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Safeguarding reputation through strategic, integrated and situational crisis communication management

Development of the integrative model of crisis communication

Ansgar Thiessen and Diana Ingenhoff

Department of Mass Media and Communication Research,
University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to address the often missing theoretical foundation of crisis communication from an integrated perspective on the micro, meso and macro level. Based on the theory of structuration, a systematic, integrative framework is developed for safeguarding organizational legitimization and multidimensional reputation through communication during crisis situations which is applicable both for profit and non-profit organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – Gidden's theory of structuration was chosen as a basis to develop the integrative model of crisis communication that proposes a communicative impact on reputation on a situative level of message strategies (micro level), an organizational level (meso level) and a societal level (macro level). A well-organized crisis communication management on all of these levels is seen as the key communicative driver to safeguard long-term organizational reputation.

Findings – The paper shows that successful crisis communication management must be conceptualized and addressed on distinctive levels of complexity. While on a message level (situative crisis communication) it creates meaning, crisis communication must be seen as management task on an organizational level (integrative crisis communication). However, in order to fully safeguard reputation in the long term and trustworthiness in the short term, crisis communication has also a societal component when addressing moral standards and norms (strategic crisis communication).

Research limitations/implications – The paper is a conceptual contribution which build the basis of a follow-up empirical, experimental study where the proposed model is successfully tested.

Practical implications – For PR managers, this paper gives reasons to conceptualize crisis communication management, not only on a message strategy level, but also to take into consideration the organizational and societal levels.

Originality/value – The paper stands in line with the theoretical discourse of organizational crisis communication. So far, few approaches conceptualize organizational crisis communication thoroughly on an integrated level of different perspectives so that the paper provides an important input, pushing the discussion forward.

Keywords Corporate communications, Public relations, Organizational processes,
Organizational structures

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction and research question

Reputation is an important intangible asset for organizations of any kind. A good reputation proves more resilient than a bad one and organizations with a good reputation

are more likable (Lyon and Cameron, 2004, p. 226). Research shows that reputation has an impact on the perception of the management style as well as on purchasing decisions (Yoon *et al.*, 1993, p. 226). It attracts qualified staff (Eccles *et al.*, 2007, p. 104) and determines investor satisfaction and loyalty (Helm, 2007, p. 33 f.). As relational capital, it deepens relationships (de Castro *et al.*, 2006, p. 576), it guides investors through investment decisions (Schütze and Rennhak, 2005, p. 11) or builds trust (Herger, 2006, p. 187; Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010). Reputation ultimately becomes an essential criterion to differentiate between organizations. Since services, products or performances in general increasingly resemble each other, reputation is a significant competitive factor, too. Although the value of reputation has been widely discussed and analyzed for economic organizations, its positive impact may be transferred to non-economic organizations as well (Parks, 2008, p. 217).

In today's media society, mediated communication is the dominant mechanism in constituting reputation (Eisenegger, 2005; Seemann, 2008). In fact, without public opinion, reputation cannot be constituted (Herger, 2006) or fades significantly (Eisenegger, 2005). Consequently, public scandals are a major threat to reputation because they can bring organizations into "disrepute", having an impact on profitability or even organizational survival (Lerbinger, 1997). Barely, a day goes by without some organizations facing assaults on their reputation. And research shows that reputational crises are on the rise. Crisis situations as an attack on reputation may prove to be either a threat or an opportunity, which depends largely on how an organization's behavior is perceived by its key stakeholders (Gaultier-Gaillard and Louisot, 2006).

In situations where reputation is threatened, one aspect of crisis management gains great importance: communication. Internal communication in a crisis enables an organization to stem rumors (Fearn-Banks, 2007), while external communication can result in favorable public perception (Penrose, 2000). Since the perception of crises depends upon the respective observer (Kohring *et al.*, 1996), the role of communication is more than simply to inform about the crisis but to influence it (Köhler, 2006; Zerfaß, 2004). Consequently, the analysis of risks to reputation and its management has become an issue of growing attention and is increasingly being discussed in both scientific and business literature (Chun, 2005).

A good reputation unquestionably serves as a reservoir of goodwill and supports organizations in times of crisis (Wiedmann and Buxel, 2005). However, the concept is also ubiquitous and therefore it is "seldom noticed until [. . .] threatened" (Fombrun and van Riel, 1997). Most literature on crisis communication remains on a case study basis and lacks a systematic understanding of its impact on reputation. Moreover, within empirical research, reputation is often one-dimensionally conceptualized in a functional way, which ignores the social and emotional aspects of reputation (Bromley, 2002; Chun, 2005; Ruth and York, 2000). Bearing these problems in mind, the article will address the following research question:

RQ1. How can crisis communication be systematically conceptualized in order to safeguard reputation during crisis situations?

We propose an integrative model of crisis communication, which is theoretically founded on the theory of structuration and consistently aims at safeguarding a multidimensional reputation.

Literature review

Organizational reputation

The understanding of reputation varies according to the focus of research. In the field of marketing, it is characterized as the result of a branding process, in principle agent theory as a signal of future behavior, in accounting as a kind of goodwill, in organization theory as the manifestation of corporate identity or as a potential market entry barrier in the field of management (Schwaiger, 2004, p. 48). Even more confusingly, researchers often do not take findings from other disciplines into account when discussing their concept of reputation (Mahon, 2002, p. 416).

Generally, reputation is described as "the net perception of a company's ability to meet the expectations of all its stakeholders" (Fombrun, 1996, p. 37). It is a synthesis of individual attitudes towards an organization's past behavior and future prospects (Davies and Chun, 2002; Post and Griffin, 1998). While in literature some researchers equate image and reputation (Bromley, 1993), we make a distinction between the two concepts. An organization's image can be seen as an individual attitude. It can be defined as the external view of an organization (Hatch and Schultz, 1997, p. 361). It is the reflection of an organization, which forms on the basis of individually and subjectively perceived attributes among stakeholders (Herger, 2006, p. 161). Reputation on the other hand is rather a synthesis of many images and therefore of many attitudes together (Fombrun, 1996, p. 72; Gray and Balmer, 1998; Helm, 2004). Following Gotsi and Wilson (2001), reputation is a common attitude towards a third party. Most approaches conceptualize reputation as an aggregated perception and the evaluation of a company by many different stakeholders (Davies *et al.*, 2003; Fombrun *et al.*, 2000). Consequently, different stakeholder groups perceive an organization's reputation differently (Caruana *et al.*, 2006, p. 430; Gotsi and Wilson, 2001, p. 24).

The three research disciplines most relevant to our research are the studies of sociologic, economic and corporate communication. From a sociological viewpoint, reputation is seen as a social acceptance of an organization. It refers to (organizational or individual) actions in the past and "[…] emerges if an actor's future partners are informed on his present behavior" (Raub and Weesie, 1990, p. 626). On a more abstract level, from this perspective, reputation becomes a legitimizing exchange process among agents (organization and stakeholder) and is gained either by the approval of a third party (e.g. through an NPO) or by cognitive processes, such as acting within a social framework. Reputation from this point of view thereby predominantly takes on an integrative function within society (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008).

From an economic point of view, reputation is seen as an intangible asset, helping to shape the financial value of a company (Ressel, 2008). Studying the precise impact reputation has on financial outcome still produces conflicting results (Eberl and Schwaiger, 2005). However, Schnietz and Epstein (2005, p. 341) show that a reputation for social responsibility yields a tangible financial benefit during a crisis situation. In terms of reputation management, business leaders indicate that it is harder to recover from reputation failure than it is to build or maintain it. Recovering from crises that hit reputation takes time – often many years, which is a long time to rebuild the trustworthiness one already had before (Milewicz and Herbig, 1994, p. 44). Recovering from a crisis is consequently more a marathon than a quick sprint, which underlines the necessity for sophisticated reputation management either long before (issues management) or right at the moment of threat (crisis and communication management).

From the viewpoint of corporate communication scholars, reputation is seen as a resource to be protected, especially during crisis situations. Communication either has an impact on image restoration (Benoit, 1995) or the media agenda in which reputation is built (Eisenegger, 2005), in order to safeguard reputation in the long run (Coombs, 2006). Building good reputation among stakeholders can enhance benevolence and courtesy (Jones *et al.*, 2000, p. 27 f.) or serve as a resource in difficult situations, such as a crisis (Davies *et al.*, 2003; Dowling, 2002).

Most methods of measuring reputation follow a functional conceptualization (Bromley, 2002; Fombrun, 2001; Wartick, 2002). It is Hall (1992) who first introduced the interrelations between cognitive and affective aspects of reputation. Cognitive reputation refers to a rational third party perception. Its components may be distinguished between a more functional reputation deriving from an evaluation of competence, and a social reputation deriving from satisfying moral norms in society (de Castro *et al.*, 2006). In contrast, affective reputation is based on emotions and sympathy, and is formed through sympathy and attractiveness (Caruana *et al.*, 2006; Schwaiger, 2004). Eisenegger and Imhof (2008) conclude that reputation has a functional, social and emotional dimension – regardless of whether it is being perceived cognitive or affective. In this article, we propose a multidimensional concept of reputation (Table I) that consists of cognitive (functional and social) as well as affective (emotional) components (Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2007, 2010). We see functional reputation as the evaluation of competence, which is expressed by the achievement of an organization's performance goals. Social reputation we propose as referring to social responsibility such as moral and ethical standards in society. Finally, we introduce emotional reputation as emerging from sympathy towards an organization and the appraisal of how favorably or unfavorably it is evaluated.

Concluding, we propose the concept of reputation as a multidimensional construct, consisting of "three distinct but closely interrelated dimensions" (Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010). It is being perceived differently among different groups of stakeholders (Gotsi and Wilson, 2001), being the overall perception of an organization and its ability to meet the expectations of all its stakeholders (Fombrun, 1996).

Corporate crisis communication
In order to address our research question, we identify two perspectives on crisis communication literature: a functional perspective, focusing on instruments and structures, and a symbolic perspective, analyzing the rhetorical impetus of message strategies. From a functional perspective, research in crisis communication analyzes structures and instruments and their impact on either trust or relational commitment. First, on a structural level, the efficiency of crisis plans have been discussed (Barton, 1991). Research indicates that pre-developed strategy plans help to create effective communication structures in the event of a crisis (Barton, 2001; Fearn-Banks, 2007; Lee *et al.*, 2007). But not all organizational plans prepare effectively

Reputational dimension	Constitutive elements	
Cognitive-functional	Evaluation of competence, achievements, reaching of (business) goals	**Table I.** Three dimensional reputation
Cognitive-social	Satisfying ethical and moral norms, corporate social responsibility	
Affective-emotional	Sympathy and attractiveness, emotional evaluation	

for crisis situations, because they can imply a false security. Second, on the subject of instruments, the leading question is what effect do communicative tools have on the perception of a crisis situation. Crisis literature indicates that audience orientation is often the key factor in influencing and building stakeholder relationships during a crisis (Falkheimer and Heide, 2006; Lee, 2004; Penrose, 2000).

The symbolic perspective of crisis communication research analyzes rhetorical response strategies and their value, while the relationship between an organization and the media is of specific interest. Research shows that communication may repair a company's image once threatened (Benoit, 1995, 1997). While the strategy of concession is most effective when organizations behave unethically (Bradford and Garrett, 1995), apologia in general has long been the main focus of crisis communication research (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995; Hearit, 1995, 2006). Sturges (1994) shows that communication strategies are most effective when focusing on communication with the public. He proposes different communication strategies according to the severity of a crisis, but without testing his ideas empirically.

A more recent approach is the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) introduced by Coombs (Coombs, 2004, 2007; Coombs and Holladay, 1996). It suggests that rhetorical responses depend on attributed crisis responsibility. For victim crises (weak attribution of responsibility), he identifies a deny response option as most suitable, including response strategies such as attack or denial. For accident crises (moderate attribution of responsibility), the diminish response option is most suitable, including strategies such as excuse or justification. Finally, for preventable crises (strong attribution of responsibility), the deal response option is most appropriate, involving strategies such as ingratiation or concern. On the one hand, the analysis of Coomb's message strategies has recently been transferred to a variety of crisis situations: for instance, Stephens *et al.* (2005) adapt them to explain technical translation strategies, which are deployed in order to provide messages that are specifically difficult to explain to a broader public. Critics, on the other hand, hold that while message strategies are being analyzed only from the recipient's point of view, for communication managers it is not only the rhetorical response strategy but rather timely, consistent and active responses that are most relevant in order to safeguard reputation (Huang, 2008).

Corporate crisis communication and reputation management
Regulators and industry groups, as well as companies and organizations, have meanwhile developed many guidelines for communicating during crises (Löffelholz and Schwarz, 2008). Communication research takes on the many "recipes" and also slowly begins to provide more theoretically derived models about crisis communication as such (Coombs, 2004, 2007). However, the definition and measurement of threats to reputation is still largely being ignored in crisis literature (Eccles *et al.*, 2007). And although "among the most important functions of reputation management is crisis management" (Tucker and Melewar, 2005), the precise impact of communication matters to maintaining or even building reputation during crises remains unclear. In our study, we put the argument forward that reputation is the perception of an organization of different stakeholders over time. Consequently, managing reputation during crisis situations seems inappropriate since first, crises often occur spontaneous and second, they last not long enough for managing reputation in the long run. Therefore, it is necessary to compartmentalize the process of reputation management. As McAllister (1995, p. 52) shows, the constitution

of reputation, on the one hand, is dependent on trustworthiness (Backhaus, 1999; Blois, 1999; Groenland, 2002; Herger, 2006; Plötner, 1995). Eisenegger and Imhof (2008, p. 130) even state corporate reputation as the "reputation of trustworthiness", so that in order to build reputation, trustworthiness becomes a minimum precondition. Trust on the other hand is built only, when organizations are able to establish an (often long built) reputation (Eberl, 2006; Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010; O'Neill, 1984). Stakeholders only trust an organization when it has proven to be trustworthy over time, meaning having built a positive reputation. Crisis communication, which is usually situational, is therefore only able to have an impact on short-term trustworthiness in order to build or safeguard long-term reputation (Figure 1).

Most striking, the dimensions of trustworthiness correspond to the ones we identified for the reputation construct: the abilities of an organization reflect its skills, competencies and expertise (functional dimension). In order to signal trustworthiness through competencies and thereby to safeguard functional reputation, an organization must clearly state its competencies, skills and abilities regarding both its core business and its crisis management. Benevolence expresses an organization's desire to do good (social dimension), while integrity testifies an organization's character, its fairness and credibility (emotional dimension) (Caldwell and Clapham, 2003), so that eventually in an empirical analysis all three dimensions may be explored distinctively.

Previous crisis communication models
Since most literature on crisis communication is case study based, the development of sophisticated approaches has only just begun. It is Gonzáles-Herrero and Pratt (1996) who propose a four-step symmetrical model for crisis communication management. Referring to Grunig and Hunt (1984), they argue that crises follow a life cycle (birth, growth, maturity and decline), demanding management procedures for each respective phase. Hence, they identify issues management, planning prevention, crisis and post-crisis management as crucial crisis management options. Our criticism is that their model is only a descriptive assignment of management activities according to crisis phases. It is neither a theoretically derived model nor does it hold empirically proven results. However, the authors do proclaim a classification of communication management activities according to different crisis stages, which is the most basic assumption for formulating crisis communication models.

A somewhat similar but more detailed approach is introduced by Horsley and Barker (2002), who proclaim a synthesis model of crisis communication. Working on a more abstract level they also follow a time-based classification of crises and introduce six steps that are necessary for influencing the public during a crisis event. However, their study is limited to the public sector and does not take different types of crises into consideration. They also widen the view and suggest seeing crisis communication
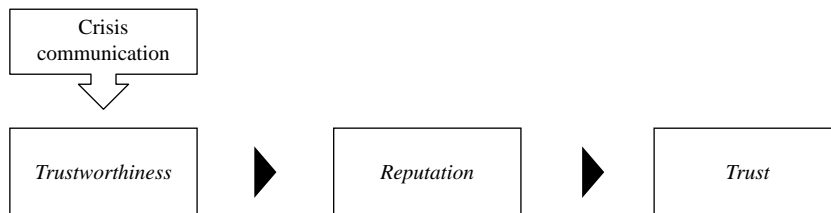
Figure 1.
Managing reputation during crisis situations

as a circle rather than an enclosed process. From their perspective, learning from a crisis becomes a crucial step for crisis communication management.

Murphy (2007) argues that uncertainties in public relations (PR) may be analyzed through complex adaptive system theory or chaos theory. This is mainly because complexity-based thinking begins "from a view of the world as a shifting, often unpredictable, environment" (p. 120). In the sense of PR being also a strategy of constant negotiating between shifting powers and interest groups, chaos theory may be a suitable framework for analyzing crisis situations. Hence, most fruitful of her approach is the contextualizing of crises: similar to chaos theory, crisis situations manifest structures and patterns; however, they are non-predictable (Murphy, 1996). Also, do both concepts share the notion of attractors, bifurcation, unpredictability and non-linearity (Gilpin and Murphy, 2008, p. 38). But despite its attractiveness for embedding crisis situations, the impact of communication in chaotic situations was neither empirically nor theoretically being discussed.

A sophisticated model, also implementing ideas from chaos theory, is introduced by Seeger (2002). He too sees chaos theory as best for understanding the behavior of complex systems but also for corporate communication during crises. Seeger implies first that precise predictions regarding system performance are impossible, so that crisis communication strategies may not be as effective as suggested by scholars so far. As a consequence, to best adjust a communication strategy to the current crisis situation, a classification becomes necessary, showing a corridor from which the set of strategies are to be chosen from. He claims that the impact of communication must be seen in a wider context than just in a timeline. However, we believe that chaos theory is a too widespread approach, modeling communication during crisis situations. It therefore does not help conceptualize modes of action regarding communication strategies and reputational outcome.

The review shows that none of the introduced models aims at profoundly explaining the safeguarding of reputation during crisis situations. Some remain rather basic approaches, only proclaiming classifications of crisis communication and therefore even lacking a theoretical grounding. But since "the [assessment of a] crisis situation should be a major influence in strategy selection" (Coombs, 1995), it is equally important to embed crisis communication into a wider context in order to help in most effectively matching a crisis situation with its appropriate strategies (Sturges *et al.*, 2001). In crisis communication models, the link between crisis communication strategy and multidimensional reputation has yet to be made. As indicated, research on crisis communication remains predominantly on a normative basis or analyses refer only to single crisis cases. Moreover, almost any concept produces its own idea of reputation, risk or crisis. It is therefore hard to find common ground from which to derive sophisticated models of reputation management during crisis situations. To demonstrate how to distinctively prevent long-term losses of (multidimensional) reputation, we develop a theoretically derived crisis communication model. Embedded in the theory of structuration by Giddens (1984), the aim is to find general structures and conditions of crisis communication and its impact on reputation, thereby helping to profoundly understand the forming and deforming of reputation during crises.

Development of the integrative model of crisis communication
Theory of structuration as theoretical foundation
In communication research, scholars predominantly either relate to system theory approaches (macro perspective) or action theory approaches (micro perspective) in order

to embed their empirical research (Röttger, 2005, p. 12). Consequently, most often studies either struggle with empirical evidence on the one hand or disregard structural conditions on the other. But in trying to describe and analyze communication conditions profoundly, especially in the field of PR, such dualism merely restricts the shaping of theoretical frameworks. Therefore, it is important to overcome such micro-macro dualism.

An approach addressing the dichotomy between system and action is the theory of structuration by Giddens (1984), which integrates both perspectives. The aim of the theory is to find a framework that allows an intermediation of social structure and social action at the same time. With the theory of structuration, Giddens outlines social structures as both enabling and constraining social actions. In the view of the theory of structuration, social actors produce actions recursively, which means they act within a structure that is produced by social action itself. As indicated above, structures thereby both enable social action and restrain it at the same time. On the other hand, acting also enforces and maintains social structures.

For Giddens, agents can be both individual persons and conglomerates such as organizations. To some extent, their actions are motivated, purposeful and designated to a relevant context. On the other hand, agents do not always know what they are doing and therefore do not necessarily carry out their actions in order to enable social structuring. Therefore, Giddens argues that social action may emerge either from a practical or a discursive knowledge. Practical knowledge is somewhat habituated and its social actions come from a certain routine. Only discursive knowledge, by contrast, is reflected knowledge, with its social actions being well considered and reasoned. Most everyday actions, however, derive from a practical knowledge and only a few actions come from discursive knowledge. Consequently, social structure to a large extent is formed through habituated social acting.

Structures by contrast are resources or rules organized as social systems. According to Giddens, there are three types of structure: signification, domination and legitimation, which are linked with one another through so-called modalities. While resources (domination) can be allocative (control over material objects) or authoritative (control over persons), rules either give meaning to social acting (signification) or legitimize social acting (legitimation).

Modalities are the links between structures and social actions, so the rules of sense-making (signification) are translated through interpretative schemes into communication. Authoritative/allocative resources (domination) translate structure through facilities into power and legitimation, and finally through norms into morality or sanctions. The fundamental improvement of the theory of structuration is to bring both the concept of structure and the concept of agent together, balancing agency and structure in the "concept of duality". These fundamental assumptions show that social systems exist over time. Because structuration is a constant process in time and space, structure only exists through social acting (which in turn produces structure again).

As Johansson (2007) shows, definitions on corporate communication employ dividing lines between internal and external communication with its very own research traditions. We follow the definition by Theis-Berglmair (2008), stating the term as communication of and inside organizations. Communication about organizations moreover describes an orientation of organizations towards public societal horizons of expectation. This definition overcomes the distinction between internal and external communication (Kuhn, 2008). We argue that corporate communication serves

as a link between the internal and external environments of an organization (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). It improves a coordination function of all corporate communication and serves on a macro level (social delineation), a meso level (user-oriented communication) and a micro level (tools of communication). In order to coordinate, it must first involve a monitoring function, monitoring communication within an organization, the communication with its stakeholders and even its very own communication. Synchronizing all monitored communication therewith enables corporate communication to attribute relevant information to system production (Röttger, 2005, p. 16 ff.). Second, it also holds a management function: communication towards markets on the one hand and communication towards society on the other. Corporate communication as management is therefore an intentional communicative acting towards stakeholders, which contribute to an organization's existence. And it is also an intentional communication towards its social environment in order to legitimize its actions (Zerfaß, 2004, p. 227 ff.). This line of argumentation, following an integrated view of corporate communication becomes relevant for the understanding of the model: it is – from a theoretical viewpoint – applicable for corporate crisis communication in the sense of both, internal and external crisis communication.

As shown above, there have been various approaches to adapting Gidden's theory to Public Relations research. However, a transfer specifically to the field of crisis communication is still missing. This research project takes on Gidden's theory of structuration to outline a profound model of crisis communication (Figure 2). We will therefore derive the key concepts of corporate communication and organizational reputation from the ideas of the theory of structuration in order to frame a sophisticated model of crisis communication. In a crisis, signification means to instantly assign meaning to an organization's wrongdoings. Since reputation may serve as a framework of interpretation, it is part of this signification as well. Legitimation in the context of crisis communication means following social or moral standards in society (external) and legitimizing communication processes within the organization itself (internal). Reputation legitimizes through its trust-building character. Finally, domination means attempting to control the media debate or even stakeholder's actions and interpretations of the crisis. Reputation as a moral rule dominates this framing of how an organization is actually perceived or interpreted during the crisis.

The integrative model of crisis communication
The central aim of corporate communication is to legitimize an organization and to secure its autonomy. Consequently, communication must create images, offer patterns of interpretation and follow the logics of corporate norms and values. In terms of the theory of structuration, corporate communication predominantly corresponds to the ideas of signification and legitimation (Röttger, 2005). Giddens portrays organizational change for societies, which we take as the framework to constitute organizational crises as an intended or unintended consequence of social acting. Stakeholders in a crisis begin to question the routine relationship. While structure has been produced out of intentional and unintentional acting, agents in a crisis begin to question this process. They even disrupt the relationship, which may lead to boycotts and an endangered organizational existence.

As portrayed, most social acting results from a continuous routine. Crises break this routine, having consequences for corporate communication. The central aim of crisis communication is to protect organizational reputation. But as reputation is formed over
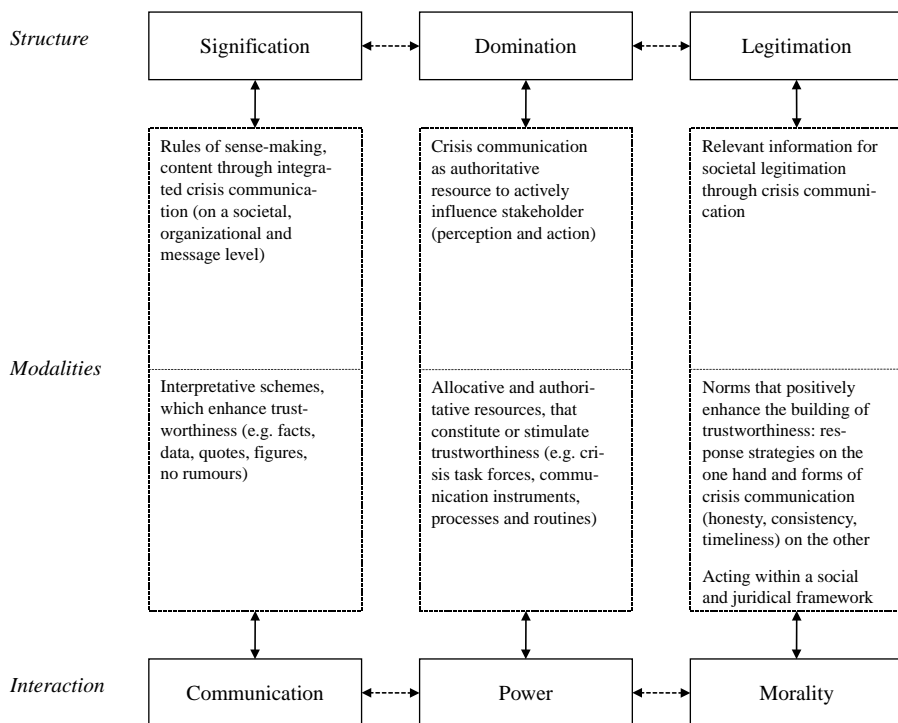
Structure	Signification	←--→	Domination	←--→	Legitimation

Rules of sense-making, content through integrated crisis communication (on a societal, organizational and message level)

Crisis communication as authoritative resource to actively influence stakeholder (perception and action)

Relevant information for societal legitimation through crisis communication

Modalities

Interpretative schemes, which enhance trustworthiness (e.g. facts, data, quotes, figures, no rumours)

Allocative and authoritative resources, that constitute or stimulate trustworthiness (e.g. crisis task forces, communication instruments, processes and routines)

Norms that positively enhance the building of trustworthiness: response strategies on the one hand and forms of crisis communication (honesty, consistency, timeliness) on the other

Acting within a social and juridical framework

Interaction	Communication	←--→	Power	←--→	Morality

Figure 2.
Analytical elements of the process of structuration

a long period of time, the focus of short-term crisis communication is on addressing two main elements of reputation: image (as single elements of reputation) and trustworthiness (as the key requirement to build reputation). Signaling trustworthiness and enhancing an organization's image demands more than simply finding functional communication strategies (micro level). Second, it must consider a company's role as social agent in society (macro level) (Carroll, 1991; Watson, 2007). And third, organizations have to provide organizational structures to most effectively communicate during crisis situations (meso level). Crisis communication "[. . .] not only can alleviate or eliminate the crisis, but also can sometimes bring the organization a more positive reputation than it had before the crisis" (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 9). Keeping these conclusions in mind, we identify three postulates of crisis communication, which have an impact on safeguarding organizational reputation.

Postulate of strategic crisis communication (macro level)
On a strategic level, crisis communication must stand in line with social, moral and juridical standards. In a crisis, it is not just crisis management which is being observed carefully by stakeholders in terms of social ethics, but also an organization's communication. Crisis communication takes on a legitimizing function (Röttger, 2005) and only a consistent signaling "of the party's past actions, credible communications about the trustee from other parties, belief that the trustee has a strong sense of justice, and the extent to which the party's actions are congruent with his or her words all affect

the degree to which the party is judged to have integrity" (Mayer *et al.*, 1995, p. 719). In order to signal trustworthiness through moral integrity and thereby to safeguard social reputation, organizations must position themselves as a fair player and as a social agent, honoring legal and ethical requirements.

Postulate of integrative crisis communication (meso level)
Crisis communication must be integrated into all the communication activities of an organization in order for it to communicate, both internally and externally with its key stakeholders, in a holistic way. As Gilpin and Murphy (2008, p. 5 f.) proclaim, organizations in a crisis must not follow normative procedures but analyze knowledge development and decision making. In particular, the link between internal and external communication plays a major role in communicating the crisis coherently, because internal members of an organization are often the source for gossip and uncontrolled communication, which has consequences for external communication, too (Fearn-Banks, 2007). The aim of an integrative crisis communication strategy is to provide methodological knowledge to communicate during a crisis rather than taking on crisis management functions itself (Zerfaß, 2004).

Postulate of situational crisis communication (micro level)
According to empirical findings in crisis communication, situational crisis communication is crucial to safeguard reputation in the long run. Crisis communication message strategies have different impacts depending on the crisis type. Matching crisis communication strategies to the type of crisis therefore becomes a task of prime importance for crisis managers. Moreover, relevant stakeholder groups with whom to communicate must be identified. Only when the crisis is assessed with precision, adequate (rhetorical) response and message strategies can be identified in order to safeguard reputation in the long run. The aim of crisis communication on this level, therefore, is to influence the crisis through communicative patterns of interpretation and sense-making, signaling benevolence and involvement.

Modeling corporate crisis communication
To thoroughly safeguard reputation, crisis communication must meet all three postulates. Therefore, we propose a crisis communication model which unfolds accordingly on three distinct levels. On a societal level, crisis communication is portrayed as following commonly accepted rules in society (such as legal and ethical frameworks). On an organizational level, it provides structures and processes to most effectively meet crisis situations (such as crisis management teams). And on the level of messages, crisis communication provides patterns of interpretation, influencing the perception of the crisis among key stakeholders and the public.

The integrated model of crisis communication has its roots in crisis communication and reputation research alike. Theoretically derived from the theory of structuration, it provides a holistic view on crisis communication, which is portrayed as the key element to safeguard reputation through signaling trustworthiness. As Ingenhoff and Sommer (2007) show, reputation unfolds functionally, socially and emotionally. Their argumentation goes beyond predominantly functional reputation models, especially from an economic point of view. In order to safeguard reputation, crisis communication must not address an organization's reputation generally, but provide

sophisticated strategies as well. Communication as organizational acting on a societal level integrates the argumentation by Voswinkel (2001) and Raub and Weesie (1990), who underline the demand for an organization's legitimacy. Also on the organizational level, the model refers to findings from Fearn-Banks (2007) and Lee *et al.* (2007), who indicate an impact of organizational effectiveness on communication during crises. Regarding the symbolic perspective on crisis communication, the model on the level of messages refers to research by Benoit (1995) and Coombs (2007), showing that message strategies have an impact on both image (short run) and reputation (long run) during crisis situations.

Crisis communication is more than just rhetorical strategies (e.g. SCCT) or organizational changes. As we have demonstrated, it is an organizational function in order to influence perceptions and thereby have an impact on reputation. The latter unfolds in three dimensions so that general concepts of reputation management are ineffective and unclear. Modeling crisis communication must consider both its organizational function, and its impact on reputation as the most vulnerable asset to protect during crisis situations. The integrative model of crisis communication is therefore a profound and carefully developed approach towards systematic reputation management through communication during crises (Figure 3).

Finally, the model is a theoretical framework in order to present three distinctive levels of crisis communication: crisis communication as norm, as resource and as sense giving character. It is meant to be independent from definite strategies as such and therefore neither functions within one specific society or understanding of organizations. As a consequence, it does not propose actual strategies corresponding to each of the levels. This may be added through future research on crisis communication.

Conclusions and outlook
Our research framework is in keeping with ideas about adapting the theory of structuration, particularly to communication research. However, it clearly adds new
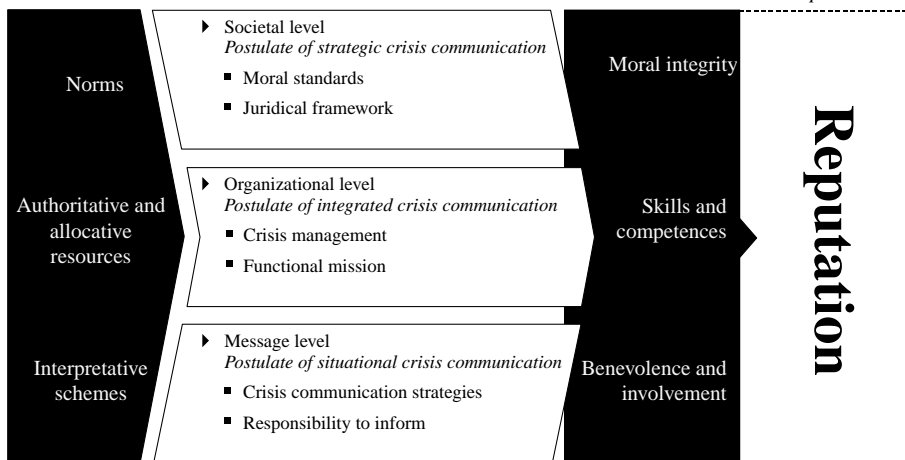

Figure 3.
The integrative model of crisis communication

ideas to the debate by developing conclusions explicitly for communication during crisis situations. In doing so, it follows three aims: first to outline theoretically in what way crisis situations impact functional, social and affective reputation. Second, to empirically endorse how communication strategies affect the safeguarding of organizational reputation under crisis circumstances. And third, to integrate the current debate in communication research, transferring the theory of structuration on research to profoundly analyze crisis communication. Embedding organizational crisis communication into the theory of structuration therefore essentially adds to the recent theory debate in communication and reputation research. To further promote the integrative model of crisis communication, we identify three main areas which need improving. First, literature on crisis communication is predominantly based on case studies. More theory-derived ideas may help future comparative research and reveal structures and coherences of crisis communication. Second, the understanding of organizational reputation is mainly subject to functional aspects. Since reputation is predominantly established through (mass) media, communication is the key element to actively manage reputation – particularly during crisis situations, when public attention is at its highest level and reputation is under attack. Here, social and emotional aspects of reputation have to be taken into consideration, too. Third, crises particularly of large organizations will have global impacts. Crisis communication, however, is culturally bounded so that the need for comparative research integrating transnational considerations will gain great importance.

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