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When is silence golden? The use of strategic silence in crisis communication

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Abstract

Purpose – Scholars have discouraged using silence in crises as it magnifies the information vacuum (see Pang, 2013). The purpose of this paper is to argue for its viability and explore the type of silence that can be used.

Design/methodology/approach – Eight international cases were analyzed to examine how silence was adopted, sustained and broken.

Findings – The findings uncovered three intention-based typologies of strategic silence: delaying, avoiding and hiding silences. Among such, avoiding/hiding silence intensified crises and adversely affected post-silence organizational image when forcefully broken, while delaying silence helped preserve/restore image with primary stakeholders if successfully sustained and broken as planned.

Research limitations/implications – First, these findings may lack generalizability due to the limited number of cases studied. Second, local sentiments may not be fully represented in the English-language news examined as they may be written for a different audience. Finally, a number of cases studied were still ongoing at the time of writing, so the overall effectiveness of the strategy employed might be compromised as future events unfold.

Practical implications – A stage-based practical guide to adopting delaying silence is proposed as a supporting strategy before the execution of crisis response strategies.

Originality/value – This is one of the few studies to examine the role of silence in crisis communication as silence is not recognized as a type of response in dominant crisis theories – be it the situational crisis communication theory or the image repair theory (An and Cheng, 2010; Benoit, 2015; Benoit and Pang, 2008; Xu and Li, 2013).

Keywords Media, Leadership, Corporate communications, Crisis, Crisis management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

When crises occur, people demand answers. Stakeholders seek them in the media, which in turn fuels the demand for information, generating an information vacuum (Pang, 2013). Scholars underscore the need for organizations to actively communicate and fill the information vacuum, failing which the space may be filled with speculation and misinformation and cause the crisis to escalate (Pang, 2013). As such, the common assumption is that a crisis response is necessary and desirable, and that organizations should not stay silent during a crisis. However, in reality, organizations sometimes opt to stay quiet during a crisis (Claeys and Opgenhaffen, 2016). There is thus a theoretical gap to be addressed, since little has been studied on silence and the effectiveness of silence as a crisis management strategy.

The present investigation aims to address this gap by examining eight international crises where silence was strategically adopted by organizations and whether the strategy worked. Theoretically, this study presents new perspectives that support the strategic use of silence in managing crises and explores a systematic approach in categorizing its uses. Managerially, it provides practical guidance on when and how to strategically adopt and break silence during a crisis.

Literature review

Defining strategic silence

Silence – defined as “a lack of communication from an organization or its failure to provide clear and adequate responses to questions or concerns raised” (Woon and Pang, 2017, p. 335) – can be used intentionally or unintentionally. For the purpose of this paper, a clear distinction between intentional and unintentional silence must be made. Penuel *et al.* (2013) termed unintentional silence as “natural silence”; Woon and Pang (2017) further identified it as stemming from unfavorable situations that prevent an organization from quickly acquiring and disseminating critical information to stakeholders. In essence, natural silence occurs when the organization has no other choice but to remain silent. By contrast, strategic silence – the focus of this study – is a deliberate decision.

In political discourse, Brummett (1980) defined strategic silence as a public figure’s intentional refusal to communicate verbally, violating expectations, with the public assigning predictable meanings to it, while Dimitrov (2015) referred to strategic silence not only as the absence of speech but also as statements providing little to no information. Strategic silence should then be operationally defined as a deliberate lack of organizational communication, and if there is any, the information is intentionally scant and ambiguous.

Silence viewed as undesirable

During a crisis, stakeholders demand answers, and when they are met with silence, an information vacuum is birthed, which may escalate or reawaken in an enlarged second crisis, resulting in speculation, frustration and loss of trust among stakeholders (Woon and Pang, 2017). As such, scholars have recommended that organizations employ proactive crisis management strategies like “stealing thunder” (Coombs, 2015a, p. 146) to break news about the crisis before the media does to reduce reputational damage (Claeys and Cauberghe, 2012; Woon and Pang, 2017). In handling challenges, organizations may adopt strategic silence as its “refusal strategy” to ignore the challenger, but Coombs and Holladay (2015) highlighted this as risky because it allows the challenger to frame the situation. In journalistic discourse, silence “often insinuates culpability and guilt by default” (Dimitrov, 2015, p. 638); and in organizations, silence from management might be interpreted as “negligence, indifference, an index of a weak position, or a validation of rumors” (Johannesen, 1974, p. 30). Hearit (1994) highlighted the benefits of issuing an apology early in a corporate crisis to deprive the media of a continuing story and restrain reputational damages, critiquing silence as “an admission of guilt” (p. 114). Without an apology or denial response, Ferrin *et al.* (2007) found the use of silence to be suboptimal in managing different types of trust violations for it neither clarifies guilt nor offers redemption.

Due to its passive nature, silence is not recognized as a type of response in prominent crisis response frameworks. The two dominant crisis theories – Coombs’ situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and Benoit’s image repair theory (IRT) (An and Cheng, 2010; Benoit, 2015; Benoit and Pang, 2008; Xu and Li, 2013) – do not consider silence as a strategy. SCCT argues that communicating information is the first priority, followed by the adoption of response strategies. Similarly, IRT recommended proactive strategies in managing an organization’s image during a crisis, and therefore excluded silence from the list of response options.

Where strategic silence might work

Despite the fact that strategic silence in crisis has been practiced by organizations worldwide, under federal investigations, religious ministries in the USA employed strategic silence (Swanson, 2012); in a survey in Croatia, 16.3 percent of practitioners chose to remain silent while facing a crisis (Jugo, 2017); in Hong Kong, silence was found to be commonly practiced by corporations during organizational crises (Lee, 2000, as cited in Lee, 2004).

It has been suggested that strategic silence can be viable, albeit circumstantially. It might be practiced when there are legal implications to speaking out or when information on hand is insufficient (Claeys and Opgenhaffen, 2016). Regulators might use strategic silence to signal confidence in position when faced with criticism in areas where they have a strong reputation (Maor *et al.*, 2012). Politicians could use it to dodge commitments or conflicts (Johannesen, 1974, p. 32). Notably, Smith (2013) suggested that strategic silence can be used to signal patience, composure with noble intentions (e.g. sympathy or respect for privacy) or to avoid sidetracking while the issue is being worked on. This strategy, however, only works when the organization is trusted by stakeholders; no “no comment” statement, which often implies guilt, is made; and a statement of justification is issued (Smith, 2013).

Dimitrov (2015) introduced four types of silences in public relations: absolute, defensive, preserving and anticipating. Absolute silence was highlighted as a riskier option as it is infinite and works best to avoid an overreaction in response to crises, which requires sound judgment. The other three types involve some form of calculated response, serving to either evade the real issue (defensive), cascade the information to a platform of lower visibility (preserving) or to flag worst-case scenarios ahead of time (anticipating) (Dimitrov, 2015).

While the above treatments of strategic silence overlap in their focus on its intentionality, organizational intentions behind the strategy are not spelled out and distinguished clearly. The authors of this paper recognize the need for a more systematic approach that examines such intentions and the corresponding strategies. As crisis literature on silence is limited, research was drawn from the field of linguistics, which has studied the subject in greater depth.

Organizational intentions of strategic silence

Jensen (1973), a linguistics researcher, listed five interpersonal communication functions of silence, which may apply in the positive or negative sense: linkage function – to bond people or separate them; affecting function – to heal or hurt; revelation function – to reveal or hide information from others; judgmental function – to signal assent/favor or dissent/disfavor; and activating function – to signal deep thoughtfulness or mental inactivity. Extending this theory to corporate communication, and specifically crisis communication, it is possible that organizations/leaders may strategically use silence for similar functions. The authors propose to transpose such into the corporate context (see Table I).

When evaluating Dimitrov’s (2015) four types of silence, an overlap appears in the five functions listed above, with absolute silence reflecting the linkage function (in this instance, avoiding), defensive and preserving silence indicating revelation (revealing and hiding, respectively), and anticipating silence demonstrating activation (work-in-progress).

Table I.
Proposed functions of strategic silence in crisis management

Silence function	Organizational intention in crisis management	
Linkage	(+) Bond with stakeholders	(-) Avoid stakeholders/issues
Affecting	(+) Heal stakeholders	(-) Wound stakeholders
Revelation	(+) Reveal information	(-) Hide information
Judgment	(+) Signal approval	(-) Signal disapproval
Activation	(+) Signal work-in-progress	(-) Signal inaction

Factors leading to the adoption of strategic silence

Besides organizational intentions, other external factors, namely the crisis situation and the local culture, might predispose an organization to adopt silence in managing a crisis.

Crisis situation factors. Even though not considered a response strategy in the SCCT (Coombs, 2008), strategic silence is still used by organizations to manage crises. Such adoption might then still be influenced by the same crisis situation factors identified in the SCCT, namely, crisis type, crisis responsibility, crisis severity and the organization's history of dealing with similar crises (Coombs, 2008).

Cultural context. As most prominent crisis response strategy frameworks have been developed in the west, they might not fully capture the influence of culture in analyzing non-western crises (Hu and Pang, 2016). Depending on differing beliefs on how much/little communication is needed in a given circumstance, different cultures can perceive silence differently (Jaworski, 1992). Specifically, Johannesen (1974) suggested that Asian cultures have a greater tolerance for silence. For instance, in Japan, silence is socio-culturally acceptable and widely perceived as meaningful (Fujio, 2004). Ye and Pang (2011) noted that Chinese cultural concepts of "saving face" and "uncertainty avoidance" (p. 260) can shape crisis responses, and these can manifest in the preference to avoid communication or divert attention (Hu and Pang, 2018). Pang (2013) also noted that the Chinese Government's first strategy is often to cover up the crisis until it fades away. Strategic silence may thus be more commonly adopted in such Asian contexts. In other words, culture can be a predisposing factor in forming a crisis management strategy as described in the contingency theory (Pang *et al.*, 2010).

The first research question thus looks at the organizational intentions, crisis situation and cultural context when it comes to the adoption of silence:

RQ1. Under what circumstances do organizations keep silent in crises?

Strategic silence as a crisis intensifier

The second research question examines what happens during the silence. Studies have argued for the criticality of responding as quickly as possible during crisis. A quick response helps the organization reassert organizational control and credibility (Augustine, 1995). A slow response, on the contrary, connotes incompetence (Donath, 1984). Woon and Pang (2017) suggested that an organization's silence during an information vacuum "provokes a response intensified by public dissatisfaction and media glare" (p. 331). This can be further escalated by media and social media hype, where issues gain traction in both legacy and new media (Woon and Pang, 2017) through created and shared content. Without a message framed by the organization, the silence would be open to interpretation by their stakeholders. As stakeholders might have conflicting interests and dissension on certain issues (Coombs and Holladay, 2015), the silence might also produce different, even contrasting, effects on different stakeholders. It is therefore meaningful to examine whether silence worsens the information vacuum in all cases, particularly in relation to stakeholders' perceptions of the organization:

RQ2. How does the organization's silence intensify the crisis?

The breaking of strategic silence

An organization might plan to break silence at a certain time, or maintain it by remaining silent until the crisis is over. In either instance, circumstances may arise which could affect the organization's plan.

Situational factors. During a crisis, new events might unfold or new information might become available. Situational factors may cause an organization to change its position. The

contingency theory of strategic conflict management termed it as stance movement, and that situational factors can be powerful enough to change the predisposing positioned stance on the continuum of advocacy and accommodation (Pang *et al.*, 2010). For example, the crisis severity might be heightened or stakeholders might gain more salience, prompting the organization to reevaluate its current stance (Coombs and Holladay, 2015), i.e. breaking the silence prematurely and/or adopting a new response strategy.

Crisis response strategy. It is worth examining how an organization breaks its silence through the type of response strategy employed. This might be part of the organization's plan prior to the adoption of silence, or the result of situational factors, such as when an organization is compelled to break its silence due to pressure from stakeholders. According to the SCCT (Coombs, 2008), ten common response strategies can be categorized into three postures based on their communicative goals: deny (attack the accuser, denial and scapegoat), diminish (excuse and justification) and deal (ingratiation, concern, compensation, regret and apology). This study thus examines the circumstances surrounding the breaking of silence:

RQ3a. What leads the organization to break its silence?

RQ3b. How does the organization break the silence?

The effects of strategic silence

Since crisis management aims to “restore organizational normalcy and influence public perception” (Pang, 2012, p. 359), the last research question assesses the overall effectiveness of silence as a strategy by examining an organization's post-silence image. This can be analyzed along the four dimensions of organizational image as identified by Van Riel and Fombrun (2007): product, social, financial and recruitment:

RQ4. How is an organization's image affected after the silence is broken?

Method

Case studies are conducted to empirically investigate this “contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 1984, p. 13) to explore a “situation in which the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1993, as cited by Pang *et al.*, 2014, p. 104). Since prior research on intentional/strategic silence is limited, this exploratory study employs the multiple-case study approach explained in Wan *et al.* (2015) and Woon and Pang (2017), where detailed documentation of organizational and social processes facilitate the answering of research questions. Case studies, as argued by Stake (1998), explore the phenomenon the researcher is interested to explore, and the exploration leads to the illumination of insights that contribute to theory building.

Case selection

Eight international crises where the organizations/leaders kept silent were identified with the following criteria: it was evident that the silence was planned or intentional; cases were sourced from different countries to provide diversity; and to lend currency and relevance, they occurred within five years prior to the study (2012–2017). For full listing of the cases, please see Table II.

Data collection

For each case, data were collected from news reports from Factiva and Google search; and official content (press releases and other documents) published online by the organization/leader involved. Sources were restricted to publications in English. In light of differing cultural interpretations of silence, local news sources as well as international ones were

Crisis descriptions (Year, country)	Use of strategic silence (Organization/Leader)	Silence duration
Violence broke out in Myanmar's Rakhine State on August 25, 2017, resulting in more than 100 deaths and 400,000 mostly Rohingya refugees fleeing Rakhine as of October 2017 (2017, Myanmar)	Myanmar's <i>de facto</i> leader remained silent on the issue for more than three weeks, issuing her first public address on September 19, 2017 (Leader 1)	3 weeks
Dire farming conditions caused growing suicide rates in India yearly since 2005. From March to April 2017, farmers from Tamil Nadu held protests in New Delhi (2017, India)	Organization 1 stayed mute on the situation for 40 days of the protest and took no action (Organization 1)	40 days
April 2016 saw a massive coastal marine pollution in four central provinces of Vietnam, caused by Formosa Ha Tinh Steel's illegal discharge of 300 tons of toxic industrial waste (2016, Vietnam)	Organization 2 attempted to protect Formosa as a major foreign investor by withholding information for nearly three months (Organization 2)	3 months
Phones were found defective with overheating issues in August 2016. Replacement devices also caught fire or exploded, resulting in a global recall (2016, International)	Initially, Organization 3 provided little information. After the recall, it kept mostly silent for 6.5 months after announcing intentions to focus on investigations (Organization 3)	4 months
In April 2015, the nationwide issuance of children's vaccines was compromised when a pharmacist was arrested for distributing expired vaccines to healthcare agencies across China (2015–2016, China)	Organization 4 chose to bury the scandal for almost a year. The news was only made known to the public on March 2016 (Organization 4)	1 year
Between April and June 2015, 25 patients and seven deaths at Organization 5 were linked to a hepatitis C virus within its premises (2015, Singapore)	Organization 5 waited for four months before announcing its suspicion of the cause of infection (Organization 5)	4 months
On July 18, 2013, Organization 6 developer site was hacked. The site was taken down and a maintenance notice was put up. No further information was shared until three days later (2013, International)	Organization 6 remained silent while working to resolve the issue. On July 21, 2013, Organization 6 notified app developers of the security breach and the corrective action taken (Organization 6)	3 days
In September 2012, Organization 7 faced a bacterial contamination in its meat-packing plant, 10 cases of poisoning and a nationwide tainted-beef recall (2012, Canada)	Organization 7 failed to offer an explanation or address the issue publicly for three weeks after the outbreak (Organization 7)	3 weeks

Table II.
Case descriptions

studied to examine the perceptions of various stakeholders. The duration was limited to a day prior to news breaking of the crisis to two months after the silence-breaking point. Please refer to Table III for data sources and duration.

Data analysis

This study employs Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative approach to inductively analyze data in four stages: comparing the incidents in each case; integrating the categories; delimiting the theory; and writing the theory. First, data were examined on how silence was adopted, sustained and broken. The cases were subsequently classified according to the intended usage of silence, and whether the breaking of silence was forced on or initiated by the organization/leader.

Next, the cases were analyzed based on the effects on organizational image during and after the silence. This was determined along Van Riel and Fombrun's (2007) four dimensions of social image, financial image, product image and recruitment image.

Case	Sources	Duration of collection
Leader 1	News sources, e.g. <i>The Guardian</i> , <i>CNN</i> , <i>The Irrawaddy</i> , <i>New York Times</i>	January 10, 2016–October 26, 2017
Organization 1	News sources, e.g. <i>The Citizen</i> , <i>The Hindu</i> , <i>International Business Times</i>	April 13, 2017–September 18, 2017
Organization 2	News sources, e.g. <i>Asia Times</i> , <i>Reuters</i> , <i>New York Times</i> , <i>Channel News Asia</i>	April 27, 2016–September 10, 2017
Organization 3	News sources, e.g. <i>Forbes</i> , <i>Wall Street Journal</i> , <i>Bloomberg</i> , <i>Reuters</i> <i>Technology-focused news sites</i> , e.g. <i>Techspot</i> , <i>CNET</i> <i>Official press releases on Samsung's website</i>	September 15, 2016–March 29, 2017
Organization 4	News sources, e.g. <i>New York Times</i> , <i>Time Magazine</i> , <i>The Straits Times</i> , <i>South China Morning Post</i>	March 26, 2016–April 19, 2017
Organization 5	News sources, e.g. <i>Chanel News Asia</i> , <i>The Straits Times</i> , <i>Today</i>	October 6, 2015–March 17, 2016
Organization 6	News sites and sources, e.g. <i>Macworld</i> , <i>CNN</i> , <i>Huffington Post</i>	July 21, 2013–July 22, 2013
Organization 7	News sources, e.g. <i>Canadian Business</i> , <i>The Globe and Mail</i> , <i>The Canadian Press</i>	September 24, 2012–July 17, 2015

Table III.
Case news sources and collection period

The information was then categorized into blocks of data representing what Glaser and Strauss (1967) called “local” concepts (p. 45), such as the perceptions of stakeholders during the silence or information vacuum, the circumstances leading to the breaking of silence, the response strategies employed by the organization/leader to break the silence and the effects on their image post-silence. With continuous comparisons of data in each category, additional categories emerged. Links were then made between local concepts and categories, setting boundaries for the theory. Finally, a theory explicating strategic silence was constructed.

Findings

The first research question examined an organization/leader’s adoption of silence as a crisis management strategy by looking at the organizational intentions, crisis situation factors and cultural context in which the organization operates.

Organizational intentions lead to different types of strategic silence used

Data showed that in all eight cases, silence was intentionally adopted by each organization/leader with different agendas. Among the ten types of intentions proposed, three were observed in the cases, namely, avoiding stakeholders/issues, hiding information and signaling work-in-progress. From these intentions, the authors propose three new typologies of strategic silence, respectively, avoiding silence, hiding silence and delaying silence (see Table IV). The cases are categorized into three groups based on the type of silence used (see Table V).

Silence function	Organizational intention in crisis management	
Linkage	(+) Bond with stakeholders	(–) Avoid stakeholders/issues <i>Avoiding silence</i>
Affecting	(+) Heal stakeholders	(–) Wound stakeholders
Revelation	(+) Reveal information	(–) Hide information <i>Hiding silence</i>
Judgment	(+) Signal approval	(–) Signal disapproval
Activation	(+) Signal work-in-progress <i>Delaying silence</i>	(–) Signal inaction

Table IV.
Proposed new typologies for strategic silence in crisis management

Avoiding silence (Organizations 1 and 7). This type of strategic silence does the converse of linkage (Jensen, 1973), separating the organization from stakeholders and/or issues concerning them. For instance, in India, Organization 1 deliberately kept silent to avoid succumbing to farmers' demands of agriculture loan waivers as it faced a shortage in the state budget.

Hiding silence (Organizations 2 and 4). This type of strategic silence does the converse of revelation (Jensen, 1973), that is, to hide or withhold pertinent information from stakeholders indefinitely. For instance, in Vietnam, Organization 2 kept silent for three months, refusing to disclose an estimate of destruction to marine life and the number of people falling ill, even withholding details of the toxic chemicals from victims and doctors, citing the need to restrict coverage during investigation.

Delaying silence (Leader 1, Organizations 3, 5 and 6). This variant of strategic silence signals activation (Jensen, 1973). The intention is to communicate work-in-progress, with a plan to break silence when sufficient information has been gathered and arrangements made for a formal response. For instance, in Myanmar, in the statement which broke their three-week silence, Leader 1 invited external observers to witness the problems first-hand in Rakhine. This suggests that during the period of intentional silence, Leader 1 was investigating the attacks and preparing for the logistics of the invitation.

Crisis management history might affect adoption of strategic silence

For each case, the study looks into whether crisis type, crisis responsibility, crisis severity and the organization's crisis history influenced the adoption of silence. Data showed that in certain cases (Organizations 1, 4 and 6), if the organization had previously adopted silence to deal with similar crises, it might do so again. For instance, with Organization 6, the company had previously employed the same delaying silence approach when there were technical issues with the antenna of a previous phone model, speaking up only after 22 days with a press conference to provide updates and corrective action for phone users.

Cultural context might predispose the adoption of strategic silence

This was evident in China where the fear of criticism deeply embedded in Organization 4's culture may explain its tendency to obfuscate or withhold vital negative news, which is consistent with the aforementioned theoretical suggestions (Hu and Pang, 2018; Pang, 2013; Ye and Pang, 2011).

The second research question examined how did the organization's silence intensify the crisis, if it did. This question looks at the changes in relevant stakeholders' perceptions of the organization during the period of silence and the information vacuum generated in the crisis. Based on the data, the effects of silence in the cases are categorized into four groups: retrospective intensifier, intensifier in the information vacuum, polarizing perceptions and minimal/no intensification, summarized in Table VI.

Location	Organization/Leader	Silence type
India	Organization 1	Avoiding
Canada	Organization 7	Avoiding
Vietnam	Organization 2	Hiding
China	Organization 4	Hiding
Myanmar	Leader 1	Delaying
International	Organization 3	Delaying
Singapore	Organization 5	Delaying
International	Organization 6	Delaying

Table V.
Case listing based on type of silence used

Silence as a retrospective intensifier (Organizations 4 and 5)

In both cases, the public remained unaware of the crises until information came to light. The organizations received retrospective criticism and were questioned on the delay in revealing the news, with stakeholders forming negative perceptions of the silence after news broke, intensifying the crisis. As such, there was no escalation of the information vacuum/crisis during the actual silence period, only after. For instance, for Organization 5, the public and opposition political parties questioned the delay in releasing information and criticized the lack of transparency when investigation had started four months prior to the news breaking.

Silence as an intensifier in the information vacuum (Organizations 1, 2, 3 and 7)

In these cases, after news of the crises broke, the silence contributed to and escalated the information vacuum, and was perceived negatively by stakeholders, which aligns with Woon and Pang's (2017) theory. For instance, in India, Organization 1's silent treatment and indifference toward the farmers' deaths and demands were heavily criticized by the media and public, vehemently protested by farmers and reprimanded by the Supreme Court.

Silence producing polarizing perceptions (Leader 1)

While the above cases indicate that silence exacerbates the crisis, the situation is less apparent with Myanmar. Leader 1's reticence was perceived both positively and negatively by different stakeholders. Generally portrayed in the international media as indifferent toward ethnic cleansing, Leader 1 drew criticism from various foreign observers, including fellow Nobel laureates. However, Leader 1 also received sympathy from foreign dignitaries, such as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and continued to enjoy unwavering support among their domestic audience, with hundreds of supporters gathering for the September 19 address. Sympathetic observers justified the silence as a result of Leader 1's limited political purview over the Myanmar military, which still held significant power. The ambiguity created by the silence might have been strategically planned to give rise to "unchecked inference about one's motives and actions", as theorized by Brummett (1980, pp. 293-294) in analyzing strategic silence in politics.

Silence having minimal/no intensification effect (Organization 6)

While Organization 6 was criticized by some developers and security experts for keeping silent when it discovered the breach, there were also some who commended the organization for acting quickly. Although there was an information vacuum, it was short-lived. Organization 6's swift action might have helped to contain the situation by preventing further breaches and overreactions from stakeholders and the press. By the time app developers were informed, the fix was already underway. A relatively short period of silence (three days) may also be more justifiable and thus more acceptable to stakeholders.

Table VI.
Effects of silence

Location	Organization/Leader	Silence type	Effect of silence
China	Organization 4	Hiding	Intensified, retrospectively (-)
Singapore	Organization 5	Delaying	Intensified, retrospectively (-)
India	Organization 1	Avoiding	Intensified information vacuum (-)
Vietnam	Organization 2	Hiding	Intensified information vacuum (-)
International	Organization 3	Delaying	Intensified information vacuum (-)
Canada	Organization 7	Avoiding	Intensified information vacuum (-)
Myanmar	Leader 1	Delaying	Polarized perceptions (+/-)
International	Organization 6	Delaying	No effect (0)

RQ3a examined what led the organization to break the silence. Data presented two scenarios: when situational factors forced the organizations to break the avoiding/hiding silence; and when the breaking of delaying silence went as planned. The breaking of silence for each case is summarized in Table VII.

Silence broken due to situational factors (Organizations 1, 2, 4 and 7)

In the four cases of avoiding/hiding silence, various situational factors prompted the organization to issue a response against its will. Such factors include one or more intensified threats (litigation/publicity/legitimization of activist’s claim) or a change in external public characteristics (size/power/commitment), which are situational factors suggested in the contingency theory (Pang *et al.*, 2010). In India, Organization 1 was forced to break its silence after the farmers’ protests became wider and more extreme, drawing support from opposition parties and trade bodies. The protesters had grown in size, commitment and power, while their demands were legitimized following the Supreme Court’s ruling. For Vietnam, after investigations affirmed Formosa’s involvement and legitimized the activists’ claims, protests spread exponentially, forcing Organization 2 to acknowledge the issue as the worst environmental crisis in Vietnam’s history. In China, the crisis was uncovered and publicized by two journalists, garnering national attention in social and mainstream media, resulting in a sudden, intensified publicity threat that prompted Organization 4 to respond. For Organization 7, the investigation confirmed its responsibility, thereby legitimizing the challenge and intensifying the publicity threat, forcing Organization 7 to issue a long-awaited news release on October 4, 2012.

Silence broken as planned (Leader 1, Organizations 3, 5 and 6)

In the four cases of delaying silence as part of a broader plan, it was observed that changes in stakeholders’ salience, if any, were not significant enough and the threats to reputation were not intensified enough to force the silence to be broken earlier than intended. Additionally, preparatory work must be completed in the form of investigative work such that sufficient information is obtained, and the organization/leader is able to form a primary response. With Myanmar, criticisms of Leader 1 were aligned with those previously received on their past track record of treating the Muslim community. Hence, although the crisis severity escalated as hundreds of thousands of Muslims fled the country with increasing media coverage, Leader 1 consistently maintained their stance on the issue. It can then be inferred that the September 19 speech was the result of deliberate planning. For Organization 3, the management used the duration of silence to gather information and take preparatory actions that would satisfy its stakeholders and provide closure. On January 23, 2017, a statement was issued regarding the cause of the fault and future quality enhancement plans. The timing seemed well planned to allow for two months to

Location	Organization/Leader	Silence	Breaking of silence
India	Organization 1	Avoiding	Forcefully broken by situational factors
Canada	Organization 7	Avoiding	Forcefully broken by situational factors
Vietnam	Organization 2	Hiding	Forcefully broken by situational factors
China	Organization 4	Hiding	Forcefully broken by situational factors
Myanmar	Leader 1	Delaying	Broken as planned
International	Organization 3	Delaying	Broken as planned
Singapore	Organization 5	Delaying	Broken as planned
International	Organization 6	Delaying	Broken as planned

Table VII.
Breaking of silence

pass before Organization 3 announced its new smartphone model on March 29, 2017. For Organization 5, while running the risk of an information leak by staff or patients, it remained silent during the investigation. With the public unaware and the virus being blood-borne instead of airborne, Organization 5 was able to determine at which point they would be ready to break the silence. With Organization 6, no reputation threat was intensified during the three-day silence, breaking it only to announce the corrective actions, implying that the announcement was part of a planned protocol.

RQ3b examined how the organization broke the silence. Types of postures and responses as suggested in the SCCT (Coombs, 2008) were used to analyze the statements issued to breaking the silence, grouped by the same scenarios described in *RQ3a*.

Forced responses following avoiding/hiding silence (Organizations 1, 2, 4 and 7)

Each organization employed different response strategies when forced to break silence, and all three postures – deny, diminish, deal – were observed. In India, Organization 1 adopted the deal posture, but with weak commitment. Compensation was offered by its Chief Minister in a promise to write off the farmers' loans. Organization 1 also issued an independent drought relief, albeit at a small fraction of the proposed amount. In Vietnam, Organization 2 applied the scapegoat strategy in the deny posture to break silence, issuing a statement to push the blame to Formosa and fining the company US\$500m. For China, Organization 4 adopted the diminishing posture to break silence, yet offered no apology. Representatives offered the excuse that there were flaws in supervising the vaccine distribution, while a top executive expressed bafflement that trafficking in vaccines could be so widespread and continue for so long. To minimize the severity of the problem, Organization 4 justified that expired vaccines rarely caused harmful biological reactions and thus had minimal health risks. With Organization 7, the deal posture was adopted, with the management expressing concern and deep regret for the illnesses caused, claiming full responsibility in an apology to all affected.

Planned responses following delaying silence (Leader 1, Organizations 3, 5 and 6)

Keeping silent allowed time to plan and prepare an official primary response. All three postures (deny, diminish, deal) were observed. In Myanmar, Leader 1 adopted diminish and deal postures in their September 19 address, stating that allegations had to be accompanied by evidence before action was taken (excuse). They also expressed concern, issuing statements showing sympathy for all victims and the drive to understand the cause for the refugee situation. As justification, Leader 1 stated that the nation was divided and the responsibility to resolve the issue laid with every person in it. For Organization 3, the management's responses reflected the deal posture. The product recall, replacement and trade-ups for the then-upcoming phones reflected compensation. Its advertisement and open letter offered apology with regret, and when revealing the investigation findings, it apologized again. In a move of ingratiation, its President of Mobile Communications Business thanked stakeholders for their patience and support. For Organization 5, the management adopted the deal posture post-silence. During its first media briefing on October 6, 2015, the CEO issued an apology and expressed regret for causing grief to the patients and families, committing to pay for the affected patients' treatment (compensation) and set up a conference to address concerns and offer victims psychological and emotional support (concern). For Organization 6, its response took on the deny, diminish and deal postures. In its e-mail to developers, Organization 6 attributed the hack to an intruder's attempt (scapegoat), informed that it had immediately taken the site down to fix the issue (justification) and apologized for the inconvenience caused (regret).

The fourth research question examined how the organization's image was affected after the silence was broken. Data were collected to assess each organization/leader's

social image, financial image, product image and recruitment image (Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007) post-silence. Table VIII summarizes the effects of the organization's post-silence image.

Where avoiding/hiding silence is broken forcefully (Organizations 1, 2, 4 and 7)

In all four cases, organizational image was negatively affected after the breaking of silence. For instance, with India, the country was left in shock as the media continued to cover the farmers' struggles and emphasized Organization 1's inaction despite the court's ruling, signifying a damaged social image for Organization 1. In the Vietnam case, Organization 2's restriction on press coverage of the pollution crisis drew attention to the lack of press freedom in the country and caused increasing unease over both pollution and food safety. Even a year post-silence, anger is still brewing among Vietnamese fishermen for the organization's poor disaster handling, affecting their livelihoods in the repercussion. Political Science Professor Tuong Vu remarked that the case showed its incompetency and corruption, resulting in lasting damage on its social image.

Where delaying silence is broken as planned (Leader 1, Organizations 3, 5 and 6)

In all four cases, those involved were mostly able to preserve or restore their post-silence image. For instance, with pre-order sales for its new phone models surpassing previous phones, Organization 3 appeared to have restored consumer confidence in its products, i.e. preserving its product image. Media reports following January 23's press conference also suggested that consumers and investors had moved on as the conglomerate continued to perform well in the market, i.e. restoring its financial image.

Discussion

New typologies for strategic silence

Out of the ten possible organizational intentions listed in Table I, the study observed three in our cases and proposed three corresponding typologies (in Table V):

- (1) avoiding silence is used when the organization/leader intends to avoid certain stakeholder and/or issues at hand;
- (2) hiding silence is used to hide relevant information from stakeholders; and
- (3) delaying silence is employed to signal work-in-progress and buy time for a primary response.

The findings show that when avoiding/hiding silence is used but broken forcefully, it produces a negative effect on stakeholders' perceptions of the organization both during the information vacuum and post-silence. However, when delaying silence is used, it can be tolerated by certain stakeholders during the silence itself. The right time to break delaying

Location	Organization/Leader	Silence	Post-silence organizational image
India	Organization 1	Avoiding	Damaged (social)
Canada	Organization 7	Avoiding	Ruined (social, product, financial and recruitment)
Vietnam	Organization 2	Hiding	Damaged (social)
China	Organization 4	Hiding	Damaged (social)
Myanmar	Leader 1	Delaying	Retained local support (social)
International	Organization 3	Delaying	Recovered (product and financial)
Singapore	Organization 5	Delaying	Recovered (product)
International	Organization 6	Delaying	Recovered (product and financial)

Table VIII.
Effects of
organizational
image post-silence

silence is when the organization has gathered enough information or is sufficiently prepared for the intended crisis response strategy. If the organization manages to break the delaying silence with an appropriate response strategy as planned, stakeholders are more likely to maintain/regain confidence in the organization.

Delaying silence can be part of an effective crisis management strategy

The findings challenge the dominant view that in times of crisis, organizations should always issue a response as quickly as possible, or “steal thunder” from the public or media. Under certain circumstances, silence can be golden, if employed strategically and implemented carefully. Among the eight cases, delaying silence has potential to work in the organization/leader’s favor, by presenting five advantages:

- (1) When used to signal work-in-progress, delaying silence may be more tolerable toward stakeholders and could reduce intensification of the crisis.
- (2) Together with constant monitoring of threats and changes to stakeholder salience, delaying silence may be able to withstand the pressures of such situational factors.
- (3) Intentionally employing delaying silence would put the organization in a proactive position as they would determine the breaking of silence, thus giving them control over the crisis.
- (4) Delaying silence can also be used to provide the organization with additional time to conduct further investigation before issuing a primary response.
- (5) If implemented well, delaying silence has shown to have a possibility of image recovery for the organization.

Delaying silence can thus prove positive if employed to signal activation and sustained long enough for an appropriate primary response to be crafted and issued.

The advantages of issuing a first-response statement before delaying silence

Since delaying silence is used to signal work-in-progress, it is worth exploring whether a first-response statement should be issued pre-silence, especially when the crisis cause is unclear, as seen in the cases of Organizations 3, 5 and 6. Smith (2013) suggested that strategic silence may work better with a statement of justification. This paper defines a first-response statement as a disclaimer to signal work-in-progress before delaying silence, without stating a definite stance. Coombs (2015b) argued that organizations can create holding statements or templates. Templates are “prewritten messages that require only a few blanks to be filled before they are released” (p. 97). These may lack details but they provide some early information. Some of these early information include core messages that have been written and approved before the crisis. These templates need to be clearly distinguished from a primary response issued only after proper investigation to break silence. Issuing a first-response statement immediately before adopting delaying silence can present a number of benefits:

- (1) It helps the organization avoid being criticized should they stay completely silent before issuing a primary response, which might be interpreted as withholding information, assuming guilt or expressing lack of sympathy, particularly when crisis severity is high or might escalate. For Organization 5, one question to consider is whether retrospective criticism could be avoided if it had offered a first-response statement. The public were not informed during the investigation as alerting them to a potentially life-threatening problem prematurely could have triggered panic, so the prudence of Organization 5 in this case might be justified.

- (2) It frees up the risk of having to adopt a stance prematurely before the organization is ready to commit to one. For Organization 3, the management had mistakenly assured customers of the safety of the devices after the first recall and eventually had to launch a second recall. An analyst suggested that Organization 3 should have made a less conclusive first-response statement at the onset of the crisis to buy time for the organization, while assuring stakeholders that it is attending to the situation.
- (3) It helps the organization to focus on fixing the issue without any external distractions (Smith, 2013).
- (4) It gives allowance to gather accurate information for a proper, primary response.

There is a need to weigh the benefits of issuing a first-response statement to avoid accusations of being non-transparent (Organization 5) against the risks of giving incomplete and possibly inaccurate information (Organization 3). If the organization is confident that the investigation can be done expeditiously, there may not be a need for a first-response statement (Organization 6).

Practical guide to delaying silence

Incorporating the points discussed above, this study proposes a four-stage managerial guide on when to adopt delaying silence, as well as how to plan, sustain and break delaying silence (see Figure 1).

When to adopt delaying silence. Delaying silence can be used when the organization needs time to investigate the crisis, especially when the cause is unclear; to fix an issue with a clear cause without inciting panic; or to gather information or make arrangements for a primary response. In such cases, delaying silence can be used as a supporting strategy to prepare for a primary response.

Planning silence. Once the crisis hits, the organization should begin to formulate a primary response strategy following Coombs' (2008) SCCT framework. The local context should be assessed, e.g. whether silence may be perceived by local stakeholders the same way the organization intends. Finally, depending on how confident the organization is in obtaining the necessary information swiftly, it might opt to issue a first-response statement to signal work-in-progress.

Sustaining silence. During the silence, while working on investigating and fixing the issue and preparing for the issuance of the primary response (and related logistics), the organization needs to continuously monitor threats and stakeholder salience to detect any intensification. It is key to have appropriate contingency responses planned in case there is a need to prematurely break the silence.

Breaking silence. If all goes according to plan, the organization issues the primary response(s) as intended once it has obtained sufficient information and made adequate preparation.

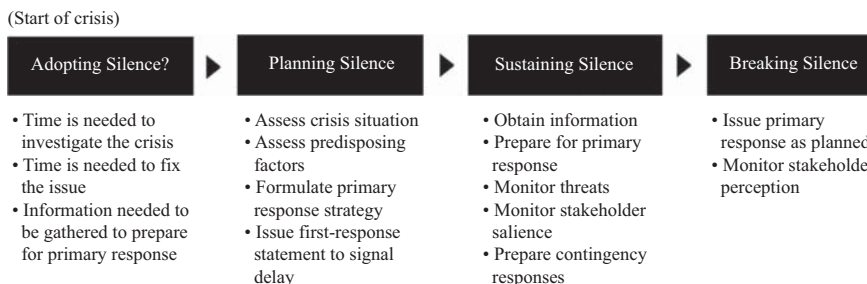


Figure 1.
“Guide to delaying silence” flowchart

It is also important to monitor stakeholders' perceptions of the response to detect if the organizational image – be it social, financial, product and/or recruitment image (Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007) – has been negatively affected, and to come up with appropriate follow-up image repair measures.

Limitations

There are certain limitations to the study. First, these findings may lack generalizability due to the limited number of cases studied. Second, local sentiments may not be fully represented in the English-language news examined as they may be written for a different audience, e.g. the expatriate community. Finally, a number of cases (Leader 1, Organization 1) were still ongoing at the time of writing, so the overall effectiveness of the strategy employed might be compromised as future events unfold.

The cases selected involved both political and organizational crises. A larger set of cases would help to determine if there are differences in the use of silence in these two crisis contexts. It is envisaged that silence might be used more often or for different reasons depending on it being a political or organizational context. Future research could examine a wider selection of cases to complete the typology of strategic silence based on the five communicative functions discussed, and investigate instances where strategic silence might be effective as a primary or solo strategy itself. Empirical studies could also be conducted to investigate the mediating power of delaying silence on the relationship between the primary response strategy type and stakeholder perceptions.

Conclusion

Crisis management strives to merge theory with practice (Heath and Coombs, 2006). However, crisis theory often trails behind practice (Coombs, 2015a), and the study of silence as a crisis management strategy is a case in point. This paper has attempted to explore the practice of strategic silence, “elevating it from discretionary reaction to complex pro-action” as Dimitrov (2015, p. 648) suggested, and aims to fill the theoretical gap by offering clearer intention-based definitions of strategic silence and a practical guide on when and how strategic silence can be used to manage crises. As Coombs (2008) and Pang (2012) noted, theory must be carefully developed and rigorously tested over time. The propositions of this paper remain to be tested in future work, and it is hoped that new avenues of research have been identified through this investigation.

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