

7. Crisis Communication

Elizabeth L. Angeli

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

Understanding crisis communication requires a clear definition of the word *crisis*. However, crises can be challenging to define because definitions risk slipping into tautologies. Quite often, crises are labeled in hindsight after events unfold that are characteristic of a crisis event. Adding to this complexity, the various definitions and uses of “crisis” are as varied as crisis situations themselves, as the definitions outlined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, n.d.) suggest:

- *Pathology*. The point in the progress of a disease when an important development or change takes place which is decisive of recovery or death; the turning-point of a disease for better or worse; also applied to any marked or sudden variation occurring in the progress of a disease and to the phenomena accompanying it.
- *Astrology*. Said of a conjunction of the planets which determines the issue of a disease or critical point in the course of events.
- *Transferred and figurative*. A vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything; a turning-point; also, a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent; now applied *esp.* to times of difficulty, insecurity, and suspense in politics or commerce.

However varied, these definitions share a few characteristics, including change, transition, and turning points. As such, any situation can become a crisis if the conditions are just right, and a crisis manifests when risk, fear, uncertainty, anticipation, and consequence converge, threaten upheaval, and overwhelm stakeholders involved. These stakeholders are not limited to human stakeholders but include organizations, *technologies*, the environment, ecologies, and economies that are impacted by crisis events.

Perhaps best defined as “a risk manifested” (Heath & O’Hair, 2009, p. 9), crisis is deeply embedded with risk because without risk, there often is no crisis (Palenchar, 2010; Venette, 2008). Consider skydiving: It involves a great deal of risk due to uncertainty and consequences if the jump isn’t successful. If the jump is successful, there is, typically, no crisis. If the jump is unsuccessful, crises may follow, including potential life-threatening, irreversible injuries or even death. Each of these outcomes has their own affiliated crisis, from high-risk medical decisions to financial consequences.

In technical and professional communication, scholars have tended more fully to *risk communication* instead of crisis communication. Our contributions

to crisis communication subsume “crisis” under “risk” or are labeled as “crisis rhetoric,” and work under the latter key term falls under *rhetorical* theory rather than technical communication (Cherwitz & Zagacki, 1986; Dow, 1989; Hart & Tindall, 2009). Given the symbiotic relationship between risk and crisis, this meshing is understandable and perhaps best captured in Dorothy Winsor’s work with the Challenger disaster, which is arguably the first instance of crisis work in technical and professional communication scholarship (1988, 1990). Although Winsor’s publications are not labeled under “crisis,” her work identifies how communication failures in high-risk situations, like a space flight launch, can lead to a crisis. In turn, she illustrates how technical and professional communicators with our rhetorical expertise can influence, and perhaps prevent, crises.

Crisis-related studies in technical and professional communication are grounded in rhetorical theories, draw on various *research* methods, and speak to a variety of crisis-related disciplines. Scholars have turned to ancient rhetorical theories, such as stasis theory (DeVasto et al., 2016) and topoi (Ding, 2018; Nielsen, 2017), assessment metrics (Applen, 2020), and visualization (Richards, 2015), as frameworks to make sense of the many facets of crises. At crisis communications’ core, though, is message creation, dissemination, and implications for multiple *audiences*, including the *public*, students (Schlachte, 2019), researchers, and practitioners. For example, M. M. Brown’s (2019) research on handwashing campaigns captures the affordances rhetoric and technical and professional communication bring to crisis research. Brown’s purpose is not “to question hand hygiene’s efficacy as a form of infection control,” which is traditionally the purview of communication studies and public health research (Brown, 2019, p. 221). Instead, Brown’s rhetorically driven research highlights the “broader implication[s]” of hand hygiene promotion in that it “moralizes the spread of infection” and raises questions about who profits from “the negative emotions often highlighted” in such campaigns (Brown, 2019, p. 221).

Due to its interdisciplinary nature, technical and professional communication crisis-related research interfaces with many related rhetorical fields of study, including public rhetorics, environmental rhetoric, rhetoric of health and medicine, *medical/health communication*, medical humanities, digital rhetorics, *intercultural communications* and rhetorics, rhetoric of risk, and *user experience* studies. Within these fields, and although they are not tagged as such, much technical communication scholarship covers crisis-related topics. These topics usually are categorized under the keyword *risk* and include

- epidemics, pandemics, and healthcare (Angeli, 2012; Angeli & Norwood, 2017, 2019; Bloom-Pojar & DeVasto, 2019; Ding, 2014; Ding & Zhang, 2010; Keränen, 2019),
- intercultural and organizational communication (Dong, 2020; Hopton & Walton, 2019),

- emergency management (Amidon, 2014; Angeli, 2015, 2019; Richards, 2018; Seawright, 2017; Yu & Monas, 2020),
- engineering and hazardous environments (Amidon, 2020; Amidon et al., 2018; Sauer, 2003; Winsor, 1988, 1990),
- natural and international disasters (Baniya, 2019; DeVasto et al., 2016; Frost, 2013; Simmons, 2007),
- climate change and the environment (Cagle & Tillery, 2015; Ross, 2017; Walker, 2016), and
- social and mass media (Potts, 2014; Roundtree et al., 2011).

Although risk is a component of these topics, some of this scholarship speaks more to crisis communication than risk communication in part because technical and professional communication has not yet parsed through the symbiotic relationship of risk and crisis.

Adjacent to technical and professional communication, the field of communication studies has refined and applied “crisis” in myriad contexts (Coombs, 2009). This scholarship approaches crisis communication from a few angles: how people and institutions communicate about a crisis (Stephens et al., 2005), during a crisis (Heath, 2006), and in the backstage of a crisis (Cole & Fellows, 2008). Work in this field focuses on public-facing communication, exploring how communicators develop messaging about a crisis and analyze its effectiveness and impact (Borden & Zhang, 2019; Wang, 2016; Zhao, 2013; Zheng et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2017). Ultimately, communication studies approaches crisis communication as a “strategic [process] designed to respond to various rhetorical problems in ways that can be evaluated by standards of empirical success, values, and *ethics*” (Heath & O’Hair, 2009, pp. 17–18).

But when understood through a rhetorical lens, this “strategic process” is murky. At its foundation, crisis communication is rhetorical, rooted in a specific situation with various, targeted exigencies, audiences, and purposes. Technical and professional communicators use rhetorical strategies to study risk and related crises, and in turn, our approaches to crises explore implications of the language that is used—and not used—about an event. These implications often are best understood by looking at the ecologies of events surrounding a crisis, particularly how risk, fear, uncertainty, and authority impact such events. For example, Huiling Ding’s (2014, 2018; Ding & Zhang, 2010) work on epidemics points to how communities and organizations navigate complex networks of power and media, and, in turn, her work highlights how these and other factors impact policy and messaging. Likewise, Esben Bjerggaard Nielsen’s (2017) work on environmental crisis reimagines the topoi of time and place to be “discursive organizing tool[s]” that create a stronger identification with a “global and far-removed audience” (p. 102). As such, technical and professional communicators look beyond crisis communication as only a strategic process and pursue lines of inquiry that tease out nuances and tensions involved in communication. These lines of inquiry include:

- Who defines, creates, deploys, assesses, and upholds “standards of empirical success, values, and ethics” (Heath & O’Hair, 2009, pp. 17–18)?
- Who determines what is “worth” being feared and risked, and whether the threatened consequences are dire enough to call an event a crisis?
- How are all the terms surrounding “crisis” defined?
- When does a situation actually become a crisis?

In short, the answer to that last question is, “It depends on who you ask.” Because risk and fear, in part, determine when a crisis manifests, the actual work of defining a crisis is subjective (Heath & O’Hair, 2009; Sandman, 2006; Stephens et al., 2005). In turn, whether events are called a crisis and responded to as such depends on who has power to define terms. Adding to subjectivities, mindsets of “it won’t happen to me” or “that doesn’t affect me” pervade much thinking and leadership, particularly in the United States, and prevent people in power from seeing crises as crises. The subjectivities associated with crises can be captured in many large-scale events, including the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and subsequent formation of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), Hurricane Katrina, the Flint water crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Before September 11, 2001, people generally did not fear terrorist attacks on airplanes in the United States, and airport security measures were limited compared to today’s standards. That all changed within two months of 9/11. The fear and perceived risk of subsequent attacks was so high among United States leadership that in November 2001, the federal government created the TSA, and current airport screening procedures, such as taking off shoes, exist because mass fear and perceived risk motivated the United States government to prevent potential terrorist risks.

However, some crisis events and their aftermath go on for much longer than two months, and despite widespread, prolonged devastation and trauma, people in power do not define them as crises; responses are then delayed, ineffective, or non-existent. In these instances, hardest hit are communities of color, and Hurricane Katrina, the Flint water crisis, and, most recently, COVID-19 illustrate the relationship among power, privilege, perceived risk, and race (Atherton, 2021; Cole & Fellows, 2008; Dave, 2015; Henkel et al., 2006; Pauli, 2020). In these crises, racial inequities were often ignored, leaving communities to face trauma without resources. Like other crises, these events had and continue to have pervasive, life-threatening, large-scale impact on numerous stakeholders—environmental, economic, structural, technological—and on communities’ and individuals’ physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and psychological well-being. Despite these consequences, systemic, timely changes were not implemented because the entities and individuals who could enact change and provide resources did not perceive the fear, threat, and risks to be at a tipping point. Consequently, inaction, delayed action, and ineffective action oppress and disempower racial minorities, leaving communities of color hit hardest by crises out of the very systems that are

set up to address them. Identifying, plumbing, and responding to that power and those systems is where technical and professional communicators excel.

In technical and professional communication, our field has defined COVID-19 and racism as crises that demand responses, and these responses model how technical and professional communicators can engage in crisis communication practice, research, and teaching. In response to COVID-19, scholars have initiated public-facing outlets, such as “Communicating about COVID-19” (St. Amant, 2020), and when our larger organizations, like the Association for Teachers of Technical Writing, cancelled annual conferences, leadership engaged best practices of crisis communication to mitigate fear, to demonstrate organizational leadership, and to commit to members’ safety. In response to racism, scholars have issued statements about zero tolerance policies and calls to action, drawing on feminist rhetorical theories that urge scholars to use “critical imagination” (N. Jones & M. Williams, personal communication, June 10, 2020), “an inquiring tool, a mechanism for seeing the noticed and the unnoticed, rethinking what is there and not there, and speculating about what could be there instead” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 20).

Because of our focus on language, action, and power, technical and professional communicators are well positioned to examine, understand, and respond to the complexities and layers involved in crisis events, which cross disciplinary boundaries. In kind, crisis communication work is interdisciplinary because the various rhetorical problems associated with crisis events are created through interrelated mechanisms, such as health, politics, environments, technologies, and economies. The complexity of these events demands contextualization and nuance, in turn, aligning with the interdisciplinary scope of technical and professional communication.

Crises are complex, often unpredictable events that involve much rhetorical work to anticipate, manage, and resolve. Despite the negative connotations of crises, they can also present opportunities, and this aspect is worth studying, especially how stakeholders leverage crisis-related artifacts, decisions, and consequences to create new policies, structures, or programs. Technical and professional communicators are well positioned to participate in this area of study given our expertise in the rhetorical nuances of communication.

■ References

- Amidon, T. (2014). Firefighters’ multimodal literacy practices [Doctoral dissertation, University of Rhode Island]. DigitalCommons@URI. http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/oa_diss/239
- Amidon, T. R. (2020). Brightness behind the eyes: Rendering firefighters’ tacit literacies visible. *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, 25(1). <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/25.1/inventio/amidon/sizeup.html>
- Amidon, T. R., Williams, E. A., Lipsey, T., Callahan, R., Nuckols, G., & Rice, S. (2018). Sensors and gizmos and data, oh my: Informing firefighters’ personal

- protective equipment. *Communication Design Quarterly*, 5(4), 15-30. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3188387.3188389>
- Angeli, E. L. (2012). Metaphors in the rhetoric of pandemic flu: Electronic media coverage of H1N1 and swine flu. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 42(3), 203-222. <https://doi.org/10.2190/TW.42.3.b>
- Angeli, E. L. (2015). Three types of memory in emergency medical services communication. *Written Communication*, 32(1), 3-38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088314556598>
- Angeli, E. L. (2019). *Rhetorical work in emergency medical services: communicating in the unpredictable workplace*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088314556598>
- Angeli, E. L., & Norwood, C. D. (2017). Responding to public health crises: Bridging collective mindfulness and user experience to create communication interventions. *Communication Design Quarterly Review*, 5(2), 29-39. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3131201.3131204>
- Angeli, E. L., & Norwood, C. D. (2019). The internal rhetorical work of a public health crisis response. *Rhetoric of Health & Medicine*, 2(2), 208-232. <https://doi.org/10.5744/rhm.2019.1008>
- Applen, J. D. (2020). Using Bayesian induction methods in risk assessment and communication. *Communication Design Quarterly*, 8(2), 6-15. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3394264.3394265>
- Atherton, R. (2021). "Missing/unspecified": Demographic data visualization during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 35(1), 80-87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651920957982>
- Baniya, S. (2019). Comparative study of networked communities, crisis communication, and technology: Rhetoric of disaster in Nepal earthquake and hurricane Maria. In Proceedings of the 37th ACM International Conference on the Design of Communication (pp. 1-2). ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3328020.3353913>
- Bloom-Pojar, R., & DeVasto, D. (2019). Visualizing translation spaces for cross-cultural health communication. *Present Tense: A Journal of Rhetoric in Society*, 7(3). <http://www.presenttensejournal.org/volume-7/visualizing-translation-spaces-for-cross-cultural/>
- Borden, J., & Zhang, X. A. (2019). Linguistic crisis prediction: An integration of the linguistic category model in crisis communication. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 38(5-6), 650-679. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X19860870>
- Brown, M. M. (2019). Don't be the "fifth guy": Risk, responsibility, and the rhetoric of handwashing campaigns. *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 40(2), 211-224. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-017-9470-4>
- Cagle, L. E., & Tillery, D. (2015). Climate change research across disciplines: The value and uses of multidisciplinary research reviews for technical communication. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 24(2), 147-163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2015.1001296>
- Cherwitz, R. A., & Zagacki, K. S. (1986). Consummatory versus justificatory crisis rhetoric. *Western Journal of Speech Communication: WJSC*, 50(4), 307-324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570318609374240>
- Cole, T. W., & Fellows, K. L. (2008). Risk communication failure: A case study of New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina. *Southern Communication Journal*, 73(3), 211-228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940802219702>
- Coombs, W. T. (2009). Conceptualizing crisis communication. In R. L. Heath & D. O'Hair (Eds.), *Handbook of risk and crisis communication* (pp. 99-118). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/978100307026-6>

- Dave, A. (2015). Categories as rhetorical barriers and the federal response to Hurricane Katrina. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 24(3), 258-286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2015.1044121>
- DeVasto, D., Graham, S. S., & Zamparutti, L. (2016). Stasis and matters of concern: The conviction of the L'Aquila Seven. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 30(2), 131-164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651915620364>
- Ding, H. (2014). *Rhetoric of a global epidemic: Transcultural communication about SARS*. SIU Press.
- Ding, H. (2018). Cross-cultural whistle-blowing in an emerging outbreak: Revealing health risks through tactic communication and rhetorical hijacking. *Communication Design Quarterly*, 6(1), 10. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3230970.3230975>
- Ding, H., & Zhang, J. (2010). Social media and participatory risk communication during the HiN1 flu epidemic: A comparative study of the United States and China. *China Media Research*, 6(4), 80-91.
- Dong, L. (2020). Rhetoric of public crises: Constructing communication networks in transcultural contexts. Georgia State University. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ProComm48883.2020.00018>
- Dow, B. J. (1989). The function of epideictic and deliberative strategies in presidential crisis rhetoric. *Western Journal of Speech Communication: WJSC*, 53(3), 294-310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570318909374308>
- Frost, E. A. (2013). Transcultural risk communication on Dauphin Island: An analysis of ironically located responses to the Deepwater Horizon disaster. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 22(1), 50-66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2013.726483>
- Hart, P., & Tindall, K. (2009). *Framing the global economic downturn: Crisis rhetoric and the politics of recessions*. ANU Press. <https://library.open.org/handle/20.500.12657/33746>
- Heath, R. L. (2006). Best practices in crisis communication: Evolution of practice through research. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34(3), 245-248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880600771577>
- Heath, R. L., & O'Hair, D. (Eds.). (2009). *Handbook of risk and crisis communication*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203891629>
- Henkel, K., Dovidio, J., & Gaertner, S. (2006). Institutional discrimination, individual racism, and Hurricane Katrina. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 6(1), 99-124. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1530-2415.2006.00106.x>
- Hopton, S. B., & Walton, R. (2019). Rigidity and flexibility: The dual nature of communicating care for Vietnamese Agent Orange victims. *Present Tense: A Journal of Rhetoric in Society*, 7(3). <http://www.presenttensejournal.org/volume-7/rigidity-and-flexibility-the-dual-nature/>
- Keränen, L. (2019). Biosecurity and communication. In B. C. Taylor & H. Bean (Eds.), *The handbook of communication and security* (pp. 223-246). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351180962-14>
- Nielsen, E. B. (2017). Climate crisis made manifest. In D. G. Ross (Ed.), *Topic-driven environmental rhetoric* (pp. 87-105). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315442044-5>
- Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Crisis. In *Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved March 16, 2021, from <http://www.oed.com/>
- Palenchar, M. (2010). Risk communication. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of public relations* (pp. 447-460). Sage.

- Pauli, B. (2020). The Flint water crisis. *WIREs Water*, 7, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1420>
- Potts, L. (2014). *Social media in disaster response: How experience architects can build for participation*. Routledge.
- Richards, D. (2015). Testing the waters: Local users, sea level rise, and the productive usability of interactive geovisualizations. *Communication Design Quarterly*, 3(3), 20-24. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2792989.2792992>
- Richards, D. P. (2018). Not a cape, but a life preserver: The importance of designer localization in interactive sea level rise viewers. *Communication Design Quarterly*, 6(2), 13. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2792989.2792992>
- Ross, D. G. (2017). *Topic-driven environmental rhetoric*. Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315442044>
- Roundtree, A. K., Dorsten, A., & Reif, J. J. (2011). Improving patient activation in crisis and chronic care through rhetorical approaches to new media technologies. *Poroi: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Rhetorical Analysis & Invention*, 7(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1081>
- Royster, J. J., & Kirsch, G. E. (2012). *Feminist rhetorical practices: New horizons for rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies*. SIU Press.
- Sandman, P. M. (2006). Crisis communication best practices: Some quibbles and additions. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34(3), 257-262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880600771619>
- Sauer, B. (2003). *The rhetoric of risk: Technical documentation in hazardous environments*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Schlachte, C. P. (2019). *Before the aftermath: A pedagogy for disaster responsiveness*. University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
- Seawright, L. (2017). *Genre of power: Police report writers and readers in the justice system*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Simmons, W. M. (2007). *Participation and power: Civic discourse in environmental policy decisions*. State University of New York Press.
- St. Amant, K. (2020). Communicating about COVID-19: Practices for today, planning for tomorrow. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 50(3), 211-223. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047281620923589>
- Stephens, K. K., Malone, P. C., & Bailey, C. M. (2005). Communicating with stakeholders during a crisis. *Journal of Business Communication*, 42(4), 390-419. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021943605279057>
- Venette, S. (2008). Risk as an inherent element in the study of crisis communication. *Southern Communication Journal*, 73(3), 197-210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940802219686>
- Walker, K. C. (2016). Mapping the contours of translation: Visualized un/certainties in the ozone hole controversy. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 25(2), 104-120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2016.1149620>
- Wang, Y. (2016). Brand crisis communication through social media: A dialogue between brand competitors on Sina Weibo. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 21(1), 56-72. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-10-2014-0065>
- Winsor, D. A. (1988). Communication failures contributing to the Challenger accident: An example for technical communicators. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 31(3), 101-107. <https://doi.org/10.1109/47.7814>

- Winsor, D. A. (1990). The construction of knowledge in organizations: Asking the right questions about the Challenger. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 4(2), 7-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105065199000400201>
- Yu, H., & Monas, N. (2020). Recreating the scene: An investigation of police report writing. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 50(1), 35-55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047281618812441>
- Zhao, M. (2013). Beyond cops and robbers: The contextual challenge driving the multinational corporation public crisis in China and Russia. *Business Horizons*, 56(4), 491-501. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2013.03.006>
- Zheng, B., Liu, H., & Davison, R. M. (2018). Exploring the relationship between corporate reputation and the public's crisis communication on social media. *Public Relations Review*, 44(1), 56-64. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.12.006>
- Zhu, L., Anagondahalli, D., & Zhang, A. (2017). Social media and culture in crisis communication: McDonald's and KFC crises management in China. *Public Relations Review*, 43(3), 487-492. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.03.006>