

Articles

REINTERPRETING CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA

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Abstract

As we enter a new era marked by changing values, driven by disruptive technologies and leading to the erosion of trust, organizations today are facing crises at greater frequency than in the past. Transformation is a phenomenon that appears to have taken place in each and every period of history, but it has never been as rapid, comprehensive, and unpredictable as we observe it today. There are an increasing number of people who name the era that we currently live in as the post-truth era where the focus is on narratives, their significance, and their abilities of persuasion, rather than focusing on presenting knowledge or the truth. Causality, or the rational paradigm, that was defended by modernism, does not seem to have enough prowess to interpret today's complexity and phenomena. This perspective and transformation are also valid for at organizations that encounter crises. This article gives a theoretical framework for scrutinising how organizations deal with obstacles within post-truth times. It suggests that the value-based and emotionally-driven framework of the narrative paradigm might be the most powerful communication approach adopted by an organization during a corporate crisis in this new era.

Key terms

Post-truth, narratives, stories, storytelling, crisis, crisis communication

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Date of Submission: 14/09/2018 Date of Acceptance: 06/12/2018

POST-TRUTH DÖNEMDE KRİZ İLETİŞİMİNİ YENİDEN YORUMLAMAK

Öz

Değişen değerler ve teknolojinin baş döndürücü etkisiyle içine girdiğimiz yeniçağda organizasyonlar, geçmişte deneyimlediklerinden daha sık bir şekilde krizle karşı karşıya kalmaktadırlar. Dönüşüm kuşkusuz tarihin bütün dönemlerinde gerçekleşmiştir ancak hiçbir zaman günümüzdeki kadar hızlı, kapsamlı ve öngörülemeyen olmamıştır. İçinden geçtiğimiz dönemi, bilgi veya hakikati açıklamaya yönelmekten ziyade; anlatılara, onların anlamlarına ve ikna becerilerine odaklanılan post-truth (gerçek ötesi) dönem olarak adlandıranlar giderek artmaktadır. Modernizmin savunucusu olduğu nedensellik (rational paradigm) günümüz dünyasının karmaşıklığını ve olgularını açıklayabilecek nitelikte görünmemektedir. Bu perspektif, ve dönüşüm, kriz vakalarıyla karşı karşıya kalan organizasyonlar için geçerlidir. Bu makale, kuruluşların içinden geçtiğimiz post-truth zamanlarda krizlerle nasıl başa çıkabileceklerine yönelik teorik bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Anlatı paradigmasının değerlere dayalı ve duygusal bir yaklaşım sunan çerçevesi, söz konusu yeni dönemde özellikle kriz iletişiminde kullanabilecek güçlü olanaklar sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Terimler

Post truth, anlatı, öykü, öyküleştirme, kriz, kriziletişimi.

Introduction

Recent studies indicate a rise in corporate crises and, thus, in crisis communications to manage them. According to ICM's corporate crisis report (2017), compared to 2016, crisis cases increased by 25 percent in 2017. There are many causes for this, but in particular three of these causes stand out. The first one is that starting with globalization and continuing with the disruptive effects of the post-truth era may have caused the existence of the companies being more fragile. The second cause for the increase in corporate crises, as a part of the effects of the first cause, is society's loss of trust in institutions (Edelman 2018). The third cause that stands out is new media and the role it plays with regard to its instant feedback capability and ability to spread false information more quickly.

Since crises spread through the media and/or from word of mouth in the form of stories, following that it is necessary to counter it with an equally or more convincing

coherent story or narrative. If there is a problem of trust and persuasion, this is where the power of narratives lies. As narratives inherently describe a particular experience rather than just stating the general facts, narratives do not need to justify the veracity of their claims; the story itself points to the claim. According to Walter Fisher (1984; 1987), the strongest metaphor in persuasive communication is drama and story. Fisher's paradigm highlights values, unlike the rational world paradigm (1984, p.4) which is logic driven. Values are the bases of the narrative paradigm. Values in the rational world paradigm exist to validate logic. Fisher's narrative paradigm (1984) does not deny rationalism in the final analysis; the narrative paradigm suggests that argumentation cannot be convincing in any discourse alone. Arguments are important, but values and narratives that revolve around them, are found to be more convincing. People tend to believe more in stories/narratives which they can form an emotional bond with and in which they can see a reflection of themselves, rather than in logic alone. At the same time, narratives allow the general public to be a part of the discussions of the crisis, while argumentation only allows a limited number of 'experts' to be involved in the discussions. The rational or argumentative world paradigm uses logic and argumentation to critique whereas the narrative world paradigm expands that idea by including values and ethics which makes it more believable.

A crisis is, in fact, an organization's difficulty with sustaining the legitimacy of their corporate narrative. In an era of post-truth, where narratives are at the forefront, it may be these narratives that cause such problems. But it also appears to be these narratives are powerful enough to provide solutions to crises as well as restoring reputation and legitimacy. This power is equally true for institutions as it is for people.

Concept of Post-Truth

Oxford Dictionary defines the word "post-truth", which the dictionary chose as the word of the year of 2016, as follows: "Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford Dictionaries t.y). This concept was first used in its current meaning in 1992 by Steve Tesich. Extensive use of the concept, however, started with Keyes' book "The Post-truth Era" which was published in 2004. When the major theme of the arguments surrounding the concept are considered, it is possible to define post-truth as a new attitude where the topic gravitates towards emotions in a way that is disconnected from the details of the topic and where arguments relating to facts are secondary or

completely ignored. According to Keyes (2017, p. 22), even though liars have always existed, lies were usually told with hesitation and a certain amount of constraint. Now, we find justifications that conceal the truth, without any sense of guilt. With this tendency of the post-truth era to reject facts, we no longer find the employment of critical prospect and a rational approach to situations necessary that was gained by modernism, and we do not think of checking the data, verifying or refuting it. Analytical resolution has been replaced by continuous confirmation of solidified beliefs. According to Yuval N. Harari (2018), humans are a post-truth species and have always lived in the age of post-truth, which is based on the creation of and belief in narratives.

At this point, we should look back and discuss the “entry to a new era” arguments and approaches of some thinkers in recent history in order to understand that our current situation may not be unique. Throughout recent history, thinkers have discussed how humankind has experienced similar frictions between old “truths” and the search for new “truths” during transitions into new eras. Italian philosopher Gramsci (2011) identified the era of crisis that he lived through in Europe, leading up to World War II, as an “interregnum”, in other words a state of existing in purgatory where the old has not fully met its demise and the new has not yet been born. According to Kahraman (2016), this existence on a threshold or in purgatory, often referred to in anthropology is existence where the world as we know it has not come to an end, but we live in a world unknown to us. Accordingly, everything and everyone is in that “in-between” situation where the new “truth” is being debated, negotiated and reconstructed.

From this perspective it can be argued that Baudrillard takes this concept one step further, defining the transition into a new era, in his case it is postmodernism, as a representation of a representation of the truth. In Baudrillard’s words: “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth-it is the truth which conceals that there is none.” (2011, p. 166). By breaking the bond between facts and the truth, Baudrillard has somewhat referred to the hot topic of today: the post-truth era.

Post-truth Era and False Information

Even though the concept of post-truth has been around since 2004, recently it has been associated with politics during President Donald Trump’s election to the highest office in the USA in 2016. The very concept of post-truth is closely affiliated with journalism and conspiracy theories literature, in other words, with stories produced and consumed in our social lives. One of the terms that embodies the characteristics of this new era is “fake

news.” This term is a general catch-all term used in the social sphere referring to any information or news that is false or misleading. The two terms, fake news and post-truth, are closely related with each other with increasing references to “fake news” in social discourse since 2016, there also has been a rise in online searches for the term “post-truth” (Philips 2017).

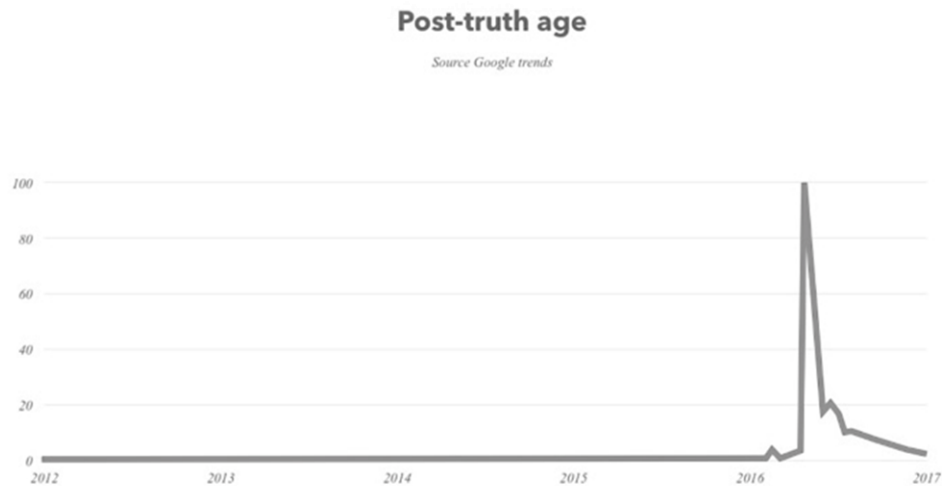


Figure 1: Google search trends for the term post-truth¹

Certain news-related concepts, particularly with the rise of social media and internet journalism, have suffered from erosion in this post-truth era. A study which was conducted just after the 2016 elections in the USA indicates that 64 percent of adults hold the view that fake news stories lead to great chaos (Anderson and Rainie, 2017). As per the same study, 23 percent of them shared their own fabricated political stories either by mistake or on purpose. This trend naturally has its reciprocity. According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism report on the growth of fact-checking websites in Europe (Newman et al. 2018), in the last decade, more than 50 “fact-checking projects” targeting the media were launched. According to the 2018 statistics, there are 149 active fact-checking groups in 53 countries around the globe and the number of new initiatives

¹ Source: Philip, R., (2017). “Crisis, what crisis? The truth about trust”.

have launched in last year is 21 (Stencel and Griffin, 2018). We can, therefore, see that the methods of combating disinformation have been increasing in recent years.

Nevertheless, such figures may have difficulty keeping up with the pace of spreading false information. According to a study of Twitter by Vosoughi et al (2018), false information in the form of news stories travels faster than truth. In this study of 126,000 news items, false news stories travel 6 times faster than true ones, they have a higher likelihood of being retweeted (70%) compared to true news stories, and the former generally reach over 10,000 people compared to 1,000 for the latter. Not only do false stories travel faster, reaching a larger audience, they also contribute to an overall sense of lack of trust in information being presented. As trust becomes rarer, people are worried about false information or “fake news” are being used as a weapon to conceal the truth. According to a report on digital news stories elaborated in 2018 (Newman et al. 2018), consumer trust in news in most of the 40 countries surveyed in the report remains low and “fake news” was a real concern with 54% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing to this statement.

Human Nature and Algorithms

In the digital realm, the concepts of “echo chambers” and ‘filter bubbles’ are also of importance. “Echo chambers” are closed systems, either online or offline, in which beliefs are amplified or reinforced through repetition. “Filter bubbles” are the results of algorithms that shape what we see online, essentially creating echo chambers in the digital realm. According to Pariser (2011), these algorithms create unique worlds of information for anyone who uses these digital platforms, essentially changing the way we feed ideas and information. A research which was conducted in 2016 regarding tweets about the USA election showed almost no overlap between the information that was presented online to Trump supporters and which was presented to Clinton supporters (El Bermawy, 2016). Thus, showing how different and unique worlds can exist and be “true” at the same time.

Studies by Loewenstein et al. (2016) point to an attitude that may be defined as “avoiding the knowledge”, where we ignore the information and people that represent opposing opinions, instead considering the information received from people we see of affinity as ‘a priori truth.’ This attitude appears to be reinforced by filter bubbles, creating chambers in which we do not need to avoid this knowledge as this knowledge has already been filtered out by algorithms. According to Lash “a society of ubiquitous media

means a society in which power is increasingly in the algorithms” (2007, p. 71). These algorithms have become an integral part of our lives and we often do not see the role they play in shaping our perceptions. It can be said that they change the stories we are being told. Algorithms reflect like-minded ideas, ignore opposing opinions, and create a “truth” that varies based on the virtual ecosystem which you belong to.

Changing Perception of Crisis in the Post-Truth Era

What becomes of corporations in this post-truth era? In 2017, the average age of a company on the S&P 500 list was under 20 years old, compared to an average age of 60 in 1950 (Mauboussin et al, 2017). This decrease in company lifespan has been attributed to the rise of disruptive technologies. After the 1980s, globalization and the freer circulation of capital around the world have given a new dimension to the world economy and approaches to crises. Another aspect which is “new” is digital opportunities that have capability to strengthen the crises and increase the speed they arrive.

ICM’s report (2017), in a certain sense, elucidates the dimension that crises and crisis communication have gained today. The trend of increased crisis situations may have two fundamental causes. First, rapid growth in the economic and social base and the recent landslide effect of the post-truth era rendered the companies more vulnerable. Another factor in this initial cause is that today’s media facilities’ present the opportunity of instant feedback. The second cause is poor structuring of crisis communications management due to failure to sense the new climate that we live in.

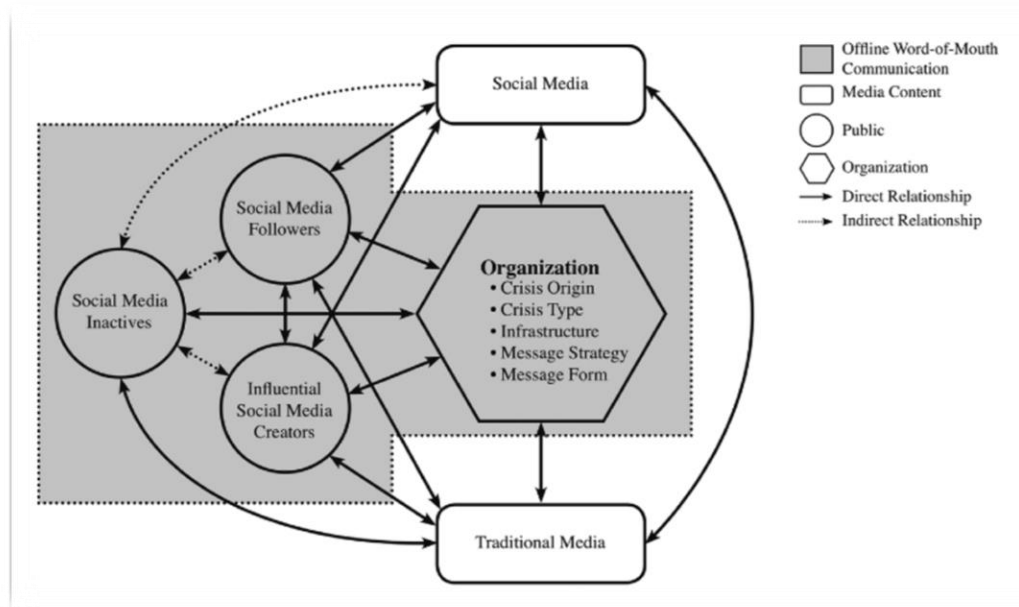


Figure 2: How crises spread in traditional and social media.²

As observed in Figure 2, social media, alongside traditional media, is related to all the stakeholders (Kaczmarek, 2017). Nevertheless, the capacity of influential people to trigger a crisis and/or expand its effects has increased because, as a consequence of user-based content and connections of the participants, social media has altered crisis communication practices on a large scale, if not radically.

Crisis Communication at Hazy Times and the Narrative Paradigm

Crisis communication is a vital component of crisis management. Recent developments show that the need for crisis communications has risen. In other words, turning crisis communications into a more efficient process and employing it as an “ongoing” means of communication are requisites (Coombs, 2015, p. 16). According to Fink (1986, p. 7), organizations are always on the verge of a crisis, if not actually in crisis. Therefore, efficient management of crises relies, to a great extent, on efficient communication.

Burnet (1998, p. 479) suggests that crises share four distinct points. These properties are as follows:

1. determined by individual perceptions rather than objective facts,
2. often resolved during a short time frame,

² Source: Kaczmarek, N. (2017). “A Look into the Future of Crisis Messaging”, *Journal of Promotional Communications*.

3. difficult to manage because of limited control over the environment,
4. in one part of an organization have implications for all other elements

Particularly, the emphasis on being “determined by individual perceptions rather than objective facts,” one of the items mentioned above, constitutes the focus of this study. Today’s discourse and comprehension, as we discussed in the post-truth framing, have gradually turned into individual perceptions. Structural theories indicate that the narrative is composed of two parts. The first one is being the “story.” This covers the events (actions and situations), characters and locations where the events take place. The second part is “discourse” and this is the narration, i.e. the mode of storytelling (quoted from Chapman in Yaktıl, 1995).

From this point of view, according to Venette et al. (2003), at a moment of crisis, there are two basic narratives in the rhetoric arena. The first narrative is the story of the crisis and the second is the responses by companies or individuals to the crisis. Crisis communication is merely narration of a story designed to create the impression that the organization involved is eager to assume responsibility for its activities and their outcomes, keep the activities under control or otherwise effectively reclaim them.

The “rational world paradigm” which relies on given data, based on its assumption that humans are essentially fundamental beings, attempted to explain the logic behind this thought. On the other hand, the “narrative paradigm”, while not rejecting this understanding entirely, takes it one step further and suggests that humans are essentially storytellers, and that meaning is both created in this manner and perceived in this way. Narrative paradigm provides an alternative approach that aims to indicate the fundamental determinant that lies beyond emotions and choices. According to Fisher (1987, p. 65), people attain narrativity in a process of natural socialization. People are natural storytellers who understand and interpret life experiences as ongoing narratives with many conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles and ends – all forms of human communication that appeal to our reason can be regarded as stories. Fisher is of the belief that narrative coherency and narrative fidelity are what make one story better than another. “The believability or persuasiveness of a crisis narrative depends on whether listeners believe the narrative presents a coherent and rational set of good reasons that account for the situation. Narratives are tested against the principles of “probability (coherence) and fidelity (truthfulness and reliability)” (Seeger and Sellnow, 2016, p. 25). Good reasons are rooted in fact, they conform to the life experiences of the audience, and they plug into transcendent value—the highest good an individual can imagine. When it

comes to evaluating coherence and fidelity, ordinary people with common sense are competent rhetorical critics (Griffin, 2009).

Narratives in Crisis Communications: Facts, Emotions and Credibility

From the viewpoint of the narrative paradigm, crisis may be defined as a shortcoming in the dominant narrative that executives or owners of the organization wish to sustain. Crisis narratives “must be understood as stories with limitations inherent in the narrator and storytelling form” (Seeger and Sellnow, 2016, p. 172). Similarly, Heath (2004, p. 169) claims that each and every mode of crisis communication is actually a narrative. According to him, crisis creates a space of narrative, a gap of communication or lack of meaning that is to be filled by stories from viewpoints of those who experience or manage the crisis, the media and observers. On the other hand, post-crisis narratives usually compete until a consensus is achieved.

At this point, understanding the narrative and the viewpoint are of particular importance. If the crisis refers to a disparity between what an organization plans or implements and the viewpoint of its stakeholders, likewise if there is serious discord or conflict between reality and perception, according to Fink (2013, p. 11) the winner is always the perception. The power of a story that is of high credibility, in accord with values of the society it addresses and also incorporating universal elements, is indisputable. “Narrative paradigm” that takes a look at causes behind this power is a firm approach suggesting that people are natural storytellers and a good story may be more persuasive than good data or pure knowledge. When organizations construct stories using empathetic knowledge of their target audiences rather than just presenting information, they increase their credibility.

Heath (1997, p. 317-318), discussing the requirements of an effective crisis narrative states the following: “a credible story, one that has factual fidelity that can withstand scrutiny of reporters, governmental investigators, and concerned citizens...crisis narrative should explain what happened, outline the crisis respondents and suggest the future for this process.” As Walter Benjamin, however, argues, the storyteller “is concerned not with ‘facts-as-information’ but with ‘facts-as-experience’” (Gabriel, 2000, p.31). Therefore, even though the crisis narrative is based on facts, it is the presentation of these facts in the form of a story – an experience which the audience can relate to – that make it compelling.

Leaders and Storytellers

At the root level of storytelling, the narrator plays a key role. Unlike what has become commonplace, CEOs are not required to be spokespeople of organizations. Storytelling practices within the organization reveal the natural leaders both outside and inside the organization. Leaders, in addition to their quality of being good storytellers, should be genuine. Denning (2005) summarized the types of stories that may be used by leaders at organizations as follows:

- Who we are – Identity
- Springboard - Spark action
- Transmit values
- Communicate who the firm is
- Foster collaboration
- Tame the grapevine
- Share knowledge

Moments of crisis also make the in-house leadership functions at organizations assume a specific importance. According to Tutar (2016, p. 36), “if the manager attempts to solve today’s problems with today’s remedies or resorts to the path of perceiving and interpreting today’s world with the mindset of yesterday, the manager themselves is a source of crisis in the organization.” Openness, honesty, responsibility, accountability, and trustworthiness are essential values for establishing the credibility of organizations and spokespeople before a crisis even occurs. In an environment of ambiguity, a leader who can give radical decisions and persuade the masses will be sought. Before and after the crisis, the leader should not merely narrate; they should listen to the people and co-create the story with them. In the communications literature, the approach of “manage the narrative before the narrative manages you” is commonly found. Heath and Millar (2004, p. 17) suggests that “they are very unlikely to control the narrative, but they can treat it as a rhetorical problem.” When we also take a look at the content that bears the characteristics of the post-truth era, we see that there is a limited room for intervention. Every story is ultimately a drama and every drama embodies conflict that needs to be resolved. Drama implies actors with specific roles to play. If organizations and their spokespeople do not choose their own roles, then their roles will be chosen for them. Today, in order to make use of these models of narrative, organizations that believe narratives are one of their main assets, are creating corporate chief storyteller positions.

Conclusion

Given that crises spread as stories either through media and/or on the grapevine, the necessity to counter this narrative/story with another story that is persuasive and comprehensive becomes evident. A good story must be powerful enough to be heard, and remembered, through all the noise. Fisher (1984;1987) believes that all messages are best viewed as a stories. Esoteric structure of the narratives is based on “persuasion.” This assigns them to a special place in crisis communication. Since they describe a specific experience rather than the general truth, narratives do not need to justify the authenticity of their claims; the story itself refers to such claims.

In fact, if not used carefully there may also be a negative side to narratives as they can be used as a means of manipulation to gain or retain power that privileges some interest over others. The strength of narratives is that they enrich, enhance, and infuse facts with meaning, but on the other hand, this is also their potential threat. As we have seen with the rise of “fake news”, narratives may be used to spread false information in the disguise of truth. This is the most prominent of the main criticisms targeting the narrative approach. It appears that the responsibility lies with organizations to embrace an ethical storytelling approach in the face of crises.

This is particularly a concern in the post-truth era where emotional narrative is becoming more powerful than objective data. Embracing the trend created by digital media in the post-truth era may strategically open the door for organizations to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the narrative during the pre-, per- and post-crisis stages. Though scholars in crisis communication tend to fall back on classic recommendations “be sincere” and “tell the truth”, under the circumstances of today’s world, however, suggestions must go beyond these recommendations and tap into the emotional side of our beings to be compelling. Though it is also important to remember that the most compelling stories are those that are, at their core, based on facts. In the post-truth era, the current socio-political climate and the changing media environment signal a paradigm shift. If an organization wishes to persuade people during the climax of a crisis and against a tide of powerful counter-stories surrounding that crisis, it may be time to revisit narrative techniques.

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