisational crisis.

With the exception of message credibility and information level, all tactics were fairly similar in evaluation outcomes. This suggests that in times of a sustained organisational crisis, the general public views each of these tactics as powerful sources of information. Further, this research has also indicated that while organisational and CEO blogs are relatively new public relations tactics, they are received as well or better than traditional tactics. This indicates that, in accordance with previous studies, blogs are a powerful, new medium that is not to be ignored (Porter, Sweetser Trammell, Chung, & Kim, 2007; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Yang & Lim, 2009; Yang et al., 2010). During a crisis, it is critical for the organisation to have a strong unified voice that speaks above the noise. Blogs provide leaders with the opportunity to appear in charge and in touch with details of the situation by responding frequently and appropriately based on the changing needs and perceptions of stakeholders (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007).

This research provides additional evidence that blogs may be particularly salient during times of crisis because of their narrative style (Yang & Lim, 2009; Yang et al., 2010) and ability to be updated frequently (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007); whereas traditional tactics appear filtered and less dynamic. This is further supported by the finding that suggests participants viewed the organisational blog as more credible than the tried and true press release. This could be due to a number of reasons such as participants are not used to receiving information in the form of a press release or simply that they prefer the more personal approach blogs offer, where stakeholders feel they are receiving information directly from an organisation's leader. Regardless, the finding should be considered when organisations have salient information for stakeholders.

Theoretical and pragmatic implications

This research has yielded both theoretical and pragmatic implications. Theoretically, evidence is provided regarding public perceptions of popular public relations tactics. Some situations elicit an increased need to reduce uncertainty because of an increased number of unknown alternatives. Shortage of information is related to negative effect where stakeholders foster feelings of powerlessness, tension, and fear. When there is a deficiency of information, negative emotions ensue, and subsequently individuals feel a stronger drive to more vigorously seek and learn in an attempt to reduce their anxiety. This research coincides with much of the extant communication scholarship on crises which substantiates during extreme events or times of great duress individuals attempt to reduce uncertainty and dissonance by engaging in information-seeking behaviours and will be motivated to seek information until their anxiety is reduced (Seeger et al., 2003; Spence et al., 2005; Spence et al., 2006). However, when individuals feel they have adequate communication and subsequently little uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) they do not seek additional information. This speaks to the need for public relations professionals to recognise the importance of addressing the uncertainty of one's audience by ensuring the audience feels informed via means the audience deems credible and trustworthy.

While practitioners have numerous choices in terms of communication channels, it is important they recognise the desires and perceptions of channel credibility is more in the hands of stakeholders than in their own. Functioning in this manner may offer public relations practitioners the ability to sustain stakeholder attention by providing information in means seen as credible rather than losing the stakeholder to a webpage controlled by someone other than the organisation. This research also adds to the growing body of literature that seeks to better understand blogs and their place in communication theory and practice. Furthering the work of Sweetser and Metzgar (2007), this study examined both organisational and personal CEO blogs in the context of a sustained crisis and also found that blogs may be useful crisis management tools. Theoretically, we are also able to see that so long as consumers receive messages they deem to possess goodwill, trustworthiness, and competence, the form is of lesser importance.

Pragmatically, instead of suggesting one tactic is more impactful or influential than another based on a feeling or previous experience, practitioners should be aware that each tactic fares similarly in terms of source credibility and competence. This privileges practitioners with a solid foundation to defend choices in message method and may encourage them if they are not already, to consider the use of an organisational blog or to prompt their CEOs to maintain a personal blog. Finally, in a world flourishing with citizen journalists and frequent organisational mishaps and corporate scandals, it is important that practitioners know how to best reach their target and how their messages are received by that target.

Limitations and future research

While this study adds to our understanding of power in public relations, there are some limitations that should be addressed. The burgeoning social media uses in applied communication contexts present new opportunities for researchers, but in these opportunities are challenges in how to best study the phenomena. This study was approached from the viewpoint of the public relations practitioner so that individuals in this position are aware of the implications their message channel and format evoke for stakeholders. To that end, some related aspects of stakeholder information seeking were not addressed. By example, there are a variety of ways in which individuals are made aware of viable sources of information—through browser searchers (i.e., Google), through relevant hyperlinks, or through recommendations from other trusted sources (i.e., family, friends and colleagues). While this line of inquiry is important in yielding understanding into the ways in which stakeholders access information, it fell outside of the scope of this particular study as this scholarship sought to examine how stakeholders perceived commonly used organisational communication methods. In terms of future research, it is suggested that scholars seek to understand the network stakeholders navigate in order to arrive at varied information sources. It may also be fruitful to see how varied routes impact perceptions of message credibility, competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill.

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