

W. Timothy Coombs

Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding, 2nd Edition

and

Robert L. Heath and H. Dan O'Hair, Editors

Handbook of Risk and Crisis Communication

Book Review

—Reviewed by

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The second edition of *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding* offers a useful, concise introduction to crisis management for public relations students. It also meets the needs of technical communication students and professionals who need to be better prepared to work effectively with relevant personnel or documents such as crisis-management plans. Coombs provides readers an approach building on staged crisis-management models mostly from the 1990s. In addition to citing a number of relevant cases in the body of his text, he peppers the book with thought-provoking scenarios (under the headings “What Would You Do” and “University Application”)—appropriate materials for small-group or class-wide discussions—and provides broader discussion questions effective for teaching at the end of every chapter. In contrast, the *Handbook of Risk and Crisis Communication*, edited by Heath and O'Hair, offers pieces that concisely address a number of issues in crisis communication and its related field, risk communication, and focuses more deeply on specific cases and applications of models. Broken into sections on the reach, key constructs, and contexts of crisis and risk communication, this edited volume's 33

articles tackle the fundamentals of these fields. These varied articles, mostly from a US perspective, are fine fodder for graduate students, professional scholars, and scholarly consultants in risk and crisis communication. Professionals in technical communication who work closely with planning and response documents would do well to home in on particular articles relevant to situations in their purview. In this review, I will first discuss Coombs's work and then move on to Heath and O'Hair's.

In Chapters 1 and 2, Coombs begins by defining a crisis as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes” [pp. 2–3], and then defining crisis management. He argues that crisis management is more important than ever because of stakeholder activism, advances in communication technologies that quickly bring crises to the attention of the public, and a post-9/11 awareness of the need to prepare for emergencies and of the effects of an external crisis on one's own organization, such as a chemical explosion forcing personnel at a nearby but separate company or plant to evacuate. He also points to the liability associated with the failure to “reduce or eliminate” risks as another driving force for crisis management [p. 10]. After a brief history of staged approaches to crisis management from 1986 to the present that focuses on Fink and Mitroff's models, Coombs provides an overview of his own three-staged model: precrisis (signal detection, prevention, and crisis preparation, covered in Chapters 3 through 6); crisis (crisis recognition and crisis containment, Chapters 7 and 8); and postcrisis (Chapter 9).

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Coombs then moves to discussing the prevention element of his model, part of the precrisis stage. Chapters 3 and 4 are largely organized around three functions of an organization that support crisis prevention: issues management, risk assessment, and reputation management. In Chapter 3, Coombs advises the reader to search systematically for and identify warning signs of crises. Among other things, he provides a table of the types of sources to scan (e.g., newsletters, online business wires, legal compliance audits, and blogs) [p. 28] and examples of failures to heed warning signs, such as Kryptonite's relatively slow response to internet-posted complaints about its bicycle locks in 2004. His hypothetical example of overly general data coding is also useful in clarifying the concepts he talks about. Chapter 4 is devoted to preventive measures an organization can take to manage issues, risks, and its reputation and the indicators one might look for to determine the organization's success.

Chapters 5 and 6 of *Ongoing Crisis Communication* examine how an organization can prepare "for the inevitable crises that will befall it" [p. 63]. Coombs, in Chapter 5, lists a number of types of crises that can occur and guides the reader through setting up a dedicated crisis-management team (CMT) to create and, if need be, enact a crisis-management plan and deal with unforeseen problems. He highlights what organizations should consider in selecting members of a CMT and presents options for structuring decision making. His breakdown of ways to train CMTs is a useful tool, particularly considering the research he cites that exposes how organizations overrely upon on-the-job training. His discussion of the spokesperson covers the factors in selecting that person and the tasks that person must perform. Chapter 6 not only includes a component-by-component breakdown of the CMT (covering what organizations must do in addition to creating the CMT such as keeping it up-to-date and testing it), but also covers the facets of a crisis-communication system with a crisis-control center at its core.

Coombs addresses what happens in the actual crisis in Chapters 7 and 8. To a novice, crisis recognition (covered in Chapter 7) seems like an obvious process, but Coombs points out that denial is a real problem in prevention and plan implementation. He covers relevant theories and analyses, such as how crisis information is processed and how an organization might respond to a crisis publicly (for instance, scapegoating someone outside of the organization). Understandably, he presents most of

this information with only general guidelines on how to apply it: Each crisis is unique. Practitioners likely will find the "SCCT [Situational Crisis Communication Theory] Recommendations for Crisis Response Selection" table the most useful part of these chapters because it delivers concise, explicit guidelines on how to react in various situations [p. 143]. Coombs's section on continuing communication to stakeholders throughout the whole crisis cycle, not just after the initial event, is another practical element that readers will find helpful.

Ongoing Crisis Communication wraps up with Chapter 9, "Postcrisis Concerns"; Chapter 10, the conclusion; and an appendix listing possible case studies from 1997 through 2006 (a simple list of organizations and dates). Chapter 9 reminds novices that crisis management is indeed a cycle and does not end after the crisis itself has seemingly concluded. One of Coombs's kernels of wisdom in Chapter 9 is that each crisis is a lesson, and an organization learns from the lesson only if it studies the impact of the response with solid data (rather than assuming how stakeholders perceived the response). It must then roll what it learns back into its plans for handling future crises, but with enough flexibility "to disregard past actions and knowledge if they do not fit well with a current crisis" [p. 161]. Coombs concludes in Chapter 10 with four take-home lessons about crisis management and communication. In essence, consider crisis management to be an ongoing process; carefully select crisis managers and teams; develop and maintain good crisis-management procedures (he again highlights the crisis-sensing mechanism); and incorporate "new communication technologies," such as the internet and intranets, but not to the exclusion of more traditional means of communication [p. 171]. Finally, his appendix with possible case studies is a simple list, providing only the company name, the years of the crisis, its general nature (fire, explosion, and so forth), and, in some cases, the location. Nonetheless, this list is sufficient to assign a student a research paper on a case.

Overall, Coombs's work is a solid introduction to the topic that will serve technical communicators learning about crisis communication from a public relations perspective. In some places, his organization is a bit confusing. For instance, in Chapter 3, he suggests a three-step approach to identifying a potential crisis—scan, collect, and evaluate—then, toward the end of the chapter, develops the idea of using a crisis-sensing

mechanism as “a systematic means of collecting crisis risk information,” seemingly part of that second step, but in a way encompassing all three steps [p. 44]. For the most part, though, readers will find Coombs’s work well presented and the concepts well illustrated with brief, concrete, and contemporary cases.

Unlike Coombs’s book, Heath and O’Hair’s *Handbook of Risk and Crisis Communication* integrates research on these two types of communication, treating them as interrelated disciplines and asserting that one can “think of crises as risks that are manifested” [p. 1]. The articles the editors have collected (including a contribution from Coombs) are well suited to readers in communication and provide a fairly cohesive look (if a bit US-centric) at the topic for an edited volume. In other words, this is a largely well-structured reader on the underpinnings and practices of risk and crisis communication, and it contains pieces by well-respected authors (Ortwin Renn and Vincent T. Covello, to name just two), including some familiar to technical communicators (e.g., Tarla Rai Perterson and Timothy L. Sellnow). Although this review is too short to address every article individually, each contributes to the value of the *Handbook*.

The first section of Heath and O’Hair’s book consists of six articles that explore the reach of risk and crisis communication. For those new to these disciplines, this section is a must read. The editors are the authors of the first article, “The Significance of Crisis and Risk Communication,” which meets the daunting task of providing a concise overview, doing a fine job of setting the stage with roughly 30 years of developments, mostly focused on risk communication. Chapter 2, “Historical Trends of Risk and Crisis Communication” (Palenchar), overlaps with Heath and O’Hair’s a bit but neatly (and with more balance) sorts out the history of legislation and research. It also provides a brief look at relevant academic research centers and recent moves to consolidate these types of communication into one field. Two articles address foundational theories: Chapter 3, “Cultural Theory and Risk” (Tansey and Rayner), presents the essence of cultural theory, its evolution, and its current significance, and Chapter 6, “The Precautionary Principle and Risk Communication” (Maguire and Ellis), fleshes out the details of the sometimes-critiqued precautionary principle, which is succinctly summarized earlier in Chapter 1:

[I]f the consequences of an action are not well known and the subject of substantial controversy regarding the potentiality of irreversible consequences, then actions and decisions should err on the side of caution. [p. 26]

The authors present a convincing argument that this principle has new relevance in current risk communication. In between, Chapter 4, “Risk Communication: Insights and Requirements for Designing Successful Communication Programs on Health and Environmental Hazards” (Renn), and Chapter 5, “Conceptualizing Crisis Communication” (Coombs), concisely provide a model of risk communication (drawing on cultural theory) and an overview of crisis communication.

The next and longest section of the *Handbook* tackles the key constructs of these paired communication disciplines, blending theory and, sometimes, prescriptive advice, often clarifying these concepts by analyzing real-world cases. The section begins with “Strategies for Overcoming Challenges to Effective Risk Communication” in which Covello summarizes four models of risk communication and discusses challenges—covering the arenas of the media and the public—and ways to overcome these challenges. Notably, this chapter includes six practical appendices, such as “77 Questions Commonly Asked by Journalists During an Emergency or Crisis.” Chapter 10, “Myths and Maxims of Risk and Crisis Communication” (Andersen and Spitzberg), relates theory to rules for practice, drawing on numerous studies to present a no-nonsense guide to myths, maxims, and good practices and correcting misperceptions, such as by noting that contrary to many communicators’ assumptions, “panic is **not** a common response to disasters” [p. 210]. These two chapters together provide a good feel for pragmatic issues.

The chapters in this section also more fully address specific key concepts in crisis and risk communication: both theoretical understandings of organizations and communication (framing, for instance) and underlying issues, such as scientific literacy and ethics. These contributions cover a tremendous amount of ground, but several themes emerge. First, psychological, cultural, and social factors play significant roles in crisis and risk communication. Chapters 13 and 14 take close looks at what influences audiences in how they perceive and react to messages. Chapter 14, “Raising the Alarm and Calming Fears: Perceived Threat and Efficacy During

Risk and Crisis” (Roberto, Goodall, and Witte), focuses on the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) as “one useful tool for developing effective health-risk messages,” with Hurricane Katrina as its centerpiece example [p. 286]. Chapter 13, “Influence Theories: Rhetorical, Persuasion, and Informational” (Springston, Avery, and Sallot), is a broader approach; it covers EPPM too, but it also covers other models.

In Chapter 11, “The Ecological Perspective and Other Ways to (Re)Consider Cultural Factors in Risk Communication,” Aldoory examines culture (and sociology, I would argue), offering a more holistic, context-sensitive approach to understanding a message’s audience. She incorporates often-overlooked variables such as audience members’ socioeconomic status and “leve[l] of decision-making power” [p. 238]. Not only does Aldoory outline a number of relevant issues, but her section “New and Alternative Ways to Consider Culture in Risk Communication” identifies potential avenues for research. In her subsection on religiosity—“measured through church attendance, prayer, participation in religious ceremonies, and beliefs about God as a causal agent” and “often associated with ethnic background”—she comments on how little research has been done about the relationship between the religiosity of non-Christians and risk communication. Given that religiosity “can profoundly influence health care beliefs and practices,” readers might take this as a call for research [p. 235].

Some chapters in this section emphasize that ethics and new media should not be ignored. Many relevant theories, approaches, and issues touch on ethics. For instance, the public’s right to know about hazards it faces and its role in risk communication (moving from recipients to participants in communication) have ethical underpinnings. However, several chapters in this section address ethics explicitly and in more detail. Chapters 15 and 17 are good examples. In Chapter 15, “Post Crisis Communication and Renewal: Understanding the Potential for Positive Outcomes in Crisis Communication,” Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger examine the ethical differences between how communication was handled during Hurricane Katrina and how it was handled in the 1997 Red River Valley flood. Chapter 17, “Ethical Responsibility and Guidelines for Managing Issues of Risk and Risk Communication” (Bowen), briefly explores how issues, risk, and crises are tied together, then considers ethics from a Kantian perspective.

And several authors tackle the role of new media (e.g., websites) in these disciplines. Chapter 21, “Crises and Risk in Cyberspace,” deals with how cyberspace (including Web 2.0 tools) not only fits into communication strategies about crises and risks, but also contributes to crisis and risk. The chapter’s author, Kirk Hallahan, more fully addresses how to contain risks than crises, but he points out that the next chapter addresses one of the gaps: hate speech. Chapter 22, “Virtual Risk: The Role of New Media in Violent and Nonviolent Ideological Groups” (Allen et al.), then examines online activism among violent and nonviolent ideological groups, using Greenpeace and the Aryan Nations as examples. The authors generate 13 propositions about the use of new media by both types of ideological groups that posit what media they use, how they use it, and the nature of their virtual communities and members’ behaviors. This is one of a number of places in the *Handbook* that speaks to opportunities for new research; the authors even state that

new media provides a unique opportunity for researchers to examine this complex interaction between ideologues and those that oppose them in an open-source setting. However, with a few notable exceptions, researchers have rarely taken advantage of this opportunity. [p. 448]

They offer their propositions as “a testable set of hypotheses for future researchers” [p. 463]. I’ll add that these hypotheses are testable by graduate students hunting for discrete research projects for a class or a larger project.

Also, this section of the *Handbook* illustrates how issues and approaches in these fields can be tackled on the local and organizational level. In Chapter 8, “Risk Communication Education for Local Emergency Managers: Using the CAUSE Model for Research, Education, and Outreach,” Rowen et al. blend crisis and risk communication, examining a communication model for local emergency response. They present Southeast Louisiana’s response to Hurricane Katrina as an example. Chapter 23, “Community Building through Risk Communication Infrastructures” (Heath, Palenchar, and O’Hair), also addresses local-level issues, using the largely failed infrastructure of the Local Emergency Planning Committee to launch an analysis of the factors that influence community building at the local level and its significance in risk communication. In Chapter 16, “Risk Communication by Organizations: The Back Story” (Chess and Johnson), organizations, especially

industrial organizations and government agencies, are the focus; the authors particularly look at the case of the US anthrax attacks in 2001.

As a side note, Chapter 16's call for more research on the organizational level provides an honest and essential glimpse into problems some researchers encounter in obtaining interviews and, when fortunate enough to be granted interviews, honest answers. They provide a string of examples. Here are just two:

Few current USPS officials were willing to speak with the researchers. . . . A local official feared that honesty about her relationships with other agencies would derail current programs. [p. 338]

The authors give practical advice, such as focusing on "successful case studies" [p. 338] (which will lead to some discussion of failures) and partnering with risk-communication consultants for organizations.

The *Handbook's* last 10 articles address the contexts of crisis and risk communication, such as videos of beheadings to amplify the public's sense of the risk of terrorism (part of Bruce and O'Hair's Chapter 32, "Magnifying Risk and Crisis: The Influence of Communication Technology on Contemporary Global Terrorism"), or problems that can arise in pandemic influenza communication (part of Seeger, Reynolds, and Sellnow's Chapter 24, "Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication in Health Contexts: Applying the CDC Model to Pandemic Influenza"). Heath and O'Hair neatly articulate the theme, reminding us that

facts count, but are interpreted through cultural frames . . . sensitive to self and political interests. . . . Sense making and interpretation are not trivial, but the essence of risk and crisis communication. [p. 489]

The reader might regard this section as a "challenges in practice" section, although many of the chapters in the second part of the *Handbook* could easily have fit here as well. Likewise, many of these chapters here might well have fit in the other sections of the book. For example, Chapter 29, "Precautionary Principle and Biotechnology: Regulators Are from Mars and Activists Are from Venus" (Proutheau and Heath), looks at the European Union's handling

of genetically modified organisms and pairs well with other work addressing the precautionary principle and the Mental Models Approach. Chapter 30, "Environmental Risk Communication: Responding to Challenges of Complexity and Uncertainty" (Peterson and Thompson), integrates relevant research on mass media as a source of environmental risk information with the psychological and social aspects of risk perception. The authors provide clear summaries of the theories and explain why each perspective is important to consider, much as chapters in the first section do. As with Chapter 19, "Warming Warnings: Global Challenges of Risk and Crisis Communication" (McKie and Galloway), this chapter focuses on global warming. Readers will appreciate the authors' brief analysis of Frank Luntz's White House memo reframing global warming as climate change.

Heath and O'Hair's *Handbook of Risk and Crisis Communication* has bits of prescriptive guidance for professionals. More important though, and more typically throughout its extensive text, it offers plenty of background, discussion of nuances, and food for thought. In many cases, the contributors examine where these disciplines have been and where they should be going, suggesting how to augment current models and theories and what future research might be done. With exceptions, the focus is mostly on risks that are largely out of the control of individuals at risk—man-made and natural disasters, disease outbreaks, terrorism, sabotage, environmental disaster—rather than risks associated with personal choices (such as cancer resulting from smoking, addressed in Downs et al.'s Chapter 25, "How People Think about Cancer: A Mental Models Approach"). From chapter to chapter, the *Handbook's* focus on crisis communication and risk communication shifts, so the treatment in places is uneven, often more weighted toward risk communication in the first two sections of the book. On the whole, though, the book provides a good integration of these related disciplines, and its contributors give readers a solid background in relevant theories and issues.

In short, each book is a worthwhile read for those in our field interested in crisis and risk communication, whether scholars or professionals.