Culture and Crisis
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Culture and Crisis Communication

Transboundary Cases from Nonwestern Perspectives

Edited by

Amiso M. George
Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo
To our students of global and crisis communication, who, spanning many cultures and boundaries, yearn for an understanding of, and emphasis on, culture in crises. And to communication practitioners everywhere who constantly contend with crisis and conflict situations that challenge their abilities and professional deontology. We hope that the cases and tips provided in this book will bring some welcome reprieve!

Amiso M. George & Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo
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The IEEE Professional Communication Society (PCS), with Wiley-IEEE Press, continues its book series titled Professional Engineering Communication with a volume collected guided and shaped by Amiso M. George and Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo titled Culture and Crisis Communication: Transboundary Cases from Nonwestern Perspectives. In the field of risk communication, there are few sustained, focused collections about practices from a nonwestern perspective. This book aims to fill that gap and show everyone how communication is, foremost, always contextualized and never inert.

With the knowledgeable and steady vision provided by the book’s editors, who also contributed to writing chapters, this tome will help anyone unpack assumptions and presumptions about appropriate actions to take while (sometimes literally) in the eye of the storm. From intense human tragedy to the follies of the rich, these chapters examine how companies, organizations, news outlets, health organizations, technical experts, politicians, and local communities communicate in crisis situations.

As with other books in this series, we aim to do more than theorize. Thus, each chapter provides lessons learned, discussion questions for interactive training, and some expert opinions. Use these resources to enrich your own thinking about the complexity of international and intra-national communication when an emergency is at hand.

When this book series began, we were looking for a collection that could address these issues, and here it is. The series has a mandate to explore areas of communication practices and application as applied to the engineering, technical, and scientific professions. Including the realms of business, governmental agencies, academia, and other areas, this series has and will continue to develop perspectives about the state of communication issues and potential solutions when at all possible.

While theory has its place (in this book and this series), we always look to be a source where recommendations for action and activity can be found. All of the books in the fast-growing PEC series keep a steady eye on the applicable while acknowledging the contributions that analysis, research, and theory can provide to these efforts. You will see Brewer’s active synthesis between on-site realities and research coming together. There is a strong commitment from the Professional Communication
Society of IEEE and Wiley to produce a set of information and resources that can be carried directly into engineering firms, technology organizations, and academia alike.

For the series, we work with this philosophy: at the core of engineering, science, and technical work is problem solving and discovery. These tasks require, at all levels, talented and agile communication practices. We need to effectively gather, vet, analyze, synthesize, control, and produce communication pieces in order for any meaningful work to get done. This book, like others in the series before it, contributes deeply to that vision.

Traci Nathans-Kelly, Ph.D.
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The global nature of crises foregrounds the importance of communication scholarship that takes culture seriously and theorizes pathways, processes, mechanisms, and message characteristics that are deeply rooted in cultural contexts. Within the crisis communication literature, there is a dearth of scholarly work that addresses culture seriously, especially from the frameworks of multiple global cultures. Often missing from the overarching concepts of crises are cultural worldviews, contextual understandings, and engagement with the anchoring values that drive the theorizing of crises. To take culture seriously and to create conceptual maps for theorizing crisis communication from cultural worldviews calls for communication scholarship that roots itself in the diversity of worldviews, approaching the theorizing of culture from within these worldviews. The refreshing part of this collection, *Culture and Crisis Communication*, lies in its treatment of culture as an anchor for the development of communication theories of crises. In doing so, the book adopts a polymorphic approach to the theorizing of crisis communication, depicting the multitude of ways in which meanings are assigned to crises, crises are constructed, and processes of communication are constituted around crises. In the chapters that follow, the reader is offered a conceptual map for journeying through a plethora of understandings of crises and communication, thus offering different pathways for addressing the questions of theory, methodology, and practice.

One of the key contributions of the book is its theorizing of crisis communication from nonwestern contexts, thus opening up the possibilities of theorizing from cultural vantage points that reside outside of the western mainstream of communication theorizing. In doing so, the cases presented in the book bring forth analyses of communication strategies in crises contexts in often under-represented and globally salient contexts such as the Nigerian response to the Ebola virus, the crisis response in the context of the conflict between the workers, the KazMunaiGaz oil company, and local government authorities that took place between May and June 2011 in Kazakhstan, the response of European countries to Syrian refugees amidst the broader Syrian civil war, the crisis negotiations of the US-based transnational corporation Chiquita Brands International® in Colombia and Guatemala, crisis management in the context of the Niterói landslide in Brazil, the response of the Chinese political and media institutions in the context of the melamine-tainted milk powder crisis in
China, the response of the Indian government to the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008, the layers of Indonesian government response to the forest fires that led to the transboundary haze crisis of 2013, and the Singapore government’s crisis response strategy in the context of the large-scale penetration of social media. This impressive array of case studies from diverse nonwestern contexts depict the interplay of cultural context and communication in crisis response. The very nature of what is communication and how to conceptualize the role of communication in the realm of crises is polymorphic, thus rendering as evident the various culturally constituted taken-for-granted assumptions that go into how we come to understand “what is communication?” and “what is the role of communication in crises?” Moreover, the contextual location of the authors of the chapters in relationship to the Western mainstream of communication scholarship offers unique vantage points for theorizing crisis communication practices.

Crises are socially constructed. They are constituted in relationships and in relationship to the structures within which we come to experience them. The ways in which we respond to these crises thus are rendered meaningful through our values, identities, and relationships. Whereas a large number of examples covered in the book result from human actions, others originate naturally from the environments within which we live, although contemporary writings on the Anthropocene depict the ways in which these crises too often result from aggregating human action over an extended period of time. Even as we consider the immediate responses that are constituted as solutions to the crises, the chapters in the book also point toward long-term and big picture questions we ought to be asking in theorizing crises and in conceptualizing responses to crises. Particularly salient are notions of global dialogues, conversations, and collaborations across cultural boundaries in the articulation of solutions that require collective efforts, especially in the realm of problems that are global in nature. How then can organizations and institutions, situated within particular and local meaning communities, come to create common communicative entry points for mutual collaboration and problem solving? What are the challenges to collaboration and how can these challenges be meaningfully addressed?

Another key contribution of the book is in the treatment of the multiple layers and levels of cultures in the conceptualization of communication. The notions of trans-boundary and within-boundary crisis communication attend to the criss-crossings and cross-boundary movements in the negotiation of stakeholder groups and contexts. The concept of boundary raises important theoretical questions about the constitution of cultural boundaries, the textures of boundaries, and the intersections and demarcations of boundaries. How then is communication negotiated as crises cross boundaries, engaging with stakeholders that are globally dispersed and globally connected? The chapters depict the constitutive role of communication in the maintenance and reproduction of relationships in crisis situations. They also pay careful attention to the nuances of the very definition of crisis and the ways in which communities come to be formed around a crisis. That crises are situated within broader social, political, and
economic contexts, weaved into intricate local–national–global relationships is a thematic lesson that emerges across the chapters. In the array of examples depicted in the chapters, we are drawn into the complexities that constitute crises and the challenges of cultural understanding. That the risks, vulnerabilities, and responses to crises are constituted through the lens of culture is an invaluable lesson that emerges across the chapters. As you read through these chapters, consider the ways in which our practices of communication are shaped by the institutions, structures, and cultures within which we reside. What values do we take for granted when we come to define crises and map out specific solutions? What other values are backgrounded or erased? The tentative conceptual maps offered in these pages are excellent seeds for crisis communication that is attentive to the cultural diversities and differences within which crises are constituted.

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The frequency, intensity, and transboundary reach of crises have increased steadily for more than three decades. More corporations, countries, and continents experience crises of a significant magnitude than could have been imagined by earlier generations. Current crises defy regional, national, and cultural boundaries as they impact the lives of diverse publics in unforeseeable ways. Simply put, the growing complexity, severity, and interconnectivity of crises defy long-standing expectations for effective crisis communication.

Current scholars who hope to generate best practices for mitigating and managing these events must do so from a transboundary perspective. Crises may begin locally, but they rarely end there. Instead, diseases spread internationally in days. Natural disasters impact food security for multiple nations. An unfortunate incident in one country can impact an organization’s reputation world-wide. Economic and political crises in one nation result in mass dislocations of populations to others. These are only a few examples of how crises expand and compound in their impact.

The evolving nature of crises has demanded innovative outlooks in theory-building and crisis communication consulting. The fact that much of the original research on crisis communication was done from a western perspective and bias has created a gap in understanding how various crises evolve and how publics respond in other parts of the world. In short, our current body of work on crisis communication fails to fully account for the impact of culture on crisis and crisis communication.

Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo and Amiso M. George and the authors of their edited text take a bold step forward in bridging this gap in their edited text, *Culture and Crisis Communication: Transboundary Cases from Nonwestern Perspectives*. Their book captures the distinct characteristics of crises initiated in nonwestern contexts. The cases selected by the authors are diverse, compelling, and thought provoking. Combined, the cases reveal the pattern through which crises begin locally and extend to international levels, impacting seemingly unrelated audiences with devastating consequences.

Most importantly, the authors adopt and adapt theories with a cultural focus to crisis communication contexts. This theory-building effort provides a much-needed expansion of the crisis communication literature. The case studies are designed to
both expand our understanding of transboundary crises and to provide explicit strategies for managing them. Thus, the book contributes to crisis planning on multiple fronts.

The authors and editors have succeeded in finding the consistency that weaves through diverse crisis types in a variety of nonwestern cultures. Crises stemming from political revolution, national sports teams, pandemics, xenophobia, food fraud, terrorism, natural disasters, nuclear disasters, worker unrest, inept crisis planning, reputational threat, homeless refugees, violations of cultural expectations, and cross-national conflict are analyzed through a consistent lens emphasizing cultural nuances.

The authors also recognize that, although crises are expanding in both their reach and consequences, we are also living in a time of unprecedented access to information and communication. Publics once considered remote now have immediate access to vital information. Audiences that once had little understanding of one another are now intertwined in commerce. The sprawling networks created by new media can exacerbate crises, particularly those involving reputation, but they can also introduce new ways of collecting and distributing information that aids in crisis mitigation. The authors of *Culture and Crisis Communication: Transboundary Cases from Nonwestern Perspectives* recognize this paradox and offer new insight into how the shifting landscape of communication technology is influenced by cultural differences.

Crises will always bring danger and disruption. And, unfortunately, the scope and scale of crisis will continue to expand. This book, however, offers a degree of optimism. The authors recognize the crucial role of culture in managing crises. The understanding and advice offered in this text advances our capacity for more effectively managing these transboundary crises. In doing so, these authors make a valuable contribution to the crisis communication literature.

Timothy L. Sellnow and Matthew W. Seeger

Authors of *Theorizing Crisis Communication and Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal*