Editor's Essay: The Multi-Disciplinary and Diverse Field of Crisis and Risk Communication Research

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ABSTRACT

The field of crisis and risk communication research has always been multidisciplinary bringing together researchers from many fields like business, public relations, political science, sociology, psychology, journalism, tourism, and public health. However, there is often a common perception outside the fields of crisis communication that is a corporate discipline focused mostly on helping organizations manage their reputations. As the pieces in this issue demonstrate, our field serves the public interest in many ways and is a growing global field of study.

KEYWORDS: crisis communication, risk communication, education, health, risk perception, conflict studies, media, reputation, disasters

For those who regularly attend crisis and risk conferences or specialist sessions at more general communication conferences like the International Communication Association, World Communication Association, or European Communication Research and Education Association conferences it is clear that risk and crisis research comes from a host of backgrounds certainly including public relations and business but also conflict studies, media, public health, political science, sociology, tourism, as well as science, engineering, and technology (Austin &

Jin, 2015; Diers-Lawson, 2017; Falkheimer & Olsson, 2015; Keen et al., 2020; Meißner & von Nordheim, 2019; Slavkovikj et al., 2014; Tömmel, 2020). Despite this diversity of focus, interest, and topic colleagues in the field of communication and practitioners often work under the assumption that crisis and risk research, theory, and practice is primarily about reputation management. We would suggest that while reputation management is an important area of study in crisis and risk communication that the pieces in this issue demonstrate very clearly that it is only one of many interests and applications in our field.

The geographic expansion of the field we discussed in the editor's essay from volume 4 issue 1 (Diers-Lawson & Meißner, 2021) and the special issue on COVID-19 (Jin et al., 2021) highlights the growth and expansion of crisis and risk communication research. Therefore, in this issue we highlight the diverse research perspectives and foci in the field of crisis and risk communication with the five articles that have been included in the issue and argue that the field is much more than many assume it to be.

Crisis and Risk Communication's Multidisciplinary Connections

In Diers-Lawson's analyses of the trends in crisis communication research from 1953 to 2015, she found clear evidence of the field's multidisciplinary nature (see Figure 1) from the very emergence of the field. In this case, she was analyzing the types of journals that published crisis communication articles. With research focusing on crisis communication published in journals like *Natural Hazards* (Xiao et al., 2015), the *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management* (Wukich & Mergel, 2015)*, Tourism Analysis* (Liu et al., 2015), *Computers in Human Behavior* (Lachlan et al., 2014), *Public Relations Review* (Jin et al., 2014), *Journal of Business Ethics* (Bauman, 2011), *Construction Management and Economics* (Loosemore, 1998), or *Journal of the Korean Medical Association* (Choi et al., 2015) there is clear evidence that to explore research in crisis and risk communication, it is critical to read broadly.
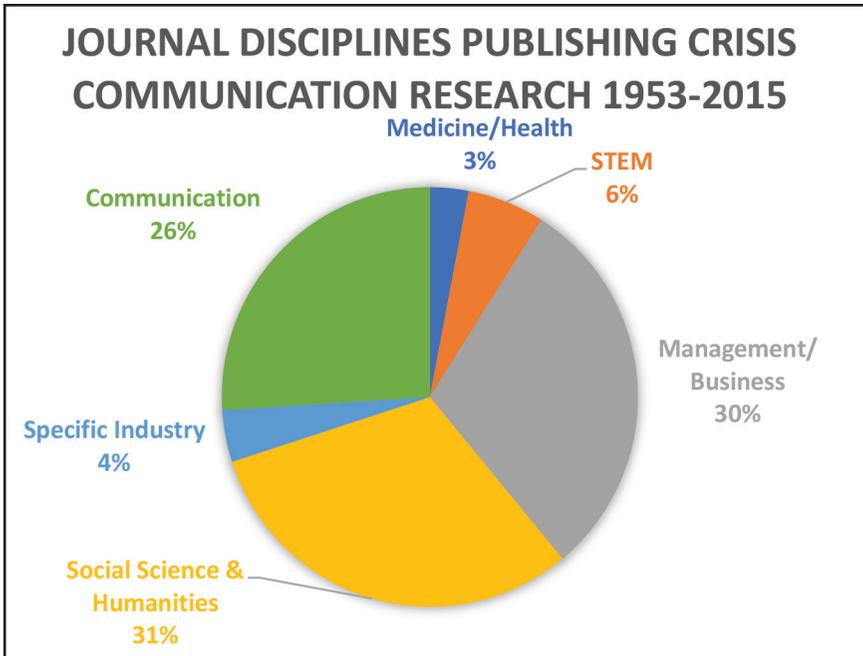
JOURNAL DISCIPLINES PUBLISHING CRISIS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH 1953-2015

Medicine/Health 3%
STEM 6%
Communication 26%
Management/Business 30%
Specific Industry 4%
Social Science & Humanities 31%

FIGURE 1   Summary of Crisis Communication as a Multidisciplinary Field of Study

The multidisciplinary nature of crisis and risk communication research also helps to explain why colleagues within the field of communication may sometimes have a narrow view of crisis and risk research—they are most often coming across it within the communication journals. Not surprisingly, in these journals the focus is often grounded in strategy or management, and organization-focused (Kim et al., 2014). However, when analyses look deeper into the evolution of the field, while much of the research in the field is tied to business, management, and communication, there is clear evidence of the field's multidisciplinary growth after 2000 (Diers-Lawson, 2017; Ha & Boynton, 2014).

This begs the question of how, within a specialist communication journal like the *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research (JICRCR)*, we fare on ensuring that our research represents the field's multidisciplinary growth. To

evaluate this question, we have analyzed the central focus for each of the articles in the four volumes of the journal (see Figure 2). As a journal, we would argue that the diverse themes and disciplines that contribute to crisis and risk communication research are well represented so far.
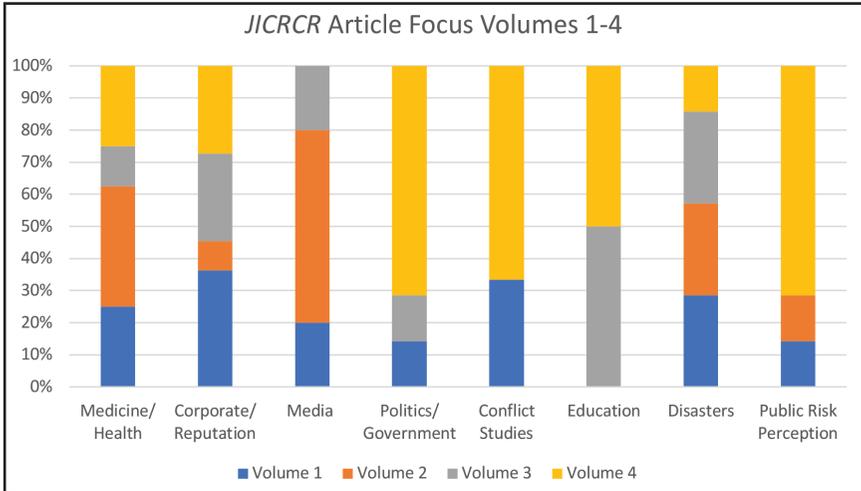

FIGURE 2　**Summary of JICRCR's Disciplinary Themes**

When comparing the research that has been published in the *JICRCR* over the last 4 years with the themes emerging across all journals that have published risk and communication research, there are opportunities to broaden the research areas and collaboration evident in our journal. Generally, we have seen good evidence of research in this journal connecting crisis and risk research to medicine and health, a corporate or reputational focus, media (including social media research), politics, disasters, and public risk perception. We have also seen some research connected to conflict studies and education across the volumes. However, one critical area of research that is not well represented in our journal is that directly connecting science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Of course, the health-related crisis research that is strongly represented in the *JICRCR* is a meaningful connection to STEM. However, given that the industries connected to the STEM fields are particularly crisis-prone (Diers-Lawson, 2020)

and topics connected to STEM industries like climate change, data security, technological innovation, or science communication represent some of the biggest risk and crisis communication topics these are themes and settings to be developed more meaningfully in the journal.

An Introduction to the Articles in Volume 4 Issue 3

Volume 4 of the *JICRCR* has produced inclusive and innovative research from around the world (Diers-Lawson & Meißner, 2021; Jin et al., 2021) addressing a variety of crises including a special issue addressing views of COVID-19 from around the world. We are pleased to present issue 3 as representative of this inclusive and innovative research on crisis and risk communication research. With research addressing crisis and risk in Germany, Italy, South Korea, and the United States this issue continues to represent a global focus on crisis and risk communication research. Moreover, thematically, these articles address risk and crisis within the contexts of higher education, leadership, government, public risk perception, conflict studies, and public health debates thus embodying important multidisciplinary conceptual and practical applications of crisis and risk communication research. Finally, the contexts for study acknowledge the continuing global COVID-19 pandemic but also remind us that there are debates, conflicts, and crises beyond the pandemic that must be addressed as well.

The first two articles in the issue address two of the ongoing challenges related to COVID-19—the challenges in higher education and governance. Liu et al.'s piece, "Evolving Best Practices in Crisis Communication: Examining U.S. Higher Education's Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic," is an important piece because as we have already seen in the new 2021/2022 academic year colleges and universities around the world are still having to make challenging policy decisions related to COVID-19 that balance the often contradictory or divergent demands of stakeholders like government, students, their families, staff, and public health. Sellnow-Richmond et al.'s piece, "Messages in Conflict: Examining Leadership Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the U.S.," picks up where Liu et al.'s piece left off by focusing on the

often impossible positions that organizational, state, and national government leaders may find themselves in when confronting a major enduring pandemic like COVID-19. In this piece, the authors consider the role of crisis severity, trust, reputation, and credibility to better understand perceptions of leadership across a long-term crisis. Together, both of these pieces provide important insights that can be applied by decision-makers but also insights that may also be developed and compared in a global context.

The third piece, Seo et al.'s "Unintended Effects of Risk Communication: Impacts of Message Fatigue, Risk Tolerance, and Trust in Public Health Information on Psychological Reactance," takes a small step back from COVID-19 because the data on vaccination attitudes in Italy was gathered in early 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic had fully developed in Italy and long before a vaccination for COVID-19 was a possibility. This international collaboration provides important and data-based information about psychological reactance to vaccination that can guide research on vaccination attitudes and provides an important point of comparison on the factors influencing vaccine message acceptance or reactance. Beyond the vaccination context, the piece also provides insight into message fatigue and its implications on attitudes and behavioral change as well. Similarly, the fourth piece, Chon and Kim's "Misinformation and Government Crisis Management in South Korea: Understanding Active Publics' Belief in Misinformation About the Yemeni Refugee Issue and Its Effect on Active Communication Behaviors," adds to Seo et al.'s analysis by considering a very different context for public information processing but adds in the challenges of misinformation. Given that we live in an environment with competing versions of the "truth" about most issues, Chon and Kim's application of the situation theory of problem-solving to the Yemeni refugee issue illustrates the challenging communication environment that governments face in responding to global humanitarian issues. Finally, Kuhnhenn's piece, "Gift im Bier: A Context-Sensitive Analysis of Culturally-Rooted Messages and Humor in Risk Communication on Glyphosate in Germany," continues to focus on a stakeholder perspective by exploring the importance and impact of culturally rooted messages in stakeholder-centered risk communication.

Review, Reflection, and Looking Ahead

In this editorial, we have highlighted that crisis and risk communication is far more interdisciplinary than is often assumed even within our own field. Especially crisis communication is typically associated with a corporate or reputational perspective. However, we do not only see an increasing variety of disciplinary themes, but also of theoretical approaches. The current issue of the *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research* is already a good example of this theoretical diversity. However, we argue that for the future development of our field, it is necessary to make further use of the broadening bandwidth of theories.

Though Jin and Austin (2020) note situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2007) and image repair theory (Benoit, 1997, 2004) remain commonly used heuristics for crisis communication, the field has grown and matured, the theoretical perspectives have diversified to address more than reputation and corporate response. For instance, approaches such as rhetorical arena theory (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017), the social-mediated crisis communication model (Austin & Jin, 2016; Liu et al., 2012), or the concept of (mediated) risk cultures (e.g., Cornia et al., 2014; Meißner, 2019; Roslyng & Eskjær, 2017) are just some of the examples of theoretical diversity to address the pressing issues within the field of crisis and risk communication.

Further inspiration can be drawn from adjacent disciplines such as risk sociology or organizational psychology. For instance, Gongora-Svartzman and Ramirez-Marquez (2021) have looked at the connection between digital communication and social cohesion in times of crisis. Doerfel et al. (2020) have described an emerging science of resilience, offering insights that can help to make organizations less vulnerable during crises. Both approaches also highlight the crucial role of preparedness, which is another important and timely issue we as a community need to promote on both academic and societal levels. We have highlighted that the *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research* has a proven record of welcoming interdisciplinary perspectives and a wide range of theoretical lenses. However, we would like to invite even more diversity in the future so that the journal can represent the growing field of crisis and risk communication as well as possible.

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