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## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION – CLASSIC MEDIA TRENDS

**Abstract:** Crisis communication, as a relatively "young" field of social sciences, is still in the development stage, which is indicated by three main arguments - problems related to definition, lack of empirical research, and the growing influence of social networks in the direction of planning and management of crisis communication. Social networks created a communication context that changed the most effective and valuable communications, including: the availability of information and the speed of its dissemination; audience engagement and feedback; Access to confidential and personal data. Also important trends caused by the development of digital media in professional mass media – the transformation of the multimedia context, data journalism and a decrease in trust in mass media. The purpose of the article is to analyze the trends of modern media and show what solution exists in the direction of effective cooperation with the media in crisis communication.

**Key words:** crisis communication, social networks, classic media, data journalism, empirical studies.

**Language:** English

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### Introduction

The definition of crisis communication is still a subject of disagreement among scientists and researchers, which creates certain difficulties. Since "the definition determines the approach to the subject" (Coombs, 2019), it is better to correctly determine the essence of crisis communication from the beginning.

We can consider crisis communication as actions in accordance with certain instructions in a crisis situation in order to limit the damage that can be caused to the organization and stakeholders (Coombs, 2014), and a crisis can be explained as an atypical event that can be predicted but not expected (Zaremba, 2015. 33-34). Communication allows you to intentionally create certain results, that is, communication is a tool used by senders and receivers to achieve goals, solve problems, influence others and coordinate actions (Sellnow&Seeger, 2013. 11).

With the growing influence of social networks, every new crisis and communication error may reveal

unexpected risks that may require updating existing strategies for managing them.

It is obvious that media organizations use social networks to strengthen their positions in the virtual space and attract a larger audience, especially young people, for whom the digital world is the main source of information. Social networks encourage mass media to create multimedia products. Fast pace and two-way communication of social networks, apparently, erased the line between traditional and online mass media.

Considering this, it is logical to use the term "classical" media for describing modern mass media. "Classic media" today compete with "new media", which arose as a result of the evolution of digital communication technologies, which arise in the virtual space.

Social networks have created a communication context in which crises arise due to the fault of one user, and it is very difficult to cope with it, especially when the mass media often share a fabricated scandal

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without verifying the facts. Also noticeable trends that we received with the growing influence of social networks: transformation of the cliché of the mass media, data journalism, low level of trust in mass media.

For comparison: even a few decades ago, both brands and consumers depended on the quality and solutions of news communicated by traditional means of mass information. Today, anyone who has access to the Internet can spread their story virally (Strawser, 2022). What is the reason? The possibilities of social networks have transformed the public from passive recipients of messages to active participants in crisis communication, where every user has the chance to influence the de-escalation and de-escalation of the crisis.

Under the influence of social networks, classical media have lost their trust, which is confirmed by many studies. В чем была расположение к мессовой информация? - The use of unverified facts by mass media in journalistic production and their further distribution in the social space, due to the interactivity of which it is difficult to return the disinformation spread, there is also the danger of so-called echo cameras, closed chats. and groups that are a fruitful example of spreading unverified information. It is here that the majority of crises arise, which harms not only the immediate addressees, but also the mass media themselves, if they use such information.

However, there are ways that mass media can support the position of a public mediator through the principles of journalistic ethics – this is data journalism and mass media monitoring. Statistics and monitoring of mass media are two of the most difficult tasks for mass media, because this is how you can reduce the risks of social networks.

## 2. Review of the literature

Crisis communication as a new academic discipline, built on the method of thematic research. Existing theories and strategies of crisis communication are developing together with technological progress, which puts completely new tasks before companies and users of social networks. A number of important works and analysis of scientific articles are used in the article, but the following is the key literature:

Thus, the article uses the book of Alan Dzhey Zarembo «Crisis communication – THEORY AND PRACTICE». The author offers a theoretical basis of myths and opinions related to the deficit of crisis communication, and gives examples of successful and unsuccessful crisis communication.

A key part of the article is the writings of W. Timothy Coombs: «Ongoing crisis communication», in which are discussed, the dangers and problems of crisis communication as well as the role and influence of social networks on crisis management, and

«Situational theory of crisis communication» (SCCT), which presents a problem on the contrary, from inside. SCCT provides a mechanism for predicting how stakeholders and consumers will react to a crisis, reputational threats to a crisis, and strategies for responding to a crisis.

The article also uses «Theorizing of crisis communication», Timoti L. Sellnou and Matthew (B. Сигер. 2021) — a manual that considers adaptive and new models of social networks and crisis communication, Theory of social information processing, Theory of guarantees, Mode MAIN, Theory of dialogue. in connection with the public; Model of social-mediated crisis communication; New theories of social networks in crisis communication.

The work of Karen Freberg **Crisis Communication.** "" is used in the article. In the guide, the basics of crisis communication are discussed, including the definition of crisis, the perception of crisis and the strategy of crisis communication.

Ivan Valchanov's paper Data Journalism. Essence, Technology, Development (University of National World Economy, Sofia. Книга BIG DATA Digital Marketing and Trendwatching, стр. 83) is a good purchase for an article. The author describes the digital technologies, communication media and software products that are causing a number of transformations in media. One of them is data journalism.

## Methods of research

Crisis communication became the subject of extensive research in the USA in the 1980s. The main task of the first researchers was to find, evaluate and generalize knowledge about crisis communication (Coombs, 2014). Most of the research available today is based on the American and European experience and may not be applicable to the cultures of other countries. That is why it is important to conduct new research in countries where crisis communication is developing, including in Georgia.

In this article I present the results of my quantitative research. The survey, which was conducted anonymously on January 9-13, 2023, includes the responses of 50 respondents. Among them: 48% work as media managers, 52% work as journalists, 72% of respondents represent central media, 16% - regional media, 12% - international media.

In addition, the article uses the components of two in-depth interviews, interviews recorded with Hatuna Bakradze, the head of the Georgian marketing company IPM, and Malkhaz Rekhviashvili, the editor-in-chief of Factgheck.ge.

In the final part of the article, an excerpt from my scientific article "Crisis communication and problems of social networks" was used, which was published in the magazine "Moambe" of the National Academy of Sciences of Georgia (Moambe, Issue: Volume 1 No. 1

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### Discussion

#### 4.1 Basics of crisis communication theories

With the strong influence of social media on crisis communication, new theories are being created and communication theories are being adapted to clarify the influence and role of social media in crisis communication, focusing on communication variables that are an integral part of new media (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021).

We can judge how big the role of social networks is in adapting theories of crisis communication using the example of the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model (SMCC).

Notably, the basis of SMCC was the Blog-Mediated Crisis Model, which focused on how bloggers inform users about an organization in crisis to highlight the potential impact of social media on society during a crisis (Matthew & Seeger, 2021. 208).

The SMCC model provides an opportunity to illustrate the dissemination of information during a crisis and reflects the influence of social networks on the interaction of new media, classic media and verbal communication, as well as on the credibility of messages. More importantly, it is a model that has the potential to replace Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) "to help organizations communicate using the most effective messaging strategies" (Matthew & Seeger, 2021).

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#### 4.2. Data Journalism

Social media was created from digital tools of communication and quickly became a source of multi-profile information not only for ordinary users, but also for journalists. Reality shows that journalists use social media tools without any criticism, filter or verification (Szews P. 2014. 96), while data journalism opens completely new horizons, and properly selected tools allow researchers not only to collect data, but also to Observe the reaction in real time (Valchanov, 2018).

Analyzing data using technology and then transforming it into a media product is a phenomenon characteristic of online media of the 21st century. Therefore, the generation of vast amounts of information in the digital space has presented media researchers with a challenge, as it is difficult to collect and synthesize data. However, with the use of

scientific and commercial digital applications, it has become possible to simplify the research process.

Analyzing data is the future for journalists - this is the prediction of English computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee. The man who created the World Wide Web and invented the Internet Resource Addressing System says, "If that sounds like a daunting prospect, it's worth considering that almost none of today's journalism courses teach any kind of data analysis, even in its simplest form—statistics." Guardian. 2010).

#### 4.3. Decline in media credibility

Research shows that trust in the media is gradually decreasing. For example, according to the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer, a global communications holding company, 64% of the US population found leaked information more believable than media reports.

Holding considers this trend as a threat to crisis communications, and in an extensive assessment (What the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer Insights Mean for Crisis Communications) emphasizes an alarming trend - the absolute lack of faith in the system. According to the trust barometer, among the four institutional pillars - government, business, media and the civil sector - the most.

The media is characterized by low trust, which is why the Edelman Trust Barometer asked the main question: if people trust organizations less in the ordinary course of business, how will they trust them when it comes to a crisis, that is, when "something goes wrong"? (Dockins, Digital practice, March 24, 2017).

According to the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer, in a survey of 26 countries, the media is distrusted (50%) in 15, including Germany (47%), the USA (43%), Australia (38%) and in South Korea (27%).

#### 4.4. Echo chambers

Notably, social media (44%) remains the least trusted sector among sectors such as technology (75%), education (71%), food and beverage (71%) and healthcare (70%). The reason for the decrease in trust in social media is in turn related to echo chambers, which is the result of the media sharing information from closed chats and groups. The shared media environment has given way to echo chambers, making it difficult to solve problems collaboratively. (ECONOMIC OPTIMISM SUFFERS A MASSIVE COLLAPSE GLOBALLY, <https://www.edelman.com/news-awards/2023-edelman-trust-barometer> 2023, January 15).

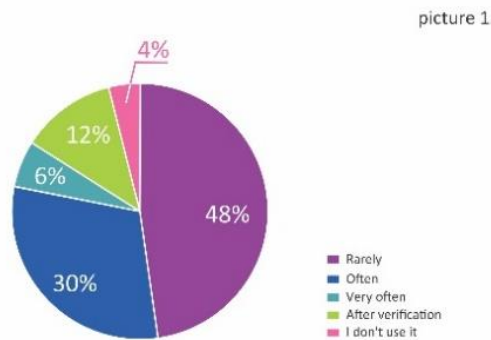
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Echo chambers in social media are a significant problem as they relate to conspiracy theories, political polarization, and the spread of misinformation. An echo chamber is a network in which users broadcast opinions to them that discredit other views (A Survey on Echo Chambers on Social Media: Description, Detection and Mitigation <https://arxiv.org/abs/2112.05084>, Submitted on 9 Dec 2021].

According to Malkhaz Rekhviashvili, the editor-in-chief of Factmeter, the number of people for whom social media is the primary source of information is constantly increasing. If we look at it, as Facebook and other big digital media have begun to sort of regulate hate speech and incitement to violence, we'll see a flow of people into small chats where information is hard to control. Thus, it is in small groups that a comfortable environment is created for ultra-right and violent groups and, accordingly, a fertile space for the creation of crises.

#### 4.5 Results of empirical research - Georgia

**Figure 1: "How often do you use information spread on social media as a primary source for preparing journalistic material?"**



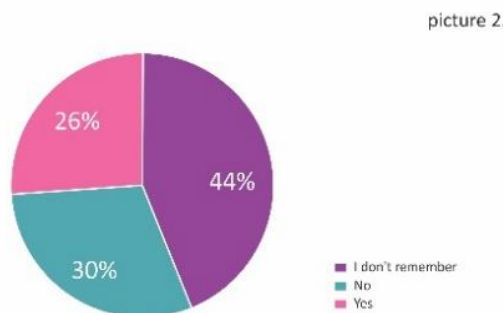
An interesting trend has emerged regarding threats related to social media. To the question - has the influence of social media created a crisis situation for your media outlet? - Only 26% of respondents answer positively, 30% - negatively, and the majority

As for the results of the empirical research, the purpose of the survey conducted in January 2023 was to determine the role of social media in the professional activities of Georgian media organizations and to assess their attitude towards crisis communication.

Research has shown that the media largely benefit from information spread on social media. To the question - "How often do you use the information spread on social media as a primary source for preparing journalistic material?" - the answers were distributed as follows: 48% rarely use the information spread on social media as a primary source, often - 30%, not at all - 4%, very often - 6%, verification then uses - 12%. Overall, 96% of traditional media primarily use social media information, albeit with varying frequency (Figure 1).

- 44% cannot recall such facts. In total, more than a quarter of the surveyed respondents confirm the existence of crisis cases related to social networks in Georgian media organizations (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Has the impact of social media created a crisis situation for your media outlet?**



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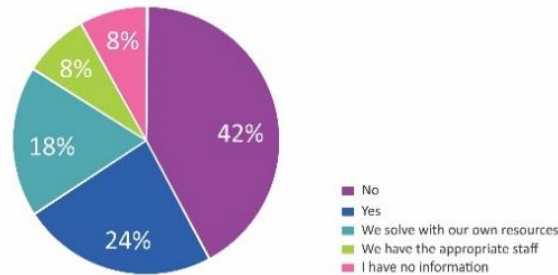
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To the question - does your media organization have any crisis management/prevention documents, strategies/plans? - The answers are distributed as follows: 24% confirm the existence of an organizational document, 18% state that they are already solving crises by their own efforts, 22% say

that they do not have such a document, according to 20%, they do not have a strategy yet, but they need it. 8% do not have information on this issue, and in the case of 8%, the media organization has a relevant staff/office (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Does your media organization have any crisis management/prevention documents, strategies/plans?**



If we summarize the results of the research, we will see that the media mainly relies on the social media narrative, and only single organizations have created a strategic communication document to manage crisis situations. Does the media use any form of monitoring and analysis? This question was answered by a leading company in the field of marketing research in the field of communication. Khatuna Bakradze, director of IPM, says in an in-depth interview that the company has been operating in the market since 1995 and currently has more than 150 clients, although there are no media organizations among them, that is, Georgian media organizations have never approached the marketing research company with a request for media monitoring or social network analysis.

What should classical media take into account in order to oppose the challenges of new media and avoid crisis communication? In addition to processing data, it is about developing the right messages for digital media.

#### 4.6. Social media messages

In the process of managing crisis situations, communication messages have changed in the 21st century, following the development of technologies. Social media provides many opportunities for public relations and crisis communication, but also creates challenges and barriers, including the so-called "Reputation killers" - the risk of cyber-attacks, rumours, misinformation and various intentional actions. Social media, on the other hand, is two-way, not only allowing organizations to communicate with their audiences, but also providing audiences with a forum for communication (Freberg, 2011.15).

Thus, it is important to correctly choose crisis messages, the purpose of which is to reduce the reputational, financial, emotional damage caused by the crisis, and at the same time to convince the audience to maintain a positive attitude towards the subject affected by the crisis (Freberg, 2011. 6).

It is important to look at social media as a mixture of different platforms, the selection and use of which depends on the nature of the crisis, the target audience, the stakeholders and the message of the crisis response. An aspect to consider when using social media is who is at risk. A crisis can put stakeholders and the organization at risk. However, stakeholder safety is the number one priority in a crisis (Coombs, 2019. 140). Taking into account these priorities should be mandatory for the classical media, because there is an institutional or organizational memory, which will always remind us of the mistakes made in the crisis. Does the crisis end when the problem seems to be overcome? Every crisis eventually comes to some resolution. There comes a time when the organization returns to normal activities. However, even after the end of the crisis, it is necessary for the media, like any other organization, to assess the lessons of crisis management, which is important for institutional or organizational memory.

#### 5. Conclusion:

Crisis communication is still a developing field among the social sciences. It has only been thoroughly studied since the 1980s and is therefore fraught with difficulties, including differing definitions, a lack of empirical studies, and the unlimited possibilities of social media, which is why even one user of the social

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network can plan and instigate a crisis in the virtual space!

Virtual space itself creates new crises and dictates new, unusual standards of crisis communications, with which there is virtually no precedent for dealing with.

Crisis communication, as a new study discipline, is built on the case study method. Existing theories and strategies of crisis communication are evolving along with technological progress, which poses completely new challenges for companies and users of social networks.

However, social media has a great opportunity to influence not only the course of crisis communication, but also the future perspective of companies and the formation of public opinion (mamiashvili, P, 2023).

Media outlets have transformed into multimedia platforms, and they have to account to users who do not act as they did in traditional media environments where communication was unanimous. Digital media users today have transformed from passive audiences to active users and have the opportunity to be not only observers but also direct participants in crisis management.

The credibility of the media is declining in the wake of the influence of social media, as anyone with a mobile device today can compete with journalists in terms of the speed of information dissemination. For this reason, the media does not have time to verify the information and sort and monitor the information accumulated in social networks, which further increases the risks of crisis communication.

It is noteworthy the tendency according to which the users of the social network flow into uncontrollable closed groups, which is a fertile ground for the creation of crises and organized attacks; This is the main reason why trust in social media is also decreasing.

Is there a solution? - It is important to carry out media monitoring, at any stage of the crisis it is necessary to carry out media monitoring and investigate the crisis messages covered by the media (Coombs, 2019. 162). Only in this case is it possible to have a consistent communication with the media during a crisis, which will give the stakeholders the opportunity to receive accurate, primary information from the classical media, and not secondary, confusing news fabricated by the social media itself (Coombs, 2007).

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