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Examining sport communications practitioners' approaches to issues management and crisis response in Northern Ireland.

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Abstract

A lack of practitioner insight into managing the 'crisis response' is a glaring gap in the communications literature, and its subset of sport communications, that exacerbates the academic-practitioner divide. Senior sport communications professionals in Northern Ireland provided their perspectives on issues and crisis management via in-depth interviews. Findings revealed that practitioners pay considerable attention to the *'tipping point',* the point where a crisis emerged from an existing issue marking the initiation of a crisis response. Declaring a crisis was deemed a last resort in the management of issues due to declarations being associated with resource and reputational risks. Practitioners developed their own methods for managing the crisis response, however reflection upon academic approaches informed these views. Capacity issues within the sport sector in the region means that traditional media remain the practitioners' most important stakeholder in a crisis. Areas for further research for (sport) issues management and crisis communications are provided.

Keywords

Issues management, crisis management, academic-practitioner gap, sport communications, tipping point

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1.0 Introduction

Sport communication has long been established as a legitimate field of public relations (Hopwood, 2005; L'Etang, 2006). Within sport communications research the management of an individual's or an organisation's response to a crisis has received considerable attention (Brown & Billings, 2013; Bruce & Tini, 2008; Fortunato, 2008; Frandsen & Johansen, 2007; Frederick & Sanderson, 2015; Glantz, 2010; Hambrick, Onwumechili & Bedeau, 2016; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). Much of this attention has used is freely available, media-data to examine the responses created (Ha & Riffe, 2015), while the voices of the practitioners involved has remained on the margins (Manoli, 2016). This marginalized position creates a problem as the lack of attention to practitioner perspectives could increase the distance of any academic-practitioner divide in public relations practice. With vast amounts of public data provided through social media the potential occurrence of crises will only increase (Spence, Lachlan & Rainer, 2016). Academic-practitioner gaps concern many applied academic fields, including management (Hughes, Bence, Grisoni, O'Regan & Wornham, 2011), marketing (Lilien, 2011; Tapp, 2005), public relations (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016) and has also been discussed in the mainstream press (Kristoff, 2014). This dichotomy however, is avoidable. Bartunek and Rynes (2014) suggest that rather than see the difference as a gap we should view it as a source of tension. This source of tension is fundamental in developing theoretical and practical advances in applied research areas. Our purpose therefore, is to examine how this tension is manifested in sport communications in Northern Ireland and as such, explore mechanisms for alleviating this tension. As such, this study addresses the shortage of practitioner perspectives in communications research (Ha & Riffe, 2015) by examining sport

communications professionals' crisis response strategies. Drawing on data generated from extensive in-depth, elite interviews with senior sport communication practitioners in Northern Ireland, this paper explores the dimensions of the academic-practitioner gap within this area of interest. We also explore the centrality and influence of academic perspectives on decision-making processes informing crisis response by examining participants' familiarity with such literature.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section orientates our study by examining the predominant perspective on crisis response in sport communications before addressing some conceptual ambiguity within issues management and crisis communications, before contextualising this discussion within Northern Ireland. Following this, an overview of the methodology employed in this paper is presented. A discussion of the results is the basis of the penultimate section before the paper's conclusions, contributions and areas for further research are presented.

2.0 Literature Review

    2.1 Crisis Communication in Sport

As a cultural practice, sport has abounded with crises, (Edwards & Usher, 2010) that have moved it from the back to the front pages, and these have been well examined phenomena in sport communications research. Crises within sport communication has typically been examined through major crisis theories drawn from the wider communications literature; Coombs' (2012) *Situation Crisis Communication Theory* (Brown & Billings, 2013; Frandsen & Johansen, 2007), or Benoit's (1997) *Image Repair Theory* (Bruce & Tini, 2008; Glantz, 2010; Hambrick, Frederick & Sanderson, 2015; Onwumechili & Bedeau, 2016; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011), or a combination of these approaches (Fortunato, 2008). These

studies have extended both theory and its application for sport communications which has increased our understanding of what is best practice in sport communications.

Whilst our understanding has grown on the ideal strategies for handling a crisis, the media-data approach employed in many of the above studies approach exposes the lack of practitioner viewpoints, reflecting the wider communications literature (Ha & Riffe, 2015). Our collective understanding is, in the main limited to viewing crises only once the event occurs. These post-hoc analyses do not pay sufficient attention to the decisions taken prior-to or during the crisis by practitioners behind the scenes. As such, the situation of an issue transforming into a crisis remains unexplored presenting a clear gap in sport communications research.

2.2 Definitions and Commonalities in Issues and Crisis Management

To understand the gaps between academic and practitioner knowledge, it is important to examine the conceptual ambiguities that shape this study. Much attention has been devoted to definitions of issues and crises (Jacques, 2009) and identifying commonalities of these two approaches in terms of the life cycle approach. An issue is defined both as "a subject and the result of public discussion" that organisations can participate in (Femers, Klewes & Lintemeier, 1999, p. 254). Whilst a crisis is defined as an imprecise science with a dearth of existing definitions, this study employs the definition of Coombs' (2012) 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" (Coombs 2012, p. 2). This definition was chosen because of the emphasis on perceptions, which has relevance for the methods used.

Building upon the work of Chase (1980) *issues management* has been developed through research and practice (Jacques, 2009; Taylor, Vasquez and Doorley, 2003). Health and Palenchar (2009) emphasised the strategic importance of an organisations' participation in public policy discourse and processes. Favourable outcomes, such as pro-business regulations could arise from such participation (Taylor, et al., 2003). Issues management has now evolved to permit the participation of non-governmental organisations and community groups in direct response to the participation of corporations in public life (Jacques, 2009), with further evolution occurring due to the abundance of digital media and the capacity demands this places upon the process, such as the media scanning of multiple communications channels (Strauß & Jonkman, 2017; Spence et al, 2016).

Similar to issues management, *crisis management* is best considered through the life cycle approach (Bruce & Tini, 2008). However, unlike issues the variability of the term crisis makes the identification of a crisis problematic (Coombs, 2012). A lack of clarity on definitions means discrepancies exist in whether a crisis is an event or a process, with each further splintering practitioner's understanding (Jacques, 2009) and intensifying the problem identified earlier. Crisis management is more concerned with the maintenance of reputation than with any potential contributions, or participation in the public policy process (Coombs, 2012; Jacques, 2009). There are a range of crisis management models therefore, by examining the process approach to both issues and crisis management our focus remains on practice.

Practitioners have long been caught-out by the sudden nature of crisis escalation (Seymore & Moore, 2000) and over the past decade social media has quickened this. The copious amounts of publicly available, social media data will continue and as such, controlling crisis response in this media context is paramount (Spence et al., 2016). This is true even if

the ability of managers to control the situation is not always guaranteed. Controlling the timing of a crisis response has been the focus of recent research by Claeys and colleagues (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012; Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016; Claeys, 2017). A proactive approach has emerged from the literature; 'Stealing Thunder' allows an organisation to self-declare a crisis. The aim is to ensure the organisation's reputation remains robust as the crisis response is determined already waiting to be implemented, for example Maria Sharapova's self-declared meldonium use in 2016. The traditional approach is to await the 'Thunder' to arrive, which assumes the public will become aware of a critical issue and then the organisation's crisis response is put into action (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Timing therefore rests with the decision of practitioners to initiate a tipping point where the issue evolves into a crisis. If issues and crisis management are ready for implementation, 'stealing thunder' and 'thunder' could both be managed to preserve, or even enhance reputations.

2.3 Research Context

This study is set in Northern Ireland - a home nation of the United Kingdom with a population of 1.852 million people (NISRA, 2016). It was established by the Government of Ireland Act (1920) and the partition of Ireland between the 26 counties of the 'South' and the six counties of the 'North' – and is a region with deep rooted tensions and a contested history arising from differing constitutional aspirations between the 'Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist' (who wish to see NI remain as a part of the UK) and the 'Catholic, Nationalist, Republican' (who wish to see the repeal of partition and the reunification of a 32 county Ireland) communities. Between the late 1960s and the mid-1990s a period of conflict, known as 'the troubles', saw these divisions result in open conflict. Since the signing of the 'Good Friday Agreement' in April 1998 the region has experienced relative peace and attempts to reconcile the two *de facto* ethno-

sectarian communities have led to the beginnings of a post-conflict society (Rice & Somerville, 2013). Northern Ireland has been the focus of previous public relations and communications research. Scholars have previously examined public relations in the historical context of the troubles (Somerville & Purcell, 2011), the current power-sharing government (Rice & Somerville, 2013), and how the segregated educational system has impacted upon the pedagogical approaches to communications education (Somerville, Purcell & Morrison, 2011). This study extends this focus to the institutions of sport within this region.

Sport is an important area of cultural practice in Northern Ireland and akin to sports practices found elsewhere, the management of sport has a series of unique factors (Smith & Stewart, 2010) for instance in relation to organizational communications, the bonds of community can prevent damage arising from crisis (Koerber & Zabara, 2017). However, in Northern Ireland the ethno-sectarian differences between the two communities is also reflected in the organisation of its major sports of rugby union, Gaelic games, field hockey and association football which have been historically viewed along divided community lines. While one community may view a sport favourably, another may view it as a distinct, and possibly alien cultural practice (Bairner, 2001).

Despite this, some advances have been made in professionalising the working practices of the sports industry in Northern Ireland. However, many athletes still compete in amateur competition, and there are very few professional athletes based in regular competition. Increasing the existing level of professionalization will require greater specificity in the skills and competences of sport managers (Hopwood, Skinner & Kitchin, 2010). Where organisational capacity permits, the management of both issues and crises rest within the communications team. Ongoing issues management is the daily function of the staff team, while the management of episodic crisis rests with senior sport communications managers or the CEO (Jacques, 2009). However, for the many smaller and/or not-for-profit organisations

that comprise the sports industry in Northern Ireland, organisational capacity is a key issue (Misener & Doherty, 2009). When crisis occurs in these organisations, who rarely possess a communications professional let alone a crisis team, it can pose major threats to organisational reputations. This lack of capacity throughout the sport industry has created opportunities for communications specialists to bring their skills to bear as intermediaries. It is these professionals (and their practices) which are the focus of this paper.

3.0 Research Questions:

Based on the current paucity of practitioner responses and the key points raised above, the following research questions were addressed.

RQ1: How do sport communications practitioners in Northern Ireland define an issue and a crisis, and;

RQ2: at what stage can one transform into the other?

RQ3: In light of a rapidly changing media landscape, how do these practitioners prefer to manage the crisis response in sport communication?

4.0 Methodology

This paper examines issue and crisis management devices employed by those working with sport organisations within Northern Ireland. Our approach was framed from an interpretative standpoint exploring how the participants reflected upon their practice in light of the academic information (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). This section will outline the sampling approach, data collection tool selection and analysis techniques before discussing the limitations of our methodological approach.

4.1 Sampling

As the total population of sport communications practitioners in this region is small we used a snowball sampling strategy. As such this technique gathered seven respondents. Each of these respondents had full-time roles in public relations and communications, either within sport organisations or as general practitioners. Some of these general practitioners had responsibilities on the Boards of Governors of various other sport organizations. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity each interviewee was allocated a pseudonym, however a brief overview of their previous experience is contained in table 1.

Table 1: Respondent pseudonym and background
1. **Cullan** – Former Director of Communications for Large Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) and Statutory Law Authority, PR Consultant and News Editor of A Local Paper. Currently sport correspondent and international crisis consultant.
2. **Donncha** – Experienced PR and media consultant. Formerly sub-editor of A Local Paper and PR Director for Communications Agency. Currently issues and crisis consultant.
3. **Michial** – Formerly a PR consultant and Medium Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) sports editor. Currently Communications Manager of a Professional Sports Team. Extensive experience in PR and crisis communications.
4. **Tadgh** – International Sports PR and Digital Communications Consultant. A specialist in issue and crisis communications.
5. **Ciaran** - Currently Director of Marketing and Communications at a major National Governing Body.
6. **Ronan** – Formerly deputy CEO of a European National Olympic Committee (NOC). Currently CEO of a local NOC.
7. **Eoghan** – Currently PR and media consultant. Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) Fellow with commendation for services to the Northern Ireland PR industry.

4.2 Data Collection Tools

In depth interviews are a trusted and well-used form of data collection in public relations research (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). In this paper, we report on findings from a series of elite interviews with sport communications practitioners. McEvoy (2006) suggested that particular concerns should be taken when interviewing elite, key informants in divided societies. Following our university's research governance system, each participant was

provided with information sheets and statement of informed consent as standard research practice. In addition to this, we ensured that our respondents were provided with a draft schedule of the proposed questions prior to the interview commencing. As sport in this region is intrinsically linked to community identity the questions were organized allowing the interviewer to move from non-threatening questions on generic issues and crisis issues, to potentially more detailed (and possibly threatening) queries of how the participant was involved with specific crises (McEvoy, 2006).

A semi-structured approach was chosen because there was a need to ask specific questions in relation to the practitioners' significant experiences in communication. An advantage of the semi-structured approach taken is that it permitted emerging themes on the academic-practitioner gap to be explored further (King, 2004). Interviews took place over a four-month period in late 2013. Each was situated in either the participant's place of work or in a public venue. Each interview was digitally recorded and lasted between 60-80 minutes, and following each interview's completion they were transcribed verbatim. The digital recording allowed the researchers to increase their awareness of the issues that were important to each respondent (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Interviewees were provided with their transcripts and given the opportunity to add additional comments if they thought it had not been expressed during the interview, in order to ensure research validity (Carson et al 2000).

4.3 Data Analysis

The in-depth, elite interviews generated over 90,000 words spanning 68 pages of transcripts. Data analysis followed Strauss and Corbin's (2015) coding procedure to reduce the data into manageable segments. The initial step to manage this data was to form the data into a number of open codes. This process began immediately following the first interview by

creating a number of categories to capture and organize the data from the interviews. The coding was performed by both researchers independently and then the codes were matched to enhance the trustworthiness of this process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An example of how the codes were derived is contained in table 2. Following this, a process of axial coding attempted to link relationships between the open codes. The agreed codes included themes such as "defining", "respondent perspectives", and "response process" (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). The final phase of selective coding drew abstractions from the data in order to bring together the relationships from the axial phase to inform the practice and add to our academic approaches.

Table 2: Example of coding process for interview transcripts		
Participant	**Utterance**	**Codes**
Cullan	Too many companies, when they are trying to save money cut back on the marketing and PR. A crisis is something that can cause irreparable damage to your organisation and the most important thing about a crisis is knowing you are in one, or not and if you are in one, to act.	Cost cutting Understanding crisis Timing
Eoghan	Yes, it becomes a crisis, turns from an issue to a crisis, yes, you have got to manage it. ….you have to respond, because if you leave something go on and on and on, in most cases it gets worse, the media get frustrated, the stakeholders get frustrated, and then they start to think the worst, and then they take a situation and multiply it three or four times which all the time is damaging the brand of the individual, the club, the sport.	Evolving crisis Stakeholder concerns Reputational risk

4.4 Methodological limitations

There were two limitations in our approach. The first is that the focus on Northern Ireland limits the generalizability of this study. This was deemed acceptable due to its

exploratory nature and the fact that is covers public relations practice in a divided society. Furthermore, while these findings do not represent global practice, the region does provide an interesting context as even within Europe there are regional differences across various countries (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016; Straub & Jonkman, 2016; Verhoeven, Tench, Zerfass, Moreno & Verčič, 2014). While sport, at this level, is far from fully professional in practice, it is professional in its management at the governing body level (a regional association representing sport clubs and participants). Therefore, the findings reflect crisis practice where specialist (and often external) sport communications practitioners are still required to assist sports because of a lack of capacity within sports organisations. The second, and arguably more important limitation is that our sample is restricted to male respondents. This was unfortunate but unintentional.

5.0 Findings & Discussion

Data generated through the interviews explored the participant's background and their involvement in sport either as a past participant or current player. All of the respondents consider themselves communications practitioner's first and foremost, the academic subset of sport communications that we introduced to two of the respondents (having not have heard it before) was considered a minor consideration within their total responsibilities. However, respondents did mention the sports sector's ability to generate crisis, suggesting that while crisis communications may be infrequent, when crisis do occur they are very public and very newsworthy. These results provide rich and detailed insights into practitioner's crisis responses strategies in sport communications.

5.1. Issues, crisis and the tipping point

There were some commonalities between the practitioners' perspectives of issues and crisis. Given the expertise and experience of the crisis practitioners, much discussion was given to the 'processes' and 'rules' for managing issues and crisis communication. An issue was an ongoing situation rather than an episodic crisis. Some examples offered as issues in the context of Northern Ireland included sectarianism, political failures and a divided society. Many respondents felt that issues that 'bubbled under-the-surface' could be managed, or even avoided. Tadgh noted that 'an issue tends to be something which may have an impact but it's relatively minor and should be able to be handled in a relatively small-scale way'. Donncha described crisis as 'any unforeseen event that threatens the viability of an organization', Tadgh added the associated factors of 'death, life, limb, serious physical injury to staff or an employee', while Michial contributed the 'long term damage to the reputation of the sports organization', both 'internal and external' and an array of potential crisis event including 'something happening to one of the players, or something happening at the ground, it could be a mismanagement or a personal crisis'. There was general consensus on how an issue transforms into a crisis (Regester & Larkin, 2008). Michial stressed the importance of preventing the *'tipping point'* when an issue is 'picked up', and a crisis situation is avoided. Issues in this region included topics such as sectarianism, and efforts to achieve reconciliation between the segments of each community.

Unlike the crisis literature, considerable emphasis was given on the decision as to whether a crisis actually existed. Eoghan explained that in the advent of an incident;

> We will keep it very simple. First establish is it a crisis. Now that might sound a
> stupid response, but in many cases allegations are made and they cause crises and
> they might actually be factually incorrect so the first thing to do is say "is this a
> crisis"?

Michial stressed that often a lack of communication, or clarity with key stakeholders is then amplified by the media in their reporting. He discussed the immediate ramifications of a crisis being declared;

> This was an issue that became a crisis by bad decisions. It resulted in an interview at half-time in one of the games here at the Club. A journalist covering the press conference asked the CEO "was this a PR disaster?"
>
> Now if a journalist asks is this a PR disaster, it's already a PR disaster.

One aspect of the issues and crisis management approaches that did result in some extended discussion was the point at which a crisis emerges from an issue, and the importance of the practitioner and the sports organization recognising the warning signs in the risk-issue lifecycle (Regester & Larkin, 2008). Emphasis was placed on monitoring activities that practitioners engaged with but the partner sports organisations did little pre-planning to anticipate. This reflects the gaps that can form in not-for-profit sport organisations where other planning tasks, such as the development of athletes taking priority (Misener & Doherty, 2009). Issue audits were one approach offered by a respondent that would monitor the progress of relevant issues in an attempt to time the *tipping point* correctly. It was suggested that declaring a crisis too early could be just as detrimental to the reputation of the organization as failing to understand that a crisis had already occurred.

5.2 Practitioner's sport communications crisis responses

Practitioner's use of crisis *typologies* reflected crisis academics' use of metaphors, such as Seymour and Moore's (2000) *cobra* and *python* and Broom and Sha's (2012) *sustained, smouldering, immediate* and *emerging*. However, practitioners adapt existing frameworks or develop their own. A metaphor of crisis was described by Donncha as *the banana index* and

was deemed relevant in the context of digital communication. Donncha described the *green banana* as the "sudden" and unexpected crisis that needed;

> Pre-agreed procedures, to have a crisis communications plan in place, to have a crisis management team identified and have a chain of command in your communications.

> That's how you guard against the green banana, because you don't know what it is.

The *yellow banana* was the emerging crisis and organisations should "have planned ahead, you would have had your responses scripted, ready and in place". The final level of Donncha's typology, the *brown banana* was described as;

> The mouldy ones (which are getting more and more common in today's regulated world) basically those old sins or old actions judged by new standards. These are things that at the time people judge differently, people didn't look into, there were different standards, different morals…they are very difficult to deal with.

The sporting "brown banana' typology can be seen in the significant sport crises of Floyd Landis (Glantz, 2010) and Lance Armstrong (Hambrick, et al., 2015) whereby specific incidents revealed historical cases that created a crisis that damaged their reputations.

Respondents' stressed the need to check before making the final decision to 'implement the crisis communication plan' (Donncha). However, once a crisis was declared the practitioners offered phases of a crisis similar to those of crisis academics (Coombs, 2012; Seymour & Moore, 2000). If a crisis has been recognized the crucial questions must be asked. 'What is the crisis? What level of crisis is it?' Each of these questions requires the establishment of facts (Michial). Fact finding was mentioned by all of those interviewed as a crucial part of handling a crisis effectively. The success of this fact-finding stage relies heavily on Donncha's point that organizations need to have 'clear internal lines of communication and a culture of openness', as Tadgh explains all 'stakeholders' will have to be contacted to 'make

sure we have the story straight'. Following this, Michial suggests the crisis team will need to meet and agree 'next steps'. He described an action plan much like that recommended by Seymour and Moore (2000, p. 102), whereby there are cycles of meetings which analyze and review the situation, agree next steps and "monitor" the coverage, these meetings are then repeated on an agreed time schedule.

5.2.1 Controlling the response

Needing to maintain control during a crisis was the respondent's top priority. For Cullan and Donncha, managing the situation was about being 'perceived to be in charge' (Donncha), or being 'seen to be in control, in command' (Cullan). Cullan went further and offered two pieces of practical advice for when a crisis hits;

> Firstly, you clear the desks...wipe out diaries.... crisis is about deploying your
> resources as well, you have your crisis plan, you have your comms [sic.] people,
> but you got to know who is deployed where and secondly you log everything.

Tadgh explained the practical implications of maintaining clear internal communication;
> 'There needs to be a blanket silence that goes on in the rest of company, no one
> speculates on Facebook, social media, Twitter, anything like that .... because the
> journalist will work their way around the company and phone anyone they can to
> get a comment and so you need to make sure your entire staff are briefed'.

Ronan, Cullan and Michial noted a significant risk was the lack of control over individuals associated with the organization, despite precautions in their contractual agreements or written guidelines. Michial explained some of the power-relations difficulties exposed in this approach;

No player will do a media interview without me knowing it. In fact, I will give you an example of it. A local newspaper rang the head coach about a fortnight ago and asked him for a comment and he gave it. I had to say through the director of sport, he can't do that and that's the head coach of the team...... you're never going to be 100 percent in control of the things that come out of this organization but I've got to be as much in control as possible. So that's why we have very strict media policies for the players.

Each respondent presented examples of where this had worked well and where it had not. Ronan provided an example of the control expected from his team during the 2012 London Summer Olympic Games;

It was one of our biggest issues that we discussed as part of our PR plan and in the main, 99 percent of athletes obeyed by the team members' agreement on these issues but there were a couple of athletes that put a tweet out and they didn't realise that that might spiral.... journalists are looking at tweets and they will say, disharmony in the camp and that's the headline and it couldn't be further from the truth.

In response to a specific crisis, Michial provided an example of how communicating the specific, yet tragic circumstances surrounding the death of a player effectively managed the news cycle;

So, when Malcolm died we managed the crisis. We said no player speaks. I wrote the Club Captain's statement, with the captain the only player that spoke for the players that week, no other player mentioned it, no other coach did anything, because that was the appropriate thing to do. It's not about keeping messaging at

that time but we just wanted a united voice and that united voice came through the captain.

Once control is assured, a context for efficient communication can be created. First, decisions are made to unify the message. Second, consultation with sport's direct family or other close stakeholders occurs and then, third the media is informed. Tadgh states 'you put it out there to the journalist...you put it out there to social media, you make sure your side of the story is out there', Building on this Donncha stressed you need to be aware that in a crisis you are having to deal with emotions as well as facts, he recommended that the story must be clear as well as 'empathetic and sympathetic' to mitigate the potential for upset and anger (Seeger, 2006).

5.2.2. Delivering the response

The line of communication an organization takes will depend on what has happened, but Donncha suggested some 'common errors' of media communication during a crisis. Firstly, *hesitation*. Donncha emphasized that a short delay may be necessary as facts are gathered but "excessive delay" allows journalists to "conjure up the worst possible image" (Mitroff et al. 1996, p. 117). It is this hesitation which can turn the media's attitude from *neutral* or *sympathetic* to *hostile* (Regester & Larkin, 2008). Furthermore, a prolonged hesitation or a 'no comment' can give the impression that an organization is hiding something and often lead to a loss of control as the media find alternate sources. Donncha noted that *retaliation* or *confrontation* may escalate a crisis further and compromises control and *obscurity* may be interpreted as dishonesty. With regards to decisions to 'withhold' information (Donncha), there was agreement between the interviewees and the literature, whatever needs to be disclosed should be. Information which will 'control the situation' (Eoghan) and 'protect the organization within the law should be unveiled' (Cullan). Donncha noted 'you do not hold back

anything that is essential to the needs of your stakeholders, including the media, but Tadgh also warns against exposing more than is necessary 'you only say what you need to say, be short and precise.' All of the practitioners explicitly warned against lying. Cullan noted 'once the media think you tell lies you might as well go and get another job'. Some warned that any lies told will eventually be uncovered by the media and therefore any information given out should be wholly truthful (Regester & Larkin, 2008; Seymour & Moore, 2000).

In this case, we revealed that practitioners suggest a strategic process is employed that focuses upon the usual activities of issues management, such as preparation, monitoring and control (Coombs, 2012; Seeger, 2006) but incorporating social media. These activities aim to prevent issues escalating into crisis. In the advent of a crisis occurring on-going activities that support the crisis process include fact-checking, crisis team meetings, action planning and crisis communication. Emphasis was placed on communicating efficiently, hence the crisis process aimed to reduce the time taken to get the right message out to the media. As a result, these issues and crisis management activities align with approaches found in the literature (Coombs, 2012; Glantz, 2008; Regester & Larkin, 2008), revealing that these models are common in Northern Irish communications practice. Nevertheless, missing from the approaches was sufficient details about the pre-crisis or preparation phase. Issues such as sectarianism, racial divides and political status are well known across the region, there was little evidence of pre-planning in the advent of these issues becoming a crisis. For example, a racially motivated incident occurred in an Ulster Gaelic Athletic Association club match in December 2012. When the incident was raised in the media, the organization delayed their response as they did not, at the time have an official policy on racial discrimination. Therefore, despite operating in this context that has been plagued with sectarian issues, creeping

professionalization had not influenced crisis processes, in particular reputation risk management.

Despite many respondents' acknowledgement that issues and crisis management requires careful planning a few did stress that they believed each type of crisis posed different threats to organizational reputation, and while models are useful, there was an agreement of caution in making generalizations about the processes, Michial noted;

"is an art, it's not a science...it's not apply X, Y and Z and the outcome is this, it doesn't work like that, media is a living breathing organization that can bite you, it can drag you down, and you can fight it off with everything you have, but it can still do it."

5.2.3 The local impact of social media

The uncensored nature of social media was a concern (Spence et al., 2016; Vail et al., 2011). Therefore, the practitioners advised organizations to monitor social media, but with the mindset that you have to 'choose your battles' (Donncha). He further explained, 'you are never going to respond to all the negative coverage, so you need to kind of qualify how valid and how influential is the source'. If an organization is to respond to public criticism, the practitioners advised to respond through more private mediums. Tadgh stated, 'I think if possible you would want to actually get a phone number, or try and speak to them' and Michial noted for his team;

Criticisms tend to come through emails or Facebook emails and we will respond to

them. That gives us discretion then to be able to take negative conversations offline,

off the public sphere, off the public page and have the conversation directly.

Michial suggested that in crisis and sport communication fans who 'say something really negative about the club, get [berated] by everyone else'. Michial suggested that 'Facebook

regulates itself' through its supporters, so intervention is sometimes not necessary. This adds another consideration to the practice of crisis communication but can soften the impact of a crisis on the reputation of the organization (see also Brown & Billings, 2013).

Practitioners agreed that there were clear benefits from effective social media use within a crisis. Precautionary measures are vital to counteract the speed by which crisis can spiral via social media. Cullan stressed 'it is about surviving the first two or three days and then being seen to be efficient'. To respond quickly, training and preparation are recommended. Cullan explained how past comments made through social media could create issues and potentially crisis. He went on to give an example of how an organization can use training to inform athletes of their responsibilities;

> I agreed to give a talk to their bright young stars of the future to put the fear of God into them about Twitter because these athletes can ruin their careers now…the athletes were smart enough about not saying stupid things to the newspapers and journalists but they had not caught on to the dangers of social media.

Tadgh noted that the 'the first place they (sports stakeholders) will go is to the official page" and that is the 'fastest way of getting news out there', with updates or changes to the official statement. Michial gave an example of this after the death of one of their players;

> For two weeks we used Facebook and Twitter in a totally different way, we used it as an information tool... the funerals going to be this day, the book of memorial is open at this point. So instead of becoming… "the players are doing this, the team is announced"… and all that, we just went to very straight information about what was happening in that crisis and I found that a very useful tool.

In such a crisis, Tadgh stressed that the advantage of social media was the interaction, the chance for conversation and the opportunity for a sports organization to show ethical and 'human behaviour'. Such interaction perceived a crisis to be managed. Other practitioners agreed that social media provides a platform to understand stakeholder's issues or concerns, then allows you to monitor the general feeling towards the organization that could ultimately prevent a crisis from happening (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). Some practical advice was provided for sport organizations to mitigate negative outcomes. In a crisis Donncha suggested creating a 'dark-website or a dark-webpage... a page which sits on your server, all ready to be activated at the touch of a button should you have a crisis', he goes on to explain that this website should provide 'immediate information'. This should be used instead of a banner link referring the viewer to a press release as that would appear as any other news story. Donncha provided an example of what it should contain citing a recent national food scandal, that reflects Coombs' guidelines for post-crisis communications;

> What I want to find there [food company website] is immediate information of what
> I should do if I have [one of their] lasagnes in the fridge. If I have bought it should
> I eat it or not eat it, should I return the product, I want to find out what [the company]
> are doing to reassure me... that dark page should have links to...food standards
> agency, local health bodies, it should help the consumer.

Nevertheless, some drawbacks were clear.

The speed at which a crisis escalated was another issue the practitioners identified with social media. Donncha noted 'I used to say when we first did crisis media training... the first 24 hours are the most important in any crisis, and now we are saying it's the first 24 minutes, almost'. Speed is the reason why Coombs (2012) advises that an organization needs to be visible and active before and during crisis. If an organization does not utilize the opportunity

to put statements out on social media, 'the conversation on the crisis will continue through social media without the organization's voice being heard' (Veil, et al., 2011, p. 118) and can lead to rumors and misguided public perception (Seeger, 2006).

Numerous examples connected the speed of social media to the loss of control in managing a crisis. Michial explained how a lack of social media planning undermined his organization's authority over their message, specifically by not controlling the growth of unofficial club branded social media sites,

> We had an issue on social media on the night that one of our players died. So, my predecessor didn't start a Facebook page [for the club], someone else did [an unofficial site], and that page grew to 30,000 [followers] by the time I had joined. My predecessor started [our official] Facebook page but two years too late. So, we had an unofficial page that had 30,000 followers and we had an official page with 12,000....so you talk about what dangers can come, it's unofficial, or its about social media channels that you don't have control of, putting information out to your followers that they think is you.

Social media presented challenges to practitioners, however it was its potential advantages that could most readily assist in preventing, or at least controlling the timing of the tipping point to wrest organizational advantage. Despite these suggestions however, there were few examples of where this actually occurred that were provided, possibly revealing a gap between practitioner expectations and practical reality. While social media generates another media-front to manage the crisis response, the respondents felt that the effective management of these streams could enhance a sport organization's reputation. The case was presented whereby a crisis was exacerbated by the release of confidential information via an unofficial

social media site. In response, the organization took control of their social media presence in the aftermath which prevented this from occurring again. Fans through social media acted as 'faith-holders' (Luoma-aho, 2006), and regulated negative comments the club received, and defended the reputation of the club toward other fans. This loyalty acts as a buffer for individuals or sport organisations in crisis situations (Koerber & Zabara, 2017) and suggests the possible emergence of a remote stakeholder/influencer approach to online communications management during a crisis (Brown & Billings, 2013; Brown, et al., 2015).

Despite the clear benefits and challenges presented by social media, most of the respondents felt that traditional media outlets were still more important than social. Donncha confirmed; 'in a crisis the majority of people will still turn to the traditional, trusted, professional, journalistic organization'. This finding is noteworthy, considering the prevalence of social media in communication research (Spence et al., 2016), and could be a reflection of context whereby traditional media is arguably the region's most trusted media source (Verhoeven et al, 2014).

6.0 Conclusions and Further Research.

In this study, we gained a welcome understanding of how Northern Irish sport communications practitioners' crisis response approaches compared with those found in academia. Each research questions outlined above have been achieved. Practitioner's in Northern Ireland adopt similarly logical approaches, which are based on, reflect and are heavily influenced by academic literature. This suggests that in sport communication in Northern Ireland the gap between practitioners and academic knowledge is not gaping. While this study's generalizability is limited it does contribute to an accumulation of cases demonstrating how PR practitioners respond to crisis situations (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016; Hu & Pang, 2016;

Strauβ & Jonkman, 2017; Verhoeven et al. (2014). Specifically, Verhoeven et al. (2014) found that different cultural contexts prioritize different forms of communication. In this study, traditional media remained the primary media stakeholder. We feel these findings creates value for wider audiences as it reinforces in various contexts the traditional approach can provide a more stable media outlet for the crisis response over and above, more contemporary mechanisms. Nevertheless, social media has challenged the models employed by practitioners but their experiences have incorporated an awareness of the speed by which a crisis spreads and methods of control into the models in order to avoid exacerbating a crisis as strategies such as preparing external stakeholders, employees and athletes in safe social media use have been enacted.

Seeger's (2006) best practices were evident in the respondent data, and as such these findings contribute to the communication literature by demonstrating that in this case academic knowledge appears to be ingrained in practice. Practitioners revealed that in their issues and crisis communication practice they stress the importance of interpersonal relationships (Manoli, 2016). They use process approaches to issues and crisis management, seek to form partnerships with publics, remain open and honest, collaborate with credible sources, ensure media needs are met, communicate with compassion, concern and empathy, accept uncertainty, and ensure that their messages are self-effacing. At this point work in this region needs to examine pre-crisis planning and 'listening to the [wider] public's concerns' with regards to various issues, and not just their own supporters. Nevertheless, given the embryonic stages of sport communications within Northern Ireland this research provides a sound basis to develop future practice in the area.

There were limitations of the approach that should be highlighted. While the sample size was limited, there was the risk of conformity within the meanings shared between these participants. That these were an elite group of individuals may exacerbate this issue due to the small scale of the Northern Irish sport media marketplace. As such, many of these individuals share numerous personal and professional relationships which could lead to an agreed worldview or groupthink situation occurring. It is also unlikely that due to the region covered and relatively small population (1.852 million – NISRA, 2016) these professionals are not exposed to the pressures from social media sites as practitioners in other regions who possess a large catchment of readers or subscribers experience, hence the focus remains on more traditional media relations approaches, while not dismissing social media the broadcast and news media remain the major constituents of these practitioners.

Further research could examine two areas. First, the models and ideas presented by the practitioners can be viewed, post-crisis from an objective standpoint to determine their success, or otherwise, and the implications for further crisis management development. Second, and as Coombs (2012) suggests it is more important that further studies empirically test the practices outlined above, from within the organization, during a crisis event. We join L'Etang (2012) in her suggestion for more ethnographic research to experience how issues jolt into crisis situations and witness the actual, lived experience of practitioners. This would contribute an academic case study of issues and crisis management that can be contrasted not only with the models discussed earlier in the paper but also with the approaches outlined by the practitioners themselves.

Word count 7379

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