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Academics engaging through the media—Insights from creating a monthly column on crisis management

Daniel Laufer

Wellington School of Business and Government, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords
Crisis management
Engagement
Media commentary
Covid-19

ABSTRACT

Universities increasingly expect academics to engage with external stakeholders. This includes providing media commentary. In this article I describe my experience writing a monthly column on Crisis Management in the New Zealand Herald, the most widely read newspaper in New Zealand with an average daily readership of over 460,000 people (New Zealand Herald, 2019). The article also describes the benefits of writing a newspaper column including educating the public about issues relating to Crisis Management such as managing Covid-19, creating a platform for enhancing collaboration between academics and Public Relations firms, and enhancing the reputation of both the academic and university. This article will benefit academics in the field of Public Relations who are interested in writing a newspaper column to engage through the media.

1. Introduction

Research and teaching-oriented universities increasingly expect academics to engage with external stakeholders. These stakeholders include companies, the government and the general public. Leading academic organizations also recognize the need for increased external engagement. For example, the American Political Science Association created a task force to discuss how to generate effective engagement (McMurtrie, 2014).

An important type of engagement activity for academics is commentary in the media which is a way to educate the public about an important topic related to a scholar’s area of expertise. An academic’s perspective is viewed by many in the public as an informed and relatively unbiased opinion compared to other commentators. This is especially important during the Covid-19 crisis when trust in the government in many countries is in decline, and the public is looking for credible sources of information.

Whereas writing op-eds, speeches and granting media interviews are beneficial for both the academic and university, I believe other types of activities are more reputation enhancing. For example, writing a column in one’s area of expertise for an influential media outlet enables academics to have a longer-term impact that goes beyond occasional commentary. In this article I describe my experience writing a regular column about Crisis Management for the New Zealand Herald, the most widely read newspaper in New Zealand with an average daily readership of over 460,000 people (New Zealand Herald, 2019). In the following sections I describe the benefits of writing a newspaper column, and my experience writing a column from 2019 to 2020.

2. Benefits of writing a newspaper column

2.1. Provides more autonomy and control over content

A key difference between writing a regular column and providing occasional commentary is control over content. When being interviewed for a story, an academic typically spends a considerable amount of time speaking with reporters and answering questions through email correspondence. Despite these lengthy and in-depth conversations with reporters, in most cases when the news articles are published, only select quotes from the academic expert’s commentary are included.

Unlike providing occasional commentary for the media, writing a regular column for a newspaper provides a much greater level of control and autonomy for an academic. Since I started writing my monthly column on Crisis Management in early 2019, I’ve always chosen the topic of the column, as well as the content included in the 800–1,000-word monthly column. My column has appeared 15 times in the newspaper since I was hired to write the column, and the editor has made only minor editing changes on rare occasions before publishing the column.

Having greater control over the content minimizes the risk of being misquoted or taken out of context. This is a major concern of academics when dealing with the media. In many situations journalists will choose
the quotes they prefer to use, and this may distort the views of academics in a published newspaper article or a news clip on TV or the radio. A good example of this is a TV interview with Cynthia Miller-Idriss, a professor of education and sociology at American University. She was interviewed on NBC’s Today show in the USA for a segment on how white nationalists were trying to infiltrate college campuses. The sound bite used by the Today show featured Professor Miller-Idriss calling a white-nationalist group “smart” and “savvy”. After the interview aired, Professor Miller-Idriss mentioned that her comments were taken out of context and did not include “the context of my larger points about why the mainstreaming of extremism in the United States is so dangerous” (Miller-Idriss, 2018).

2.2. Further enhances the reputation of both the academic and the university

Commentary in the media enhances both the reputation of the academic and the university. The academic benefits from commentary in the media because the general public learns more about the expertise of the scholar, which enhances the reputation of the scholar as an expert in his or her area of specialization. This can create opportunities for the academic including invitations for giving presentations, membership on advisory boards, and consulting projects (Miller-Idriss, 2018).

In addition, the university benefits because it is viewed by the public as a prestigious institution employing scholars highly sought after by the media for commentary on important issues related to their areas of expertise. This can influence prospective students in deciding whether to apply for programs at a university, or alumni in donating to the university. According to Orr (2010) “Universities are now competitive businesses as much as spaces for advancing knowledge. Universities market themselves as brands, hence media attention is one way university bureaucrats measure success”.

Writing a column in a newspaper can enhance the reputation of an academic and a university even more than occasional commentary in the media. The frequency of exposure to the public through the publication of a column can strengthen perceptions of the public regarding an academic’s standing in his or her area of expertise. In addition, the academic’s name and university is typically featured more prominently in a column when compared with being quoted in the media.

3. Experience writing a newspaper column

3.1. How to pitch a column to a newspaper

In order to maximize the chances of convincing a newspaper to launch a new column, it is important to demonstrate that an academic has the ability to write a regular column. An effective way to show that an academic can be successful as a columnist is to prepare a portfolio of previous media commentary. When I approached the business editor at the New Zealand Herald with the idea to write a regular column on Crisis Management in 2018, I sent him samples of my commentary for the Wall Street Journal’s “Crisis of the Week” column in the USA where I contributed as a member of their panel of experts from 2014 to 2018. The Wall Street Journal’s “Crisis of the Week” column focused on company responses to high profile crises, and the panel of experts provided brief commentary (up to 250 words) on the effectiveness of a company’s response to a crisis. Samples from my commentary in the Wall Street Journal column provided the New Zealand Herald with evidence of the quality of my writing. In addition, my four years serving on the panel of experts was compelling evidence of my commitment to the Wall Street Journal.

In addition to the importance of prior experience writing commentary in the area of Crisis Management for a well-known global media outlet, experience with media commentary in New Zealand was also important. My commentary for Radio New Zealand about a product tampering crisis involving imported strawberries from Australia (Laufer, 2018), and an interview about my research on TV1’s Q + A, the leading weekly news program on TV in New Zealand, played an important role in the New Zealand Herald’s decision to hire me as a columnist.

Finally, beyond demonstrating relevant experience, an academic also needs to convince the newspaper that its audience will be interested in reading a new column. In my case the New Zealand Herald had never previously published a regular column focused exclusively on Crisis Management. In pitching the idea, I emphasized the success of the “Crisis of the Week” column in the Wall Street Journal, as well as the interest of major media outlets in New Zealand for commentary on topics related to Crisis Management. This was compelling support for the potential of the new column in attracting interest among the newspaper’s readers.

3.2. Choosing topics and content for a column on crisis management

My efforts to convince the New Zealand Herald to launch a new column on Crisis Management were successful, and I received a one-year contract to write a monthly column in 2019 (800–1,000 words). Due to the success of the column, the contract was extended for another year in 2020. In determining the topics and content to include in my column, there were a number of factors that influenced my decision:

3.2.1. Incorporating topics relating to the different phases of a crisis

In writing my column, I wanted to educate the public about topics related to all three phases of a crisis (for a list of topics in my column, see Appendix A). It is worth noting that most research published in the area of Crisis Management focuses on the crisis phase (Coombs & Laufer, 2018), and the media also tends to focus on issues around managing a crisis. Despite the importance of knowing how to respond to a crisis when it happens, how to prevent a crisis from occurring (pre-crisis phase), and how to learn from a crisis (post-crisis phase) are also important topics in Crisis Management which I wanted to incorporate in my column.

In order to emphasize the importance of crisis prevention, I decided to write about a topic related to the pre-crisis phase in my inaugural column. My focus in the column was on crisis contagion, or how a crisis occurring in one organization can spillover to others (Laufer & Wang, 2018). The column described ways a company can assess the risk of crisis contagion, and how it can manage the risk.

An example of a topic related to managing a crisis in my column was a discussion about whether to use a CEO as a spokesperson during a crisis (Laufer, 2020). This topic is of great interest to companies who need to decide the best way to communicate their message during a crisis. Should they use the CEO, or perhaps another spokesperson may be more effective in communicating during the crisis? The column discussed several factors to consider in deciding whether to use the CEO as a spokesperson during a crisis.

Another topic related to managing a crisis in my column involved Carnival Cruise’s response to the Covid-19 crisis on its cruise ships. In the column, the company was criticized for its poor response. According to Claudia Macdonald, Managing Director, Mango Communications NZ, who provided commentary in my column “Their lack of communication to date is not helping them repudiate an already shaky health reputation. The president of Princess Cruises only spoke this week for the first time – more than a month after the first incident”.

Finally, my column also covered topics related to the post-crisis phase. For example, I discussed conducting an investigation after a crisis. What increases the likelihood that learning will take place after the findings from an investigation are published? In the column I discuss factors that enhance the credibility of an investigation, and the likelihood that recommendations from an investigation will be accepted by stakeholders.

3.2.2. Discussing an academic’s research in the column

When deciding on topics for my column, my research provides me
with a lot of useful ideas. These included writing about crisis contagion (Lauffer & Wang, 2018), how crisis management in China differs from the West (Wang & Lauffer, 2020) when to use the CEO as a spokesperson during a crisis (Einwiller, Lauffer, & Ruppel, 2017; Lauffer, Garrett, & Ning, 2018) and how to manage customer rage (Gregoire, Lauffer, & Tripp, 2010).

However, in deciding whether to focus on my research topics for my column, an important consideration is my target audience. Is my research of interest to the general public, or is it primarily of interest to an academic audience? For example, an article about the usefulness of a scale would be of great interest to academics, however it would not be a good topic for the column.

In addition to my research, I incorporate information from other sources as well, including government officials. For example, I interviewed a senior government official from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment in New Zealand for a column about managing product recalls. During the interview, I asked the Senior Product Safety Analyst about the most common mistakes companies make in New Zealand during a product recall. This type of information is of great interest to the readers of the Herald, and it was included in the column.

3.2.3. Focusing on global vs. local crises and Covid-19

As previously mentioned, the relevance of a topic to the newspaper’s readers is an important consideration in choosing the topic for the column. An important issue related to relevance is whether the audience is familiar with the organizations involved in the crises. As a result, I include examples of well-known New Zealand companies that have experienced crises in my column. For example, when I wrote my column on consumer outrage, I discussed a crisis involving Burgerfuel, a well-known fast-food restaurant chain in New Zealand. The crisis occurred when an employee at a Burgerfuel franchise in Auckland used blackface to promote a new Jamaican burger launched by the company. In the same column I also describe the outrage directed towards Air New Zealand, the country’s national carrier, after the Christchurch mosque shootings in March 2019. The airline raised its prices after the shooting due to the increased demand in flights to Christchurch.

Despite the importance of including local content in the column, I also believe it is important to discuss global topics. New Zealand is a country that relies heavily on international trade, and readers of the Herald are interested in news from overseas. In one of my columns I wrote about how Crisis Management in China differs from the West. China is New Zealand’s largest trading partner, and there is also a free agreement between New Zealand and China.

Finally, Covid-19 is an example of a crisis with a significant impact both globally and domestically. The crisis has dominated the news over the past few months, and my column has covered Covid-19 three times. There is enormous interest in the topic, and no other crisis has been covered as frequently in my column. Covid-19 was also the first topic that was covered under the new format of the column involving an exchange of views between academics and practitioners. In the next section, I will discuss the new format of the column.

3.2.4. Creating a platform for an exchange of views between academics and practitioners

After my contract as a columnist for the Herald was renewed in 2020, I decided to make changes to the column. The newspaper was pleased with the column, however I felt that through changes to the format I could achieve another important objective, creating a platform for an exchange of views between academics and practitioners. Collaboration between academics and practitioners has long been identified as an important objective in the field of Public Relations. For example, the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) states that increasing collaboration between educators and practitioners advances excellence in public relations education and practice throughout the world (http://www.commissionpred.org/).

An important prerequisite to collaboration is creating a greater understanding of the different ways practitioners and academics view issues. Before considering collaboration, both practitioners and academics need to assess the potential benefits of collaboration. Through the mutual exchange of ideas in the column, practitioners can assess the potential benefit of academics’ ideas for improving their practice, and academics can assess the potential for research collaboration and improvements in teaching by incorporating the practitioner’s perspective. Newspaper readers of the column also benefit from this exchange of views by getting different perspectives on Crisis Management.

In redesigning the column, I incorporated the approach taken by the Wall Street Journal with their “Crisis of the Week” column by creating a panel of experts. As part of the new format for the column, I decided to incorporate commentary from both a practitioner and an academic on how an organization or individual performed during a crisis. Both experts would have up to 350 words to give their perspective.

The response to the new format of the column has been overwhelmingly positive from both academics and practitioners. Academic experts in Crisis Management from most of the major universities in New Zealand have agreed to provide commentary for the column. Similarly, most of the leading Public Relations firms in New Zealand with expertise in Crisis Management have also agreed to provide commentary. In total, I have a pool of 20 people on my panel of experts comprising of both academics and practitioners. Each month I choose two different experts to provide commentary for the column.

The Herald has already published the column three times with the new format. With Covid-19 dominating the news, I decided to focus on how individuals and companies are managing the pandemic. The column has focused on the Prime Minister of New Zealand’s response to the crisis, how Air New Zealand is managing Covid-19, and how Carnival Cruises’ managing the pandemic. Feedback from the new format has been very encouraging. For example, my column about the Prime Minister of New Zealand’s response to Covid-19 was included on an influential list of recommended news articles by one of the leading online news outlets in New Zealand (Newsroom, 2020).

4. Afterthoughts

Writing a newspaper column is a very fulfilling experience that can greatly benefit academics and universities. Despite the considerable amount of time involved in writing a column, I believe the benefits greatly outweigh the costs. In writing my column on Crisis Management, in addition to the benefits to academics and universities, I believe that the field of Public Relations can benefit as well through the potential for future increased collaboration between academics and practitioners. The public also benefits through exposure to a diversity of views expressed on topics related to Crisis Management by leading experts from both academia and Public Relations firms.

Writing a column has enabled me to share my expertise with the general public, which has resulted in a number of opportunities. These include receiving invitations to give presentations at high profile industry events and to teach webinars. It is worth noting that one event has been especially gratifying. As a result of the column, I was invited to give a presentation to high school teachers in Auckland to discuss how the column can be used to teach their students about crisis management. I believe teaching Crisis Management in high schools will increase the demand for Crisis Management courses at universities in the future.

My university has also benefited from the column. As part of my contract with the New Zealand Herald, my university has permission to post the column on its website one month after it is published in the newspaper. By sharing the column with its stakeholders, the university can highlight that its faculty provide commentary on a regular basis in their area of expertise in leading media outlets. This enhances the reputation of the university.

Creating a platform through the column that incorporates the views of both academics and practitioners can also play an important role in bridging the gap between these groups. In many cases, academics and
practitioners are not familiar with each other’s work. By including commentary in the column from both groups, this increases the chances that they will become more familiar with each other’s views and ideas. To facilitate this, I email a copy of the column to my panel of experts after it is published, so they can read the commentary of the academic and practitioner.

Finally, the public also benefits from a diversity of views. This is especially important during times of crises such as Covid-19 when there is a need for reliable information from credible sources. By presenting the views of leading experts from academia and public relations firms, the public learns about important concepts in Crisis Management. For example, in his commentary on the response of Air New Zealand to Covid-19 (New Zealand Herald, 2020), Dr. Chris Galloway from Massey University mentioned that “This is the time when lessons need to be absorbed, new operational procedures and structures introduced, and reputations rebuilt where damage has occurred”. Neil Green, chief executive, Senate SHJ, a leading Public Relations firm in New Zealand, also provided useful commentary in the same column: “Clarity of communication and calmness under pressure are highly regarded leadership attributes and Foran (CEO of Air New Zealand) has consistently demonstrated both, earning respect and goodwill from staff, customers, shareholders and other stakeholders”. After reading the column, readers gain a better understanding of best practices when dealing with a pandemic. This is of great value to the public and represents an important contribution in the area of engagement.

Appendix A: List of Topics in Column on Crisis Management in the New Zealand Herald (2019–2020)

- How companies can protect themselves from crisis contagion.
- Beware of judging during uncertain times.
- Should the CEO of a company be a spokesperson during a crisis?
- What causes consumer outrage, and how can companies prevent it from happening?
- Can celebrity endorser crisis spread to companies?
- When trouble strikes, investigate.
- How to avoid costly mistakes when managing a product recall.
- Firms losing victim status in data hacks.
- What foreign companies can learn from past crises.
- Crisis management in the era of social media.
- Crisis management in China: How it differs from the West.
- Think long term before going on a limb: Weigh the risks before you take a stand that can later prove controversial.

- How has Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern been managing the coronavirus crisis (includes expert commentary from academic and practitioner).
- Covid-19 coronavirus: Air New Zealand’s response (includes expert commentary from academic and practitioner).
- Carnival Cruises’ response to Covid-19 (includes expert commentary from academic and practitioner).

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