The Benefits and Pitfalls of Stealing Thunder

An-Sofie Claeys

ansofie.claeys@ugent.be

Introduction

Organizations are often the first to know when they face a potential crisis (Fennis & Stroebe, 2014). Such knowledge gives them the opportunity to self-disclose incriminating information before a third party “drops the bomb,” so to speak. The self-disclosure of a crisis is labeled “stealing thunder” and results in a better reputation than responding to revelations from a third party (Claeys, 2017). Not only is the self-disclosure of relevant information ethical and effective, any other course of action entails major risk. The potentially rapid spread of crisis-related news through social media has made it more important than ever to confront crises head-on (Beldad et al., 2018). At the same time, social media also allow organizations to announce a crisis directly to the public in their own way (Huang & DiStaso, 2020). As such, stealing thunder presents an intriguing strategy for crisis communication researchers to examine and for practitioners to consider.

When talk show host David Letterman self-disclosed that he had sex with female staffers in 2009, his audience seemed more entertained than shocked (Kelly, 2009). Stealing thunder allowed Letterman to present “his story on his own terms to an audience that was naturally inclined to be on his side” (Kelly, 2009). Because he opened up about something that most people would want to conceal and because he did not minimize or deny his actions during that confession, people seemed to empathize with him.

In 2017, Bart De Pauw, a Belgian television personality, tried to do the same thing when his employer, the Flemish public broadcaster, fired him over sexual harassment allegations (Heremans, 2017). Before anyone else had the chance to reveal his misdeeds, he posted a video online. Rather than self-disclosing his own misconduct, however, he announced that the broadcaster had fired him over a number of what he considered “unclear and unfounded" allegations. He minimized his behavior throughout the whole video. While again this is a clear case of stealing thunder, he received a lot of negative response because he used the video to strategically position himself as a victim. These examples indicate that stealing thunder is a powerful strategy, but also that the mere self-disclosure of the existence of a crisis is not enough to minimize its impact. Crisis communication researchers and practitioners must understand what makes stealing thunder effective in order to prevent it from potentially backfiring (Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

This chapter provides an overview of the research on stealing thunder that has been conducted since Arpan introduced the concept to the field of crisis communication almost two decades ago (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). This offers insights into whether there is indeed a "stealing thunder effect" and how we can theoretically explain it. Understanding how the effect works enables practitioners to effectively apply the strategy in practice.

Additionally, the stealing thunder effect is discussed in this chapter as intertwining with other elements of crisis communication and situational factors related to crises. Self-disclosure cannot be considered independently from other choices in the crisis communication mix. Based on these insights, misconceptions related to the interpretation and application of stealing thunder will be addressed and discussed. Finally, a number of suggestions are made for the future. Stealing thunder is a great strategy in all its simplicity, but to truly grasp its effect, we should address its complexities as well.

The Effectiveness of Self-Disclosure

Stealing thunder was first examined in the context of lawsuits (Williams et al., 1993). When an opposing party is likely to reveal damaging information during a trial, a defendant is given the recommendation to steal thunder (Mauet, 2007). The tactical reason for doing this is to reduce the negative impact of that information on jury members and the judge (Dolnik et al., 2003). Research on stealing thunder as a courtroom tactic has shown consistent benefits in terms of guilt. Mock jury members confronted with the revealed (not stolen) thunder version of a trial were more likely to consider a defendant guilty than participants who witnessed the stealing of thunder by the accused (Dolnik et al., 2003; Williams et al., 1993). These findings from law studies have provided the foundation for the examination of crisis self-disclosure in the field of communication.

Perhaps the most crucial outcome of stealing thunder in the context of crisis communication is the increase of credibility (Claeys, 2017). Trial researchers have already shown that a defendant is perceived to be more credible when self-disclosing incriminating information, which in turn reduces perceptions of guilt (Williams et al., 1993). Stealing thunder in the context of organizational crises increases the credibility of public relations practitioners (Arpan & Pompper, 2003), the organization (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005), and the crisis message (Lee, 2016). The beneficial effect of stealing thunder on credibility in turn results in less reputational damage (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012).

In other studies, scholars have associated stealing thunder with increased trust (Beldad et al., 2018). An organizational self-disclosure results in more trust among consumers than does a third-party disclosure (Fennis & Stroebe, 2014). That trust results in more positive evaluations of the organization. As such, organizational self-disclosure quite consistently seems to affect credibility and trust, which in turn minimizes the crisis damage to the overall perception of the company.

The positive impact of stealing thunder on credibility and trust offers confirmation for one of the theoretical explanations that have been provided for its effect. The disconfirmation of expectations theory proposes that stakeholders assume that organizational spokespersons exhibit knowledge bias and reporting bias (Eagly et al., 1978). Knowledge bias implies that the information provided by spokespersons about their organization is inherently biased, because the organization itself is their source of information. Hence, during a crisis, these spokespersons are expected to communicate in a one-sided manner from the organizational viewpoint, rather than taking into consideration the viewpoints of victims or other stakeholders as well. Reporting bias implies that stakeholders assume that the information provided about a crisis by organization spokespersons will be overly positive because their willingness to convey incriminating information about their company will be limited (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). When organizations fail to self-disclose an incriminating event, those biases are confirmed. If, however, the organization takes the initiative to share information about a crisis, those biases are disconfirmed and stakeholders may infer that the organization and its information are reliable (Williams et al., 1993; Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Hence, by speaking against their own self-interest, organizations become more credible (Fennis & Stroebe, 2014).

A second reoccurring outcome of the stealing thunder effect has been its impact on news value and news framing. Both researchers and practitioners assume that when an organization is the first to announce a crisis, it takes the wind out of journalists' sails (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Consumers are likely to be less interested in news that is self-disclosed, with journalists subsequently associating less value to those stories. In one experimental study among journalists and journalism students, researchers found that stealing thunder increased news value associated with a crisis and made no difference in how journalists framed their story (Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

Most studies, however, shed an opposite light. Case studies comparing the news coverage of crises involving public figures (Wigley, 2011) or organizations (Zhou & Shin, 2017) show that stealing thunder is associated with less news coverage of a crisis and more positive stories and headlines. That interesting finding is explained through the reduction in news value brought about by self-disclosure (Zhou & Shin, 2017). When we consider this from a consumer perspective, we reach similar conclusions. Experimental research shows that consumers pay less attention to critical articles about an organization in crisis, if that organization stole thunder compared to when it did not (Claeys et al., 2016). While breaking the news on your own crisis may result in an initial boost in news value, it seems that in the long run, such crises receive less coverage (Claeys & Coombs, 2019).

The findings regarding the effect of stealing thunder relevant to news value offer confirmation for a second theoretical explanation, namely commodity theory or the old-news-is-no-news hypothesis (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Dolnik et al., 2003; Williams et al., 1993). The basic premise of commodity theory is that “any commodity will be valued to the extent that it is unavailable” (Brock, 1968, p. 246). Commodities that are scarce or difficult to obtain will be considered more valuable. The same goes for information, and as such, for information related to organizational crises. When a third party discloses a crisis, stakeholders may conclude that the organization failed to disclose that information or even attempted to conceal it. That would make all information regarding the crisis extra valuable. Stakeholders would then be more interested in reading crisis-related news and the impact of negative publicity would become more pronounced (Claeys et al., 2016). If, however, an organization decided to disclose all information it had about a crisis as soon as possible, the information would become readily available and therefore less interesting. By self-disclosing, the information loses power.

A third reoccurring outcome variable in stealing thunder research is perceived crisis severity. While there are indications that self-disclosure can minimize perceptions of severity during a trial (Dolnik et al., 2003), this effect has not found support in crisis communication research (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Lee, 2016). As such, no substantial basis has been found for the change of meaning hypothesis as a theoretical explanation for the stealing thunder effect. According to this explanatory mechanism, attempts to withhold crisis information suggest that the company must consider the information extremely damaging (Fennis & Stroebe, 2014). If, however, an organization self-discloses, this results in an inconsistency in the eyes of stakeholders (Williams et al., 1993; Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Why would any organization tell the public about something that could potentially damage its reputation? To resolve that apparent inconsistency, stakeholders may infer that the information that was revealed is probably less significant. Hence, the meaning attached to the crisis disclosure will be altered to become consistent with stakeholders' expectations. While intuitively appealing, however, no support has been found for the assumption that self-disclosed information would be considered less severe. Hence, the main benefits of stealing thunder appear to be an increase in trust and credibility on the one hand and a decrease in news value of the story for both journalists and the public on the other.

Contributions to Crisis Communication Theory

In an increasing number of studies, researchers have compared the impacts of presenting thunder to those of stealing thunder and consistently concluded that stealing thunder enables an organization to minimize crisis damage. The choice to either steal thunder or not, however, is not independent of other elements in crisis communication theory and vice-versa.

First, situational factors can determine the significance of stealing thunder, with pre-crisis reputation as one of the most important. A favorable pre-crisis reputation can create a halo effect that protects organizations from crisis damage (e.g., Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Turk et al., 2012). Situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2007) prescribes that the more reputational damage a crisis inflicts, the more accommodating the organization should be in its response. As such, organizations with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation should be especially willing to accept responsibility. The organizational pre-crisis reputation should also be taken into account when assessing the importance of self-disclosure (Fennis & Stroebe, 2014). When an organization has a good reputation beforehand, less responsibility will be attributed to that company and the result will be less reputational damage. As a consequence, with the aim of reputation repair, less blame needs to be taken and there is less of a need to self-disclose the events. If an organization has an unfavorable or neutral pre-crisis reputation, however, self-disclosure will result in more positive post-crisis evaluations than the revealing of thunder by a third party.

In addition, the stealing thunder effect can intertwine with the impact of crisis response strategies (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). Crisis communication theorists prescribe that organizations should first provide stakeholders with information about what happened (Coombs, 2007; Sturges, 1994). They should then add a suitable crisis response strategy (e.g., apologies, denial) to protect their reputation. Stealing thunder research shows that when an organization self-discloses, the absence or presence of a suitable crisis response strategy has no effect on crisis damage (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). When that same organization waits for crisis revelations by a third party, however, a suitable crisis response strategy should be added to the basic information immediately in order to restore the organizational reputation.

In research related to those findings, authors have only examined short-term effects, so it is likely that the public would demand a suitable crisis response strategy in the long run. But the results indicate that self-disclosing a crisis early on may give organizations some space to gather more information before taking a definite stance in terms of accepting responsibility. This does not mean, however, that stealing thunder provides the opportunity to minimize or avoid responsibility. Research in the context of law studies has been conducted to examine whether framing is required for stealing thunder to be effective (Dolnik et al., 2003). The conclusion was that stealing thunder without framing was more effective than doing so with framing. However, the framing condition in this study diminished responsibility. So, while stealing thunder may provide organizations in distress a little more time to determine a suitable crisis response strategy, it probably does not change what the most appropriate strategy is. When an organization is responsible for a crisis, stealing thunder does not provide it with an excuse to avoid blame.

Finally, crisis timing strategies can determine the impact of emotional crisis communication. The results from several studies have indicated that emotional crisis communication can minimize crisis damage compared to rational crisis communication (Kim & Cameron, 2011; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). Genuine expressions of sadness in particular can soothe the negative impact of a crisis (Claeys et al., 2013; De Waele et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2019). The findings from research on stealing thunder indicate that indeed, expressing sadness over a crisis can minimize reputational damage through increased perceptions of sincerity (Claeys et al., 2013). However, such a positive effect was only found in the case of stealing thunder and not when responding to revelations from a third party. As such, organizational self-disclosure gives spokespersons the opportunity to express their genuine emotions regarding the events. Once that same organization forgoes the opportunity to steal thunder, however, the public may no longer consider expressed sadness as sincere.

The findings from several studies have therefore shown that crucial elements of crisis communication such as pre-crisis reputation, crisis response strategy, and emotion cannot be considered independently from the crisis timing strategy. Stealing thunder may also provide alternative explanations for conclusions that were drawn in prior research.

Shultz, Utz, and Göritz (2011) examined the impact of the channel through which an organization communicates about a crisis and specifically focused on social versus traditional media. They concluded that a channel effect exists in crisis communication. Organizations suffered less from a crisis when they communicated through their own blog or Twitter account than when the same message reached an audience via an online newspaper. The difference between those conditions is, however, not simply related to social and traditional media. The difference was also one between an organization communicating directly to the audience as opposed to sending messages through a newspaper.

Additional research allowed to manipulate both the channel and the source of disclosure (Coombs et al., 2017). While there was no longer an impact of the medium through which either an organization or newspaper communicated about the crisis, revelations about a crisis coming from the organization directly resulted in less damage than a message from the press. Hence, findings from prior research regarding the benefits of merely communicating a message via social media may be better explained through a stealing thunder effect than a channel effect.

Stealing Thunder as an Easy Fix?

Crisis communication researchers have offered nearly unanimous findings when it comes to the effect of stealing thunder. While research comparing the effects of crisis response strategies such as apologies and denials sometimes yield conflicting results (cf. Fuoli et al., 2017; Schoofs et al., 2019), we may conclude that stealing thunder has nothing but benefits for organizations in crisis (Claeys, 2017). The strategy also seems quite straightforward. Organizations merely have to be the first to disclose a crisis to boost their own credibility. While that simplicity is indeed part of the appeal of stealing thunder, it may also mislead people into believing that it can justify an otherwise terrible approach to crisis communication.

Belgian television personality Bart De Pauw (Heremans, 2017), for example, seemed to believe that self-disclosing the accusations made against him would enable him to minimize his own behavior and to attack his accuser. Yet, while self-disclosure may allow the sender to postpone some messages or details, it is by no means a conduit by which to minimize responsibility (cf. Dolnik et al., 2003). On the contrary, stealing thunder should be considered one of several manners in which organizations can and should show they are willing to behave responsibly (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). It can additionally diminish the appeal of a crisis among journalists and the public, but only when everything that is known is also revealed (Claeys et al., 2016).

To be clear, this does not mean that individuals and organizations should hold back on stealing thunder until they have collected and processed all information. There are many situations in which organizations have to address the media with an incomplete story (Coombs, 2019). There is nothing wrong with telling the press and public that additional information will be provided as soon as it is available. There is a problem, however, when someone knowingly and deliberately holds back information that is relevant and that the public needs to know. Based on commodity theory (Brock, 1968), we can presume that withholding information makes it all the more interesting and impactful. Information that is self-disclosed, however, loses its appeal and power. Bart De Pauw knew more than he announced, leaving more than one interesting detail left for the press and public to uncover. This worked to his detriment.

Stealing thunder as a way to spin a crisis in an overly positive manner or as a way to communicate only certain bits of information are two of the potential ways in which this strategy is misused. A third wrongful approach is to withhold information until there are no other options. Research among practitioners indicates that a widespread strategy is to await developments regarding an issue and actively monitor the press and social media in order to anticipate a potential revelation (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Such companies hope they will be able to "let sleeping dogs lie," but they prepare statements in case a crisis does reach the surface. When that happens, these organizations either manage to steal thunder last-minute, or to reply quickly enough to make it seem as if they did. While this may be more effective than an obvious case of responding to thunder, stealing thunder becomes less effective the later it is initiated in the crisis lifecycle (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Stealing thunder is not just about a quick response, but about a spontaneous revelation of something that might otherwise remain unknown (Wigley, 2011). Such an application of the strategy not only reduces its effectiveness, it may even backfire.

Early discussions of stealing thunder refute a number of potential side effects, such as the fear that the self-disclosure of incriminating information can create a negative schema, increase the availability of negative information, or be interpreted as an admittance (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Dolnik et al., 2003; Williams et al., 1993). However, these authors did confirm the existence of a potential backfire effect. When stealing thunder is considered merely a public relations trick, it can result in untoward consequences directed at the organization (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). The results from a number of studies provide support for this assumption. When mock jurors received a warning that the self-disclosure by a defendant was purely strategic, they were motivated to correct the initial stealing thunder effect (Dolnik et al., 2003). Research in the context of crisis communication alike shows that when persuasive intent is clearly involved in an organizational disclosure, the effect diminishes (Lee, 2016). Finally, while Fennis and Stroebe (2014) concluded that stealing thunder is especially effective for organizations with a negative pre-crisis reputation, the reverse may also be true (Beldad et al., 2018). Beldad and colleagues (2018) found that stealing thunder results in higher perceptions of integrity and purchase intentions when used by organizations with a favorable pre-crisis reputation than by those with an unfavorable one. So while organizations with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation may get more benefits from stealing thunder (Fennis & Stroebe, 2014), their self-disclosure might also be met with more suspicion and might be more readily considered a public relations maneuver (Beldad et al., 2018).

Stealing thunder should therefore not be considered a cure-all or easy fix. True instances of stealing thunder can and will harm an organization in the short term (Claeys & Coombs, 2020). Doing so reveals bad news about an organization, at a point when no one else sees it coming. This is understandably a difficult decision to make. When put in front of that choice, it may seem far easier to wait and see. But when applied correctly and with the right motives, organizations that self-disclose will eventually benefit. In the unlikely case that the disclosed crisis would have otherwise never become known, the organization will suffer from the crisis but will be able to establish a transparent relationship with the public and media. In addition, it will no longer have a sword of Damocles hanging over its head and will be able to focus on what actually matters.

That said, the odds of a crisis never reaching the surface have become smaller than ever (Coombs, 2002). Social media can allow crisis information from myriad third parties to spread in no time (Beldad et al., 2018). Despite this plea in favor of self-disclosure, there is still a lot that we do not know about stealing thunder, and reality is often not as black and white as the simple comparison between responding to thunder and stealing thunder.

The Way Ahead

More research is needed to examine the explanatory mechanisms behind the effects of stealing thunder (Fennis & Stroebe, 2014) and to explore the moderating effects of situational variables and other elements of crisis communication. In addition to this continuation of research, which has been initiated by a stream of recent studies (e.g., Beldad et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2019; Lee, 2016; Lee & Lee, 2021; Zhou & Shin, 2017), three other avenues of research are plausible. First, it would be intriguing to look beyond the basic comparison between thunder and stealing thunder. Second, we can broaden our scope and consider related strategies focused on the overall speed of crisis communication and strategic silence. Finally, while we know that stealing thunder works, we also know that the strategy is difficult to apply in practice. Restraints experienced by practitioners should be addressed in future research.

Crisis Disclosure Strategies

More than a decade ago, crisis communication researchers began to systematically examine the effects of crisis response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Many of those experimental studies resorted to the simple comparison between the accommodating strategy of apologizing on the one hand and the defensive strategy of denial on the other. That black-and-white comparison has led to the conclusion that organizations in crisis should simply apologize. However, there are more crisis response strategies than apologies and denials alone (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007); in fact, a full spectrum of possibilities is available. Notably, not every apology is the same (Bentley, 2015, 2018; Lee, 2005; Lee & Chung, 2012) and denial is not always inappropriate or ineffective (Fuoli et al., 2017). In the same vein, we should explore a broader spectrum of so-called crisis timing strategies aside from just thunder or stealing thunder.

As discussed earlier, practitioners often employ a sort of pseudo-stealing thunder activity. When organizations become aware there is crisis, they prepare statements “just in case” (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Once third-party disclosure is anticipated, they release those statements as soon as possible. When there are no such indications, they remain silent. Such a response can be quick and come across as stolen thunder to the media and public, but the disclosure lacks spontaneity. The communication is initiated by a third party, rather than by the organization. When we consider the timing of disclosure from organizations as existing on a spectrum, stealing thunder is on one end while this pragmatic, standby approach is somewhere in the middle. Research should be conducted to examine to what degree that pragmatic approach, which lacks genuine openness toward stakeholders and is not truly proactive, results in the same outcomes as actively stealing thunder.

One the thunder-end of the continuum, researchers have examined scenarios in which organizations simply did not self-disclose. This is a passive form of thunder. Its effects should be compared to a more active form in which organizations make deliberate attempts to hide information about a crisis. Based on commodity theory (Brock, 1968), we suspect that the stealing thunder effect would be greatest when an organization has no problem self-disclosing all there is to know about a crisis, and as soon as possible. That same theory also indicates that when an organization actively tries to cover up a crisis (or is accused of doing so), the thunder effect will be all the more pronounced. A parallel can be drawn with the Streisand effect, according to which attempts at censorship can be counterproductive and actually draw more attention (Jansen & Martin, 2015). Crisis cover-ups are at the most defensive extreme of the crisis disclosure spectrum. Passive versus active engagements with thunder ought to be compared, as in the case of active thunder, the cover-up may become worse than the crime.

Timing and Frequency of Crisis Communication

The stealing thunder effect is likely to be attributed to initiative as well as timing. An organizational crisis disclosure that is both spontaneous and communicated as quickly as possible is likely to be the most effective. A forced announcement that comes late is likely to be the most harmful. While stealing thunder has been labeled a crisis timing strategy, perhaps a more appropriate term would be “crisis disclosure strategy.” That said, in recent studies scholars have explored related strategies that tap into some, but not all, of the same processes as those which explain the stealing thunder effect. In one emerging stream of research, the role of speed in crisis communication is specifically examined. In another, the focus is on the importance of addressing potential information voids and organizational silence throughout the crisis lifecycle. This overall interest in speed and the frequency of crisis communication can be explained through the struggle that many organizations in crisis have with the demands of social media.

In a recent study, Huang and DiStaso (2020) tried to address the question of how quickly an organization should offer its first response to a crisis. They compared the impact of an organizational crisis response made one hour, one day, or one week after the crisis, without making explicit whether the message involved thunder or stealing of thunder. Their findings indicate that stakeholders appreciate when an organization communicates sooner rather than later. Organizations should not stay silent for several days before they offer their first response. However, responding one hour or one day after the crisis does not seem to make a difference. The authors concluded that social media users demand a quick response, yet organizations may have some time to sort things out and draft a well-thought-out reaction. Of course, this finding may depend on the type of crisis and the sense of urgency related to it. This study was an interesting first attempt at examining out how social media may have affected our information needs. Hence, besides research on crisis disclosure strategies, more studies should be conducted to examine how quickly stakeholders expect organizations to communicate via social media or otherwise. Findings from these types of projects can help organizations in crisis to find the right balance between communicating information quickly, and communicating information that is verified and complete (Coombs, 2019).

The change in our media use has also raised questions on how active organizations should be on social media throughout a crisis. Fowler (2017) used Twitter to examine real-time police communication about an ongoing shooting. Whereas Huang and DiStaso (2020) focused on timing alone, Fowler's (2017, p. 726) study informed us about the importance of communicating first, doing so quickly, and providing continuous updates during a crisis as a way to "fill the silence." A main conclusion from this study is that continuous communication during an ongoing crisis can help establish credibility. It has been recommended that organizations be present during crises that create a large information gap, in order to keep other, less reliable voices from becoming primary sources of information. On the other side of that spectrum, researchers are now examining strategic silence (Le et al., 2019). Based on a number of international cases, a practical guide has been developed to adopt certain forms of strategic silence before communicating reputation-restoring crisis response strategies. More research is required, however, to establish when and how organizations can or should remain silent.

Lifting Restraints

A final way ahead is to not only expand research related to stealing thunder, but to also expand its application in practice. Research among communication practitioners has revealed that while many of them agree that the practice is useful and important, there are a number of things holding them back from doing so (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016).

First, organizations fear that they can only steal thunder effectively when they can present the media and the public with complete information (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). The moment a crisis is discovered, however, organizations often feel they have insufficient data available. As a consequence, crisis disclosure is delayed. It is understandable that business leaders would want to first gather verified, basic information before announcing a crisis. When the announcement is not urgent in terms of guaranteeing the safety of stakeholders, organizations do have the liberty of gathering and verifying the most important facts before communicating. However, uncertainty is part of the very essence of most crises (Liu et al., 2016). As such, stealing thunder does not imply that an organization must be able to communicate everything there is to know; rather, it points to the need for an organization to share what it knows at a certain point in time without holding anything back. This is an important distinction. Given the uncertainty that is inherent to most crises, crisis communication often requires a level of ambiguity (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). If anything, stealing thunder will get an organization more goodwill regarding the nebulous nature of unfolding events. What is unknown, however, is the degree to which stakeholders tolerate ambiguity in stealing thunder messages.

A second reason why stealing thunder is not always applied in practice appears to be the difficulty in convincing management of the importance of self-disclosure (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Crisis response strategies that are accommodative in nature (such as apologizing) suffer from the same problem. Additional risks are introduced when management is fearful that apologies may incur legal liability (Myers, 2016; Patel & Reinsch, 2003). Regarding stealing thunder, leaders might be reluctant to take the step of actually disclosing a crisis that would perhaps otherwise remain unknown. Such decisions may be led by the overly optimistic and short-sided idea that things will blow over. The descriptive theory of behavioral crisis communication (Claeys & Coombs, 2020) posits that crisis management teams may prefer strategies that avoid short-term losses over those that aim for long-term gains. There are ways to stimulate management to look beyond the potentially detrimental short-term effect of stealing thunder, however, that should be explored.

Crisis communication decision makers could be stimulated during an ongoing crisis to analytically consider all of the potential outcomes of diverse disclosure strategies. When management is focused on a short-term perspective and inclined to keep things “in the family,” communication advisors could influence them to “consider-the-opposite” or “consider-the-alternative” (Lilienfeld et al., 2009; Milkman et al., 2009). Both strategies could help management to actively consider not only the possibility that they can handle things internally, but also the outcomes when a third party reveals the crisis first.

Another option is for communicators to nudge management toward stealing thunder via framing (cf. Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Because people are loss aversive, explaining the potential fallout from failing to steal thunder (enormous reputation damage if a third party discloses the crisis) may increase the likelihood of self-disclosing. An approach focused on loss avoidance may be more effective than trying to convince executives of the long-term reputational gains related to self-disclosure. Finally, we should examine the aspects of stealing thunder from the viewpoints of management as well. We can only truly understand what is holding them back by considering their perspectives.

Conclusion

Stealing thunder is an appealing strategy because of the idea that simply being the first to communicate about a crisis can be enough to minimize reputational damage. While there is indeed a strong and consistent stealing thunder effect, self-disclosure is only one element in the crisis communication mix. Choosing to communicate any type of information about a new crisis first, will not sufficiently accomplish the mission.

Prior research shows that stealing thunder can effectively lower the news value of a crisis and increase organizational credibility. The consistently beneficial impacts of self-disclosure on these two outcomes teaches us something about what makes it effective and how we should apply it in practice. First, by self-disclosing a crisis and communicating all there is to know at that time, an organization shows it has nothing to hide and that it has no problem with transparency. As a result, the press and the public will likely be satisfied and therefore less inclined to be overly critical or to search for additional bits of news. Second, by communicating what is known as soon as it becomes known, the organization shows it is able to overcome a one-sided and self-serving perspective and as such can establish credibility and trust.

Stealing thunder therefore implies that an organization communicates what is known about a crisis as soon as it becomes aware of the situation. Holding back parts of information or using the opportunity to first spin the crisis and minimize responsibility, however, will reduce the effect of stealing thunder. When the press and the public get the idea that an organization's self-disclosure is merely a public relations trick, stealing thunder might lose its effect or even backfire. While stealing thunder can buy an organization some time in terms of developing its crisis response strategy, it should not be considered as an excuse to minimize organizational responsibility. Guidelines regarding the appropriateness of crisis response strategies (cf. Coombs, 2007) will likely be applicable, irrespective of the crisis disclosure strategy used. Stealing thunder does provide organizations with more of an opportunity to frame a crisis in its own way, at least in terms of emotions. Spokespersons can more freely express genuine emotions when self-disclosing, as this will come across as more sincere compared to sadness expressed in reactive statements.

Ever since Arpan (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005) first applied the stealing thunder effect to crisis communication, research on this topic has expanded with results consistently confirming the effectiveness of self-disclosure. The authors of several studies have corroborated the main effect of responding to thunder versus stealing it. However, the spectrum of crisis disclosure strategies is broader than this basic comparison and should be further explored. Research shows that oftentimes, stealing thunder in practice implies a quick response to potential external revelations, using prepared statements, rather than a spontaneous self-disclosure as soon as the organization becomes aware of a problem (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). When we consider thunder, there is likely to be a major difference in the effects of a passive approach (when an organization fails to steal it) as opposed to cases in which companies actively attempt to conceal information.

In addition, stealing thunder research has initiated related streams of research focused more on the overall importance of responding quickly and frequently. The importance of social media has led to questions among organizations regarding the amount of time that is available to draft a response, as well as how frequently they should communicate. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we should consider that while the idea behind stealing thunder is appealing in all its simplicity, applying self-disclosure in practice is far from simple. Organizations that become aware of a crisis can make distinctions among three potential scenarios: (1) remaining silent and watching as the crisis fails to surface; (2) remaining silent and watching as the crisis is eventually disclosed by a third party; and (3) self-disclosing the crisis. While researchers who study the strategy of stealing thunder consistently compare the second and third scenarios, in practice, management often hopes for the best and focuses on the first. As a consequence, they decide not to steal thunder or to postpone it. Researchers must further examine what factors hold management back and consider ways to increase the application of this great strategy.

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