

The impact of polarization on crisis communication: insights from consultants and CCOs on decision-making

El impacto de la polarización social en la comunicación de crisis: la opinión de consultores y dircoms sobre la toma de decisiones

O impacto da polarização social na comunicação de crise: a opinião de consultores e diretores de comunicação sobre a tomada de decisões

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Information and communication technologies and social media foster an environment of social polarization, making it increasingly challenging for companies to manage crises effectively. Through a qualitative study based on 12 in-depth interviews with consultants and chief communications officers with over 15 years of professional experience, we gather insights that explain the reasons behind this phenomenon. The findings reveal commonalities regarding how political discourse has permeated organizational discourse, a situation that should alert companies and encourage them to strengthen their resources to address these challenges.

KEYWORDS: Crisis communication, risk management, polarization, ICTs, social media.

Las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación y las redes sociales promueven un entorno de polarización social en el que las empresas encuentran mayores complicaciones al gestionar una crisis. A partir de un estudio cualitativo que se basó en 12 entrevistas en profundidad a consultores y dircoms con más de 15 años de experiencia profesional, recopilamos información que explica las razones detrás de este fenómeno. Los resultados muestran coincidencias sobre cómo el discurso político se ha trasladado al discurso organizacional, situación que debe alertar a las empresas a reforzar sus recursos para abordar estas situaciones.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Comunicación de crisis, gestión de riesgos, polarización, TIC's, redes sociales.

As tecnologias da informação e comunicação e as redes sociais promovem um ambiente de polarização social no qual as empresas enfrentam maiores dificuldades para gerenciar uma crise. A partir de um estudo qualitativo realizado por meio de 12 entrevistas aprofundadas com consultores e diretores de comunicação com mais de 15 anos de experiência profissional, foram obtidas informações que explicam as razões para isso. Os resultados mostram coincidências sobre como o discurso político se transferiu para o discurso organizacional, situação que deve alertar as empresas e, assim, reforçar seus recursos para lidar com essas situações.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Comunicação de crise, gestão de riscos, polarização, TIC, redes sociais.

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INTRODUCTION: POLARIZATION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Several authors describe the current era as an information and knowledge society (García Nieto et al., 2020), in which social networks change the relationships between individuals and organizations, whether between companies and consumers or between citizens and organizations, institutions and the third sector (Serrano et al., 2019).

Current business dynamics differ from those in the past, mainly due to technological changes in the media. These changes have been labeled *Communication 3.0*, a term referring to social networks, blogs and wikis, which make up a new way of generating relationships through the Internet (Viñarás et al., 2010).

The current digital ecosystem is made up of communities whose core lies in affect and the polarization of ideas, which directly impact behavior and communication consumption (Calvo & Aruguete, 2020). Digital platforms have facilitated the creation of “echo chambers” (Sunstein, 2017) or “filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011), in which individuals are exposed to information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs, intensifying polarization and hindering dialogue by limiting users’ exposure to diverse perspectives.

In that same ecosystem, there is an information overload that forces quick decisions, making it easier to accept ideas that align with our way of thinking or to reject contrary ones, and to surrender to our mental spontaneity as if it were indisputable (Innerarity, 2022). Algorithmic personalization of information not only affects what people know about the world but also how they perceive social reality, since automated content selection can distort individuals’ understanding of the diversity of opinions and experiences in society (Pariser, 2011).

The fragmentation of the digital information space has ultimately eroded societies’ capacity to maintain shared experiences and common narratives (Sunstein, 2017). This leads to the spread of hate speech characterized by its virulence: “This type of publications has direct effects on those who are threatened or subjected to violence in the public sphere, due to their political positions, their opinions, or because they belong to social minorities” (Slimovich & Richard, 2025, p. 2).

Two essential variables must be taken into account to understand how controversial issues generate polarization. First, there are changes in the content of our beliefs –ideological polarization–, and second, there are modifications in the attitudes with which we defend those beliefs and confront those of others –affective polarization– (Velasco Arias, 2023).

Selective exposure to like-minded opinions on social media has catalyzed this phenomenon, leading to proposals to replace the concept of epistemic bubbles with epistemic bunkers, which would place greater emphasis on the affective and identity components: “It should be noted that social media can generate polarization, since the network encourages users to only receive information consistent with their opinions and to meet with individuals who think like them” (Ruiz-Dodobara et al., 2023, p. 16).

Various studies are beginning to address how users’ attention or selective exposure to different messages is configured, even when they are vulnerable and can be exploited by different types of actors who seek to “distort the attention economy and influence public opinion through subterfuge, false rumors or constant decontextualization” (Magallón & Campos, 2021, p. 29).

As Rodríguez-Virgili and Serrano-Puche (2019) point out, “the digital public space, whether through social networks, blogs or other forums, allows citizens to participate in public opinion in different ways, which are combined with other traditional channels” (p. 35). However, in the digital public space, the discussion has shifted from the consequences of disinformation, post-truth, and fake news (Mut Camacho & Rueda Lozano, 2022) to focus on polarization, both political and social, as a strategy and a result of the new digital public sphere.

In a polarized environment, dialogue ceases, moderates are considered lukewarm by both sides, and mediators are seen as traitors, so any excuse serves to start a crisis that will test an organization’s ability to efficiently and effectively implement the emergency operations necessary to reduce threats to the health and safety of the individual, damage to property, whether public or private, or a negative consequence for the normal development of the company (De La Cierva, 2021).

Crisis management can be defined as “the process by which a community or organization deals with an unexpected event that threatens to damage its structure, its stakeholders, or the general public” (Hristoulas & Chong, 2020, p. 159). During crises, every second counts, and the ability to communicate clearly and efficiently is paramount (Xiao & Yu, 2025).

Properly managing a crisis requires a proactive approach that includes prior preparation, constant monitoring of warning signs, as well as the implementation of well-defined response protocols that allow for coherent and timely communication with all stakeholders (Coombs, 2012).

The link to intangible asset management is direct and must be taken into account, as its impact on corporate reputation is proven and increasingly significant (Santana Villegas et al., 2023). According to Vanalocha et al. (as cited in Medina & Kvirikashvili, 2021), successful crisis management “depends as much on the appropriate response to political, strategic, and communicative challenges as on the response to purely instrumental ones” (p. 1029). During crisis management, communication should be brief and clear. Key messages should be conveyed. A positive and objective approach is essential, applying basic principles of transparency, openness, and accountability. Institutions must be very clear and strive to understand that more is expected of them than of the rest of society precisely because of the nature of their role (Coombs, 2012; Espino, 2022).

In summary, the current situation is not unprecedented, but it presents characteristics that set it apart due to its particular intensity. Crises, traditionally defined by loss of control and uncertainty, are now unfolding in an environment marked by rising irrationality and unpredictability. In this scenario, communication and public relations professionals face the challenge of performing their work in complex communication environments, where they must balance defending organizational interests with fulfilling their social responsibility to contribute to informed and constructive public debate (Heath, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to study the impact of polarization on decision-making when managing crisis communication. The general objective of this research is to understand the opinions of communication management professionals –consultants and communications officers– on the challenges of crisis management in polarized environments. Given the complexity and novelty of this context in our society, it was deemed necessary to use a technique that would allow for “adaptation to the subjects and the conditions” (Díaz-Bravo et al., 2013, p. 163), that is, “meetings oriented towards understanding the perspectives that informants have regarding their lives, experiences or situations” (Robles, 2011, p. 39). The semi-structured interview limits this capacity for reflection and, above all, avoids any conditioning in the questions (Ríos, 2019), which, in the case of polarization, could influence the interviewees.

To achieve the above, the specific objectives are: first, to detail each participant’s understanding of a crisis based on their experience; second, to examine which aspects of the current political, economic, social, and cultural environment contribute to the emergence of an organizational crisis; third, to understand their opinions on how the pressure and activism exerted by different stakeholders currently affect the situation; fourth, to delve into the impact of social polarization as a crisis and its influence on potential business crises. Finally, the fifth objective is to analyze how this has affected strategy, specifically whether companies are merely reactive when a crisis arises or, given the changes in the environment, have adopted a proactive approach that prioritizes planning to avoid, as possible, facing a crisis situation.

Communication professionals face an unprecedented situation. For this reason, a qualitative technique that can delve deeper into the issue has been deemed essential. This is an exploratory, qualitative study based on in-depth interviews. Only this type of technique allows for an approach to the object of study, which, due to its novelty, requires gathering information on the variables that will need to be examined in

depth in future research. The dependent variable is crisis communication management, and the independent variable is polarization, as this factor affects management.

The structured in-depth interview enables the collection of first-hand information on the point of view of the subjects (Carmona & Anguita, 2021) to better understand the problem that is the object of study (Verdeja, 2022), thanks to the environment of trust created (Castro, 2021). In this case, the fact that the researcher has practiced the same profession as the interviewees is an advantage due to the need to understand in depth the decision-making in these situations, as indicated by numerous authors.

These are “repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and the informants, encounters directed towards understanding the perspectives that the informants have regarding their lives, experiences or situations, as expressed in their own words” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1987, p. 101). In this technique, the interviewer becomes another instrument of the research, exploring, detailing and tracing the most relevant information for its analysis through their questions (Lázaro, 2021; Robles, 2011).

Sampling

The sample consists of 12 professionals with 15 or more years of experience in strategic communication management, specifically, eight consultants who work for international communication firms, and four chief communications officers (CCOs) at international companies based in Mexico.

Having at least 15 years of experience ensures that they possess knowledge of the profession and its evolution. Furthermore, all interviewees have experience managing crises for their clients or companies. Convenience sampling was used, as this type of sampling works by selecting a population whose size is uncertain, thus relying on whoever is available (Mendieta, 2015). Similarly, this method allows for the selection of accessible cases that agree to participate (Otzen & Mantrola, 2017).

The interviews were conducted through video calls to each of the members of the sample. Among the consultants, there were seven men

and one woman, and among the CCOs, two men and two women. All of them work for international consulting firms and multinational or internationally recognized companies. Formal requests for interviews were sent to various professionals who met the experience requirements, and those interviewed responded positively to the invitation. Therefore, the fact that there are more men than women among the interviewees was not a deliberate choice.

Rather than generalizations applicable to large groups, which is the purpose of quantitative approaches, the aim was to delve into the practices and perceptions of the interviewees; for this, the depth and richness of the responses were weighed against the sample size (González et al., 2021).

Although the study was conducted in Mexico, the interviewees are part of international companies and communication firms, therefore the findings are applicable to other contexts.

TABLE 1
LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

No.	Position	Years of experience
1	Consultant	Over 20 years
2	Chief Communications Officer	Over 15 years
3	Consultant	Over 15 years
4	Chief Communications Officer	Over 25 years
5	Consultant	Over 20 years
6	Chief Communications Officer	Over 15 years
7	Consultant	Over 25 years
8	Consultant	Over 15 years
9	Consultant	Over 25 years
10	Consultant	Over 15 years
11	Consultant	Over 25 years
12	Chief Communications Officer	Over 25 years

Source: The authors.

RESULTS

For the presentation of results, thematic analysis was used, as it is a qualitative approach that allows identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This involves “collecting all the data related to similar themes, ideas, and concepts and analyzing them” (Robles, 2001, p. 46). The results are presented in a summary of the most relevant information obtained from the interviews, grouped by the specific objectives of this research and the themes that emerge. All interviews were transcribed, analyzed for content, and the recurring and conclusive themes were identified. Each theme is accompanied by illustrative direct quotations.

The overall objective was to understand the opinions of communication management professionals –consultants and communications officers– on the challenges of crisis management in polarized environments. Before detailing each specific objective, the results reflect a consensus that polarization has altered the characteristics of crisis elements, with emotions and technology forcing companies to make decisions on new issues and situations.

Concept of crisis situation

As previously stated, the first specific objective of this research is to understand each interviewee’s concept of crisis. Therefore, the first part of the interview focuses on the definition each person offers. Analyzing each response reveals commonalities in all the definitions. In general, they refer to crises as disruptive, unexpected events that can damage reputation and jeopardize business continuity by affecting relationships with various stakeholders.

It is an event that, in terms of communication, jeopardizes the viability of the business or the reputation of a brand (Interviewee 1).

The basic concept of crisis is any situation that generates disruption in the normal and natural operation of the company (Interviewee 4).

It is any situation that puts at risk, in particular, two circumstances of the company: its reputation or the continuity of the company's operations (Interviewee 5).

Environmental factors and their influence on organizational crises and their communication

The second objective seeks to understand which aspects of the current political, economic, social, and cultural landscape contribute to the emergence of an organizational crisis. The responses concur that we live in a turbulent environment, where technology makes transparent a great deal of information that was previously unseen. There is a high level of connectivity and widespread distribution of false or misleading information, emotional factors carry more weight, there is a shift in societal expectations of organizations, and government decisions and geopolitical conflicts have a greater impact on organizations.

We live in a disruptive environment because we are truly in a constantly changing environment (Interviewee 7).

It is an environment that leaves pragmatism aside, and emotionality plays a big role (Interviewee 5).

There is even an expectation that companies will speak out on certain issues on which they previously did not have to speak out (Interviewee 2).

The growing pressure and activism in crisis management

The third objective is to understand the participant's views on the pressure and activism currently exerted by various stakeholders. The consensus is that technology has given rise to social activism by various interest groups, which puts greater pressure on companies, and this does not seem to be slowing down; rather, it is continually evolving. Everything is constantly being questioned.

Today's consumer is too radical; they forgive absolutely nothing. They are willing to speak ill of you on social media. They are tyrants (Interviewee 11).

We live in a glass box. There are no more secrets. Anyone can record with a cell phone and leak it, and that forces us to move from the era of aesthetics to the era of ethics (Interviewee 9).

Polarization as a crisis factor in organizations

The fourth objective is to confirm interviewees' views on whether we are currently experiencing social polarization and whether this makes it difficult to manage any crises that might arise. The interviewees agreed that a visible aspect of these changes in this context is the polarization they generate, and that such situations make it difficult to manage organizational crises.

Polarization is an intrinsic part of the person. The only thing that changes is that now it's visible. Before, companies didn't listen; the conversations were far removed from them. Today, you hear it, whether you want to or not (Interviewee 8).

The pandemic exacerbated many fears, and there was also a lack of trust in institutions that were already experiencing declines in their trust ratings. Now, even more so. And this is polarizing, or has polarized, the world (Interviewee 10).

The crisis communication strategy

The fifth objective is to determine whether, from their perspective, companies remain reactive when a crisis arises or if, in light of changes in the environment, have adopted a proactive approach that prioritizes planning to avoid, as much as possible, a crisis situation. In this case, the consultants agreed that there is greater awareness, but much work remains to be done. The CCOs concurred that the companies they work for are taking the issue of crises more seriously, but also agreed with the consultants that, in other organizations, companies still need to deepen their crisis prevention programs.

The issue of crisis management has become much more professional. The reality is that, unlike before, we now have training that is very much based on operations, and nowadays it is impossible to think about doing crisis training in operations without talking about communication (Interviewee 4).

I know people whose experience is very different and who work in companies that are navel-gazing and unaware of the impact they can have (Interviewee 6).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Theoretical implications

The transformation underway in crisis communication demands a critical review of traditional frameworks, now overwhelmed by hyperconnected, emotional, and polarized environments. Evidence shows that algorithmic architecture and platform dynamics amplify moral and emotional content, giving it a potentially significant profile. This reconfigures the rhythms and logics of crises (Brady et al., 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018). In parallel, exposure on social media does not correct biases; rather, as the literature has shown for some years now, it can intensify polarization, even when opposing viewpoints are present (Bail et al., 2018; Bakshy et al., 2015). This socio-technical substrate multiplies uncertainty and accelerates attributions of responsibility, raising the reputational costs of every action.

Categories anchored in control, hierarchy, and linearity prove insufficient in the face of phenomena such as virality, feedback, and identity conflict. Affective polarization, which creates emotional divides between opposing camps, erodes the ground for consensus and transforms any issue into a symbolic battleground, with direct effects on the reception of corporate messages (Iyengar et al., 2019). In this context, insisting on unidirectional or purely instrumental approaches overlooks the fact that audiences co-create narratives, contest frames of reference, and publicly sanction, or even demonize, responses.

Consistently, operational frameworks should shift from message management to relational governance of conflict. They must anticipate cycles of outrage, monitor affective climates, and design iterative, verifi-

able, and empathetic responses. Situational crisis communication theory remains useful for aligning responses with perceptions of responsibility and mitigating reputational damage (Coombs, 2007), but its implementation needs to be integrated with network analytics, diffusion dynamics, and attention economics. Furthermore, the rise of corporate sociopolitical activism strains strategic neutrality and entails certain risks. Certainly, taking a stance can strengthen ties, but it can also trigger boycotts, generate a negative collective response, or even create a boomerang effect in polarized contexts (Dodd & Supa, 2015).

Therefore, the theoretical discussion must incorporate evidence on diffusion, emotionality, and polarization to build transdisciplinary models (communication, psychology, network science) capable of operating in an environment of high complexity, demand, emotionality, and risk.

Practical implications

Organizations are now affected by a highly aggressive environment. All interviewees agree that the environment is more turbulent and that geopolitical, social, economic, and cultural factors, which previously had no impact on companies, now require constant monitoring (Bonime-Blanc, 2016; Mañas-Viniegra et al., 2019). This constitutes the first conclusion of the research: the environment impacts organizations both qualitatively and quantitatively, causing more frequent and intense crisis situations.

Secondly, it is concluded that the concept of polarization is not exclusive to political literature. Organizations today are immersed in a polarized society where there seems to be no desire to reach points of agreement, but rather to impose ideas (Mut Camacho & Rueda Lozano, 2022; Velasco Arias, 2023). This poses a risk for companies because expectations are placed on them to join activism, and if they take a stance, they may generate discontent among those who oppose it. In other words, political and social polarization reaches the corporate world. Therefore, companies face a new scenario, typical of politics and previously foreign to them.

Based on the above, another conclusion is that there is greater pressure from stakeholders due to increased access to information and greater exposure (García Nieto et al., 2020), which places companies

in the public eye and forces them to adopt transparency strategies and make a special effort to maintain their own narrative. There is more visible activism on their part, and this situation puts companies in a kind of showcase, increasing expectations and prompting them to express support for or opposition to certain issues (Bonilla, 2014). This implies that companies must constantly pay attention to different narratives in order to establish their own and thus avoid falling into a crisis, whether through omission or action.

On the other hand, the emotionality that characterizes the polarization of public debate has moved into the sphere of organizations (Magallón & Campos, 2021), where these are required to make a commitment that, on occasion, exceeds their role. There is an expectation that companies will speak out on issues on which they did not previously have to speak out. It could be argued that polarization has changed the tone of communication and is pushing organizations to take positions on issues unrelated to their own business, leading to the conclusion that political and social polarization has increased and intensified crisis situations in companies with the reputational risk that this entails. This forces them to make decisions tailored to the characteristics of this context: greater transparency, more emotional language, corporate activism, etc.

In general terms, the findings allow us to conclude that polarization generates a state of permanent vulnerability for organizations, in which the risks of crises increase and diversify. The changes do not lie in the concept of crisis itself, but rather in how it is currently managed. Despite the progress organizations have made to understand that the best way to deal with a crisis is still to avoid it, they agree that this is not the case in most companies. Reacting to the crisis, rather than avoiding it, remains the most common approach.

Research of this kind allows us to understand the perspectives of professionals who are at the forefront of communication on a daily basis, whether to prevent or manage a crisis. Their insights are therefore valuable because they are relevant to current events. The results of this study are useful not only for researchers in this field but also for crisis communication professionals and those in training, as the shared knowledge stems from the interviewees' extensive experience. Future work may

address these professionals' views on the role CEOs play in crisis management and their impact on corporate reputation, as well as their awareness of their role in safeguarding it.

Limitations of the research

The analysis relies on a limited theoretical framework that, while including current and relevant references, does not cover the entirety of the broad interdisciplinary field of crisis communication and polarization. This selection may introduce a bias and limit the generalizability of the findings.

Furthermore, the approach focuses primarily on a discursive and strategic level, without incorporating extensive empirical work or interviews with professionals or the public. This limits the practical validation of the hypotheses and forces us to treat the examples presented only as an exploratory analysis, not as a systematic case study.

It is also important to bear in mind that polarization and virality phenomena in digital environments evolve rapidly, so the conclusions presented here are provisional and may become outdated in a short time. This extends to the geographical and cultural dimension, since much of the literature and examples come from Western societies and global platforms, making it difficult to extrapolate the findings to other sociopolitical and media contexts.

Finally, the inherent complexity of crisis communication makes it difficult to isolate and accurately measure all the variables involved. These limitations do not diminish the value of the analysis, but they do underscore the need for future research using mixed and comparative methodologies, as highlighted by Coombs (2007) and Holland et al. (2021), who agree that the field requires more integrative approaches that are sensitive to the complexity of the current environment.

Future lines of research

The limitations mentioned open up various opportunities for future research. First, it is pertinent to design comparative empirical studies that examine how different types of crises (corporate, political, health, technological) are affected by polarization and emotionality in digital environments. This would allow for the identification of common patterns and contextual particularities that remain largely unexplored.

Secondly, it is necessary to incorporate mixed methodologies that combine content analysis, social media studies, public perception surveys, and in-depth interviews with crisis communication professionals. This approach could offer a more holistic view of the factors that amplify or mitigate the effects of polarization in crisis management and the role that CEOs play in these processes, as well as the impact on corporate reputation.

Another key area for development involves broadening the interdisciplinary perspective. The field would benefit from integrating contributions from social psychology (on cognitive biases and affective polarization), the sociology of risk (Sundberg, 2024), and data science (Vosoughi et al., 2018), thereby facilitating the construction of more robust explanatory frameworks for understanding the dynamics of crises in hyperconnected societies.

Finally, future research should explore the role of artificial intelligence and automation in the early detection of polarizing narratives, fact-checking, and anticipating emotional climates. The incorporation of these tools raises ethical and practical challenges that require systematic academic attention (Cinelli et al., 2020).

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