



## Editorial Essay: Innovation in Risk and Crisis Communication: Toward New Topics, Theories, and Methods

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**KEYWORDS:** crisis communication, theory, research methods, risk and crisis communication theory

Climate change, emerging diseases, population migration and displacement, breakdowns in civil society, aging infrastructure, rising expectations, limitations and competition for critical resources—food, water, energy—technological complexity and collapses, and many other forms of natural, human-caused, and interactive events will challenge and, in many cases, overwhelm our communication processes and capacities. (Seeger, 2018)

Just 4 years ago, Dr. Matthew Seeger, the first editor of the *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research* (JICRCR) made this prediction in the journal's inaugural issue. In late 2022, Seeger's prediction appears almost prophetic as we look back on nearly 3 years of the COVID-19 pandemic, on a series of climate-induced, large-scale disasters across the globe and on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The concurrent and connected global crises we all face pose both challenges and opportunities in crisis and risk communication research. At this point,

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it seems more important than ever to critically reflect on the status quo, anticipate new developments, and engage in discussion about the future directions in our field.

Therefore, in our fourth and final essay as an editorial team for the *JICRCR*, we ask: Which innovative approaches do we find in the work our community is conducting, in particular, regarding research topics, theories, and methodology? To what degree can they help tackle the most pressing challenges related to our field? And what needs to be done to foster further innovation? To find answers to these questions, we will reflect on new topics, theories, and methods in crisis and risk communication research.

## Topics

While dominated by PR research early in its development, crisis communication has become a diverse and interdisciplinary field of research (Diers-Lawson, 2020). Over the decades, it has gradually broadened its focus from organizational and reputation crises to address crises like public health crises, disasters, terrorism, or political crises. Consequently, crisis communication increasingly overlaps risk communication, with close ties to sociology and psychology that have traditionally focused on themes like health and technological risks.

However, even interrelated fields of research still have blind spots and neglected topics. The most obvious example is climate change, which demonstrates characteristics of developing from a so-called wicked problem to a series of interrelated and global crises. So far, it has been mostly covered by other communication subdisciplines like science or environmental communication; however, it is astonishing how little attention it receives in the risk and crisis communication research. Perhaps this is attributable to the Northern and Western bias in the field (Diers-Lawson, 2017, 2020), particularly given that the early effects of the climate crisis presently disproportionately affect the global South. The need for risk and crisis communication research about climate change, the roles that governments and organizations play along with self-protective behaviors from citizens is underscored by the clear related communicative challenges that come with it. Therefore, we are convinced it is an essential time for the risk and crisis

communication community to begin to develop this research agenda to give the climate crisis a much higher priority in the research agenda of our field.

Moreover, conflicts on multiple continents like the Russian invasion of the Ukraine; internal conflicts between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray region; the continuing humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan; the devastating war in Yemen; the ongoing Gaza–Israel war; warring gangs in Haiti vying for control of the country; and increasing Islamist militancy across countries in Africa like Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Somalia, and Mozambique all pose new challenges and raise questions that have not been meaningfully discussed in risk and crisis communication. For instance, to what degree, if at all, can existing theory and knowledge in the field of risk and crisis communication be applied in the context of international security and war? A rare approach that tries to connect these two areas is Nohrstedt's (2011, 2016) approach of a “threat society” where he considers a successor of Beck's (world) risk society (1992, 2009). However, with a view to the literature, it seems that the discussion about what crisis and risk communication can contribute in the context of war and conflict has not yet gained traction.

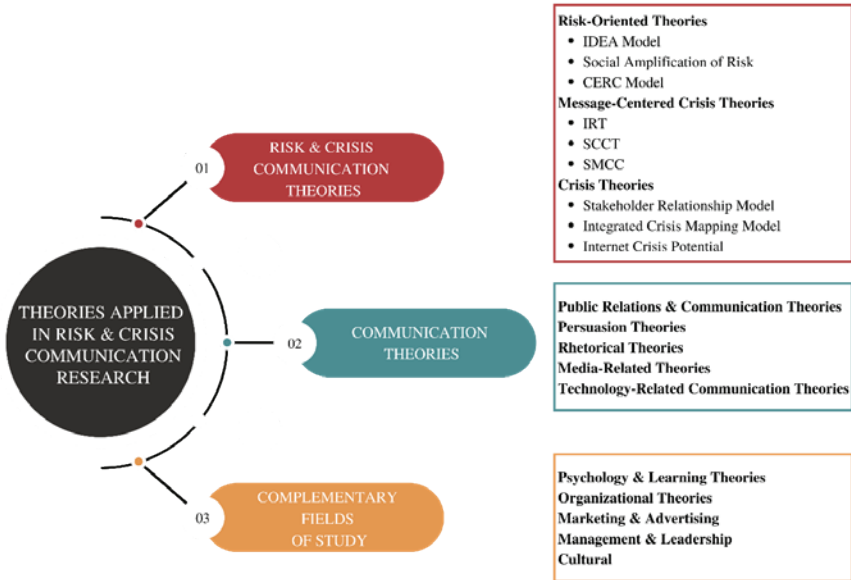
Another issue that is still far from being fully explored is connection between crises and mis- or disinformation. While relevant within the context of war and propaganda, as we have seen throughout the global vaccination debates and COVID-19 contexts, the concept of disinformation represents a global threat to societal security and decision-making at institutional and individual levels. While present research is beginning to describe and analyze mis- and disinformation, there are several related questions to which risk and crisis communication can contribute. For example, what are the mechanisms and effects of misinformation? Is it possible to improve resilience against disinformation? Much work is yet to be done in this area.

## **Theory**

While the dominance of the field of public relations influenced theoretical development application in the earlier years of crisis communication with a distinctive organization-centric focus there

is an increasingly broader set of perspectives articulated in the field (Diers-Lawson, 2023—in press) more appropriately reflecting interdisciplinary contributions to risk and crisis communication (see Figure 1). In her review of risk and crisis communication from 1953–2015, Diers-Lawson (2020) found that more than 95 different theories were used across the body of research in crisis communication from risk- and communication-related theories to more general communication theories, and of course related fields of study. However, based on research emerging in a pandemic and post-pandemic context, it is clear that more theories related to health behaviors, conflict, and information consumption have been applied to risk and crisis communication contexts. Moreover, there is a need to further develop theories like macro theories stemming from fields such as risk sociology. For example, sociological theories like world risk society or theories related to societal security borrowed from political science would make sense to be applied with communication objectives and outcomes as well.

The theories used in the field of risk and crisis communication indicate we are an interdisciplinary field and one of the critical lessons that we are learning from the pandemic is that there is a greater need for international and interdisciplinary learning and collaboration. For example, the World Health Organization is placing risk communication and community engagement alongside medical interventions in the importance that it has on effective responses to health crises. That is why they are in the process of formalizing a technical advisory group in Europe and Central Asia that brings together practitioners and academics from across disciplines to improve engagement. If academic theory development fails to keep pace with this kind of engagement, we risk being less relevant in coming years as the risk and crisis contexts become increasingly complex. We can ill-afford dated and siloed approaches to theory development in risk and crisis communication.



**FIGURE 1** Summary of Theories Applied in Risk & Crisis Communication Research (adapted from Diers-Lawson, 2020).

## Methodology

The interdisciplinary needs in the field of risk and crisis communication are also demonstrated in the methodological innovations emerging in the field as well. The interdisciplinary turn is especially important as we tackle complex issues like communicating climate change, pandemics, international conflict, and even cyber security, and nudging behaviors. Interdisciplinary research design and methods would improve risk and crisis mitigation when addressing wicked problems and emergent societal-level crises because they can be pragmatic approaches focusing on *best practice*.

Second, the computational turn in the sciences also increasingly manifests in crisis and risk communication research. Computational methods are particularly helpful given the vast amounts of communication data being generated during crises and the potential for short-term, exploratory analyses. A problem, however, lies in the lack of theory development and application in the interpretation of the data. In this regard, there is much innovative

potential in the combination of computational with manual methods, both quantitative and qualitative (Vogler & Meissner, 2023 in press). If triangulated with such additional methods, it is possible to both validate and add depth to the analysis. It is a promising way toward methodological progress; however, researchers are just beginning to explore its full potential.

Third, there is still need for more cross-cultural research: As risk and crises are culturally dependent phenomena (Meissner, 2019; Seeger et al., 2016), more international, culturally sensitive research is necessary. The COVID-19 pandemic offers a range of opportunities in this context given the international differences regarding, for instance, self-protective behavior like mask-wearing and vaccines.

### **Reflections on Volume 5 Issue 2**

This essay has illustrated that the study of crisis and risk communication continues to offer plenty of opportunities. The need for progress and innovation is obvious given the simultaneous, multi-layered, and interlinked global crises that we are currently facing. It is also an opportunity to underline the value that the crisis and risk communication research community contributes to academia and to society at large. We therefore postulate more intense collaboration both within the field and beyond to jointly advance new topics, theories, and methods.

This issue in the *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research* demonstrates much of what we have discussed as important innovations in the field's development. For example, Koch and Viererbl's discussion of the role that corporate social responsibility can play in organizational crises directly crosses the risk and crisis boundary by exploring the degree to which prior social responsibility activities can help or hurt an organization's reputation when it is in crisis. This contributes to previous research (see e.g., Diers-Lawson et al., 2020) trying to account for the often-contradictory findings related to corporate social responsibility and places it directly as an issue for risk and crisis communication.

Three of the pieces in this issue represent not only conceptual innovation, but also the importance of considering different perspectives as well. For example, Wang and Chen's analysis of the convergence of uses and gratifications and the social-mediated crisis communication model to explore what motivates information seeking and sharing during public health crises is a very good example of addressing the need for more crisis research on information consumption but also represents a strong innovation in theory development by looking beyond single-theory explanations for phenomena in an increasingly complex information environment and from a non-Western perspective. Similarly, Brand's ethics of care analysis of the *Visit Aurora* response to the Black Lives Matter Protests against police violence further expands our collective understanding of diverse communities of practice as well as the ethical responsibilities of local organizational response to societal turmoil. Additionally, Akhther and Islam's resilience approach to COVID-19 by exploring how mental health issues were communicated to college students of color represents an important theme in crisis communication—the need to adapt messaging to at-risk communities across societies. One consistent finding emerging from the research on the pandemic has suggested that those institutions that better adapted their messages to the different communicative needs in different communities were more successful in protecting lives.

The final piece in this issue represents an important and often under addressed piece of work—the convergence of research and practice. Prasad's analysis and advocacy for templated crisis communication explores the importance of connecting theory and applied research to practice as he reviews relevant bodies of literature and critically reflects on crisis communication practice. However, he also tackles an often-ignored community in risk and crisis communication—people with disabilities, access, and functional needs (DAFN). As his piece points out, there is a clear dearth of research on risk and crisis for the DAFN community.

Together as we conclude our tenure as the editorial team for the *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, we are proud of our community's growth and expansion. We would

like to thank the editorial board, the reviewers, and the authors for their work, their quality contributions, and their engagement. We would also like to recognize and thank the colleagues behind the scenes at the University of Central Florida for their unending support of this journal. The journal is now Scopus listed and remains open access because of their work and contributions to the field. We would especially like to recognize Editor-in-Chief, Dr. Timothy Sellnow for his unending support of the journal, the development of the field, and support for young and mid-career scholars. We would also like to thank Dr. Patric Spence for his behind-the-scenes work to support each issue, the digitization of the journal, and ensuring that the technical work needed for the journal's development is completed.

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