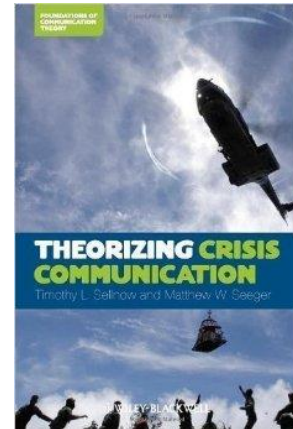


Timothy L. Sellnow, and Matthew W. Seeger, **Theorizing Crisis Communication** (Vol. 4). West Sussex, UK: Wiley, 2013, 272 pp., \$35.95 (paperback).

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To understand the relevancy of crisis communication in today's world, one must look no further than the front page of the newspaper—or perhaps one's Facebook or Twitter feed—to witness the latest crisis, whether it is a natural disaster, corporate failure, government misdoing, or campus shooting. In the aftermath of crisis, communication planners and practitioners look for lessons learned and future guidance, while researchers and scholars analyze case studies to develop deeper understandings of the crisis milieu. Against this backdrop, **Theorizing Crisis Communication** by Timothy L. Sellnow and Matthew W. Seeger provides a compilation and critique of crisis communication theory.

Sellnow and Seeger take a multidisciplinary approach and draw from across the vast field of communication research. From rhetoric to network theory, to media effects and organizational communication, this text examines crisis communication from diverse perspectives. The authors provide current, practical examples and apply a broad set of theories to the issue of crisis communication.

Crisis is defined as “a specific, unexpected, non-routine event or series of events that creates high levels of uncertainty and a significant or perceived threat to high priority goals” (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003, p. 7). In the introduction, the authors argue that crises are more severe, cause more damage, and are occurring more frequently than ever before. Disciplines from criminal justice to medicine to political science and communication have all examined crises, but this research is often not integrated. Sellnow and Seeger pull research from these various disciplines to provide a comprehensive perspective on the subject. The authors cite Charles Perrow's prediction that crises will become more and more common. Perrow's normal accident theory postulates that the number of crises will rise as the connections between society and technology become more complex and more interwoven, and failures in one system cascade because of this interwoven network of systems. Other causes cited include failures in warnings and a breakdown in vigilance. The authors go on to define crisis communication as “the ongoing process of creating shared meaning among and between groups, communities, individuals and agencies, within the ecological context of a crisis, for the purpose of preparing for and reducing, limiting and responding to threats and harm” (p. 13).

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Sellnow and Seeger concisely articulate the function of theory, theory building, and critique as a foundation for the remainder of the book, which in subsequent, stand-alone chapters, catalogues theories that can be used to understand crisis communication. Theories are presented in progressive groups in the order of crisis phases—before, during, and after a crisis. The substantive chapters cover crisis development, warning, crisis outcomes, emergency response, mediated crises, influence, risk management, and ethics, and a final chapter examines the use of theories that can translate from an academic perspective to practical application for the communication practitioner.

The development of crisis and theories that articulate the various stages of a crisis form the core of chapter 2. While those in crisis tend to consider their situation to be a unique event, scholars have dissected the progression of a crisis and come up with a variety of theories from the most simple three-stage process of precrisis, crisis, postcrisis (p. 30) to the complex Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) model developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as a means to structure crisis progression. Sellnow and Seeger argue that there is a trade-off in building general models that will encapsulate most types of crises, and rightly note that these models provide less predictive value. In contrast, more detailed models may offer too much specificity to be of value in all cases. Despite these shortcomings, models are useful to crisis managers as they provide an orderly way to frame management choices.

Following the discussion of the stages of crisis, chapter 3 addresses warning messages and how risk is communicated as a crisis unfolds. A common theme in effective warning communication is message quality and consistency. The authors provide an accounting of how text messaging has been utilized as a warning system and note that current warning theories do not take social media into account. Theories in this area tend to account for one-way communication from a central communicator or warning agency to the public. The modern prevalence of the use of social media networks allows for a more reflexive warning system. Thus this new, more dynamic communication environment requires further theory development.

For organizational communication scholars, chapter 4 situates a crisis from the perspective of outcomes. The authors examine theories of organizational learning, sensemaking, organizational legitimacy, situational crisis communication theory, and a rhetorical perspective with a discourse of renewal. The common thread running through these discussions focuses on the fact that in order to capture an understanding of crisis outcomes, a full communication loop must be accounted for in which an organization that has experienced crisis captures and internalizes the lessons learned.

While numerous theories examine the effect of communication during crisis, theories of emergency response focus on the role of communication itself during various stages. Sellnow and Seeger

call out four theories that focus on the role of communication during emergency response: chaos theory, crisis coordination, resilience, and a four-channel model that incorporates social media. Chaos theory suggests that a crisis will lead to new forms of self-organizing in a system. The authors specify that a theory such as chaos theory is more of a conceptual framework rather than a theory that would stand up to more empirical testing. Within the construct of crisis coordination theories, three forms of coordination emerge: bureaucratic, structural, and network. Federal practitioners will be familiar with the discussion of the network practice used in Joint Information Centers as outlined in the National Response Framework. The authors articulate the strength of these sorts of emergent multiorganizational networks that form to respond to specific crises requirements. They state that of the three forms of coordination, bureaucratic forms are the most common, even though research suggests this form is the least effective. Significant discussion is also dedicated to a conceptualization of community resilience and a model of stress resistance and resilience over time (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008) that is brought in from psychology. Chapter 5 concludes with an introduction to Pechta, Brandenburg and Seeger's (2010) four-channel model of communication that places the public at the center of the communication system, addressing the emerging role of social media and user-generated content in crisis situations.

A critical facet to understanding crisis communication lies in an examination of the ways crises are impacted by news media and media consumption. Chapter 6 pulls together theories that address this facet and provides examples of research that has examined news framing, focusing events, and news diffusion. Their discussion of media consumption looks at research that, for example, has applied uses and gratifications theory using Hurricane Katrina research exemplars and used diffusion of innovation theory to examine how the Internet and social media are used during periods of crisis.

Postcrisis rhetoric can illuminate the construction of influence and persuasion that are at play between the various individuals and organizations involved in a crisis. Chapter 7 thus considers the rhetorical theories of apologia, image repair, kategoria, dramatism, and narrative. Though each of these theoretical perspectives have long-established histories, Sellnow and Seeger artfully pull together current studies that have advanced these concepts in the examination of persuasive language used in crisis communication.

Related to crisis management is the concept of risk management. Risks that are not managed well or risks that become inflated, can evolve into crises. Chapter 8 highlights theories of risk communication from organizational as well as critical perspectives. Mindfulness theory and high reliability organization theory explain how the uncertainty inherent in risk can foster heightened perception and learning. The precautionary principle and cultural theory can critically examine relationships in risk determinations and seek to empower the voices of those who would be subjected to the consequences of

risk. A rhetorical examination of arguments at play in risk communication highlights the public debates that precede crisis or mitigate risk. An examination of these theories serves to highlight the importance of risk communication.

Crises invariably raise questions of ethics. Sellnow and Seeger provide a thorough discussion of ethics and present five conceptual "moral theories" to be used in a critique of risk and crisis plans: responsible communication, significant choice, the ethics of care, virtue ethics, and justice. Ethics are discussed beyond mere consideration, but rather as key considerations that can impact a successful crisis response.

The final chapter of *Theorizing Crisis Communication* focuses on the communication practitioner and using theories of crisis communication. Sellnow and Seeger criticize the current emphasis on the development of an all-hazards approach to crisis management. They argue that these approaches, which apply one crisis management plan to any number of varying types of crises, limit the role of communication to the detriment of effectiveness. Theories presented throughout the book support this criticism as they demonstrate the complexity of the role communication plays in crisis management as well as the need for flexibility in a dynamic environment. The authors note the significant role of the media and encourage strong relationships between communication practitioners and their media counterparts as a path to change. They also encourage continued work to link theory-based research with practitioners.

*Theorizing Crisis Communication* would make an excellent textbook, as it provides a solid introduction to a cross-spectrum of theories, practical examples, and critiques. The stand-alone chapters can be supplemented with case studies to exemplify the theories discussed. The text also provides crisis researchers a multitude of perspectives through which to consider case study events. The text does, however, have a few limitations. While the authors' definition of crisis communication includes creating shared meanings with individuals and groups, theories of interpersonal communication and crisis, for example, are not covered. Considering the interpersonal nature of social media and the growing body of literature on social media use in crises, a more robust discussion of interpersonal communication theory as well as social media examples would have strengthened this compendium. Although the book addresses the general role of managing a crisis and the need for managers to not let a crisis develop (mostly in the section on failure of foresight), it has little on leaders or leadership theory. Finally, the text does not offer enough actionable lessons for crisis managers. The authors would be wise to point practitioners to *Effective Crisis Communication* by Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2010) as a work that is more suited to those looking to put theory into practice.

The glory of *Theorizing Crisis Communication* is in its concise synthesis of multiple theoretical perspectives into overarching categories. Every major theory presented is accompanied by an insightful

discussion of strengths and weaknesses. Sellnow and Seeger have crafted a text that should encourage researchers to examine crises from a variety of perspectives and inspire inquiry that ties research to practice.

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