

Issue and Crisis Management: Quicksand in the Definitional Landscape

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Abstract:

The broad field of public relations is plagued by difficulties of definition, none more problematic than the definitional challenges facing issue management and crisis management. After considering the need for commonly understood language as a basis for meaningful discourse, the paper identifies the particular reasons for ongoing ambiguity in issue and crisis management and charts some distinct approaches which have developed within each discipline. It then analyzes how these evolutionary changes are creating further difficulties for defining the interplay between the two, and identifies a more integrated process approach focused on characterizing clusters of activities.

Keywords: Issue management; crisis management; crisis communication; definitions; taxonomy.

1. Defining the field

The broad field of public relations is plagued by difficulties of definition. In fact defining the term “public relations” itself has generated extensive scholarship, going back to the famous study by Harlow (1976), who reportedly identified 472 different definitions of public relations.

Over time such analysis has overall proved less than helpful. Cropp and Pincus (2001), for instance, observed that 25 years after Harlow’s seminal work, definitions of public relations continue to proliferate with little common perspective, and that this decades-long confusion over the nature and applications of public relations has in fact seen a *deteriorating clarity* of its transcending purpose. Indeed, they went further and concluded: “The confusion has been exacerbated by the myriad definitions and terminology applied to the various specialties, activities and literature falling under the rubric of public relations” (2001, p. 191).

One such specialty area “under the rubric of public relations” is crisis management and issue management, where growing convergence and overlap between the two disciplines has created new quicksand on the definitional landscape, creating uncertainty and inexorably drawing in other activities and processes.

Unlike some other definitional disputes within public relations, motivated (inter alia) by dueling academic schools and orientations (discussed by Reber & Harriss, 2003), crisis management and issue management began as distinct activities, thriving in both theoretical and practitioner contexts. But the commonly available definitions and terminology have failed to keep pace with their evolution.

2. The importance of common meaning

Although it is self-evident that language which communicates common understanding is needed as the basis for meaningful discussion, in many areas within public relations such agreed taxonomy is both elusive and illusory.

The challenge was highlighted by the renowned scholar Quarantelli who conceded that after four decades working in the area of disaster he still struggled with how to define and conceptualize the term. "A major reason why we need clarification is because otherwise scholars who think they are communicating with one another are really talking of different phenomena" (1998, p. 3). He said he was not arguing for agreement on a single, all purpose definition, and he had no problem with different views. "However," he concluded, "in my view, for *research* purposes aimed at developing a theoretical superstructure for the field, we need greater clarity and relative consensus."

This runs counter to the common wisdom that debate over definitions is the norm in just about any field, and that experts "know" the meaning of key concepts without the need for formal agreement on terminology. Or as US Justice Potter Stewart famously opined on the subject of pornography: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced . . . But I know it when I see it."¹

Yet, following on the work of Quarantelli, Rockett (1999) argued for *redoubled* effort to produce definitive language for meaningful discourse. In a discussion of risk, crisis and disaster he observed that effort to obtain a "definitive bounding of terms" had been limited in perception and unnecessarily divisive. "What is important is not what a term might have meant . . . but what we as practitioners or theorists of crisis management require of the words" (p.45). "It does not for practical or theoretical purposes matter how we define the terms so long as we agree, at the point of definition, their meaning." He added: "To progress, both in definition itself and in our ability to converse and discuss meaningfully, we need to standardize what we mean" (p. 46).

Taking a somewhat different perspective, Shrivastava (1993) argued that research was moving away from establishing definitions and creating vocabularies towards building theoretical frameworks and models. Referring to the "fragmentation and idiosyncrasy" of research in the field of crisis management, Shrivastava said the attention of scholars from many different disciplines had resulted in what he called a "Tower of Babel" effect. "There are so many disciplinary voices, talking in so many different languages to different issues and audiences," he said. "This creates difficulties in

¹ Jacobellis v. Ohio, 378 U.S. 184 (1964)

communication of research results within the research community. It also impedes development of consensus over policy and practical issues” (p. 33).

Furthermore, the search for definitional understanding differs across international lines, varying between developed and developing societies, between democratic nations and authoritarian regimes. Curtin and Gaither (2007) examined failed international efforts to grapple with definitions in the field of public relations and concluded: “Definitions privilege world views, establish power relations, and affix names to communicative processes that are constantly in flux, shaped by global forces that include economic and cultural tides” (p. 14).

This concept of attempting to define processes which are in a state of flux is particularly pertinent to crisis management and issue management, which have both witnessed substantially evolving and expanding parameters and applications. In fact the definitional challenge here involves two related concepts where the dissimilarities and working interface help fully define them, with the focus more properly on their correlation than on individual descriptions.

It is important to note that there is a vital distinction between disputes over terminology and differences in definitions of the subject itself. For example, the atmospheric condition referred to as a cyclone in the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific is called a hurricane in the Western Atlantic and Eastern Pacific, and a typhoon in the Western Pacific. Yet the phenomenon is exactly the same irrespective of terminology (except, of course, that it rotates counter-clockwise in the northern hemisphere and clockwise in the southern hemisphere). With issue and crisis it is not simply such a difference in terminology, but a more fundamental difference in accurately characterizing each phenomenon.

3. The definitional challenge

While crisis management and issue management have been dubbed the “Siamese twins of public relations” (Jaques, 2002), this description refers to the inseparable way they have come to be linked in practice rather than to any idea of common birth. In fact the disparate origin of the two disciplines played a major part in the subsequent definitional challenge.

Of all the activities in public relations, issue management is unique in that its formal birth can be traced to an exact time and place – the first issue of the new publication *Corporate Public Issues and their Management* on 15 April, 1976 – which “nailed the issue management manifesto to the cathedral door” (Chase, 1984, p. 15. For a full description see Jaques, 2008). Most importantly, issue management was born virtually fully formed, not only on a known date, but with a newly coined name, purpose and language, to meet an acknowledged management need. Accordingly, early scholarship centered mainly on defining issue management, not defining an issue.

By contrast modern crisis management emerged only slowly after years of discussion about how to define a crisis, with very little debate about what constitutes crisis management. In this case the early scholarship centered mainly on defining a crisis, not defining crisis management.

Crisis management in a general sense emerged after World War II, taking its roots from crisis study, which expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the fields of behavioural science and disaster response (Booth, 1993; Milburn, Schuler, & Watman, 1983). The developing discipline also gained prominence as an international policy concept in the wake of the much-studied 1962 Cuban Missile crisis (Lagadec, 1993). But it has been widely accepted (including Fishman, 1999; Heath & Palenchar, 2009;² Mitroff, 2004) that *organizational* crisis management as a formal management discipline did not gain real impetus in the United States until the Tylenol poisoning scandal of 1982, and in Europe after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006).

4. The evolution of issue management

The evolution of issue management has seen two separate forces at work – one relating to the nature of its structural framework and the other driven by its application in practice.

Although there is continued discussion about the merits of the different ways to define issues, a broad agreement seems to have emerged that there are three distinct constructs – the controversy or disputation theme (an issue as a contestable difference of opinion); the expectational gap theme (an issue as a gap between the actions of an organization and the expectations of its shareholders); and the impact theme (an issue as an event, trend or condition which creates, or has the potential to create, a significant impact affecting the organization). However, there is no such broad agreement about how to define issue management itself. Heath (1997) observed that no definition of issue management had yet achieved consensus, and continuing debate and evolution has sustained that uncertainty.

The first reason for this situation relates to the structural framework in which the discipline operates. Issue management began as a business discipline specifically designed to enable corporations to participate in, and not simply respond to, public policy issues which have the potential to impact the organization. Howard Chase, the father of issue management, colorfully described it as “a methodology by which the private sector can get out of the unenviable position of being at the end of the crack-the-whip political line” (Chase, 1980, p.5). As a result, defining issue management as a way to enable participation in the public policy process was a consistent early theme, particularly among practitioners, and has continued to retain support, as shown in Table 1.

² Heath and Palenchar (2009) noted: “Before the Tylenol case, crisis was probably a major topic. Afterward it became a cottage industry” (p. 366).

Meantime a separate approach developed relating to its area of application, positioning issue management as an organizational process, or set of processes, effective not just in the public policy arena but across a full range of public relations and management activities. This process approach emphasizes linking and coordinating processes and functions within the organization.

The contrasting definitions in Table 1 are not intended to constitute a comprehensive review of the entire field, but to reflect the contribution of some leading authorities to the development of the distinct public policy and process approaches to the discipline

Issue Management Comparative Definitions

Public Policy Approach	Internal Process Approach
Issue management is the management of organizational and community resources through the public policy process to advance organizational interests and rights by striking a mutual balance with those of stakeholders and stakeholders (Heath & Coombs, 2006)	Issue management is the management process whose goal is to help preserve markets, reduce risk, create opportunities and manage image as an organizational asset for the benefit of both an organization and its shareholders (Tucker, Broom & Caywood, 1993)
Issues Management is not the management of issues through public policy forums or management of the public policy process itself. It is the management of an institution's resources and efforts to <i>participate</i> in the successful resolution of issues in our public policy process (Ewing, 1987)	Issue management is the orchestrating of a positive plan for dealing with issues rather than merely reacting to them. It is a tool used in corporations and trade associations to come to an earlier and more constructive understanding of the issues an organization or industry will face in the next few years (Coates, Coates, Jarratt & Heinz, 1986)
Issue management is systematic identification and action regarding public policy matters of concern to an organization (PRSA, 1987)	Issue management is the process by which the corporation can identify, evaluate and respond to those social and political issues which might significantly impact on it (Johnson, 1983)
Issue management is a strategic set of functions used to reduce friction and increase harmony between organizations and their publics in the public policy arena (Heath, 2005)	The overriding goal of an issues management function is to enhance the current and long-term performance and standing of the corporation by anticipating change, promoting opportunities and avoiding or mitigating threat (Renfro, 1993)
Issue management is the capacity to understand, mobilize, coordinate and direct all strategic and policy planning functions, and all public affairs/public relations skills, toward achievement of one objective: meaningful participation in creation of public policy that affects personal and institutional destiny (Chase, 1982)	Issue management attempts to minimize surprises which accompany social and political change by serving as an early warning system for potential environmental threats and attempts to promote more systematic and effective responses to particular issues by serving as a co-ordinating and integrating force within the corporation (Wartick & Rude, 1986)
Issues management is a process to organize a company's expertise to enable it to participate effectively in the shaping and resolution of public issues that	Issues Management is a means for linking the public relations function and the management function of an organization in ways that foster the organization's

critically impinge upon its operations (Arrington & Sawaya, 1984a)	efforts to be outer directed and to have a participative organizational culture (Heath & Palenchar, 2009)
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Table 1.

There is obvious overlap between the two approaches, and both have supported migration of issue management beyond the narrow corporate environment. Issue management began as a corporate response to adverse public policy and the desire to move from reaction to participation, driven by a belief that identifying and managing issues early enhances corporate capacity to influence new regulations and guidelines rather than responding to them *ex post facto*. This eventually led to business and government using issue management processes to promote their positions. In this way government legislatures and agencies began to use the discipline’s tools and processes, not to resist or modify public policy as originally conceived by the corporate founders of the discipline, but to promote and implement such public policies.

Meanwhile, NGOs and community activist groups began utilizing issue management methodology not only to resist big business and big government, but to demand greater public participation. And this in turn led to an increased expectation that big government and big business *should* provide for greater public participation, with an issue management approach often used by government and business to facilitate that participation.

At the heart of this evolution are a dramatic change in societal expectation and progress beyond the purely managerial approach. These trends together make it even more difficult to define and characterize the evolving discipline of issue management, when “opposing parties” to any particular issue may adopt and customize for their own use the identical tools and processes (see Jaques, 2006).

At the same time, increasing demand for participation has been a major contributor to development of a number of novel constructions – such as Stakeholder Relations/Management, Risk Communication, Environmental Risk Management, Community Outreach and Sustainability Management – which often utilize the proven tools and processes developed within issue management. But the most important relationship for future practice is between the developing nature of issue management and the simultaneous evolution of crisis management.

5. Expanding the boundaries of crisis management

It has been argued that while it is difficult to define issues independent of issue management, crises can properly be defined independent of crisis management (Jaques, 2007). One manifestation of this paradox is the detailed research available on defining the form, nature and typology of a crisis, while far less scholarship is devoted to achieving consensus on the span and parameters of crisis management as a discipline.

How to effectively define the word crisis has been a problem for decades. More than 30 years ago, Holsti (1978) commented: “Crisis is a much overused term which has become burdened with a wide range of meanings, some of them quite imprecise” (p. 41). This conclusion has been repeatedly reinforced over subsequent years by other scholars who found the term overused and poorly defined. Typical of these is Smith, who observed (1990) that crisis has different meaning according to the disciplinary background against which it is set. He later concluded: “The definition of crisis has generated considerable debate within the academic literature and there is no real collective acceptance about the precise meaning of the term” (Smith, 2005, p. 319).

Given this focus it is no surprise that there has been less scholarship, and less consensus, on crisis management. Because much of the early attention was on crisis defined as an event, it followed that many early conceptions of crisis management primarily emphasized incident response – what to do when a crisis occurs – along with some basic preparation, such as cross-functional teams, crisis manuals and scenario training. This event approach has substantial support, particularly in practitioner literature, where there is sometimes a bias towards a check-list style.

More recent scholarship has seen an increasing view of crisis management as part of a process continuum, which builds on the recognition (a) that most crises are not sudden occurrences but follow a period of precognition and red flags and (b) that managers have a wide range of proactive processes and activities which can be implemented to identify, pre-empt or prevent potential crises, or to mitigate the duration and impact of those which do occur.

Table Two reflects some of the scholarship which has marked the development of two distinct approaches to crisis management.

Crisis Management Comparative Approaches	
Crisis as an event	Crisis as part of a process
A crisis is a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and reputational threat (Coombs, 2007)	Crises are not events but processes extended in time and space (Shrivastava, 1995)
A critical incident or a crisis is simply a sudden, unexpected event that poses an institutional threat suggesting the need for rapid, high level decision-making (Paschall, 1992)	A crisis is composed of a continuum, beginning with an incident, continuing with an accident, followed by conflict, and ending with a crisis, the most serious form of disruption (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992)
Crisis management deals with a situation after it becomes public knowledge and affects the company. It is needed after there is public outrage (Regester & Larkin, 1997)	Crisis is a process of incubation which starts long before the triggering event (Roux-Dufort, 2007b)
A crisis is an event that brings or has the potential to bring an organization into disrepute and imperils its future profitability, growth and possibly its very survival (Lerbinger, 1997).	Organizational crisis management is the systematic attempt by organizational members with external stakeholders to avert crises and to effectively manage those that do occur (Pearson & Clair, 1998)
A crisis is an extreme event that may threaten your very existence. At the very least, it causes substantial injuries, deaths, and financial costs, as well as serious damage to your reputation (Mitroff, 2005)	Crisis management is not the same as crash management – what to do when everything falls apart. The total crisis management effort focuses not only on what to do in the heat of a crisis, but also on why crises happen in the first place and what can be done to prevent them (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992)
A crisis is a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company or industry as well as its publics, products, services or good name (Fearn-Banks, 1996)	Crisis management is a series of functions or processes to identify, study and forecast crisis issues, and set forth specific ways that would enable an organization to prevent or cope with a crisis (Darling, Hannu, & Raimo, 1996)

Table 2

Here again the definitions selected are not intended to be comprehensive and, as with the contrasting conceptions of issue management (illustrated in Table 1), the event and process approaches to crisis management have areas of evident overlap. But in this

case the difference has a far deeper influence on both the theory and practice of the discipline.

Some of the seminal research distinguishing and comparing these two conceptions of crisis management was by Forgues and Roux-Dufort (1998), who concluded that the process perspective offered the most promising avenues for future research. Roux-Dufort later noted (2007a, 2007b) that the distinction between the two approaches is more complex in practice than in theory, and that even among authors who hold both perspectives, most understate that crises are processes and still treat them as if they were events. He also found that although the event- and process-oriented approaches are naturally complementary, the crisis management literature has mostly developed the event approach.

The present definitional challenge derives not just from these contrasting approaches to crisis management, but also from the lack of any agreed taxonomy to define and differentiate the phases of the crisis management continuum, including (but not confined to) crisis preparedness, training, planning, signal detection, prevention, systems activation, response, recovery, apologia, image restoration, post-crisis discourse and organizational learning. Indeed, each of these areas has generated its own scholarship and literature, in some cases quite considerable. Adding to this ambiguity is the increasingly ubiquitous term “crisis communication” which has been permitted to become almost a proxy for the key areas of crisis management, so much so that crisis management, crisis response and crisis communication not only overlap, but are sometimes used as virtually interchangeable.

Crisis communication has been represented as largely comprising what is said by an organization during and after a crisis (Ogrizek & Guillery, 1999). And a strong focus on crisis communication is reinforced by conceptions such as the widely-published Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) championed by Coombs. While Coombs argues that crisis management overall begins well before the triggering event, his crisis communication theory was developed to articulate a theory-based system for matching crisis response strategies to the crisis situation to best preserve the organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007). Yet Heath and Millar (2004), among others, have suggested a broader conception of crisis communication. In a leading analysis of a range of different definitions of a crisis, they noted that crisis communication has a firm place not only in crisis response and post-crisis discourse but also in the pre-crisis/crisis prevention phase.³

Fishman (1996) has described the literature on crisis communication as often bewildering, and in search of analytical concepts and methodologies. This lack of clarity in the area of communication is exemplified by Hearit and Courtright (2003) who dishearteningly observed: “In the public relations literature, the problem of crisis

³ For this more expansive view of crisis communication see also Fishman (1999) and Sellnow and Seeger (2001).

management is most typically phrased as a question of how to manage an organization's media relations" (p 84).

6. A possible way forward

In reality the overall term crisis management now embraces so many different aspects that it effectively lacks the level of clarity and consensus which Quarantelli, Rockett, Shrivastava (qv) and others have declared is necessary for meaningful discourse.

It is clear that unambiguous language to define the elements of crisis management is essential to improving understanding of both the event and process approaches. Moreover the recent work of Roux-Dufort and others in analyzing and developing the process approach reinforces the remaining facet of the definitional challenge under discussion, namely the complex interplay between the recognized elements of crisis management and other stand-alone disciplines which form part of the overall process continuum, particularly issue management.

To date no agreed language has emerged to adequately differentiate between the principal sequential activities of crisis planning and preparedness; crisis prevention; incident response; and the many elements of post-crisis recovery and discourse. Rather than attempting to debate and establish exact definitions of the different elements, a more productive way forward may be to identify and characterize phases of the continuum and to develop agreement on the scope of these key clusters of action.

Some attempts have been made to formulate such broader language. Among these are Mitroff (2004), who suggested that *Crisis Management* comprises primarily the reactive phase after a crisis has happened whereas the proactive, systematic preparation phase before the crisis should be characterized as *Crisis Leadership*.

Similarly Coombs (2001) proposed three sequential phases:

- Pre-Crisis (signal detection, prevention, preparation)
- Crisis Event (recognition, containment)
- Post-Crisis (evaluation, learning, follow up communication).
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For his part, Jaques (2007) further developed clusters of action which more specifically encompass various associated disciplines:

- Crisis Preparedness (planning processes, systems and manuals, documentation, training/simulations)
- Crisis Prevention (early warning, risk and issue management, social forecasting, environmental scanning, emergency response)
- Crisis Incident management (recognition, activation, damage mitigation, implementation)
- Post-Crisis Management (recovery/resumption, post-crisis issue impacts, judicial inquiries, evaluation, modification).
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(7) Implications for current practice

Issue management and crisis management have come to be intimately linked – in theory and also in practice, as demonstrated in the titles of innumerable practitioner seminars, university courses, academic and non-academic books, and journal papers (including this one).

While this link is entirely appropriate, and convenient, it is essential to properly identify and understand both the difference between the two disciplines and their inter-relationship. Such understanding certainly has implications for where they are positioned within the organization, how they are resourced and what processes are used. As Ogrizek and Guillery (1999) commented: “Although crisis is not a precise concept (quite the contrary, as a concept it is vague), it is important to understand its specificity to distinguish between a crisis and other situations that might be close but whose management would be significantly different” (p xii).

From this management perspective, a fundamental concern relates to where crisis management and issue management are positioned within the organizational structure. Typically, crisis management may be structurally positioned alongside security and emergency response and assigned to operational managers and technicians; or within the CEO’s staff and aligned with strategic planning; or positioned primarily as a communication role within the public relations function. Each of these models can be found within current practice; each derives to a large extent from the way the discipline is internally defined and perceived; and each has direct implications for the way resources are allocated.

Similarly, issue management may be structurally positioned primarily as a communication role within the public relations function; as a strategic activity within businesses; positioned wholly within the government affairs function; or shared between communications practitioners “owning” the process and businesses and functions “owning” the issue. Again, each approach has implications for the way the discipline is resourced and perceived, both within the organization and in relation to external stakeholders.

Across these and similar applied models are overlaid other important organizational perspectives, such as whether issue and crisis management are seen primarily as head office or regional responsibilities; whether the most senior management are directly involved; and, most critically, the degree to which functional silos and turf-wars hinder co-ordination between disciplines.

In terms of operational practice there are many different models, and the optimal structure will vary for different organizations. But it is difficult to reach such decisions without an accurate understanding of the nature and parameters of each discipline and their interfaces, and that requires meaningful language. In addition, evolution and an increasing focus on process (as itemized in Table 1 and Table 2), directly impact the way each activity is implemented within an organization. For example, defining issue management as primarily a mechanism for participation in public policy would see it

positioned and staffed quite differently than if it were seen as an element of broader strategic management.

In addition, the task can be made even more difficult when the distinctions are blurred. A reportedly common rhetorical strategy is to characterize an issue as a crisis simply to create attention, free up resources and facilitate change (Sellnow & Seeger, 2001; Smudde, 2001). And another risk for operational practice is the introduction of potentially blurring compound terminology, such as “risk issues” (Larkin, 2003; Leiss, 2001) and “crisis issues” (Kovoor-Misra, 2002).

Research suggests that relying entirely on definition to distinguish the nature of issue management and crisis management has not been effective. An alternative approach is to more fully define and describe the process relationship between the two. Jaques (2007) has presented a relational construct, with issue management serving as an active contributor to both pre- and post-crisis management, while Heath (1997) has argued that crisis management is a part of issue management and not vice versa, indeed that crisis management is actually a *function* of issue management.

Either way, effective development of issue management and crisis management is problematic without a much improved degree of consensus on terminology and structure, particularly for the relational clusters of activities within and between the two disciplines. Absent such understanding, scholars and practitioners will continue to be trapped in the definitional quicksand. A more comprehensive approach, reflecting an integrated broader continuum of process, offers an optimal way forward across a treacherous landscape.

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