

CHANGING USES OF TECHNOLOGY

Crisis Communication Responses in a Faculty Strike

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This case study of a faculty strike examines the crisis response strategies of a university and its faculty union and the changing uses of technology to communicate to key stakeholders. An analysis of the types of crisis response strategies reveals that both the university and the faculty union used defensive and ingratiation strategies to build their cases and protect their reputations. The university also used denial to argue that the strike was not disrupting operations. The university and the union both relied on e-mails, Web sites, and press releases to update their constituencies. The difference was that for the union in particular, technology both expanded the options for sending information and accelerated the flow of information when conditions changed. The case study illustrates that technology has diminished an organization's control of crisis communication by opening numerous communication channels for others to use to explain their positions and build support.

Keywords: *crisis communication; faculty strike; communication technology; communication strategy; case study*

Unfolding crises require consistent, timely, and credible messages targeted to the affected organization's multiple stakeholders. Although it often addresses a wider range of stakeholders than conventional reporting, crisis communication is an important part of corporate reporting with a key purpose being to maintain the organization's reputation and credibility as it addresses the crisis. Traditionally, public relations guidelines for crisis communicators have recommended that the organization have a single spokesperson who can speak authoritatively for the organization on the

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crisis's status and any response the public would be required to take (Ferguson, 1999; Ogrizek & Guillery, 1999; Pinsdorf, 1987; Register & Larkin, 2002). While the single spokesperson can insure a consistent message, many organizations facing complex crises rely on crisis management teams with multiple spokespersons who all draw from the same information to coordinate their crisis messages and their relevance to various stakeholders (Coombs, 1999; Covello, Minamyer, & Clayton, 2007; Lerbinger, 1997).

Regardless of who communicates during a crisis, the organization's stakeholders expect fast, accessible crisis information. If this need is not met, the organization's credibility and reputation can easily erode. As a result, organizations in crisis in both the public and private sector rely increasingly on technology to speed communication to their varied stakeholders including the public at large. Targeted messages with information adapted to various stakeholders' needs are posted simultaneously on corporate and government Web sites and sent electronically to e-mail boxes, PDAs (personal digital assistants), and mobile phones. Technology greatly expands the options for message transmission in a crisis.

The employee strike is one type of crisis that creates multiple communication challenges. The labor problems that lead to a strike can create a crisis that requires careful management to protect the organization's reputation as well as its relationships with and commitments to such key stakeholders as customers, vendors, shareholders, and nonunionized employees. The organization's leadership team must simultaneously communicate its positions to its various constituencies even as it focuses on negotiating with union representatives.

In the past, an organization's top leadership could control much of the information about a strike, often by working with a public relations firm or its own professional communication staff with either capable of drawing on well-established media relations. Leadership also had internal communication outlets and networks to apprise all employees of the latest developments.

The union involved in a strike also needs to get its side heard and uses varied media to share its messages with the public. In the past, these media were often limited to picketing, rallies, and union meetings with only telephone "trees" to alert members of breaking news on strike activities and negotiation updates. The grapevine was also a relevant, although usually poorly controlled, element of labor's communication. In the balance, because an organization's top leadership usually had the best access to other media, it had the upper hand communicating messages to stakeholders.

Educational institutions present a special case when labor problems result in strikes, particularly by faculty. As with a business strike, an institution's leadership works to establish its voice as the legitimate source of information and to articulate the strike's consequences on students. Leadership can also use media relations to frame the discord in favor of the institution's leadership with relevant stakeholders including parents, prospective students, alumni, interested community members, and the faculty.

Likewise, the striking faculty union must establish its voice and credibility with most of these same stakeholders and the administration. As a result, such a strike may lead to competing messages and create inconsistent views for the institution's many stakeholders. Previously routine forms of communication are replaced with crisis messages sent through varied communication channels aimed at building support for either the administration or the union.

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The purpose of this study is to examine the crisis response strategies of a university and its striking faculty union and the changing uses of technology for communicating with key stakeholders. The review of literature first examines the role of communication in crises and then the response strategies organizations engage in during a crisis. The article next explores how technology, particularly through Internet applications, has changed the ways unions communicate. The case study that follows explores one university's faculty strike and the changing communication practices that were facilitated through technology. Implications for organizations managing crisis communications in a technology-rich environment are next.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Communication's Role in Crisis Management

Crisis management models proposed by both researchers and practitioners recommend preparing for a crisis by first developing plans, then

using crisis management teams to implement planned responses as the crisis unfolds, and finally conducting a postcrisis review that allows the organization to modify its plans for future events. A number of books in the popular business literature provide strategies as well as practical guidelines for planning for and managing a crisis (e.g. Coombs, 2006; Dezenhall & Weber, 2007; Fink, 2000; Mitroff & Anagnos, 2000; Pinsdorf, 1987; Smith & Elliott, 2006).

Communication scholars have focused more specifically on communication's role in a crisis. Barker and Horsley (2002) proposed a synthesis model of crisis communication that provides a framework for developing a crisis communication plan to be used before, during, and after a crisis. They found that key components of successful crisis communication for the public sector included some previous experience communicating during an actual crisis event, a postcrisis evaluation that led to revised public relations efforts, and coordination with other political leaders, government agencies, or institutions.

Researchers have also examined communication's role in protecting an organization's reputation as well as managing its organizational legitimacy. Legitimacy is managed successfully when stakeholders perceive that an organization's actions are consistent with its stakeholders' expectations. Suchman (1995) argues that legitimacy management "rests heavily on communication—in this case, communication between the organization and its various audiences" (p. 586). For Massey (2001, p. 155), "on-going strategic communication targeted toward a specific organizational audience" is required to manage and protect organizational legitimacy.

Furthermore, the organization's crisis communication choices may reflect its perceptions of the crisis' nature. Penrose's (2000) study found "a link between external communication and the perception of a crisis as a threat and an opportunity" (p. 167). Organizations that understood both the threat and opportunity inherent in a crisis tended to engage in planning precrisis and postcrisis activities that can lead to effective external communication with the organization's stakeholders, which in turn helps a company maintain its reputation.

Ray (1999) notes that the greater the uncertainty about resolving the crisis, the greater the crisis. The purpose of strategic communication during a crisis is to reduce uncertainty about the crisis's causes, who is to blame for it, and its consequences. Stakeholders are likely to believe and to forgive an organization that provides credible answers to questions the crisis raises.

Yet, Stephens, Malone, and Bailey's (2005) study examining message strategies used during crises with technical implications found that organizations tend to provide little explanation for technical details in their crisis communication. Moreover, these same organizations were not consistent when targeting messages to different stakeholders. The authors cite the use of easy access to a variety of information sources through Web searches as a way for stakeholders to discover message inconsistencies and reach their own conclusions about the credibility of the organization and its reputation.

Communication researchers have also examined specific crisis responses that organizations employ when managing a crisis. Coombs (2004) presents recommendations for crisis communication based on his situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), which "evolved from studies that examined how a crisis might shape selection of crisis response strategies and/or examined the effects of crisis-response strategies on organizational reputation" (p. 266). Coombs further found that "to adequately protect an organization's reputation, management must adjust its communication to account for possible past crises about which relevant publics are aware" (p. 265). He specifically recommends that crisis managers accept responsibility and demonstrate concern for victims or those adversely affected, especially if the organization has a history of similar crises.

The kind of responses the organization makes to the crisis will dictate the content of the messages sent and, to some degree, the channels or media used. Coombs (1999, p. 122) identifies seven common crisis communication responses drawn from crisis research. These responses reflect actions on a continuum from defensive (denial of a crisis or blaming others) to accommodative (apologizing and taking responsibility and remedial actions to correct the crisis).

Defensive strategies include attacking the accuser, denial, excuses, and justification. Attacking the accuser involves confronting the person or group claiming a crisis exists, whereas denial strategies eliminate a crisis by arguing that none exists. Excuse strategies minimize the organization's responsibility, as the organization claims it had no control over the events that led to the crisis. Justification, another defensive strategy, minimizes the damage imposed. The organization can claim that the crisis is not as bad or that there is no serious damage (Coombs, 1999, p. 123).

Coombs (1999) sees ingratiation as an attempt to counter the negative aspects of a crisis with its positive elements and places it near the middle of his continuum. Ingratiation strategies are used to seek public approval. The organization can praise a stakeholder or remind the stakeholders of

past good deeds. Ingratiation works well when the organization has a good reputation with the public.

Corrective action and full apology are strategies on the accommodative side of the continuum used when the organization is responsible for the crisis. Corrective action strategies are used to repair the damage from the crisis or take steps to prevent further harm, while full apology strategies are used to take full responsibility for a crisis and to ask forgiveness (Coombs, 1999, p. 123).

The Coombs continuum is a useful framework for examining crisis communication responses. By examining their own responses, communication professionals in organizations can discern whether their external and internal messages are largely defensive or accommodative. Coombs also details when each of the communication strategies can be used successfully in managing a crisis, thereby providing guidelines that can improve an organization's crisis communication and protect its reputation.

How crisis messages are communicated through various communication channels also influences stakeholders' perceptions of the organization's credibility during times of crisis. Selecting appropriate channels can resolve problems of ambiguity and consistency of messages as well as protect the organization's reputation. Communication channels, in times of crisis, help strategic communicators provide consistent, clear, authoritative information to their many stakeholders. Crisis communicators may select such communication channels as Web site postings or e-mail alerts because of the possibility of reaching large numbers of key stakeholders quickly and allowing instant feedback.

The next section examines how technology has changed the way unions communicate with members as well as with the organization's leadership team and other key stakeholders.

Technology's Impact on Union Communication

Argenti (2006) argues that "technology has fundamentally changed the dynamic between corporations and their employees and outside constituencies, creating a new sense of entitlement by enabling insiders and outsiders to disseminate and collect information about companies at will" leading to "a new equality in communication" (p. 361). This new equality levels the playing field between the organization's leadership team and its unions. In the past, corporations had the communication staffs, the public relations firms, and the media relationships to control much of the information the public received. Today, with technology, unions and union

members are able to make their voices heard and to build support for their positions.

Research has begun to address the new opportunities and challenges for unions resulting from the growth of the Internet and the World Wide Web (Chaison, 2005; Fiorito, 2005; Pinock 2005; Shostak, 2005; Smith & Elliot, 2006). In a special issue of *Working USA, The Journal of Labor and Society*, Ness (2005) sees the challenges inherent in employer control of new technologies; however, he also points out the growth in information technologies as an “opportunity [for unions] to build new channels of communication rather than a hindrance.” Information technology can serve a means for “transmitting useful information to members and providing a new path for organizing” (p. 379) through Web sites and direct e-mails.

Shostak (2001), writing on cyber unions, frames the change eloquently by describing union communication in the past as involving “a staid house organ, poorly attended meetings and many (commonly ignored) mailings” (p. 88). Instead, today’s union members can easily access union Web sites that provide access to updated information on union activities and negotiations as well as facts, figures, and archives. Other common tools are streaming videos, links to relevant Web sites, and blogs. E-mail allows two-way communication permitting union leaders and members to share their perspectives with leaders. Stevens and Greer (2005) note that both e-mail and Web sites give members a voice and serve as an information source to them and the public.

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Shostak (2002, p. 243) cautions, however, that “high tech” works best when supporting “high touch” efforts. If unions rely primarily on e-mail and Web sites to communicate with members, they may find that this use of lean technology as ineffective as the commonly ignored mailings of the past. Personal communications (richer messages) by phone or face to face with union leaders and other members build the relationships that in turn may motivate members to read e-mails from a known source or to seek out updates on a Web site.

Blogging is one way to encourage and channel upward communication. Santora (2002) likens blogs to union halls in cyberspace. Information formerly shared in the union hall is posted online using Web sites workers can manage and access. Significantly, he notes that this information comes from the bottom up rather than the traditional top down and underscores the potential for future changes in the labor movement as well. Gely and Bierman (2007) note that these blogs permit employees "to discuss a broad range of topics, both work-related and personal, and create a sense of community" (p. 288).

Two recent labor disputes dramatically underscore how technology has expanded communication for both employer and employees. Barnett's (2003) case study of a newspaper strike in Calgary, Canada describes the many ways strikers used technology to communicate, including a Web site with news articles and photos, flyers directing the public to the union's Web site, and even chat rooms to discuss the strike. Strikers used e-mail extensively to provide picketing information and to update negotiations, as well as to build connectedness among the strikers and community supporters. Many strikers concluded that communicating with the public, supporters, and fellow strikers with e-mail campaigns, flyers, and Web sites had a greater impact than the numerous hours of picketing members had endured, often in bitter cold.

A 2006 strike at the Goodyear plant in Ohio saw both the company's leadership team and its United Steelworkers Union (n.d.) using sophisticated Web sites to argue their positions. One innovative application on the union's Goodyear/Kelly/Dunlop (GKD) Web site gave an American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO; 2006) link, which allowed members to plug in their own salaries and then calculate how many times greater was the CEO's compensation. According to that site, "an average worker would have to work until 2593 A.D. to equal the CEO's pay package."

Labor disputes that end in strikes create crises for organizations and unions that must be managed through effective communication strategies. The media selected as well as the crisis response strategies used during the stages of the crisis will influence whether the company (through its leadership team) or the union (or perhaps both parties) can maintain both legitimacy and reputation. The case study that follows describes one university's faculty strike and its aftermath and the changing communication practices facilitated through technology.

Case Study: Using Technology to Expand Communications during a Faculty Strike

The following case study examines the 2006 faculty strike at Eastern Michigan University. The decision to use a case study methodology was based on the authors' access to data from multiple sources as the crisis occurred as well as the desire to examine in depth the communication responses to a crisis.

Yin's *Case Study Research* (1994) defines the case study research method as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident." Yin adds that a case study method is used "because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions in order to understand the phenomenon of study" (p. 23). The context of the case study presented here is important to understanding the communication strategies used as well as how technology impacted the crisis responses.

Two key research questions guided the investigation explored here:

- (1) What differences, if any, were there in the crisis communication responses of the faculty union and the administration?
- (2) What differences, if any, were there in the way the university and the faculty union used technology to communicate during the labor strike?

Study Site

Eastern Michigan University (EMU), a large, comprehensive institution with over 20,000 students, has approximately 700 full-time faculty members. With seven separate unions representing various employee groups, the university has had considerable experience successfully negotiating union contracts. The faculty union (an American Association of University Professors [AAUP] bargaining unit) has represented the full-time faculty for over 30 years in negotiating compensation, benefits, workload, and promotion and tenure requirements.

Data Collection and Analysis

To examine crisis communication strategies and messages, the researchers collected press releases, Web site postings, and e-mails sent by the university's leadership and by the faculty union from August 21,

10 days before the strike began, until September 14, a day after the strike ended. Additional data came from a blog written by the union's chief negotiator, newspaper articles and editorials, and video clips posted on Web sites during that time. All the data used were widely distributed on public Web sites or published in newspapers and reflect no confidential messages.

To analyze the data, the researchers reviewed the e-mails and press releases used by both the university and the union during the 24-day time period. Based on the literature review, the researchers examined the documents to identify the crisis response strategies and the technology used to communicate those responses before, during, and immediately after the strike ended. The authors independently identified examples of Coombs's seven crisis response categories and resolved differences through discussion of the examples selected as well as the categories the examples represented. The following narrative describes the context in which the crisis communication occurred.

Case Study Context—The Faculty Strike

The contract between the university and the unionized professors (the AAUP bargaining unit representing all tenure-track faculty there) was set to expire on August 31, 2006. Negotiations had gone on all that summer, yet no closure had been achieved on the key issues of salaries, health care, and compensation rates for off-campus or noncredit instruction.

Leading up to the contract expiration date, the union communicated with its membership primarily through e-mail, Web site updates, and a chief negotiator's blog. As the deadline approached, the union briefed members on the negotiation process nearly every day through e-mails. These messages directed faculty to updates on the union's Web site as well as the chief negotiator's blog posting that detailed both substance and tone of the negotiations. One entry describing negotiations stated, "The climate worsened when we heard reports that administrators threatened new faculty with loss of health insurance if they struck. And . . . threats to interfere with our legal right to picket further outraged us" (Homel, 2006a). The university administration also kept a Web site updated with summaries from each negotiation session and press releases.

Classes were not set to begin until September 6, but the union called the strike at midnight on August 31 as the contract expired. E-mails alerted faculty that the strike was on and told them to plan to picket at their assigned locations. The next morning, picketers blocked all road entrances to the university, including the shipping docks where supplies were

received. Cell phones kept union officials abreast of the location and distribution of pickets and of any problems that might occur from confrontations especially between picketers and suppliers.

Negotiations still continued, and both sides predicted a settlement before classes started. However, the administration warned that it would end all negotiations if the strike was not called off in time for faculty to be in classes the first day. The night before classes were to begin, the administration's negotiation team presented the union with a "best and final offer" and walked away from the table saying it would not negotiate as long as the "illegal strike" continued.

The resulting dilemma was that the university negotiators, under board of regents' direction, refused to talk with the union negotiators until the faculty strike was called off. At the same time, the faculty negotiators refused to end the strike without a contract. With both sides refusing to speak to each other, the strike continued.

The strike lasted for over a week, at the end of which the union agreed to halt it for 24 hours so negotiations could resume. Little progress was made on that front, and the union suggested going to binding arbitration. The administration rejected this but offered to engage in fact finding with a mutually approved fact finder, although the administration cautioned that it would not be bound by the findings. Nevertheless, the strike was officially suspended on September 13 with both parties agreeing to submit the issues to an independent fact finder. Not until April 2007 did both the faculty union and the university administration agree to the fact finder's recommendations on the key issues of salary increases and health care insurance premiums. Subsequently, the faculty contract was then approved by a vote of the faculty and the members of the university board of regents.

Analysis of Crisis Communication Strategies

During the strike, both the administration and the union used a variety of crisis communication strategies to present their cases to students, university faculty and staff, and the public. The Coombs typology of crisis response strategies provides a framework to examine these crisis responses and the messages sent.

Defensive Communication Strategies

The administration and union both engaged in defensive communication strategies during this strike period. A press release posted on the

administration's Web site confronted the union during the strike: "Eastern Michigan University today is demanding faculty union leadership put students first by discontinuing the illegal strike and making preparations to be in the classroom for the start of classes Wednesday, September 6" (EMU, 2006b). The emphasis on the "illegal" nature of the strike and the demand that faculty end the strike directly confronted the party it held responsible for the crisis. Coombs (1999, p. 123) recommends the "attack the accuser" strategy to challenge a crisis with an identifiable and refutable attacker.

The faculty union also engaged in the same strategy when the chief negotiator posted the following blog: "We restated our willingness to bargain and said that if their team breaks off talks, it's the administration who's on strike against the university" (Homel, 2006b). His regular blog postings during negotiations were set up as a conversation with faculty and clearly had as a secondary audience other external stakeholders. The next day, the administration's decision to stop all negotiations until the strike was called off ended all formal communication between the two sides.

During the strike, both the administration and the union used a variety of crisis communication strategies to present their cases to students, university faculty and staff, and the public.

Denial was another defensive strategy the administration used by arguing that a crisis did not exist because classes would start on time. A university press release said, "the University is prepared to utilize its non-union instructional staff, adjunct professors and other qualified educators to head classrooms" (EMU, 2006c). Schultz (2006a) in *The Detroit News* reported that students were to go to class unless they heard otherwise. The university posted these same messages on its Web site's home page and on a special strike page linked to the home page. Local radio and television media also communicated that classes would begin. University leadership members, lecturers, and adjunct faculty met but did not teach classes.

Another example of the denial strategy is from an EMU (2006c) Web site update the day before the start of classes:

While it is true that faculty are staging a work stoppage, we expect minimal disruption to the campus community. EMU staff are committed to your comfort, service and safety throughout this time. We are confident that the negotiations will be resolved soon, and that faculty will go back to work.

The union countered this defensive strategy with a number of messages targeted to students. As students entered buildings, picketing faculty talked with them and handed out flyers explaining the strike. Students were encouraged to visit the union Web site for more information to be found in the updates, the FAQs (frequently asked questions), negotiator's blogs, and in links to a student-made video of a faculty rally and picketers.

Once negotiations broke down, both parties used excuse strategies to blame each other for the stalemate. An EMU (2006c) press release quoted the board of regents chair as saying

As a result of the AAUP's unwillingness to put professors in the classroom by calling an end to the strike, the Board has directed the University administration to suspend all further negotiations until the AAUP changes course and joins the University in our mission to educate.

Student well-being was a theme evident in much of the administration's crisis communication.

In a newspaper article, Schultz (2006b) reported how the union president similarly expressed the union's concern for students, stating, "I don't think the administration understands our level of commitment to the students and their education. So many of our proposals have to do with fixing buildings and putting more faculty members in the classrooms" (p. 1B). On its own Web site, the EMU-AAUP (2006b) posted the text of a petition signed by 1,200 students calling for the administration to meet the professors' demands and "stop falsely portraying your actions in the 'benefits' of EMU students."

Justification was another defensive strategy used to minimize crisis-caused damage. The university justified its actions in suspending negotiations by publishing portable document format (PDF) files with the details of its "Best and Final Offer of Settlement" (Nelson, 2006) on its Web sites as well as the union's last counterproposal. The union responded with its own comparative analysis presented in PowerPoint slides. One slide, for example, showed how the combination of proposals and the expected inflation rate over the next 3 years meant net gains of less than 4%. The EMU-AAUP's (2006b) analysis was later posted online as a PDF file and

shared at a large meeting with a majority of faculty present. Media reports simply reported the salary increases the administration offered and the union proposed without analyzing how requiring health care premiums would erode any salary gains.

Ingratiation Strategies

When the strike was suspended and both sides agreed to submit to a third-party fact finder, the administration and union used ingratiation strategies to seek public approval. In an EMU (2006a) press release posted on the university's Web site, the regents' chair appealed to students, parents, and the public: "As we move forward with the negotiations, we must now jointly strive to maintain that delicate balance between the needs of our faculty and the need to keep a quality education affordable for our students and their families." The union's response was similarly focused. In an EMU-AAUP (2006a) Web site posting (also e-mailed), the union president explained the union's decision to suspend the strike and return to the bargaining table: "Your negotiating team has taken this step after careful consideration of the needs of our students, their families, and faculty, as well as the future of Eastern Michigan."

ANALYSIS OF THE USES OF TECHNOLOGY

The available technology used to communicate crisis messages to students, faculty, media, and the public was essentially the same for both the university and the union. The university's wireless fidelity (WiFi) system helped ensure easy access to information from all parts of the campus at any time of day.

Strategic Uses of E-Mail

The campus e-mail system was a valuable tool for both sides. The union used it for several purposes including keeping members apprised of ongoing progress. To ensure that communication lines remained open, faculty members were urged to provide alternate e-mail addresses should access to the online resources be cut off by the university's information technology staff, although this never happened.

These frequent—at least once daily—e-mails from the union president provided real-time information about the strike, picketing, and rallies as well as faculty meetings to discuss the strike's next steps. In addition to

sharing information, the union president used e-mails to boost morale. When some among the faculty at one college looked as if they might cross the picket line to attend the fall term college meeting, the union president targeted this faculty group with an e-mail urging that its members respect the picket line. During the time period this case evaluates, the faculty union leadership sent 39 e-mails to its members. These e-mails from the union's leadership provided an interactive communication tool that invited responses from the faculty. Most of the e-mails from the union president ended with "thanks for listening," creating the sense that this was a conversation between the union leaders and the faculty.

Class lists posted on the university's intranet gave each faculty member the ability to write to the students enrolled in his or her classes. The union used this capacity to its advantage. Instead of sending out e-mails to all students on campus, union leadership urged striking faculty to write to their classes with syllabi, book order information, and even some initial instruction. Rather than talking about money or health benefits, faculty stressed the desire to return to the classroom. Faculty members were advised to show that they took seriously the education of their students and to work to keep the strike from hurting student progress during the term.

For students, these e-mails from the actual instructor put a human face on the strike. They helped reduce the uncertainty that accompanies any new term and assured the students that the instructor would work to keep from disrupting a student's progress towards a degree. They also provided the student with the name of someone who could answer questions and concerns.

The administration sent e-mails through college deans to the students in each college to stress that classes would be met by members of the university's leadership and by non-tenure-track instructors (also unionized but forbidden by their contract from sympathy strikes). During the time covered by this case, the university leadership communicated directly with the faculty with two e-mails. One came from the university president a week before the strike began and emphasized plans for the new academic year without mentioning negotiations with the faculty. It closed with an invitation to coffee on the day classes were scheduled to open. On September 8, during the strike, he sent a second e-mail concerned that students were caught in the middle of the strike and urged faculty to remember their mission.

Strategic Uses of Web Sites and Blogs

For the union in particular, technology both expanded the options for sending information and accelerated the update of changing conditions. The faculty union Web site posted copies of the e-mail updates the union

president sent each day to faculty as well as the chief negotiator's blog, which gave students and other stakeholders a view of the negotiations. The site also provided needed contact information including the union's e-mail address as well as phone numbers for the leadership, including the faculty stewards for each academic department. Students, parents, and other concerned stakeholders could easily contact the union's officers through e-mail. Also posted were links to videos students filmed of the faculty picketing.

Informal commentary on the strike was also available in the form of blogs written by the chief negotiator and by faculty members maintaining personal blogs. For example, when the university administration's negotiation team walked away from the table refusing to negotiate until the faculty ended its strike, the union's chief negotiator wrote, "A day that started with so much hope ended with the university bargaining team walking out, going on strike against the negotiations" (Homel, 2006c).

On its homepage, the university also posted brief messages with the most current news along with regular updates on its strike Web site, which served essentially as a repository of press releases and carefully crafted summaries of negotiations. Students and others could call a strike hot-line number for strike updates. However, contact information was limited to the hot-line number and phone numbers of campus offices that students could call for general campus information.

Overall, between the university and the faculty union there was a noticeable difference in the number of messages sent and the use of technology to communicate with stakeholders. Throughout the strike, the administration sent only one e-mail to faculty and used the university Web site primarily to post its eight press releases with updates on the strike, newspaper editorials, and files with the administration's contract offer to the faculty. Besides press releases, the faculty union Web site posted links to faculty blogs and student videos and copies of e-mails sent daily from the union president to communicate real-time information to faculty, journalists, and other supporters.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: Differences in Crisis Communication Responses

Two research questions guided the development of this case study analysis. When examining possible differences between the crisis communication responses of the faculty union and the university's leadership, the

researchers found both used similar communication strategies. Although there were differences in the actual messages used to bolster one side over the other, both the university and the union used defensive strategies including attacking the accuser, excuses, and justifications. By emphasizing a concern for students, they also both sought public approval by using ingratiation strategies after the strike was called off.

A difference was found in the university leaders' use of denial, a defensive strategy not used by the union. The president's e-mail sent shortly before the strike inviting faculty, staff, and students to stop by for coffee on the first day of class could be considered optimism or denial that negotiations were leading to an impasse. Denial was more clearly communicated on the EMU Web site posting that stated "While it is true that faculty are staging a work stoppage, we expect minimal disruption to the campus community" (2006d). The university hurt its own credibility among students, who plainly saw many of their professors picketing in front of classroom buildings. Cancelled classes were another obvious sign that the disruptions were not minimal for students.

Research Question 2: Differences in Technology

The second research question explored possible differences in the way the university leadership and faculty used technology to communicate during the strike. Both parties basically relied on the same technology, e-mails, and Web site postings. The differences lay in how the technology targeted students. Faculty used e-mails to communicate directly with the students in their classes with information about the courses as well as their reasons for supporting the strike. Faculty members also answered student questions by replying individually to the students. University leaders, including the vice president for student affairs and the college deans, also sent e-mails to students. These leaders were largely unknown to the students.

Use of the university and faculty union Web sites also differed. The university's "strike information" Web site had updates with press releases written for the media rather than messages targeted to students, whereas the faculty union Web site had copies of the e-mail updates the union president was sending each day to faculty as well as the chief negotiator's blog, which gave students a view of the negotiations. Links to videos students filmed of the faculty picketing were also posted. Flyers handed to students included the URL for the faculty union's Web site where students could find the latest strike news.

When comparing the uses of technology, the researchers found the faculty and the union using technology to communicate directly to students,

to post rapid updates, and to reinforce messages individual faculty were communicating to students. The university administration, on the other hand, used the technology primarily to send the same messages being communicated by the media found in the university's press releases posted on the Web.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATION

This study suggests several important implications for organizations managing crisis communications in a technology-rich environment. The clearest one is that technology expands the communication options available during a crisis. While corporate communicators will likely continue relying on the media used in the past, they can also use corporate Web sites, e-mails targeted at stakeholders, and instant messages.

Technology also clearly expands who can be a legitimate source of crisis messages. Previously, organizations facing a crisis (including a strike) attempted to control the information flow both to contain the crisis's consequences and to provide consistent, credible messages that protected the organization's reputation. Today, technology facilitates instantaneous information from a number of sources. Victims, government officials and agencies, news reporters, and even bloggers can communicate easily and rapidly through Web site postings, e-mails, text messages, and blogs.

Clearly, some of these external sources of communication can provide a more complete picture of the crisis and its impact on victims and stakeholders. At the same time, some external communication that may or may not be accurate can damage the reputations of organizations. With competing sources vying to be seen as the legitimate voice sharing information about the crisis and its impact on others, victims and stakeholders must differentiate between truthful, factual information and what is biased and inaccurate.

The widespread and, in the case of cell phones and personal computers, the nearly universal availability of communication technology tools coupled with greatly enhanced technical expertise widens the options for both organizations and employees to be heard—and listened to. Formerly just top-down communication is increasingly two-way. And communication, particularly from employees, does not have to flow within traditional channels during a crisis. This article shows how the nature of blogs makes them useful for sharing informal information.

Technology facilitates new dynamics that will continue to challenge the reliance an organization's leadership places on the traditional model of

carefully crafted crisis messages, which are often massaged by public relations specialists and scrutinized by legal counsel before being sent through appropriate channels. The downside for organizations occurs when the professional communication staff, public relations consultants, executives, and legal advisors need to weigh in on the language in press releases. The resulting red tape can delay the organization's response to an evolving crisis that requires accurate, timely information.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this case study, the researchers examined the impact of technology on crisis communication responses in one university's faculty strike. While the study reveals the changing role of technology in crisis communication experienced in this particular university strike, generalizing beyond this one case to all strikes or even all university and faculty strikes should be done cautiously. The study suggests that technology provides equal opportunities for both faculty and university leaders to target key stakeholders instantaneously, primarily through e-mails and Web sites. The case study does not examine the use of technology in other strikes occurring today and is thus limited in predicting how technology will influence the ability of strikers and organizations to get their messages out to stakeholders, and more specifically, the media and the general public.

Technology facilitates new dynamics that will continue to challenge the reliance an organization's leadership places on the traditional model of carefully crafted crisis messages, which are often massaged by public relations specialists and scrutinized by legal counsel before being sent through appropriate channels.

Another limitation concerns the role of the participant observer. The case study authors are also faculty members at the subject university and possibly have biases that can limit what they observe and how they

interpret the observations made. The researchers attempted to neutralize this natural bias by selecting variables—communication response strategies and technology—that could be objectively discerned through examining the text of e-mails and Web sites and identifying what technology was used and how it was used.

Gathering data from a period immediately before, during, and immediately after the strike limits the analysis to the crisis stage. The precursors of crisis response strategies occur in a precrisis stage, when organizations and unions develop their crisis communication plans. Without additional data, the influence that crisis communication planning, or the lack of planning, may have had on the messages and technology in this case is unknown.

Further research opportunities include examining the effectiveness of crisis response messages mediated by technology in establishing a legitimate voice and protecting the reputation of the organization. For example, are certain messages more effective when communicating through the traditional media rather than a corporate Web site posting that requires the public to seek out the information? Do others view blogs as credible options for responding to a crisis with real-time, personal messages that provide substantive information? By expanding this study beyond one case example, researchers may determine consistent themes in crisis response messages and the reliability of technological options for communicating those themes to key stakeholders in times of crisis. Continued research into the ways that management and unions use technology, especially during strikes, may provide lessons for organizations and unions to raise the level of discourse beyond the shouts of picketers to reasoned dialogue about real differences.

As technology continues to expand how we communicate, communication scholars and practitioners can make significant contributions in helping organizations develop strategic communication plans and to communicate accurate, credible information to key stakeholders and the public in times of crisis.

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