

Pursuing a Modern Crisis Definition

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I. Introduction

For the purposes of crisis management professionals, a crisis can be most succinctly characterized as a constantly evolving event that combines the elements of threat, urgency, and uncertainty to bring widespread destabilization and potential harm to an organization, and which is highly dependant upon the perceptions of both those managing the organization, and the publics they serve. This characterization is built upon foundational research advanced by leading minds in the crisis management field like Arjen Boin, W. Timothy Coombs, Bruce W. Dayton, Kathleen Fearn-Banks, Margaret G. Hermann, and Patrick Lagadec. The discourse provided below will thoroughly analyze the utility of the definition outlined here, consider the strengths and weaknesses of the research that supports it, identify trends found within leading literature on the definition and evolution of a crisis, and highlight areas in need of additional research with respect to the topic under review.

II. Utility and Strength of Foundational Research

The definition of a crisis outlined above is primarily useful to crisis managers because it is a “living” characterization of what a crisis is. In other words, it’s specific enough to touch upon the key elements that have characterized the crises practitioners have seen to date, yet not so static that it can’t be used as a tool to address the new types of crises arising from a world that’s rapidly becoming more interdependent and connected through the forces of online communication and globalization. Indeed, “classifying crises means shooting at a moving target as future events may differ from the incidents known today...only an elastic typology, allowing users to allocate an infinite set of crises to a finite set of classes can be of use both today and in the future” (Gundel, 2005). This viewpoint must be central to any approach to defining and categorizing crises. Beyond this, the definition outlined earlier is sound and useful because it emphasizes the main components seen in any crisis of the past, present, or one that will occur in the future. These components are threat, urgency, and uncertainty. Regardless of how these elements manifest themselves and the order in which they do so, they are the common thread that links all crises.

The commonality of threat, urgency, and uncertainty is a theme that’s continually outlined by leading researchers in the crisis management field, and its establishment can be found in literature published over thirty years ago: “The concept of crisis as a turning point...resembles the characteristic of urgency culminating in stress and anxiety...crisis is characterized by threat to the goals of the persons involved...uncertainty is also a variable in crisis” (Hermann, 1972). This theme can be seen once again in research published in 1991: “Crisis management involves the making of tough decisions in an environment of threat, urgency, and uncertainty” (Rosenthal, 1991). The theme presents itself once more in relevant literature that is more recent: “One ‘stable’ characteristic of crises in the past and future is the combination of uncertainty (inconceivability if you will), threat or disjunction (crises as critical phases) and time compression” (Boin & Lagadec, 2000).

The recurrence of the elements of threat, urgency, and uncertainty as ubiquitous building blocks of a crisis in applicable literature published decade after decade illustrates the importance of these items in any definition of a crisis. There is clear consensus among crisis management researchers on this. However, it's also essential that equal weight be given to the role that perception plays in defining a crisis, as all crises are significantly influenced by the perceptions of those affected by them. Indeed, "what we typically think of as crises are events that are easy to perceive as such...however, it is the perceptions of stakeholders that help to define an event as a crisis" (Coombs, 2012). A similarly strong point is made by Hermann and Dayton (2009): "At issue is how those who have to manage the crisis view the situation and whether they view the event in the same way as these outside observers do. After all, crises are to a considerable extent what people make of them and, in effect, in the eye of the beholder."

The perceptual component described above is important to outline when defining a crisis because it heavily influences the level of damage that can be brought about by the event being characterized. After all, an actual event – like brake failures and subsequent recalls in a particular brand of automobile – may not reach the crisis stage and simply remain an issue if the leaders of the organization impacted and their publics perceive the event to be under control, and therefore of little consequence. By contrast, a rumor circulating through various means of online communication that is totally baseless – such as one claiming the vaccination against the human papillomavirus causes mental retardation – can quickly move from the issue stage to the crisis stage, if a majority of the public perceives the rumor to be true.

The final component required in any complete definition of a crisis seems fairly obvious, but cannot be overlooked – this is the potential for the event being characterized as a crisis to cause widespread destabilization and harm to an organization. Fearn-Banks (2011) outlines this sentiment well in arguing "a crisis is a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as

its publics, products, services, or good name.” After all, it is this all encompassing, widespread damage to an organization’s reputation that distinguishes an issue from a crisis, with the former being far more manageable than the latter.

Now that the strong points of the relevant literature and the definition it informs have been examined, it’s time to address areas where this literature fails when it comes to defining a crisis. The majority of these failures center on the inability of researchers to develop a viable alternative to current definitions of a crisis in the face of the speed with which online communication and the forces of globalization are making the world more interdependent and complex.

Gundel (2005) sums up the central reason for the aforementioned shortcoming in the body of crisis management research produced to date, when he argues that today’s crises increasingly “have no clear beginning, escalate suddenly, and, in unforeseen directions, exploit linkages between functional and geographical domains.” One of the few simple facts tied to current day crises in a world that’s tightly woven both economically and functionally, is that they often have no clear beginning and end as traditional crises do. This relatively new dynamic throws a monkey wrench into the foundational theories that support current definitions of crises and crisis management research, like the staged approaches developed to organize both.

Each of the staged approaches to crisis management – be they Steven Fink’s, Ian Mitroff’s, or some related variant – fit into the common three-stage model of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. Modern crises present a challenge to this model because the majority of them heavily blur the lines between the three stages. Indeed “the combination of geographical and functional ‘spread’ can easily create a power vacuum as it is not clear who ‘owns’ the crisis and who must deal with it” (Boin, 2009). Beyond this, modern crises often erupt from multiple geographical locations in concert with little discernable warning, and leave lingering effects that crop up in novel and less than predictable ways many years later. This makes the ‘breakout’ stage of a crisis fairly simple to pick out, but

severely hampers efforts to pinpoint a ‘prodromal’ or ‘pre-crisis’ stage, as well as a clear ‘post-crisis’ marker, or ‘resolution’ of the event. Recent and ongoing crises like the world financial meltdown, the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks, and climate change are apt illustrations of the point being made here.

Researchers willingly admit that the shortcoming outlined above is clearly present in current literature dealing with crisis management. Gundel (2005) notes “latest developments reinforce the impression of the typologies available at present not being suitable for the different and complex crises occurring today and presumably in the future.” In research conducted by Hermann and Dayton (2009) on modern crises that span geographical borders, it’s noted that of the cases studied, only “one-fifth of the 77 cases were perceived to have the characteristics that match those of the definition of crisis extant in the literature, that is, were perceived to involve high threat, time urgency, and surprise.” This finding indicates that the nature of modern crises are even calling into question the basic tenets of threat, urgency, and uncertainty traditionally tied to the definition of a crisis, as outlined earlier.

The revelations outlined above point to obvious flaws in the leading crisis management literature available – crisis definitions, typologies, and research findings that are too static to account for modern and future crises that simply don’t follow the defined crisis management scripts practitioners are used to. These novel events are challenging basic assumptions of what a crisis is and how it behaves. For this reason, study of this topic is increasingly becoming a trend among researchers.

III. Trends Found Within the Literature

Clear trends are apparent in the literature that has informed the crisis definition laid out in section I. One such trend was introduced in section II, this being the elements of threat, urgency, and uncertainty as a foundational component for any definition of a crisis. Since this trend received fair billing in section II, the focus here will be on an additional trend outlined at the close of the same section – this being the emergence of

'new,' 'future,' 'mega,' or 'transboundary' crises that are pushing researchers to reevaluate the manner in which crises are defined.

Mitroff and Alpaslan (2003) summarize the central issue they and their colleagues in the crisis management field are currently grappling with: "Quite simply, the tenets of traditional crisis management are not serving us well anymore. Something critical is missing: the ability to think comprehensively about crises." The key phrase the authors use in their observation here when it comes to modern crises – commonly referred to in the literature as 'transboundary crises' – is 'think comprehensively.' Arjen Boin (2009) explains why this is the case when he argues that the definition of a transboundary crisis "builds on the traditional notion of crisis with its core conceptual elements of threat, urgency, and uncertainty. What sets it apart from the traditional definition is its emphasis on the tightly woven web of critical infrastructures that characterizes modern society."

The conclusion Boin, Mitroff and Alpaslan are drawing is this – modernity has created a global village that is, day by day, becoming more susceptible to unexpected and largely unmanageable disturbances. They're arguing that a small problem that develops on one side of the world can and will, in short order, erupt on the other side.

Additionally, they claim the complexity of the global network that sends this small problem from point A to point B will make it difficult to discern exactly where the issue originated, and how it's moving across the globe. The recent economic disturbances created by the failing Greek economy offer a good example of the problem at play here.

The consensus reached in the literature is that transboundary crises are a significant trend, and are necessitating a shift in the way we think about and define crises. This is due to several factors that work in concert with the geographic, system complexity, and speed variables addressed above. These additional factors include ownership ambiguity, time ambiguity, stage ambiguity, and potential for damage magnification.

Ownership ambiguity is born of the geographic and functional reach that

characterizes transboundary crises. The tendency of these events to occur in multiple areas and time zones brings up questions of who “owns” the crisis, and is therefore responsible for responding to it. Time and stage ambiguity are tied to the disregard transboundary crises show for the stage and life cycle models that characterize traditional crises. Indeed, “a transboundary crisis transcends traditional time boundaries. Whereas a traditional crisis has a clear beginning and an end, the transboundary crisis cannot be easily pinpointed in time (Boin, 2009).” Finally, the potential for damage magnification is tied to the system complexity variable discussed previously. This factor indicates that the more complex and interdependent the affected system, the more widespread and serious the damage will be, due to vulnerabilities tied to “growing social-economic and technological complexities, boundary-spanning interdependencies between critical infrastructures, and rising social-economic inequalities” (Boin, 2009 December).

IV. Areas in Need of Additional Research

The existence of and obvious ambiguities posed by the emergence of transboundary crises as discussed in section III have clearly drawn the interest and attention of crisis management researchers. This significant emerging trend in the crisis management field should act as a catalyst for additional research concerning the definition of a crisis.

The most effective way to integrate the erratic and multi-dimensional characteristics of current and future transboundary crises into an updated crisis definition involves getting more researches to probe the snow of this impending avalanche. Indeed, “the most important task to be performed should thus be the establishment of expert groups, allowing for all possible future crises and exploring appropriate countermeasures” (Gundel, 2005).

Beyond this, “the random-selection model can also be the basis of a rational budgeting strategy for an illogical world” (Mitroff & Alpaslan, 2003). A random-selection approach, in which experienced crisis management practitioners and those in

related fields adopt a think tank mentality when it comes to transboundary crises, would likely be helpful in developing a more current and useful crisis definition that incorporates the lessons to be learned from the emerging trend reviewed in section III. The random-selection approach to developing an updated crisis definition would also aid practitioners in efforts to think outside of the box created by current methods of crisis planning – that is, to conceive of new, more random, complex and interconnected crisis events that fail to follow a clear life cycle.

Finally, additional thought should be given by researchers to ways in which modern societies might guard against transboundary crises, as this may outline new commonalities between them, thus aiding in the development of an updated crisis definition. Arjen Boin claims modern societies, when combating a transboundary crisis, are left with two strategies. “The first strategy aims at enhancing societal resilience...the second strategy is to develop transboundary crisis management capacity” (Boin, 2009 December). Societal resilience involves a society’s ability to be mentally tough and cope with a prolonged crisis event. Transboundary crisis management capacity refers to the ability of multiple societies to work together across international, cultural, and political divides to address the extreme challenges posed by transboundary crises. Both are good starting points for further research into the emerging trend outlined in section III, and a new crisis definition that addresses this emerging trend.

V. Conclusion

Although there are some weak points within the literature that supports it, the crisis definition outlined in section I is still useful to those in the crisis management field due to its elasticity and ability to act as a “living” characterization of what a crisis is. Additionally, the definition’s foundational elements – the presence of threat, urgency, and uncertainty, perception as a driving factor, and the potential for widespread destabilization and harm – are sound crisis indicators. The utility of these indicators doesn’t appear as though it will erode significantly anytime soon, even with the emerging

transboundary crisis trend outlined earlier. However, like all other crisis definitions available to practitioners, the one advanced in section I must take a reactive approach to the new and emerging crises of this increasingly complex and interdependent global system, and would benefit from any new research on the emerging trend of the transboundary crisis.

Resources

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