

A book review

Lisa Anderson-Meli & Swapna Koshy (2020). Public Relations Crisis Communication; A New Model. London: Routledge

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The ambitious title of one of the recent books in Routledge series titled Routledge Focus on Business and Management (“small books on big topics and how they intersect with the world of business research”) could not be more welcome topic in this age of epidemics and related infodemics (popular new word that no Google or similar translator recognizes, yet) as it turns out that the two are two sides of the same ominous coin the world received as a present at the beginning of the third decade of third millennium.

If anything was ever crisis, this one indeed is, for individuals, for organizations, global, national, business, civils society organizations, the governments, the big, the small, for all. While there have been literary hundreds, if not thousands, of books published, in English alone, on crisis management in the last fifteen or so years, rarely crisis communication and public relations would be found together in one book title. This has probably a lot to do with the fact that reducing crisis to public relations crisis was not very well received by neither strictly “business “ specialists neither by public relations specialists themselves. What of it? Is it not a crisis when people die, big damage is done, but nobody knows about it? Is it only crisis when publics know it happened?

Nobody could sign such unethical statement, yet, in private business, it is exactly the way it is (still) sometimes if not, often, often understood. So, there is no crisis when people get killed in car accidents which could have been prevented had the company invested in changing a small ignition switch part, but the crisis starts when it becomes public relations crisis and the controversial electronic mail revealing that the company knew it all the time, the management was warned by engineers and even made a calculation of costs of exchanging the defective parts versus paying the damages to the families of deceased in out of courts settlements. That practice, that attitude, PR professionals hate the most: being garbage cleaners invited to solve the mess once everything has been broken and the ugly truth is out, instead of being consulted at the beginning, the operational and strategic levels. That is one reason why probably we rarely find crisis management and public relations expressions in one title.

The other reason might be even stronger. In the last decade or so, crisis management as a management theory discipline as well as operational practice, all this in the context of increasingly important and by now only politically correct stakeholder approach, has developed to the extent that it is taken for granted that three levels of crisis management – strategic, operational, communication – are not only equally important but so much overlapping that they fall into the same discipline of crisis management, academic research or beyond. That is probably why this title intrigued this reviewer who has had not only academic but also substantial experience in both crisis management and public relations. Today there seem to be a consensus on the fact that crisis is not only related to communication, sometimes, it is often caused by it. Hence the everlasting debate about

apology and how much of the facts should, could, and might be shared with the publics in some point of crisis involvement. If anything, the pandemic crisis we are living with now is the living proof of that. Protests, violence, vaccination, individual decisions, and choices, all is related to communication.

Having, thus, somehow framed the area within which this book navigates with the ambition to propose a model, it remains to see what is this model, what is new about it, and has it, indeed, been born not only out of the case study (substantial portion of the book is the public relations mistakes and lessons learned when communicating the tragic accident of Malaysian airplane crash but), but, also does it have the operational testing value that could make it a new normative model of crisis communication.

Where public relations and crisis communication fit in the continuum between academic disciplines and operational public relations and crisis communication, as practiced by public relations agencies, corporations and consultants, is discussed in the first part where the reader is presented with various definitions of public relations, communication and crisis communication. It is noted that, both in the academic and organizational context, the function of what is known as public relations, public affairs, crisis communication or corporate communication has only recently managed to claim its own territory and identity.

Previously to internet kingdom which, as one of the results, has risen the number of potential journalists to equivalent number of humans – over seven billion to be precise – crisis communication was directly related to coverage of incidents and crisis in the mainstream media. That gave public relations professionals enough time to gather the information needed and present them through media to various publics. The professionals spoke of 24 hours' time span, then it shrinks to the coined phrase known to all public relations professionals as golden hour. It has changed, as we know all too well, no hours or minutes are relevant anymore, news of crisis are out there almost simultaneously in the real time. New meaning, texts, videos, opinions, comments, everything that the publics need to be informed, to comment, make an opinion, be influenced by other opinions. News on our company have the life of their own.

Crisis communication has in the past, indeed, found its identity within the remit of Public Relations but, as these two authors rightly point out, not all crisis communication is public relations and vice versa. Public relations, as the vocational practice is assigned to corporate communications and public affairs, however, in crisis, this function becomes the leading, or, rather, coordinating function for the so-called crisis teams and their operational management role.

This book goes a step further, although it might seem that conceptually it is a step back. The key concept of this book, and, as authors advocate indeed of the discipline, is the conception and perception of publics, or stakeholders. It must be added here that the two, although overlapping, are not completely same categories as J. Gruning had already pointed out in his situational theory of publics. Among many definitions, this book adopts the definition that a “public relations crisis is triggered by an event, issue or incident and is the critical breakdown of relationship between an organization and one (or more) of its publics, threatening the organization’s existence and warranting an organizational response.”

The crucial concept most relevant for the new model of crisis communication is relational convergence evidenced in the communication domain dominated by communication of everybody with everybody. As they explain, relationship schism can trigger another in an ongoing cycle. They also adopt the used distinction between an event, an issue, an incident, and crisis, stressing that that the incident or event is not the issue or the crisis, but it merely constitutes a potential trigger for one. In contextualization of public relations crisis, they point out that crisis often emerges from poor public relations issue management and that “a sustained crisis refers to poor public relations crisis management (communication) where the organization is unsuccessful in communicating through the crisis and becomes mired in constant crisis communication”. In drawing the differences between events, incidents, issues, and crises, the critical factor is the severity .

Defining extensively the organization in the context of crisis communication their focus is on relations with publics and stakeholders stressing that this relationship is neither static nor fixed, it can be transient, the public can be transitional and organizations themselves can constitute a public.

Their central concept are publics, “multiple transformative groupings, with various relationships with an organization”. Intercessory publics are defined as having independent relationship with an organization’s publics outside of the organization’s control. The communication sphere in which these relationships are taking place is “not made up of a set of neat singular pathways of communication between an organization and its publics but a congested set of highways and byways constantly crisscrossing each other” and within this the communication sphere various publics (static, transitory and transformational) interact with each other. Intercessory publics actively seek to intrude, and media being a primary intercessory public, it should be kept in mind that media are under increasing pressure to create more content with less resources which makes their hunger for sensational news. Crises definitely have that potential.

In crisis communication key factors being speed, consistency and transparency are related to Grunig excellence theory of supremacy and business value of Grunig`s famous fourth PR model of two way symmetrical communication whereby the research not only guides to tailoring the messages for audiences but adds value by dialogic supremacy over manipulation opening the possibility for audiences to affect the communication (and decisions!) in other direction too.

In the current communication scenario, as the authors see it, an organization communicates directly with its publics also simultaneously connected in the communication sphere, communicating indirectly or directly with each other independent of the organization. “The communication sphere is in crisis when an event damages the relationship between an organization and its public threatening other existing relationships and sometimes the existence of the organization.” The event triggers or creates a Public Relations Crisis, resulting in the deferment of normal communications and requiring an organizational crisis communication response which forms the new public relations crisis communication model.

The convergence of media and publics in the communication sphere necessitates a rationale for hierarchically organizing publics during a crisis. This will ensure the

organization sends messages tailored to the needs of each public, thereby minimizing miscommunication. There is an universal agreement that not all publics are going to be of equal importance during a crisis. However, there will be multiple publics that need simultaneous prioritizing. The unique relation between the publics, the organization and the event is an indicator of the type of response. Therefore, developing a hierarchy of crisis publics is essential if crisis resolution is to be effective, and this hierarchy is the essence of the new model.

That concept very much resembles the model of communicating with stakeholders which, in the known stakeholder mapping process, are also hierarchized as no organization has resources or the need to invest into communicating with all of them equally in quality and quantity terms. Likewise, the hierarchy of publics to communicate with in crisis situation proposed by this model, in many senses and very probably already used in real life in various crisis management programs which gave crisis communication embedded in the overall strategic approach to crisis management, nevertheless, represents valuable contribution. This is true particularly if it would provoke further research in theoretical field as well as new case studies beyond the cases of grand disasters like the Malaysian airplane crisis described here, but, and maybe even more important in the direction of crises caused by management negligence, corruption, ignorance or deliberate wrong doing and criminal offenses. In that sense, the book opens door to empirical research of more current crisis communication and its role in overall crisis management of an organization.

Current COVID related situation, particularly the communication of various political, governing bodies and health authorities give plenty of material to check the validity of the model and seek its alteration and new models of essential public relations crisis communication model which remains to be fact based and truthful. That is one, among other relevant reasons, why the two closely related subjects Crisis Management and Business Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility deserve separate courses in business schools and high education in general. This book could, in that sense, also serve as a useful t The ambitious title of one of the recent books in Routledge series titled *Routledge Focus on Business and Management* (“small books on big topics and how they intersect with the world of business research”) could not be more welcome topic in this age of epidemics and related infodemics (popular new word that no Google or similar translator recognizes, yet) as it turns out that the two are two sides of the same ominous coin the world received as a present at the beginning of the third decade of third millennium.

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