

Research Philosophy: The Role of Strategic Communicators in Crisis and Disaster Communication

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Understanding of science information is a challenge for the broader public and mainstream media today. The language of science and disaster communication must not just be clear it must encourage action. Communicators often need to convey information that is dense to a public in a much more accessible way.

Science is often complex and abstract, and scientists are hung up on using field-specific terms that often lack meaning outside their professional circles. Natural disaster communication often uses information provided by scientists to the public. Presenting this information in a cohesive and easily understood way is the charge of public relations practitioners and journalists. The way information is shared and travels changes during a natural disaster, as some technologies are quicker ways to communicate than others. As a mass media and communication scholar, I seek to understand how public relations practitioners must plan for whatever can go wrong and how to share information clearly and efficiently. They must think about how they formulate messages and how they interact with journalists. My long-term research agenda examines these ideas by applying and adopting theories concerning community resilience, the role of public relations in crisis and how mass communication can contribute to collective memory.

Through a qualitative and narrative lens, I seek to understand the actions and interactions of public practitioners and journalists. I use theory to examine these relationships and build theory using textual analysis, surveys and interviews. My research focuses on crisis communication and the role of strategic communicators and journalists in shaping crisis and disaster preparation and response. I often use quantitative data to compliment my work, and enjoy collaboration with researchers of many methodologies. Case study research allows the researcher to draw on many types of data in the process of research.

My recent work helping scientists with research branding and creating interactive digital science materials for middle school and high school STEM programs has shown how stories can change the way people understand science materials.

My crisis and disaster communication research often focuses on the role of individuals and communities and how they interact with the national level news media. My dissertation challenged the traditional understanding of how public relations practitioners and strategic communicators as well local journalists interact with each other and the public during disaster and crisis situations. I presented this research at AEJMC 2016 in Minneapolis, and Summer 2017 at ICA, and plan to send many of these pieces to journals this fall.

Crisis communication has traditionally focused on national media, often ignoring the role of the local journalist in the process. Disasters are often localized to smaller geographical areas defined by smaller regions, or communities. In these communities, public relations practitioners already have established relationships with local journalists. For this reason, local journalists often have a leg-up on coverage and use different themes in their coverage. This pattern presents an advantage as well as a challenge for public relations practitioners.

Three of my published articles deal with different components of crisis communication. The first study included a review of the literature both academic and practical concerning the role of social media in disaster communication. The study examined how journalists, public communicators and health officials use social media to share disaster information. Although many disciplines use social media to communicate in disaster situations, the study found that there is no one consistent understanding of how social media should be used in a crisis.

My second article involves a study concerning whether people trust the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency. Using the older and more updated tornado-warning messages, our research team created four mock-up tornado-warning messages. We then created a survey and embedded the messages. The study indicated that behavioral intentions were not different depending on the type of message, however the older messages were perceived as more credible than the updated messages. In addition, of the individuals who took the survey, those who were women and had previous disaster experience used more sources to confirm severe-weather information.

My most recently published article concerns the frequency of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome mentions in *The New York Times*. This study found the context differed in stories concerning the military and PTSD and civilians and PTSD. Stories that mentioned individual family space generally featured fewer treatments in relationship to PTSD than stories where family space was not mentioned.

In addition, I continue to look for research opportunities where I can integrate my experiences in the field of public relations and journalism. Drawing from my experiences at the United States Institute of Peace, as well as the *Palm Beach Post* and *Town Crier* my research spans the boundaries of public relations and journalism. Many mass communication researchers see the definition of journalism as changing to integrate goals and tactics applied by public relations practitioners. Crisis communication is the ultimate test for public relations and strategic communication in that it presents unforeseen challenges. This informs my approach to research, and theory as well as the methods I have applied.

My experiences with natural disasters growing up in Texas as well as a journalist in South Florida instilled in me a desire to understand the way that communicators cope with natural disasters. It also made me question what the role of journalists is in disaster situations. Later with my work at the United States Institute of Peace, I sought to convey stories of communities all over the world coping with crisis and disaster. I discovered that many public officials, public relations practitioners as well as journalists were using the word “resilience” to describe communities who appeared to cope well with the adverse events they faced. However, in my observations it seemed to me that “resilience” might be in the eye of the beholder. I also began to see the how some technologies are more like to change the way public relations practitioners; journalists and citizens respond and share information in a crisis or disaster situation. I have also begun to consider how long term reactions to natural disasters might form the collective memories of communities and how strategic communicators and journalists might contribute to those memories.

My work provides insight into how people respond to science communication, and disaster information. I plan to continue to submit my research in these areas to top tier as well as interdisciplinary journals.