Sensemaking Process of Public Relations Practitioners During Post-Crisis: A Conceptual Perspective

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Abstract. Public relations practitioners play a role in preserving the image and reputation of an organization. The existence of social media presents a great challenge for public relations practitioners to escape from negative perspectives which can affect the image and reputation of the organization. This is because information disseminated on social media, if not managed effectively, can bring damage to the image and reputation of the organization and can cause crisis. Thus, public relations practitioners play an important role in making sense of the crisis that is at stake for, in crisis management, they will be able to positively impact the organization while improving the reputation of the organization. The role of public relations is also seen not only during the crisis but also in the post-crisis phase. In this regard, this article will discuss the process of sensemaking of public relations practitioners in the post-crisis era.

1. Introduction
Crisis is an unforeseen circumstance or event that threatens the trust of an organization's stakeholders which simultaneously impacts the reputation of an organization. Hence, in any organization, public relations practitioners are seen to play an important role in the face of today's rapidly changing technology. This is so as public relations practitioners are a useful management who plays a role in identifying, establishing and maintaining (interrelated) relationships between organizations and the public [15].

Effective crisis management can reduce the negative impact on the organization, in fact, it can even protect the organization, stakeholders, and industry from various threats in a limited period. Consequently, crisis management is viewed as a systematic and an organized action taken by public relations practitioners in dealing with a crisis [3].

As such, the roles and duties of public relations practitioner are regarded imperative as they act as a mediator between the public and the organization. In general, one of the important tasks of public relations practitioners is to promote the organization while maintaining the goodwill and image of the organization so as to be recognized positively by the public, stakeholders, customers and potential investors [4]. Besides, public relations practitioners also play an important role in addressing issues or crises faced by organizations [11]. According to [9] the duties and roles of public relations practitioners also include the use of technology such as the latest communication tools that are the intermediary platform between the public and the organization. This is to preserve the image and reputation of the organization it represents.
Public relations practitioners do not only play their role during a crisis, in fact they also play an important role after the crisis. This is because, the post-crisis phase is a situation that requires a careful analysis and reasonable explanation of the occurred crisis and the necessary actions to avoid the crises from recurring [4]. According to Coombs [3], this is the basic process of making sense of the crisis; i.e. by retrospectively examining what has happened and simultaneously constructing and providing a reasonable interpretation for it [22].

With the advent of social media, the role of public relations practitioners is seen as becoming increasingly challenging. Ultimately, it requires the public relations practitioner to make sense of the crisis that is at stake. This is so as according to [20] organizational crises place an organization in an irrational and unstable state in decision making and this leads to a devastating effect. Organizational crises create uncertainties to those involve in the related events. Also, it is referred to as cosmological episodes in which individuals involved in such situations experience high anxiety, high ambiguity and irrationality to make sense of the information around the environment [21].

2. Public Relations Practitioners
Public relations is a team of communication management inside and outside an organization aiming at building and maintaining its positive image [4]. [7] defines public relations as the management of communications between organizations and their target audience. The definition of public relations as provided by Grunig and Hunt is simple but it includes a combination of several words that provide a lot of information. The word management refers to knowledge in coordinating organizational activities with the aim of achieving effectiveness. The word communication, according to them, does not only refer to sending the message to the recipient, but it also includes things that involve understanding other people's messages through 'listening' and 'dialogue'. The word organization refers to any group created with the same purpose, which is usually a corporation, government agency, business or non-profit group. The term target audience refers to any group of people united by the same interests. They are also public who receive targeted messages that are tailored to their interests. All four of the above words are combined by Grunig and Hunt and they formulate a brief sentence that explains the meaning of public relations [7].

In tallying to the definition of public relations as provided by the western scholars, local scholars define public relations by referring to local needs and circumstances. For example, [8] defines public relations as the management of communications within and outside the organization to create and maintain a positive image. Professional public relations often concern with reputation, organized practice, ongoing efforts, change agents and organising various activities that bring positive impact to the organization.

What is more, [14] states that public relations is very much functioning through the use of media relations and others. As a matter of fact, he also sees public relations as an affair of communication, promotion, and business of social responsibility. Because of this, the public relations profession is becoming more and more influential today as it becomes a necessity and an imperative for every organization be it the government or private organization. In addition, the current demands of the organization requires leaders to possess and master the skills of public relations such as communication and self-promotion, making the profession more prominent in today's society.

3. The Sensemaking Process
Public relations practitioners should understand the crisis situation experienced by the available information to make the best and the most informed decisions [8]. The decision-making process requires public relations practitioners to understand the current situation; or as presented by this terminology, referred to by scholars [20] as sensemaking. Sensemaking is generally described as a process in which ambiguity and uncertainty are interpreted for understanding through a dynamic process directed by social signals and influenced by the environment [13]. Sensemaking becomes more important to organizations in the event of an organizational crisis that threatens the
organization’s core operations [21]. In dealing with crises, sensemaking is seen as important as it helps public relations practitioners to understand the crisis holistically and collectively.

According to Weick (1995), sensemaking can be simplified as a process of understanding the current situation by referring to past experience (retrospectively) [22] on the basis of the current environment. The organization makes sense in its environment through three stages; enactment, selection and retention. In this phase of the enactment, the organization receives information that is around it. During the phase of the organization’s enactment, it is reminded of the changes in its information environment. It is during this phase that public relations practitioners assign meaning to the issues faced by the organization.

During the selection phase, the decision on how the rules and cycles used by the organization affect the misinformation and in what cycles the organization needs to be re-processed for further input is made. It is in this phase that public relations practitioners provide the best communication strategies to address future issues. This phase is also known as the information interpretation phase.

Moving on to the retention phase, this is when information regarding actions taken by the organization is collected and stored for future reference. Various cycles of communication are used by organizations to process information inaccuracies and the results are stored for future use by the organization. The sensemaking process will be based on the responds to interpretations of the organizational environment, which is where communication is viewed as an important element. Sensemaking comprises seven properties; identity construction, retrospective, enacted sensemaking, social sensemaking, ongoing sensemaking, extraction cues, and plausibility [23].

The first properties of sensemaking, identity construction is fundamental to sensemaking and influences how other sensemaking features are understood. Identity building comes from the need for an individual to form and maintain an identity and to know who I am in the context of an organization. The question of who ‘I’ is determines how and what an individual thinks and discovers [21]. Communication is an important element of the sensemaking process because identity is formed through the interaction process [22]. Weick added that how an individual wants to be understood while interacting with others is a reference to the individual’s need to form and introduce his or her identity in order to know who he or she is.

According to [23] the construction of personal identity is driven by three personal needs: the need for self-improvement, the need for self-efficacy and the need for self-consistency. The need for self-improvement is related to maintaining a positive self. Whereas, the need for self-efficacy involves the desire to see oneself as competent and capable. The need for self-consistency, in turn, reflects a desire for sense and a coherence of experience (22). In addition, identity construction also involves the image of the organization and the identity of the organization [6]. Organizational image is related to how organizational members believe where others see their organization[5]. Additionaly, organizational identity refers to how organizational members view their organization [18].

Personal identities of organizational members are influenced by how they think others see their organization, besides their own perception of the organization [22]. Organizational sensemaking gives organizations an opportunity to validate, refine, and rebuild their identities. Sensemaking starts with anonymity and is activated when an organization member detects something which is unusual from the norms [21]. [23] asserts that an individual can change the sense they have made to past events, even if it means they have to redefine their identity.

The second properties of sensemaking is retrospective. Retrospective can be referred to as experiencing by looking back on past experiences, events and actions [23]. An individual acts first and then considers their actions to interpret what they mean. Gestures are extracted by linking them to past events in order to get its intended meaning. Since meanings are constructed through reminiscing, Weick asserted that retrospective is influenced by whatever situation that was happening at that particular time. For example, when an action leads to failure, the process of re-scanning tends to find incorrect perceptions or misinterpretations. Therefore, the interpretation of the same event tends to change. Past experiences may seem unclear or vague because they carry different meanings. The
meaning is different because the focus given to past experience is based on the situation it was at that particular time.

In order to face past experiences, the challenge for sensemakers in retrospective sensemaking is to deal with equivocality. In particular, as Weick points out, individuals may need to synthesize as many possible meanings that arise through reflections of ambiguity. Such misunderstandings can cause confusion for sensemakers who need to choose which sense to maintain and to act on. Thus, to address this ambiguity, Weick emphasizes that individuals need values, priorities, and clarities to help them resolve what is important based on past experiences.

Next is the third properties of sensemaking, enacted sensemaking which emphasizes on the aspects of action in sensemaking that are related to taking action on what is already in the sense [22]. In organizations, members often create a part of their environment and that environment then restricts their actions. Individuals are ‘part of their own environment. They act and in doing so produce information that is a hindrance and an opportunity for them.

The fourth properties of sensemaking is social sensemaking. Sensemaking is a social activity [23]. The thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of an individual are influenced by the real life, imagination, or involvement of others [2]. What happens internally, such as a monologue or an individual's thinking, actually depends a lot on how others respond to or are expected to respond to it.

The nature of social sensemaking in organizational contexts can be seen in the following two aspects [23]. First, individual sensemaking takes a cue from the context in which it is located. Organizational sensemaking takes place in the context of regular organization, symbols, languages and scripts. Organizations constantly reinforce, update and negotiate rules, symbols and scripts through interactions; through communication.

Secondly, he emphasized that sensemaking involves the sharing of ideas, thoughts, feelings and meanings among organizational members that subsequently influence how others perceive events. Communication can be considered as a way for organizational members to test how others perceive the situation. In other words, members of the organization are involved in establishing a sense of what is happening and acting as a form of enactment through interaction (for example; conversation). In addition to exchanging views on the sense of a situation, experts also make sense for others and actively shape their own meaning and sensemaking process [23]. Sensemaking is also a social activity that involves teamwork [13].

The fifth properties of sensemaking is the ongoing sensemaking. This sensemaking feature shows that sensemaking is an ongoing process. An individual is often at the center of something and constantly creates, validates, perpetuates and changes meaning. Maintaining the meaning of a situation continuously reduces the degree of ambiguity and uncertainty.

In organizations, there are often surprises or unforeseen events that disrupt the flow of sensemaking. The noise or noise signals are significant changes ow what have taken place in the environment, prompting the individual to ask if the current situation has changed or changed. Disruption of the sense making process often results in emotional reactions and allows emotions to influence sensemaking in terms of extracting and interpreting signals [22].

Extraction of cues is the sixth properties of sensemaking. According to [22] this feature focuses on the process of making meaning which is how an individual detects, classifies (brackets), labels and develops extracted signals. Individuals can only process limited amounts of information by focusing on just a few and ignoring others. Being observant is important because it binds to the cognitive elements and is then used to develop greater sense of purpose. The signals extracted by the individual are influenced by other sensemaking features such as the identity and emotion caused by the disorder. [19] described noticing of filtering, classification and comparison activities as marking the beginning stages of sensemaking. Noticing determines the information available for sensemaking. [11] concluded that individuals generally detect (noticing) events that are unexpected, negative, unusual, or goal-related. The study of noticing activity focuses on the question of how an individual in particular perceives signs that are different from the routine.
According to [21], noticing and classifying are influenced by individual contexts (e.g., past experience), mental models, and referrals. Putting a label on a signal shows the interdependence of events and actions needed to allow organizational members to discuss events and to shape the environment. Labelling provides a basis for members to interact socially within the organization.

Finally, the seventh properties of sensemaking is plausibility. According to [23], reasonable explanations include past experiences and expectations, which can be constructed retrospectively, can be used prospectively, and can be associated with more general ideas. [14] conclude that organizational members do not need accurate solution to solve problems. Instead, they can deal with problems by giving meaning to the situation and acting fast rather than seeking the right solution in line with their long-term goals.

According to [23], a crisis occurs as a result of sensemaking failure and can result in a person losing their rationality to make sense of the information obtained. This situation is known as cosmology episode and sensemaking usually cannot be applied in times of crisis. Sensemaking will also reflect on the past or retrospective experiences as one will make sense after the results of actions that have taken place in the past. This theory provides guidelines for communication during crisis based on retrospective results of the organizational sensemaking. [22] emphasized that sensemaking is applied in the event of uncertainty and ambiguity in specific situations such as crises. In the field of communication, this theory is considered the basis of rational management and understanding that helps any organization to develop better structures and actions to reduce information uncertainty [21]. Sensemaking is also a process of reducing ambiguity and uncertainty in a given situation.

4. Sensemaking by Public Relations Practitioners During the Post-Crisis

During the post-crisis, the sensemaking of public relations practitioners to the surrounding environment especially the disseminated information is essential in order to act and develop the right and proper strategies for managing the crisis [23]. This is because the sensemaking of public relations practitioners leads to action-based decision-making [23] due to the fact that in times of crisis, the public is in a state of anxiety, confusion, fear, and is confronted with unclear information [19]. As a result, there will be question marks and assumptions that can affect the image and reputation of the organization.

Henceforth, the sensemaking of public relations practitioners during the post-crisis phase is important because it is during this phase that public relations practitioners often face overloading information which makes it difficult whether to process and not [2]. This is a challenge for public relations practitioners as the public is still affected by the crisis that is facing the organization. The misunderstanding or misunderstanding of information provided by public relations practitioners is one of the reasons public sources still collect accurate information from public relations practitioners [4].

5. Post-Crisis

Crisis management aims to prevent or mitigate the negative effects of crises and thus protect organizations and stakeholders from harm [20]. It is believed that effective crisis management can deal with crises systematically. Crisis management is also a step taken by organizational management in an effort to determine the crisis so that it can be addressed effectively and produce positive results [1].

The phases after crisis or the post-crisis phases focus on better ways to address future crises and fulfill commitments made during the crisis phase including the follow-up information [3]. Crisis is like the spiral movement, with the end of a crisis is the beginning of a learning process that can help an organization prepare for other crises in the future. [17] Thus, the post-crisis phase of recovery is seen as crucial in addressing the recurrence of a crisis.

[12] stated that in the post-crisis phase, failure is a necessity in learning. He believes that the post-crisis phase is a critical phase in making change, improving and demanding a new understanding of risk, in corresponding with the procedures, policies, norms and behaviors. This phase helps ensure that the organization does not make repeated mistakes. He therefore argues that the crisis plan should be amended, the procedure should be improved, and that the crisis training be enhanced [18].
sources of crisis signal detection should also be identified for future crisis control. Thus, the post-crisis phase is an important phase of organizational learning.

6. Post-Crisis and Public Relations Practitioners
During this phase, the organization recovers from the crisis and returns to its daily routine. Crisis is also no longer the main focus of management but it still requires public relations practitioners as it is still in the recovery phase. [4] emphasizes that at this stage organizations need to be kept up to date on the recovery process, corrective action or crisis investigation status. Public relations practitioners need to provide additional information on a regular basis to avoid the risk of losing their trust to the public and stakeholders who need information to complete the recovery process. In addition, the current digital medium needs to be leveraged by organizations to disseminate the latest information to stakeholders. For example, the use of Twitter can disseminate current information in line with the current events [4]. Information to employees in the organization and stakeholders can also be conveyed by telephone, text message, voice message, and email. Personal emails and phone calls can also be used to provide follow-up information.

Crisis management during the post-crisis phase is an ongoing process and requires public relations practitioners to continuously work to reduce the likelihood of similar crises from reoccurring and to deal with other crises in the future. In addition, the ability to communicate effectively is crucial in times of crisis.

7. The Impact of Social Media Existence on Public Relations Practitioners
Social media is affecting public relations practitioners. This is because, according to [22], organizational crises place an organization in an irrational and unstable state in decision making and have a devastating effect. Organizational crises create qualms and uncertainties for those involved in these events. Organizational crises are also referred to as cosmological episodes in which individuals involved in such situations experience high anxiety, high ambiguity, and irrationality to make sense of the information in the environment. The existence of social media make it open to the public to provide opinions, to provide feedback, and to facilitate two-way communication such as face-to-face communication for control [21].

According to [3], the organization's time in the communication crisis is very important when communicating information. When a crisis occurs within an organization and they are the first to report on the crisis, the likelihood of the organization experiencing image damage is lower than if the crisis was reported by others first. The study by [17] using the sensemaking theory only focused on the situation during Cadbury's halal crisis; this indicates that sensemaking is still lacking in research in Malaysia, particularly in the field of public relations and crisis management. Therefore, this study is very important to help public relations practitioners manage crisis especially in the post-crisis phase more effectively.

Further studies were conducted by [10], on communication during organizational crises using Facebook as a communication management tool. The study aims to determine how organizations communicate using Facebook in times of crisis. The study concluded that Facebook is a communication strategy for an organization. This is because, features like wall posts, Live Chat Boxes, Facebook Page, tagging, messages, videos, pictures and the likes on Facebook help facilitate the two-way interaction between the organization and the customer. Facebook is a fast and accurate platform for communicating with customers in crisis situations and also a precautionary measure against crisis [10].

The study by [11] focused on the impact of social media on crisis communication from the perspective of public relations practitioners by taking the Malaysia Flight MH370 crisis as a case study. The study was done in mixed mode; the timeline analysis, online surveys and semi-structured interviews with six different public relations practitioners found that social media had transformed crisis communication due to its nature; i.e. immediacy, ubiquity, and availability. Public relations practitioners also acknowledge when their crisis is out of control due to the rapid nature of social
media. In addition, social media was also found to have transformed the practice of crisis communication from the way crisis was reported until it was managed by the organization. Therefore, public relations practitioners need to be efficient and always anticipate the impact of social media on the crisis.

Whereas, [20] in their study suggested that public relations practitioners learn how to handle modern-day crises including facilitating the use of online media by making MH370 crisis management a guide and an example. It is important for public relations practitioners to address the crisis that can occur at any time in addition to the emergence of fast and speedy social media in the dissemination of information. Crises need to be addressed immediately to avoid the image and reputation of the organization from being damaged or falling apart [18].

8. Conclusion
In conclusion, the role of public relations practitioners as noted by the western and local scholars has shown that it is a serious and not an easy task. The emergence of social media poses a major challenge for public relations practitioners especially during the post-crisis phase. This is because, the role and responsibility of the public relations practitioner is not only within the scope of the organization but it also involves a wide range of target audiences with a wide range of unexpected characters and attitudes.

In addition, public relations practitioners are also exposed to a variety of negative activities when carrying out their work whether it is due to themselves or environmental factors such as corruption, fraud, lies, and others. Therefore, it is important for public relations practitioners to make a sense before making the decision to ensure that their image and credibility as a public relations practitioner in the organization they represent is not scratched and questioned.

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