Placing Crisis Management Research in Context
An Analysis and a Call for the State of Crisis Management Research in Public Relations

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Based on a content analysis and thematic review of eleven years of research published in Public Relations Review and Journal of Public Relations Research, trends and lacunae in the study of crisis communication in public relations are documented and analyzed. Prominent scholars and programs are identified through a bibliometric analysis to account for many of the research trends. A call is made to broaden the public relations research program related to crisis management, using a life cycle of proactive, strategic, reactive, and recovery phase. Suggestions are made for shifting from qualitative, a-theoretical case studies to more theory-driven research, including more theory testing through quantitative analysis of testable hypotheses that build theory for the academy and the profession.

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1. Introduction

During the last decades, the theme of crisis management has produced a significant amount of theoretical and practical research (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006). Researchers from a variety of disciplines have studied the origin of crises, how organizations manage crisis, and the most effective ways to avoid crisis (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006). Crisis management has been studied in the various fields such as public relations, management, rhetoric, and organizational psychology (Coombs, 2001).

Although scholars have studied crisis management for a long time, the topic did not become an established area of study in the public relations field until late 1990s. As Coombs (2001) pointed out, crisis management was not an explicit public relations area in the 1999 Commission Report on Public Relations. However, crisis management takes on an important role in the contemporary public relations (PR) field. Notably, many PR textbooks published after 2000 categorize crisis management as an important functional PR area (see Wilcox & Cameron, 2008; Hansen-Horn & Neff, 2008; Kim, 2003; Yoon & Shin, 2000). Also, crisis management research in public relations has been dramatically grown in theoretical and managerial ways (Coombs, 2001). Crisis management significantly influenced the role of public relations, encouraging improvement in managerial functions and developing practical skills (Coombs, 2001). Coombs (2001) suggested that crisis management study was the best way to teach public relations theory, concepts, information as well as practical skills including problem solving and communication management, Crisis management influenced the stakeholders’ perception of the organization’s value and scholars found that the extent to which crisis management works was closely related to the value of investment for the organization (Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001; Report on risk and crisis, 2001).

In spite of the rapid growth of crisis management research and its importance in public relations, Coombs (2006) criticized that most of crisis management research involved the descriptive stage. The descriptive case study offers little theoretical insight into the crisis management studies