# Political communication in and about crises. Potentials of a fragmented field

Linards Udris, University of Zurich, Department of Communication and Media Research & fög – Research Institute for the Public Sphere and Society

## Abstract

While there is growing interest in political crises in political communication research, crisis has not yet become a meaningful concept. Also, research tends to be reactive, which is suggested by an analysis of when and how the "crisis" label occurred in Swiss media from 2000 to 2018 and how recent scholarship examines political crises. This commentary gives an overview of different research areas within this fragmented "crisis" field and discusses a nuanced concept of crises that is more sensitive to the causes and dynamics of communicatively constructed crises on the macro level. It argues that a more systematic, more comparative and more macro-oriented research on political crises will help reduce the reactive nature of the field and enhance its public relevance.

## Keywords

political crisis, political communication, crisis theory, crisis communication, public sphere, social change

## 1 Introduction

Crisis quickly has become an issue in political communication research. Just let us look at three recent conferences in the field. First, the Political Communication Section of ECREA labeled its bi-annual conference (Zurich, November 2017) "Political Communication in Times of Crisis: New Challenges, Trends & Possibilities". Second, at the annual conference of the ICA (Prague, May 2018), two panels of the Political Communication Division debated on the "crisis of democracy": one focusing on "Global Populism, Local Populism: Comparing Sub-National Dynamics of the Crisis of Democracy", another on "Social Media Platforms: A Crisis of Democracy?" Third, the political communication groups of DGPuK, DVPW and SGKM devoted their annual conference to "Political Communication in and about Crises" (Fribourg, February 2018). This last conference is the basis for three papers published in this special issue and the basis for this commentary.

What does this apparent interest in crises reflect and what could we learn from it? First, there is a tendency for polit-

ical communication scholars to use crisis as a buzzword, sometimes not even defining how crises differ from non-crises. In this sense, some scholars seem to react mainly to current (Western) public debate where the "crisis of democracy" frame has become prevalent especially since the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, the sudden increase of migrants in Europe in the summer of 2015, the Brexit vote 2016 and the election of Donald J. Trump as the president of the United States in 2016. Second, political communication scholars also understand very different things when allegedly talking about the same thing (crisis), which reflects a fragmented field. For instance, scholars apply crisis either to society and public communication at the macro level, borrowing theories from sociology and political science, or to concrete organizations on the meso level, relying more on public relations research.

In this essay, I will argue that crisis has not yet become a meaningful concept in the field yet but there is potential to integrate a fragmented field with a nuanced concept of crises that is more sensitive to the causes and dynamics of communicatively constructed crises on the macro lev-

el. If we do this, I believe this would also allow us as a field to contribute with our research even more to society because we would use it to address more directly society's pressing concerns. This means we could contribute more to the seismographic function (discussing problems before they turn into a crisis), more to a deep understanding of past crises (keeping the focus on explaining crises even if they have fallen out of the media's spotlight) and more to a sober assessment of current crises (avoiding episodic, ad-hoc research as a mere reaction to public debates). This essay is meant to stimulate further debate within the field, which is why I will use a more commentary-oriented style and will take the liberty of making some general, simplified judgements.

This essay is structured into four parts. First, I analyze when and in which contexts the "crisis" label has been used in news coverage of Swiss media since 2000 and try to relate it to current research interests of scholars examining crises. Second, I give an overview what this broad and fragmented "crisis" research field looks like and what the implications are for political communication research. Third, I sketch out an approach that offers more linkages within the fragmented field. I conclude with general remarks on the need for diachronic, comparative analyses and more public engagement.
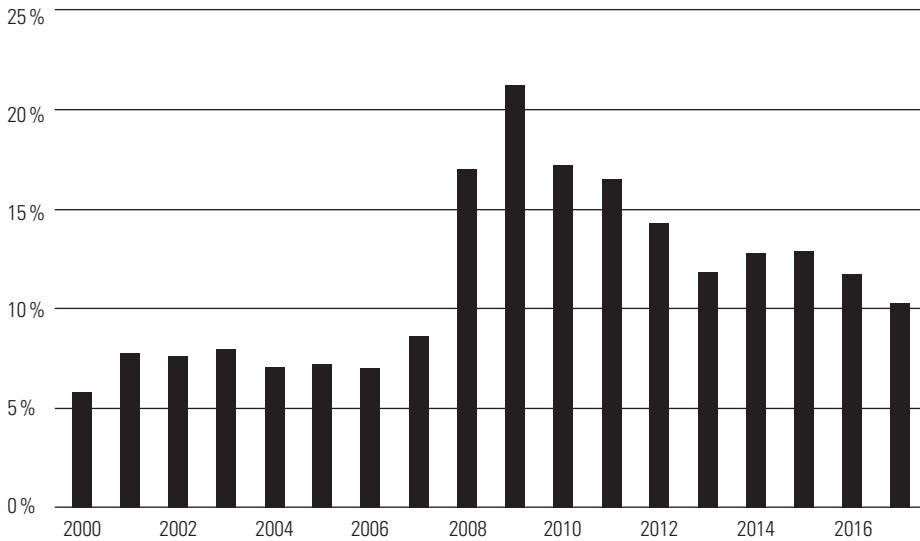
## 2 Mediated crises and research interests

As I argued, the current scholarly interest in political crises might be driven also in part from the current public debate. While I cannot prove this point with exact methods, especially not in an international context, I try to find plausible linkages between media coverage and scholars' current interest by looking at the debate about crises in Swiss media in a slightly longer time period. Especially when we focus on the more European or global crises, leaving aside Switzerland's domestic crises, we can use Swiss media coverage as a possible (albeit not perfect) yardstick for me-

dia attention to crises in general (at least in Western Europe and more specifically in Germany). This is because (Western) media across countries have developed professional standards and specific logics which events make the news. With the rise of international 24/7 TV channels, news agencies and generally more transnational news flows, big transnational events find it easier to be reported than before (Brügge-mann & Wessler, 2014). In addition to that, in view of the "next-door-giant" effect, it is clear that German-speaking media in Switzerland show a significant overlap with news coverage in neighboring Germany.

To track the salience of crises in Swiss media coverage, I was able to work with a pre-structured database of coded media articles at fög – Research Institute for the Public Sphere and Society at the University of Zurich. In the context of several research projects, full editions of newspapers were analyzed, with some restrictions, e.g. excluding very short articles, news agency reports, or ordinary sports coverage (game reports). Each article was assigned to an inductively generated "communication event" or issue (cf. Imhof 1993; Udris, Schneider & Lucht, 2015). In view of this inductive logic and the semantics that journalists themselves use when making sense of events, communication events can range from concrete episodes (e.g. earthquakes) and more mid-range events (e.g. elections including run-up and reflection afterwards) to more long-term, abstract processes (e.g. economic performance in general) (Eisenegger, 2005). In this database, each communication event carries a distinct label capturing the geographical scope, the main actors involved and the thematic focus of newspaper coverage.

From this collection, I chose three newspapers, each of which represents an important segment of the (German-speaking) Swiss press system: Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ) as a quality paper with an international outlook, Tages-Anzeiger as a quality-oriented "mid-market" paper addressing wider audiences than the NZZ, and finally Blick, Switzerland's

Figure 1:    Share of articles in Swiss media mentioning crises (2000–2017)

largest tabloid daily. Within all coded issues that these three newspapers covered over a time period from 2000 to 2017 ($n=570\,929$), I used basic search strings to look at the intensity and type of debate of crises in general (regardless its context) and the crisis of democracy in particular. In addition, I analyzed in which communication events (issues) these articles appear. The following results are meant to show the broad picture and not the exact number of correct instances, which is why I did not check individual articles for false positives.

The results show that "crisis" as a term is often used but with noticeable peaks. In 2009, the year with the highest frequency and highest share, these three newspapers mention "crisis" in around 18 news articles every single day, which constitutes 21% of the coded articles in 2009. In 2017, it is (only) around 10%. Just looking at the development, it becomes clear that "crisis" is used more often from 2008 on, and the decrease from 2011 does not reach the pre-2008 level any longer. As can be seen from the list of the largest five communication events per year (cf. Table 3 in the Appendix), the main driver of this peak from 2008 to 2012 is the "economic crisis" and the according communication events clustered around it: the global financial crisis in 2008, which also affects Switzerland's largest bank UBS, and later the "Euro crisis" or "Debt crisis". Other drivers in that peak period include the accident at the nuclear power plant in Fukushima 2011 and the war in Syria in 2012. In 2014, "crisis" is most often used in connection with the conflict in the Ukraine. In 2015, another round of crisis in the Eurozone (e. g. the referendum in Greece) as well as a perception of a (European) "refugee crisis" dominate. This "refugee crisis" also explains part of the relatively high attention to "crisis" in 2016, and the decreasing media interest to this issue in 2017 also correlates with decreasing mentions of crisis overall.

Taken together, these results indicate that crises discussed in Swiss media in the last two decades refer more often to economic than political crises and more often to violent conflicts and wars than non-violent political crises. One could argue that applying the term "crisis" to economic crises (including crises of concrete companies such as Swissair or Fiat) than to political institutional crises is easier for

the media as they can use seemingly simple and uncontested indicators such as falling stock market prices, state debts etc. Of course, economic crises had a clear political impact (e. g. regulation debate) and often were accompanied with political crises. Also, the results indicate that rapidly escalating violent conflicts such as in Syria (for Swiss media mainly in 2012), in Iraq (in 2003), between Israel and Lebanon (in 2006) and between the Ukraine and Russia (in 2014) find high attention and are labeled as crisis events, especially since violence and the physically visible erosion of the social order pose an imminent threat. The same can be said for riots like in France (2006). Finally, disasters such as the floods in Switzerland (2005), the tsunami in Thailand (late 2004) and Fukushima (2011) and epidemics such as the Bird Flu (2005–2006) and Ebola (2014) are interpreted as "crisis" events and shape the media agenda. Given this overall pattern, the high attention to the "refugee crisis" in 2015 and 2016 is remarkable, as this policy issue is neither a measurable economic crisis nor an obvious violent threat to the social order like a war (attack on one's country) or a natural disaster which strikes suddenly.

Regarding political crises on the system level, I checked the use of "crisis" in context to the "crisis of democracy", using a basic string with "crisis" that appeared in the same article as the word "democracy". This is deliberately a very strict criterion, as crisis debates on the system level do not necessarily use the label "democracy". Not surprisingly, the numbers mirroring this potentially much more self-reflexive debate are much lower (n = 4 376); overall, they constitute a mere 0.8% of all coded articles. In 2017, for instance, there is less than one article every day when crisis appears in the context of democracy. But the development over time suggests an increasing awareness to political crises on the system level. Before, at the start of the century, the data shows much "noise", meaning many isolated instances of crises that refer to one case (one country) and are thus geographically confined (e. g. the riots in Thailand in 2008). Not even the

terrorist attacks on 9/11 (2001), in Madrid (2004) or London (2005) increase the perception that there is a crisis of democracy of the Western world or a crisis of democracy in general. The peak in 2009 reflects a whole series of isolated events (e. g. difficult coalition-building after the elections in Germany and protests in Iran).

It is only after 2009 that the articles really reflect a perception of more encompassing crises affecting democracies as such. For instance, in 2011 and 2012, events during and after the Arab Spring are set in relation to political crises, as are events following the crisis in the Eurozone. The more recent peaks (2016 and 2017) reflect the renewal of a political crisis in Europe in the context of the debt crisis and in the context of increasing Euroscepticism, which is found in the high attention to Brexit or to the success of right-wing populists in Poland. Especially following the US presidential elections in 2016, there is much debate about the rise of populism, which again is used to highlight the alleged crisis of formerly stable political systems in established democracies (e. g. the seemingly surprising success of the right-wing populist AfD in the German elections in 2017).

In sum, news coverage of Swiss media shows clear patterns when it comes to media attention to "big" global crises and different types of crises in general (economic crises, war, conflict, disaster), some of which will look familiar also to scholars in other European countries given the regularities in international news flows.

Against this background, what can we observe when looking at researchers' current projects on political crises? To give an example, I examined how scholars at the conference on "Political Communication in and about Crises" (February 2018) used the crisis concepts in their abstracts and which crises they focused upon. The vast majority of scholars came from German-speaking universities in Switzerland and Germany, which again makes the analysis of Swiss media coverage a reasonable starting point. There were 15 abstracts, each around one page long, which means potentially enough space to give at

Figure 2:　Articles in Swiss media mentioning the crisis of democracy (2000–2017)
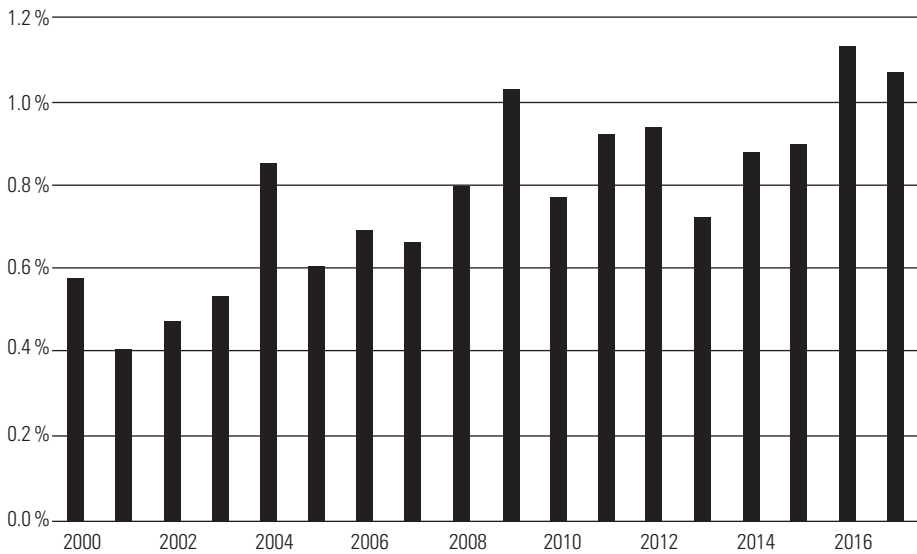
least some information on the crisis concept. 10 abstracts had a first author from a university in Germany. 5 abstracts had a first author from a Swiss university.

13 out of those 15 abstracts did indeed use the word crisis, thus offering starting points for further debate among conference participants. (Two abstracts, focusing on terrorist attacks, did not even mention the word crisis.) Most abstracts focused

Table 1:　Examined crises and scope of analysis

| Examined crises | $N=(15)$ |
|---|---|
| Refugee crisis* | 7 |
| Climate change | 2 |
| Terrorist attacks (abstracts did not mention the word "crisis") | 2 |
| Ukraine crisis* | 2 |
| Brexit | 1 |
| Euro (debt) crisis* | 1 |
| (Right-wing) populism | 1 |
| Crises in general | 1 |

Note. Examined crises and scope of analysis in 15 abstracts prepared for the conference "Political Communication in and about Crises" (2018); * one abstract examined and compared three crises (cf. Lichtenstein & Nitsch, 2019)

on concrete crises that are and have been also salient in more recent Swiss media coverage ("refugee crisis", Brexit, Ukraine, Euro "debt crisis"), while a few abstracts focused on more general, long-term processes (climate change, terrorism, populism). In this sense, scholarship seems to be responsive but unfortunately also reactive. To be clear, my critique is *not* a plea against conducting studies on recent salient crises such as the "refugee crisis" per se – after all, its extraordinary impact on the media agenda and public agenda is striking, which makes it a highly relevant case. My plea is for a well-reasoned, justified selection of the crisis cases and the according links to theory. This justification is not always given sufficiently; the reactive nature of our field was apparent at the conference because only two abstracts explained why the chosen, examined crisis "is" actually a crisis (rather than just a conflict, a challenge, a routine process, etc.). Most abstracts just labeled something as a crisis without giving any reason. Typically, authors mentioned the "refugee crisis", sometimes not even using inverted commas. In this sense, scholars willingly

or unwillingly accept the crisis labeling from public discourse. This is a problem because the term "crisis" is contested and crises are usually defined in public communication, which also means crises are defined by political actors with a strategic interest in labeling events a "crisis" or by media following certain logics (be they political or commercial). Therefore, a stronger awareness in our field regarding the labeling of political problems and conflicts would be helpful. Ideally, scholarship will address political crises without contributing to "hyped-up" crises and without neglecting those formerly big crises that are now disappearing from the media agenda.

Regarding the reactive nature of the field, we could also wonder why political communication scholars do not (any longer) study former "big crises" such as the global financial "crisis" or the Euro "crisis". Do we really know enough already whether and how political communication patterns were at the root of these crises and how political communication as a whole relates to the still ongoing effects of the crises? For instance, what does it mean that new protest actors such as "Occupy Paradeplatz" (who in 2011 protested against the financial sector on a square in Zurich where Switzerland's two largest banks have their headquarters) appeared rather quickly with much media attention but rather quickly fell out of the media spotlight? Are we as a field confident enough we can share our insights with the public and political actors to help prevent or alleviate a (likely) further economic "crisis"? And even more generally, are we doing enough to find basic patterns of different crises that would allow us to be more sensitive to upcoming crises and thus allow us to be more of a seismograph of problems in a democratic society?

Some studies can be indeed considered less reactive and more continuous, as they focus on more long-term processes such as climate change (2 abstracts), terrorism (series of terrorist attacks) (2 abstracts) and populism (1 abstract). However, it is striking that the link to "crisis" in these abstracts was either fully absent or rather weak – with the study on populism

as an exception. The studies on terrorism did not even mention the word "crisis" in the abstracts, and the abstracts on climate change just stipulated that climate change was one of the main crises of our time without giving any reasons why and how climate change really (now) is a political crisis. To put it bluntly, scholars focusing on concrete, delimited crises should clearly justify their cases in order not do episodic research, and scholars focusing on long-term processes should clearly justify when exactly and under which circumstances these long-term processes change their dynamics and turn into political crises.

Reviewing the contributions at the conference in this light, the selection of three papers for this special issue is convincing: First, the study by Kösters et al. (2019) chooses the most salient recent "crisis", i.e. the "refugee crisis", but it does not take the crisis label at face value but rather asks how one shared topic which is salient in all segments of the population is interpreted differently in different political and communicative milieus. Thus, the study uses one indicator of "crisis" (high media attention) and links it to other indicators of "crisis" such as polarization (ideally two conflicting milieus) and sinking legitimacy of political elites in some milieus. In this sense, the results could also be used in the ongoing debate about "filter bubbles" and fragmentation. One strand of research suggests that selective exposure especially on digital media leads to filter bubbles in which different people and different milieus each have their own topic preferences. But this argument is difficult to sustain, especially when "extreme events" such as the "refugee crisis" are covered in the media, which reach most segments in the population (Pörksen, 2018). At least in my reading, the results of the study by Kösters et al. (2019) speak against the existence of filter bubbles, since these milieus all consider the "refugee crisis" to be important. The results rather suggest the existence of what Pörksen (2018) would call a "filter clash". Different milieus actually share and debate the same topic but in a networked and digital public sphere, they directly and immediately collide with each other

as their perceptions of the world (and of this topic) radically differ from each other. Second, the study of Nitsch and Lichtenstein (2019) is one of the rare examples when several (types of) crises are analyzed and compared. Furthermore, the study is innovative as it applies established concepts such as framing or indexing on satire shows, a news genre often overlooked and hardly ever linked to crisis research despite its general relevance in people's media consumption (also for news purposes) and despite the fact that satire often is especially important during crisis periods. Third, the study by Wirz et al. (2019) does justice to the active and strategic use of crisis rhetoric of political actors who dramatize developments and ultimately create a political crisis from which they hope to benefit. In terms of operationalization, using dramatization in populist rhetoric as an indicator of crisis rhetoric is an important step to close the gap in the literature (cf. also Bos & Brants, 2014); at the same time, more attention could be paid to how dramatization (crisis rhetoric) relates to other elements of the populist style (e. g. emotionalization). From Wirz et al. (2018), we can learn that the (right-wing) populist rhetoric does have an effect on attitudes of media users but only in combination with anti-immigrant rhetoric (nativism) of political actors and only for individuals holding populist attitudes.

## 3    Spotlights on political crises and blind spots of research areas

As mentioned, the three papers in this special issue are laudable exceptions to the rule, i. e. scholarship tends to be reactive and does not systematically link political crises to established social theories. One of the reasons for these shortcomings outlined above might be the heterogeneity of crisis research. Political crises are studied in many different research areas, but in hardly any area do these crises play a prominent role. Even in crisis communication research, the field that exclusively deals with crises, "political crises are a blind spot" (Auer, 2016). This becomes apparent especially in publications that claim much authority: encyclopedias and handbooks.

In the *International Encyclopedia of Communication* (Donsbach, 2008), the only two entries with the word "crisis" in the title refer to more meso-oriented research, focusing on "Crisis Communication" (Coombs, 2009) and on "Communication in Organizational Crises" (Sellnow, 2008). The number of entries mentioning crises is relatively high (143), but the number mainly shows the heterogeneity of how the term is used (e. g. in the entry on "Disasters and Communication" or on the cultural theorist Stuart Hall). This heterogeneity is also visible in the *Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research* (Schwarz, Seeger & Auer, 2016a) but one clear advancement of that handbook is the attempt to offer clear linkages between the different approaches in studying crises (e. g. Heath & Palenchar, 2016) and integrate a few chapters explicitly dealing with political crises (e. g. Auer, 2016) – a point to which I will come back later.

In political communication research, crisis is certainly less a core concept. In the *SAGE Handbook of Political Communication* (Semetko & Scammell, 2014), for example, there is not even one subject index entry for "crisis"; the only article out of 41 mentioning "crisis" in the title deals with a very specific crisis (Tait, 2014). Furthermore, only one out of 61 articles in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Political Communication* (Kenski & Hall Jamieson, 2017) focuses on crises, i. e. "media responsiveness in times of crisis" (Winkler, 2017). Furthermore, the handbook by Reinemann (2014) on *Political Communication* devotes little space to political crises and again relates crises more to organizational crises than to political crises on the macro level. In the subject index, "crisis communication" is listed with a link to Strömbäck's entry (2014) on "Political public relations", indicating the main lens how political crises are studied despite a few cross-references to related issues such as "hypes, waves and storms" (Stanyer, 2014) or "political communication in social transformation and revolution" (Hertog and Zuercher, 2014).

Reviewing the literature more broadly, I would suggest there are six areas where *political* crises are studied (cf. Table 2). There are, of course, some overlaps between these areas and my main goal in highlighting their specific conception of crisis and their weaknesses and blind spots is not to overly problematize this heterogeneity but to offer possible linkages and starting points for further common ground. When reviewing the research areas, I focus on which types of crisis come into focus; I also focus on conceptual problems and blind spots of these research areas, which relate to the social level of analysis (e.g. predominant meso perspective), the definition and conceptualization of crises and the time delimitation (crises as short events or long-term processes). Other categories such as national vs. comparative or cross-cultural analyses (Schwarz et al., 2016b) are not the scope of this essay.

To begin with, *risk communication* (e.g. Ruhrmann, 2015) as an important field focuses on disasters such as epidemics (e.g. bird flus) or accidents (e.g. in nuclear power plants) and examines, among others, the role of political organizations before, during and after disasters. Disasters constitute clear risks, as they might appear with high probability and inflict much damage, possibly threatening the social order physically in the short term (e.g. deaths) and morally also in the long term (e.g. erosion of trust). Relating disasters to political crises, one could argue that risk communication takes into account insecurity and responsibility-attribution, which are important elements of crisis definitions. Of course, insecurity will be especially high in the immediate aftermath of an unexpected disaster (e.g. earthquake), where political actors are expected to bring the situation under control. But insecurity might also be high already before disasters if people anticipate (more) disasters and if people have reasons not to trust political actors with managing a crisis. Thus, risk communication offers crucial insights into the more episodic character of the aftermath of disasters (post-crisis phase) and in the more

process-oriented character of anticipated disasters (pre-crisis phase). That being said, however, one weakness is the unclear relation to political crises. After all, if disasters can be anticipated and risks calculated, disasters might be more easily controlled once they strike. A government in California will expect a likely earthquake (and hence prepare for it) but a government in France will not expect a certain type of political protest such as the «Gilets Jaunes». In this sense, disasters become routine events with clear expectations, thus pointing more at the stability of the social order than its erosion in a period of crisis.

A more precise understanding of crisis is used in the field of *crisis communication*, the only one out of these six fields that puts crises at the very center of its research. Crisis communication is a communicative process where situations that are perceived as threatening and disruptive are also being labeled as crises by individual and organizational actors (Schwarz, 2015). Typically, this strand of research is connected to public relations research and focuses on organizational crises on the meso level. Thus, a crisis is a "perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generative negative outcomes" (cf. Coombs, 2012). A crisis occurs when an organization confuses its internal view and external views and when it neglects the changing issue environment (Kepplinger, 2015). This research field offers a number of established indicators to measure the reputation of actors in crisis (e.g. guilt-attribution frames, negative evaluations etc.). Using organizations as cases, it can examine more clearly more distinct time periods when an organization is in a state of crisis and what it does to strategically "manage" the crisis – hence "issues management" or "reputation management" are defined as allied fields (Coombs, 2012). In terms of political crises, this research includes political organizations that themselves experience a crisis – for instance a political party following a decisive electoral loss – or that

Table 2:    Research areas dealing with political crises

| Research Areas | Type of Crisis and Overall Focus | Conceptual Problems |
|---|---|---|
| Risk Communication | disasters; anticipation and reaction to events | focus on expected and calculated risks |
| Crisis Communication (Public Relations) | organizational crisis (meso level) with clear time period; strategic action and communicative construction of crisis | few macro theories (e.g. also regarding reasons why expectations towards organizations change) |
| Structure and Function of the Public Sphere | (dys)function of the public sphere (media system etc.) (holistic approach) | few dynamics, no clear time period, unclear connection between concrete political crises and overall crisis of the public sphere |
| Conflict, War and Protest | crises as processes with high threat potential for society (interdisciplinary approach); conflict dynamics | unclear distinction between (manageable) conflict and (escalating) crisis, no clear time period |
| Agenda-building ("Media Storms") | media logic; media reactions to external events | not primarily (political) crises |
| Cultural Studies ("Moral Panics") | social order (hegemony), communicative construction (narratives) | (in-depth) analysis of single cases instead of overall patterns |

play a decisive role in causing a crisis for other organizations, for instance NGOs scandalizing the use of toxic chemicals in clothing production or the government executing new and unexpected regulatory measures. Similar to the field of risk communication, this field advances the argument that insecurity (when will a crisis strike?) and high damage are constituting elements of the crisis definition. Pointing at the fact that crises are perceived anomalies that break with the status quo even if they are expected, this research enhances our understanding of the communicative construction of crises.

However, it is striking that the main lens of the *crisis communication* field is the meso lens where crisis management is understood primarily as an organization's constant anticipation of and reaction to changing stakeholder expectations in order to avoid crises. This is a clear limitation of the crisis communication field (for this cf. Schwarz et al., 2016b) and leads to blind spots. First, it is certainly possible that crises might not necessarily be an exogeneous factor and not even a negative factor for an organization. Instead, one could also argue that crises are actively constructed and created by (parts of) an organization itself, since a crisis rhetoric and the resulting loss of security tends to benefit charismatic power-holders (within an organization) (cf. Imhof, 2010). Related

to that, "crisis" can be strategically used as a "descriptor of institutional disarray because it has utility for those invoking it" (Zelizer, 2015). A second blind spot is the question why organizations' environment changes on the macro level in the first place (cf. Eisenegger, 2018). As this meso-oriented research area is interested more in how (concrete) crises can be controlled rather than in the actual causes of crises and the reasons why crises take the form of certain dynamics, (for this, cf. Malsch et al, 2014), links to more encompassing theories from sociology and political science are rather weak.

A more macro-oriented perspective on political crises is apparent in research which ultimately is based on *public sphere* theories. In this perspective, crisis is used as a concept with two different meanings. First, broadly defined, a crisis (usually singular) occurs when the public sphere (or public communication) stops to fulfil its function for a democratic society. Second, political crises (usually plural) refer to "situations (…) in which a government or other ruling body finds its command and control of the communicative levers of power, its authority and legitimacy, its very capacity to govern undermined to the point where collapse becomes possible or likely or where good governance becomes difficult to sustain" (McNair, 2016). Scholars point at the increasing occurrence of

concrete crises, which is explained with theories from conflict sociology and the changes in the media logics that awards taboo-breaking, conflict-intensifying political actors higher media attention. The increasing number of political crises (plural) is then used to illustrate the overall crisis (singular) of the public sphere.

In this holistic approach, much attention is paid to the communicative infrastructure of a society. Scholars point at the crucial role of the media as a forum for public debate, watchdog of power holders and space offering the integration of society, or they examine processes on the level of audiences (e. g. selective exposure, fragmentation). In this view, scholars go beyond examining the "many crises of Western journalism" (Nielsen, 2016), thus linking an analysis of journalism to an analysis of society overall. For instance, Jay Blumler (2018) in his recent essay on "The Crisis of Public Communication, 1995-2017" points to the more process-oriented functional crisis definition, saying that "an institution may be regarded as in crisis when it is no longer able to serve its ostensible purpose". The current crisis diagnosis is formulated against the backdrop of rapid digitization and social change. Considering the internet as a disruptive force that is accompanied with a "profound disconnect" between politics, journalism and ordinary citizens, Blumler finds that public communication as a whole does not fulfil its function to foster citizenship. Similar arguments can be found in Kurt Imhof's (2011) "Crisis of the Public Sphere", whose crisis diagnosis is related to the commercialization of the media and the growing de-nationalization of political and economic spheres that lack according public spheres.

This double meaning of crisis mentioned above is apparent in Brian McNair's (2016) book on "Communication and Political Crisis". The number of political crises increases because of the increasingly volatile information environment (cf. also Pörksen, 2018). The overall crisis, in McNair's view, results from the fact that the current media change leaves societies in a transition phase with uncertain outcome.

It is unknown whether the inevitable transition of "elite control" to a liberating "cultural chaos" (where the high number of scandals are beneficial for society) will succeed, also because tendencies of polarization are at play (autocratic elite actors vs. democratic non-established actors). To sum up, this holistic approach offers great advantages by empirically and normatively assessing the characteristics and impact of political crises both on the level of concrete events and on the overall system level. However, questions remain how exactly to link these two types of crises. Also, the process-oriented crisis definition (crisis of the public sphere) needs to be linked more to concepts that give justice to the more dynamic nature of political crises in order to claim more convincingly when the crisis of the public sphere actually begins and when it might end; after all, just by definition, a peaceful democratic society (or a public sphere) with working institutions can hardly be in a permanent state of crisis for decades.

The theme of polarization with uncertain outcome is a recurrent feature in the research field studying the communicative aspects of *political conflicts*, including wars, revolutions and social protest. Typically, this strand of research is broader when it comes to using and borrowing theories from sociology and political science. For instance, scholars link the occurrence of social movements and protest actors to "crises" in society such as the global economic crisis (e. g. Flesher, 2016; Kyriakidou & Olivas Osunas, 2017). Often, classic theories from political sociology such as (relative) deprivation etc. (for an overview cf. Della Porta & Diani, 2006) form the background of these explanations. It is also typical, however, for scholars to use insights from conflict sociology to show that relative deprivation etc. does not constitute the crisis itself, i.e. a necessary cause (crisis) for further processes. Conflict theory suggests it is rather the rapidly increasing political polarization itself which is both an indicator of a political crisis and a factor for subsequent crisis (Imhof, 2011). Sociological theories are then supplemented with more media-cen-

tric factors focusing on the interplay of communication strategies of protest actors and the news media. Among others, the "protest paradigm" (e. g. Weaver & Scacco, 2013; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014) of the news media is used to discuss possible discrepancies between "real" grievances of protest and crises constructed in and by the news media (e. g. Kepplinger, 2009). In the case of violent conflicts like wars, attention is paid to the shift from stable conflicts to escalating conflicts and vice versa (e. g. Auer, 2016). In the escalating mode, the role of the media changes: to name just a few patterns, news media are incentivized to assume particular issue stances or change their selection routines (e. g. deselecting "hostile" sources) (Baden & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2017). Overall, while this strand of research is relatively sensitive to conflict dynamics (escalation and de-escalation), these dynamics are not often enough used as indicators to specify when a conflict is actually a crisis or a crisis is not more than an intense but ultimately stable, "frozen" and manageable conflict.

An even more dynamic perspective is used by scholars focusing on *"media storms", hypes or waves.* The starting point is the fact that media coverage on an issue is usually not continuous but shows remarkable peaks. This is in line with the definition of crises as extraordinary events that trigger extraordinary attention. Research in the tradition of agenda-building and intermedia agenda-setting concepts stresses how different these two phases (the peak or "storm" phase and the non-storm phase) are for a number of indicators. For instance, media storms start with a sudden increase in attention but then, once in a storm mode, media coverage becomes less explosive, meaning it does not oscillate very much on a day-to-day basis as media coverage in non-storm phases. Also, fewer issue areas become subject of media storms (Boydstun, Hardy & Walgrave, 2014). Reasons for this are also found in the production logics of the news media, which points at the herd-like behavior of journalism (co-orientation) in the context of commercialized media systems that increasingly and especially fo-

cus on scandals (Stanyer, 2014). The main strength of this strand of research is its clear empirical focus and clear delimitation of storm periods (on average 15 days, cf. Boydstun, Hardy, & Walgrave, 2014) and work with clear mid-range theories. However, the connection to crises remains unclear. Sometimes, these storm phases are used as an indicator of a crisis itself. Describing the highly volatile (but normal) nature of attention dynamics, peak phases with "disproportionate" media attention are labeled as "crisis", with phases of "stasis" with low media attention being the opposite (Boydstun & Russel, 2016). Looking at further empirical examples given for "media storms", one would probably not be surprised to see the media devote much attention to these "big-ticket news stories of the decade" such as the Clinton / Lewinsky scandal, 9/11, Enron, and the Terri Schiavo debate but one might wonder if all of these examples really constitute political crises (Boydstun, Hardy, & Walgrave, 2014). Thus, one main challenge of this research area is to distinguish ephemeral storms and hypes (e. g. scandals) with few consequences for politics and society from encompassing political crises that affect larger parts of society also in the long run.

A clear interest in periods and issues with intensified media attention can also be seen in research done in the context of *cultural studies*. Most notably, Stuart Hall and his colleagues (Hall et al, 1978) consider a "moral panic" an indicator for an overall crisis of society. In a holistic approach, the authors start with a "real" problem and a "real" series of events. In their case study, the authors study the social phenomenon of "mugging", which was a form of robbery committed by young adults in Great Britain in the early 1970s. But the main point is that the authors focus their analysis both on society's reaction to these events and, above all, the contradictions and the underlying ideological currents causing first the moral panic about "mugging" and then the moral panic about seemingly increasing crime rates. These panics, which are accompanied by high media attention, are "about other things than crime, per se. The society comes to perceive crime

in general, and 'mugging' in particular, as an index of the disintegration of the social order (…). So the book is also about a society which is slipping into a certain kind of crisis. It tries to examine why and how the themes of race, crime and youth – condensed into the image of 'mugging' – come to serve as the articulator of the crisis, as its ideological conductor (…) for the construction of an authoritarian consensus, a conservative backlash" (Hall et al., 1978). Methodologically, fine-grained qualitative content analyses of news coverage and letters to the editors are qualitatively set in relation to crime statistics, legal texts and, overall, broader ideological frameworks (which reflect and shape class struggles) and historical developments of key values and terms. One of the strengths of this holistic approach is its attempt to contextualize concrete patterns of extraordinary media reactions (and the reactions of the public) with wider social issues. Combining the use of concrete indicators (moral panics) and discourse analyses of underlying ideological struggles over cultural hegemony, constitute an encompassing analysis of contemporary society. In this sense, this approach complements more empirical research on media hypes and storms as it asks why media and society in general rapidly construct a "crisis". Another example is the analysis of Colin Hay (1996) on the "winter of discontent" as a "moment of state crisis" in Great Britain in 1976/1977, when tabloid media and rightwing political actors scandalized the wave of strikes and managed to narrate a crisis that needed to be solved with more drastic measures – in Hay's assessment a "hegemonic moment of Thatcherism". Whether one would call the openly normative character of these analyses as overly critical or overly interventionist is, of course, open to debate. (More recent, less normative examples include, among others, the case of "fake news" as an "informational moral panic", cf. Carlson, 2018.) It is also open to debate to what extent these types of qualitative analyses can complement the numerous quantitative analyses in the positivist tradition. One could certainly agree, though, that the tendency of this type of

research to conduct in-depth, extensive case-study analyses leads to blind spots because observed patterns might not be generalized. Case studies, of course, have lots of merits, but mainly if they are conducted at least with an implicit comparison in mind.

## 4    Political crisis, social change and media change

While the overview of the research areas deliberately stressed the heterogeneity, I now want to emphasize in this chapter those (hopefully) fruitful research endeavors that try to relate these research areas to each other. An important starting point of the more integrative approaches is the communicative construction of political crises. It does not really matter whether we take a more "realistic" perspective or a more "constructivist" perspective. In the "constructivist" perspective, the logic of how this construction takes place and what are the driving actors that define what "is" a crisis is at the core anyway. In the realistic perspective, we would distinguish "real" crises and the "real" character of events from the "disproportionate" attention to crisis mainly in the news media. But we would still consider the crucial importance (because of its "deviation") of this communicative construction. This is probably an assumption that most researchers from these different fields would share. In this sense, political crises become phenomena that should be studied not only as independent variables but also as dependent variables.

Taking this one step further and relying on a phenomenological perspective, we could argue that political crises can be identified when looking at communicative processes in the mass media. After all, public communication and, above all, the mass media, is the main place where a society can define problems (and crises) and observe and integrate itself. In this ongoing struggle in the definition and solution of political problems, we can distinguish between usual political problems and political crises. Political crises differ massive-

ly from the usual communicative reproduction of structures with their tendency to escalating turbulences. An encompassing theory of how crises differ and when and why they occur in public communication was offered by Imhof (2011, 2016). In his crisis theory, Imhof speaks to several of the research areas outlined above. His approach is a sociological one concerning the causes and dynamics of political conflicts but also an approach relying heavily on the communicative infrastructure of the public sphere, the insights from cultural studies regarding "moral panics" as a crisis indicator and the insights from crisis communication and conflict sociology regarding the sudden loss of reputation of organizations and institutions. Some of these theoretical elements will be sketched out briefly:

As for the causes of crises, theories of social change stipulate that crises occur not only because of unexpected events (e. g. scandal about corruption in government) but also because formerly raised expectations cannot be fulfilled. Every societal model depends on shared expectations, and it is obvious that these expectations change on a discontinuous basis because of slowly developing unintended consequences of social action (e. g. traffic jams in growing suburbs that were actually meant to be an idyllic refuge from crowded cities). Unfulfilled expectations go hand in hand with growing disenchantment (Imhof, 2016). Formerly held expectations are shattered, meaning people are disappointed and lose security. People are then confronted with a world in which they cannot be and act the way they once thought they would (be) (Siegenthaler, 1993). Given these increasing anomic tensions across society, the need for a reduction of complexity increases. Here, the use of "crisis" as a label in public discourse is instructive, as "crisis" allows people to position phenomena as identifiable and finite, which can be more easily grasped and controlled; "crisis" promises closure (Zelizer, 2015). Hence, in these situations, the need for clear problem definitions and real problem solutions increases, which is typically mirrored in public communication's focus

on very few issues. Usually, in these few high-attention issues (which can include one or several media storms), established political actors suffer from a sinking reputation and a loss of legitimacy while new actors (or new ideas) enjoy increasing reputation. On the level of society, this typically coincides with growing polarization until (in the extreme case) two completely antagonistic conflict camps with two competing problem diagnoses and problem solutions are set for a stand-off. While polarization helps to reduce complexity, it increases insecurity as it becomes uncertain which of the two competing camps will gain the upper hand. A crisis will then be solved either with violent means (e. g. civil war), where one camp will impose his preferred social model, or with compromises between the conflicting camps, new institutions (e. g. more political regulators) and new ways that public communication handles topics (e. g. integrating neglected issues).

In this process, media are not only mere mirrors reflecting political contestation. Media change has to be analyzed carefully, as the media in their own logics contribute to escalating or de-escalating political crises, with one argument being that increasingly commercialized media and the increase of social media as "emotional media" tend to give disproportionate attention to polarizing conflicts and polarizing actors (who might have a strategic interest in the crisis mode). Again, the interest lies in to what extent the communicative infrastructure of a society is a factor in explaining political crises.

To identify and explain political crises, we can look for the following characteristics in public communication (cf. Malsch, Florian & Schmitt, 2014; Imhof, 2016; Hirschman, 1994): 1) conflict-induced cluster of communication (high media attention), 2) statements reflecting unfulfilled expectations (anomic tensions) and diffuse threat and risk potentials that are not really understood (insecurity), 3) marked loss of reputation (even if only temporary) of relevant individuals, organizations and institutions, 4) intensified and dramatized pressure to act and to

decide while the process cannot be controlled, 5) polarization into two conflicting camps where routine conflicts of "more or less" are transformed into fundamental conflicts of "either-or", 6) anticipation or imagination of solutions which oscillate between doom and salvation, 7) more visibility and resonance of new actors or new positions in the news media.

Bearing this in mind, we could start examining which of the many problems and conflicts that are labeled as "crisis" by scholars fulfill these criteria. In his empirical analysis of public communication in Switzerland between 1910 and 2012, Imhof identified seven main clusters of intensified media attention and fundamental conflicts within 100 years, hence seven periods of crisis (Imhof, 2011, 2016; cf. also Udris 2011). These periods were 1) at the end of World War I, where a fundamental conflict culminated in the "General Strike", 2) in the mid-1930s with sharp conflicts about the role of Nazi and fascist groups in Switzerland and the Swiss democratic model, 3) in the mid-1960s when the issue of "Over-Foreignization" through immigration of "foreign workers" suddenly increased in salience and the perception of a "Helvetisches Malaise" was apparent, 4) in the early 1970s when the separatist Jura movement and new right-wing populist actors severely challenged the political system, 5) around 1990s when several scandals about Swiss political institutions and the polarizing referendum on Switzerland's (non-)admission to the European Economic Area took place, 6) around 2000 when Switzerland's economic and political elite was delegitimized because of its role in the "grounding" of Switzerland's national, prestigious airline, 7) insecurity resulting from the financial crisis in 2007 and turmoil in Switzerland's financial sector.

While one might want to opt for less strict criteria to include more cases for comparative reasons, this overall historical analysis and its focus on relatively few crises helps us become aware when we deal with really extraordinary crisis situations or with the more or less usual mode of mediated conflicts. Against this background, the high number of scholars currently working on the "refugee crisis" might check to what extent this issue constitutes a crisis or not. There are reasons to consider this refugee question a crisis: Vowe (2016) claims that "no other topic has occupied us [i. e. the Germans] as migration – migration has challenged us, it has partially overwhelmed us. This is why one can speak of a migration *crisis*" (emphasis in the original). Still, more research is needed to see whether all the criteria listed above are fulfilled. In this context, scholarship would benefit from more comparative approaches. Thus, recent "crisis" phases should be compared with earlier phases of high-media attention of which some turned out to be crises and some did not (because other criteria were not fulfilled), ideally using similar issues in earlier phases. The current "refugee crisis", for example, should be compared with the period with sudden increase in German refugees coming from former German territory right after World War II or with the highly salient debate about asylum seekers in the early 1990s, which triggered a series of violent attacks against foreigners and in turn stimulated further media attention (Koopmans, 2004).

At the same time, this theoretical approach can lead us to discover the importance of issues usually not considered as "crises": when analyzing media coverage in the United States in the interwar years, it became apparent that Prohibition (the ban on alcohol) was definitely not a human interest or amusing issue for contemporaries but in fact the decisive issue of the 1920s and early 1930s which transformed from a routine conflict in the early and mid-1920s into a fundamental conflict in the late 1920s and led to a high polarization, rapidly erosion of trust in political elites and social trust in general (high increase of violence), new emerging actors, and a complete re-alignment of the two political parties based on the Prohibition issue – all this preceding the economic depression (Welskopp, 2010; Udris, 2012). As regards the communicative infrastructure, US-American media in the 1920s were in a period of transformation where different logics collided: newspapers embracing the

newly emerging ideal of objectivity (e. g. New York Times), partisan newspapers owned by business moguls with political ambitions (e. g. William Randolph Hearst, who changed his view on Prohibition unexpectedly in 1929 and then used his newspapers to lead an anti-Prohibition campaign), newspapers following clearly commercial rationales (e. g. tabloids in New York), and radio as a new medium for conveying political messages. Again, in order to make sense of the current so-called "crisis" of (Western) democracy in the age of Trump, social media and disinformation, examining earlier periods of rapid social change and transformations of both the political system and the media system can be illuminating.

## 5 Conclusion

In the previous sections, I argued for a nuanced understanding of political crises which takes into account the peculiar dynamics of crises, analyzing when, how and why routine conflicts are transformed into fundamental conflicts and which role the media play in shaping and amplifying the crisis. Even though I highlighted the heterogeneity of the field, I would emphasize that especially now is a good time and an important time for more integration of the fragmented field.

This is a good time for crisis scholars because the current phenomenon of (right-wing) populism and its crisis potential offers even more linkages between the research areas. In *crisis communication*, the strategy of populists to use a crisis rhetoric has to be emphasized (Wirz et al., 2019). Populists in their communication strategies not only attack the political elite and out-groups but they also depict the current or future situations as overly critical, offering radical solutions to overcome a crisis they themselves have an interest in (re-)emphasizing (Bos & Brants, 2014). Thus, not necessarily the media but political actors might be amplifiers of political crises. Still, the crisis rhetoric of populists seems to apply only to certain issues such as migration or law and

order. *"Risk issues"* such as terrorism and climate change are increasingly politicized by right-wing populist actors. Strikingly, however, these actors stress various risk issues but emphasize the crisis potential for some (terrorism) while de-emphasizing the crisis potential for others (climate change), again highlighting how the crisis rhetoric is instrumentalized for strategic purposes. Using *public sphere* theories, scholars examine the fragmentation of media audiences also as a result from political polarization, with supporters of (right-wing) political actors constituting milieus that use news media differently than large parts of the population and that do not trust established media and political actors (Kösters et al., 2019; Kösters & Jandura, 2019). These theories also connect "media populism" resulting from the commercialization of the media with better chances for populist actors, including (purposefully triggered) counter-reactions of political elites, news media and (also) satire shows (Lichtenstein & Nitsch, 2019) against populists. Transferring this idea from traditional news media to social media, public sphere theories point at "elective affinities" between social media and populism because social media as "emotional media" are better suited to populists' communication styles (Ernst et al., 2017). Not surprisingly, the right-wing populist AfD dominated the election campaign on Facebook in Germany, triggering most user reactions, especially in emotionally charged fields such as migration or law and order (Lucht, Udris, & Vogler, 2017). All these developments on the level of media audiences and on the level the communicative infrastructure is taken as proof of the alleged crisis of the public sphere. Learning from research on *"media storms" and hypes*, we can argue that one reason for the current success of populists is their ability to trigger some of these storms. Just think of the deliberately provocative statements by populists that lead to strong, negative counter-reactions, which sets and keeps the populists' issue on the agenda and helps the populists confirm their main narrative that "everybody" is against them, in some cases set-

ting off a discursive escalation where a formerly stable political situation suddenly spirals "out of equilibrium" (for the case of Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands in 2002, cf. Koopmans & Muis, 2009; for Switzerland cf. Udris 2011). Also, one could also argue that the more public communication is shaped by a growing number of media storms, the more volatile, more episodic and more emotional public debate becomes, making also the reputation of organizations and institutions more volatile. One could link this increasing volatility also to *"moral panics"*, either against outgroups problematized by populists (e. g. refugees) or against populists themselves. Again, this fits the populists' communication logics. Finally, based on theories on *political conflicts, protest and war*, one can see elements of a growing fundamental conflict between populists and "the elite" that is discussed as a looming or imminent crisis of democracy. However, at the same time, this literature also reminds us that not every highly visible and not every highly politicized conflict is a crisis. This literature also reminds us that the success of populist actors in the long run heavily depends on the reactions of elite actors, i.e. political actors with their policies and their communicative strategies, and on internal power dynamics within populist movements or populist parties (e. g. Mudde, 2007).

A more integrative perspective would basically mean taking note from each other, acknowledging these different research areas and learning from them. More concretely, meso-oriented studies of organizational crises can be conducted as a more explicit contribution to when these organizational crises lead to societal crises. The concept of reputation can be useful in empirical analyses as dependent variable – the question being how and why the reputation sinks not only in the case of few organizations but on the level of sectors and organizational types and especially regarding powerful organizations and institutions (Eisenegger, 2018). Holistic case studies of a specific societal crisis in turn can benefit from more testable and more

mid-range theories developed in the field of crisis communication.

A more integrative perspective would also mean going beyond case studies and especially conducting diachronic, cross-country comparative analysis of several cases of societal crisis or at least several "crisis events" and "critical junctures". This is a point that the leading experts in the field of crisis communication rightfully stress (cf. Schwarz et al., 2016). In communication studies in general, we have seen an impressive move towards more comparative research (cf. Esser, 2016) but empirically, this research applies mainly to routine periods or elections, probably because these periods can be more easily controlled by researchers (cf. Humprecht & Udris, 2019). "Crisis events" such as referenda with far-reaching impact (e. g. the Brexit referendum in Great Britain in 2016), wars, catastrophes (e. g. nuclear disasters), "moral panics", big political scandals (e. g. revelation of corruption) or events with massive protest upheavals are studied much less in a comparative perspective. Scholars might consider them to be too idiosyncratic and too "messy" for a meaningful comparison over time and across countries. At the same time, not studying them also means neglecting exactly those events that are especially important for the media and society as a whole. In this light, cross-country analyses of single crises such as the financial crisis are an important step in the right direction as they reveal how political system factors and media system factors shape the way these crises were dealt with in the news media (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2015.; Picard, 2015) The trend towards more collaborative research projects will hopefully also lead to more cross-country analyses that *also* use a diachronic perspective *and* compare cases over time (e. g. for the importance of "crisis events" for national and European identities cf. Krzyżanowski 2009; Tréfás & Lucht 2010).

This is not only a good time for crisis scholars but also an important time. Hardly any other phenomenon is as instructive for a societal analysis as crises. Studying political crises allows us to see how and

why the social order starts to erode, which strategies are used to re-stabilize the social order and how social structural change begins and takes full shape. Crises, like societal analyses, basically do the same thing: they question that society as we know it is not self-evident (Malch et al. 2014). In addition to this, studying political crises is important because every democratic society is inextricably linked to a functioning public sphere. Thus, how and why the mass media as the main arena in the public sphere convey or amplify political crises are ultimately normative and highly relevant questions that touch the core of social analysis.

Finally, an integrated research field which takes into account these normative questions will tackle one of the main problems: the field is rather reactive than proactive. Researchers start doing a project on crises usually after the start of an alleged crisis, and they tend to study the very crisis that is happening at that moment or that has recently happened. Also, in their analysis scholars usually focus on the reactions to a crisis, not the phase leading up to the crisis. In general, the field could do more to help society detect early warning signs of an upcoming crisis and, of course, contextualizing a crisis once it is in full swing or pointing out that not every "crisis" currently discussed in the media is actually a real crisis. Some of us might readily want to criticize the media for having failed to ring the alarm before a crisis or for magnifying a crisis once it has started. We should probably take even more efforts to make sure that research does not show the very same patterns as the media. On a broader and sounder theoretical and empirical basis, we can probably also be more confident in engaging with the public in discussing our research. "No one cares what we know" – Nielsen's (2017) provocative but apt comment on the lack of engagement and the resulting "irrelevance" of political communication research – will hopefully serve as an early warning sign and a stimulation to us all to do better in the future.

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## **Appendix**

Table 3:    Top 5 communication events (issues) in Swiss media mentioning crises

| Year | Communication Event (Issue) | Number of Articles |
|---|---|---|
| 2000 | Israel – Palestine: Conflict | 54 |
| | Germany: Donations Scandal CDU | 43 |
| | Northern Ireland: Conflict | 39 |
| | Zimbabwe: Regime Mugabe | 37 |
| | Switzerland: Reform of the army | 37 |
| 2001 | Switzerland: Swissair grounding | 206 |
| | Switzerland: Swissair performance | 113 |
| | USA: Terrorism (9/11) | 108 |
| | Afghanistan: Global conflict | 103 |
| | Macedonia: Conflict | 101 |
| 2002 | Argentina: Economic performance | 125 |
| | Israel – Palestine: Conflict | 89 |
| | Iraq: Global conflict (preparation for war) | 82 |
| | Italy: Fiat performance | 67 |
| | Switzerland: Economic performance | 41 |
| 2003 | Iraq: War | 246 |
| | North Korea: Global conflict | 86 |
| | Switzerland: Swiss – New airline | 85 |
| | Iraq: Post-war order | 79 |
| | Switzerland: Economic performance | 77 |
| 2004 | Iraq: Post-war order | 75 |
| | Sudan: Civil war | 50 |
| | Thailand: Tsunami | 49 |
| | Switzerland: Gov't performance | 43 |
| | USA: Presidential elections | 34 |
| 2005 | Thailand: Tsunami | 132 |
| | EU: Integration | 46 |
| | Germany: Elections | 40 |
| | Switzerland: Flood | 39 |
| | Global: Bird flu epidemic | 30 |
| 2006 | Libanon – Israel: War | 144 |
| | Israel – Palestine: Conflict | 103 |
| | Iran: Global conflict (nuclear program) | 40 |
| | Global: Bird flu epidemic | 39 |
| | France: Protests | 37 |
| 2007 | Global: Performance of financial sector | 199 |
| | Switzerland: UBS performance | 59 |
| | Israel – Palestine: Conflict | 57 |
| | USA: Economic performance | 51 |
| | USA: Housing sector | 49 |
| 2008 | Global: Performance of financial sector | 677 |
| | Switzerland: UBS performance | 210 |
| | Switzerland: Economic performance | 152 |
| | USA: Elections | 112 |
| | USA: Economic performance | 72 |
| 2009 | Global: Performance of financial sector | 391 |
| | Switzerland: Economic performance | 165 |
| | Switzerland: UBS performance | 118 |
| | Switzerland: Bank secrecy | 112 |
| | Switzerland: Economic policy | 83 |
| 2010 | EU: Economic performance (debt) | 419 |
| | Switzerland: Economic performance | 136 |
| | Switzerland – USA: Fiscal conflict | 111 |
| | Switzerland: Regulation financial sector | 102 |
| | Global: Performance of financial sector | 100 |

Continuation of table 3

| Year | Communication Event (Issue) | Number of Articles |
|---|---|---|
| 2011 | EU: Economic performance (debt) | 718 |
| | Switzerland: Economic performance | 166 |
| | Japan: Tsunami (Fukushima) | 126 |
| | Global: Economic performance | 95 |
| | Switzerland: Central Bank policy | 79 |
| 2012 | EU: Economic performance (debt) | 635 |
| | Syria: War | 138 |
| | Switzerland: Economic performance | 81 |
| | France: Elections | 71 |
| | USA: Elections | 65 |
| 2013 | EU: Economic performance (debt) | 234 |
| | Syria: War | 117 |
| | Italy: Elections | 57 |
| | Egypt: Conflict | 56 |
| | Switzerland: Economic performance | 53 |
| 2014 | Ukraine – Russia: Conflict | 523 |
| | EU: Economic performance (debt) | 92 |
| | EU: Central Bank policy | 61 |
| | Africa: Ebola epidemic | 57 |
| | EU: Elections | 45 |
| 2015 | EU: Economic performance (debt) | 407 |
| | EU: Migration / Refugees | 282 |
| | Switzerland: Migration / Refugees | 94 |
| | Ukraine – Russia: Conflict | 90 |
| | Switzerland: Elections | 69 |
| 2016 | EU: Migration / Refugees | 175 |
| | USA: Elections | 77 |
| | UK – EU: Brexit / Negotiations | 68 |
| | EU: Economic performance (debt) | 68 |
| | EU: Integration of member states | 66 |
| 2017 | EU: Migration / Refugees | 67 |
| | Germany: Elections | 75 |
| | Spain – Catalunya: Conflict | 60 |
| | EU: Economic performance (debt) | 54 |
| | North Korea: Global conflict | 53 |