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Crisis communication in public organizations: Dimensions of crisis communication revisited

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Research on crisis communication has traditionally focused on private organizations' reputation and blame avoidance strategies. As a result, there is limited knowledge on crisis communication from a public organizational perspective. This is troublesome since the public organizations have a great deal of responsibility for preparing, communicating and managing large scale crisis events. In order to be able to better conceptualize public crisis communication, a typology based on communication aims and orientations is introduced. According to the typology public organizations engage in two dimensions of crisis communication: reputation/ resilience and strategic/ operational. These dimensions are illustrated and discussed by empirical examples from the Queensland floods of 2010/2011. The paper ends with a discussion on crisis communication dimensions in relation to public organizations' priorities, processes and practices.

Crisis communication research has traditionally focused on private corporations and their efforts in sustaining and restoring image and trust. As a result, crisis communication theories have been developed based on private actors without sufficient attention given to the distinctive nature between corporate and public communication (Tracy, 2007; Liu and Horsley, 2007). Yet, public organizations are especially significant since they often have the overall responsibility for preparing, communicating, and managing large scale crises. Therefore, there is a need to elaborate on new approaches within crisis communication research, beyond its traditional focus on actors' blame management, and to take into account issues related to community needs: such as, the role of communication in improving resilience and sense making (Ulmer, 2012; Heath, 2010, 2004).

In addition, there is a need to investigate how new information technologies are changing patterns of interaction (Eriksson, 2013). According to Jenkins (2006) new patterns of interaction include, for example, *participatory cultures* which are characterized by people sharing information and engaging in the process of producing *collective intelligence*. Collective intelligence can be summarized as "none of us can know everything, each of us knows something, and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills" (ibid, p. 4). From a crisis communication perspective, social media (such as Twitter and Facebook) becomes important tools in creating conditions and platforms for users to engage in information collection and distribution. Moreover, new information technologies are not only changing the interaction between people but also the nature of organizations by challenging traditional assumptions about organizational boundaries and possibilities for organizational control (Gilpin and Murphy, 2008). According to Lull (2007), the new media landscape can be described as polarized between a 'pull' and 'push' culture. In a 'push' culture, centralized authorities and organizations deliver professional information through traditional mass media channels to passive receivers. On the other hand, the 'pull' culture is

defined as a media culture where the needs and interests of niche publics or individual media consumers are in focus and where the receivers demand information and do not simply absorb what they are given. Push culture is collective, slow-paced, closed, community-bound, and uniform, and based on a paradigm of production. Pull culture is individual, private, fast-paced, micro-oriented, open, diverse, and fragmented, and based on a paradigm of active consumption making the old sender-recipient models obsolete.

Against the backdrop of the above changing conditions for communication, this article is an attempt to identify, exemplify and discuss various dimensions of crisis communication from a public organizational perspective. This is done by proposing a two dimensional typology for public communication which is applied to an illustrative case study of the Queensland floods. In the concluding section of the paper, the impact on organizational priorities, processes and practices are discussed.

<h2 style="text-align:center">Defining crisis</h2>

Studies in crisis communication involve a range of phenomenon, such as scandals, product failures, natural disasters and environmental crises (Fearn-Banks, 2011). As a result, the field has been characterized by a multitude of conceptualizations such as crises, disasters, and emergencies. One frequent source of inspiration regarding definitions has been Hermann's (1963) classical definition of crises as events characterized by threat, surprise, and short response time. Another definition of crisis presented by Coombs (2007) argues that a crisis is "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p. 2–3). Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer (1998) understand a crisis as "a specific, unexpected and non-routine organizationally based event or series of events which creates

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high levels of uncertainty and threat, or perceived threat, to an organization's high priority goals" (p. 233). Traditionally, crisis communication researchers have perceived crises as man-made and organizationally centered with a strong focus on preserving an organization's reputation.

In broadening the crisis definition from the organizational to the community level, crises can be understood as situations when core values or life-sustaining systems of a community are under threat, which in turn induce a sense of urgency and create considerable uncertainties regarding the nature of the event and its consequences (Boin et al, 2005, p. 2-3). It should thus be noted that the difference between the community and reputational oriented definitions are not clear cut since large scale crises also test the competence of crisis response organizations and consequently affect their reputation (Waymer and Heath, 2007).

Common to these crisis definitions is the fact that they define crises as threats either to a community's or organizational core values. According to Ulmer (2012) the notion of crisis as a threat has resulted in a preoccupation with blame reducing strategies amongst crisis communication scholars. Hence, a conceptual re-orientation that expands the crisis concept to include the notion of opportunity would give rise to new research interests related to how communication can reduce uncertainties, provide stakeholders with information aimed at self-help, and facilitate learning and trust in connection to crises.

In this paper, crises are understood from the community level perspective, and are not only perceived as threats but also as opportunities for communities and individual actors, not only in relation to reputational aspects but also in regard to increased resilience at the community level. The crisis communication dimensions are illustrated by the Queensland floods in 2010/2011 which affected three-fourths of the state and demanded the involvement of different administrative levels, as well as various political and private actors.

The following section aims to provide an overview of previous research on crisis communication from the perspectives of crisis and emergency communication. The overview will account for crisis communication research from a broad perspective. This has been done in order to provide a foundation for introducing the two dimensional typology of communication aims and orientations.[1]

Basically, crisis communication can perform three functions: *instructive* information which informs people on how to react in terms of personal protection, *adjustive* information which helps people to cope with uncertainty, and *internalizing* information which refers to information that helps an organization manage its reputation (Sturges, 1994). In general, crisis communication literature has been dominated by studies on internalizing information at the expense of the first two dimensions (Holladay, 2010). The preoccupation with internalizing information is understandable considering that crisis communication theories originates from the notion of apologia, described in the classical rhetorical literature as the art of defending a position (Hearit, 1999). In accordance to this tradition, crisis communication focuses on the development of rhetorical strategies with the aim of reducing blame and helping organizations, foremost companies, to get back to their everyday activities with minimal harm to their reputation (Coombs et al, 2010). One important theoretical contribution to the field is Benoit´s (1995) *Image Repair Theory* which categorizes different types of rhetorical image restoration strategies aimed at reducing the negative effects of crises. The image repair theory has been further elaborated upon, for example, by Coombs (2004; 2007) in his *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (SCCT). SCCT was founded in attribution theory which places apologia strategies in the context of stakeholder attribution.

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[1] The literature in these fields is vast and this paper by no means attempts to cover all the existing research within these fields. For example, literature on risk communication has not been considered in this overview.

According to the theory, the most effective crisis response is the one that manages to match organizational rhetoric to the level of reputational threat posed by a crisis. An alternative perspective on crisis communication has been advocated through the concepts of *restorative rhetoric* (Griffin-Padgett and Allison, 2010) and *renewal discourses* (Seeger and Ulmer, 2002) where scholars have studied the role of communication for organizational recovery process in the crisis after-math.

Within the reputational management research tradition, private organizations have foremost been the object of study. Exceptions to this are studies made on President Bush's communication during Hurricane Katrina (Benoit and Henson, 2009), the pedophile scandals within the Catholic Church (Legg, 2009), and political leaders' rhetorical responses to the current financial crisis (Masters and ´t Hart, 2013). In terms of practices, crisis communication has in general been understood as a planned activity conducted through the use of established strategies, regulations and standardized plans (Ashcroft, 1997; Fearn-Banks, 2011). This has led to the impression of communication as a top-down strategic transmission of information rather than as an active and critical sense-making process aimed at engaging stakeholders (Falkheimer and Heide, 2010). However, it should be noted that the sender-centric perspective has recently been challenged by scholars in the field (see for example Heath, 2010; Frandsen and Johansen, 2010).

Communication in connection to crises and disasters has also been studied within the broader field of emergency management. Here, communication has been related to aspects such as interpersonal influence, media relations, technological systems, and inter-organizational networking (Garnett and Kouzmin, 2007). In general, studies on emergency and disaster management have not focused on information quality or content and there has been little interaction with communication scholars (Richardson and Byers, 2009). Within the emergency management field one of the major concerns has been coordination in multi-

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agency environments. Often the dynamics relate to coordination between emergency personnel, NGOs, and various governmental agencies engaged in intergovernmental, intersectoral, and multiorganizational operations (Vanderford 2007; Waugh 1993; Waugh and Streib, 2006; Atkins, 2010; Kapucu, 2006). Another key focus has been on the design of information systems from a technical perspective (Reddy et al, 2009; Quarantelli, 1988; Coile, 1997; Palen et al, 2007).

In line with the development of new information technologies, the use of social media in crisis communication has attracted extensive attention (White et al, 2009: Yates and Paquette, 2011). One such event was Hurricane Katrina where scholars found new information technologies useful tools for activating social networks, reducing uncertainty, and maintaining a sense of community by linking and sharing information (Procopio and Procopio, 2007; Macias et al, 2009). However, other findings suggest that, even though friends and relatives were important sources of information during Hurricane Katrina, traditional media was still the most important source of information (Li et al, 2008). Nevertheless, new information technologies are believed to have a special beneficial role in creating community resilience by developing social capital, creating collective intelligence, coordinating responses, and initiating discussions across communities about risks and their management (Dufty, 2012). In the few studies where information content has been the focus of attention, scholars have revealed that disaster information ought to be directed toward reducing uncertainty and providing people with knowledge on how to act in order to ease stress and increase self-sufficiency. Further, in times of quickly changing conditions, information is best disseminated by experts close to the event in order to ensure speed and accuracy (Reynolds and Seeger, 2005; Heath et al, 2009).

Crisis communication dimensions

In the following section, two dimensions of crisis communication will be presented based on

key themes in the emergency and crisis management literature. The dimensions will be

illustrative by examples from the Queensland floods that hit the state of Queensland in

Australia during 2010 and 2011 (shortly described below). The case is based on official

documentation, media reports, and interviews with 12 key persons who work for Australian

governmental agencies and media organizations.

<u>The Queensland floods</u>

Floods, described as having "biblical proportions," hit the state of Queensland in Australia in

2010 and 2011. Up to three-quarters of the state was declared a disaster zone. The flooding

started in early December 2010 hitting large areas of Queensland. On January 10, 2011, the

area of Toowoomba faced heavy rainfalls resulting in a flashflood killing two people.

Unprecedented flash floods also affected the Locker Valley area the same day, killing sixteen

people and resulted in three missing persons in the region. On January 12 the Bremer River

in Ipswich was flooded and around 1000 Ipswich homes were inundated. On the same day the

state capital, the city of Brisbane, was also flooded. During the flood peak 14,100 Brisbane

properties were affected with 1203 houses suffering from inundation. Five days later, on

January 17, around 10,000 homes in Ipswich and Brisbane were still without power. The

flood water had left a thick layer of mud in both cities. Around 20,000 volunteers, the so

called 'Mud Army', helped cleaning up the city of Brisbane. On February 3 the northern part

of Queensland was hit by a category five cyclone named Yasi (Queensland Floods

Commission of Inquiry Final Report, 2012). The scale of the floods required extensive

cooperation between several key actors: various government agencies and authorities, the

media, politicians, and the public. Extensive use of social media (such as Twitter and

Facebook) was used to keep the various actors informed during the flooding; for example, the Queensland Police had 1.3 million followers on Twitter during the most intensive period.

Dimensions of crisis communication

As already stated, the proposed typology is based on two dimensions. The two dimensions is summarized in the typology below.

[INSERT model 1 here].

The first dimension is divided into two types of communication: operational and strategic. Operational crisis communication has traditionally been concerned with issues related to distributing relevant information about a crisis to those most affected in order to ensure informed decision making on critical matters (Morgan et al, 2002). Operational information focuses on comprehensive information, availability, and emotional reactions rather than organizational survival and reputational aspects (Heath et al, 2009). In contrast, strategic information is pre-planned and aimed at achieving long-term organizational goals. It should be noted that strategic communication can have different conceptualizations. (For an overview, see Hallahan et al, 2007.) Thus, for the purpose of this paper, strategic communication is conceptualized as a managerial function aimed at organizational survival and/or achieved by cultivating positive perceptions among the stakeholders (Mintzberg, 1979; Perrow, 1992; Grunig et al, 2002).

The second dimension relates to two aims of communication: maintaining reputation and instilling resilience. The first aim is reputational and self-centered with the purpose of explaining and promoting the organizations' own framing and preferences. The second aim is resilience and focuses on providing information that is

critical for communities and individuals to survive and revive in the event of a crisis. A short caveat on the concept of resilience is in order here. There is a vast literature on resilience and consequently, numerous definitions. On a general level, the concept of resilience captures communities' capacity to 'bounce-back' after crises, that is, the ability to adapt and change to new situations and in doing so creating long-term stability (Wildavsky, 1988; Smith and Fischbacher, 2009; Gunderson, 2000; Hanson and Roberts, 2005; Longstaff and Yang, 2008). According to Norris et al (2008) resilience is most often understood as a capacity for adaption when faced with adversity. Moreover, resilience should be understood as a process of adaptability rather than as an outcome.

In sum resilience can be defined as "a process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaption after a disturbance" (p. 130). Moreover, community resilience is closely related to trust which is an essential component in creating effective crisis management collaboration, network building, and public engagement (Dekker et al, 2008; Peterson and Besserman, 2010; Hutton, 2012; Murphy, 2007). In this paper resilience is applied in order to describe communication that aims to support people and communities in the crisis management process (e.g., by facilitating coordination, information sharing, and collective sense making) as well as in the rebuilding and recovery process (e.g., via the affirmation of collective identities, shared norms, and positive emotions, and crafting of normalcy and future orientations) (Buzzanell, 2010; Chamlee-Wright and Storr, 2011; Ulmer et al, 2006).

Together the two dimensions create four ideal types of crisis communication which will be illustrated below by empirical examples from Australian public organization's management of the Queensland flood.

INSERT MODELL II

<u>Operational resilience communication</u>

The '*operational resilience*' category is used to denote information which is provided with an operational perspective and aims at increasing self-sufficiency, affirming collective identity and providing emotional support. In the case of Australia, resilience is stated as the main goal in emergency management operations with a strong focus on shared responsibility. According to the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience* (COAG, 2011) the notion of "shared responsibility" means that state agencies and municipal councils as well as communities and individuals have to take greater responsibility for their own safety including independently acting on advice and various informational cues.

During the floods, the dissemination of adequate operational information was a key concern for actors at all levels, from central to local, engaged in the acute flood response. The lead agency for the response was the Queensland Police (QPS) (Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry Final Report, 2012). The police received particular attention and praise for its extensive use of social media. According to the QPS, the heavily reliance on social media was not pre-planned but grew with the realization that traditional informational practices, such as press releases, were to slow to capture the rapidly changing conditions. By publishing their own information, as well as information from other departments, the QPS wanted to act as a "centralised clearing house for disaster-related information" (Queensland Police Service, 2011, p. 5).[2] According to the organization, the benefits gained by being able to speak directly to the public and not having to rely on journalists were immense. "We're not relying on news bulletins. We're not relying on journalists to make decisions about newsworthiness. We've just been able to go directly to the people when we need to" (ABC, 20

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[2]http://www.police.qld.gov.au/Resources/Internet/services/reportsPublications/documents/QPSSocialMediaCase Study.pdf

January- 2011).[3] Instead of the QPS relying on the news media in order to get their message out, which would have been the normal procedure, in this case traditional media actually used QPS's social media channels as a major source of information in their reporting which created a crossover from 'new media' to 'old media' (QPS 2011).

In their operational communication the police made extensive use of both Facebook and Twitter. During the period of 10-16 January 35,000 tweets were sent of which 11,600 had been sent on 12 January alone at the height of the flooding in Brisbane. In January 2011 the QPS Media, which manages the QPS social media activity on its website, had roughly 11,000 followers and an additional 164,133 people following ('liking') their Facebook page. The hashtag *#qldfloods* became established as the central gathering mechanism for flood-related information and was used to share information related to, among other things, road conditions, calls for assistance and coordination of activities. In order to debunk rumors, the Police regularly posted tweets under the hashtag *#Mythbuster* (Bruns, 2011). Social media was then foremost used as a way of distributing critical information. For example, an analysis of the QPS revealed that their Facebook site fulfilled the following core functions: posting information related to actual occurrences and situations (59%), warning the community of upcoming threats (18%), encouraging certain kinds of behavior via action from the community (13%), appeal for information, with the intention to get information back from the community (8%), and fighting rumors (2%) (Ehnis and Bunker, 2012). QPS was also the most retweeted source of information, as can be seen in Figure 1 below (Bruns et al, 2012).

[INSERT figure 1]

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[3] Kym Charlton, QPS, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-01-20/police-tweet-on-the-beat-during-flood-crisis/1912328

Figure 1 highlights two features of the crisis response. Firstly, it illustrates the high credibility of the QPS as a source of information, evident by the fact that it was the most retweeted source of information. Moreover, the diagram can be seen as an expression of the high level of interaction between the authorities and ordinary citizens as social media users, which in turn expressed a sense of 'we're all in this together '. Retweeting as a phenomenon can likewise be seen as a sign of the communities' ability to self-organize responses and information sharing during the 2010-2011 flooding, in which the authorities, and especially the QPS, played a crucial role (Bruns, 2011, p. 42).

The Brisbane City Council also used the social media to communicate with the public, even though they did so to a lesser extent than QPS (McCulloch, 2011). Similar to the QPS, the Brisbane City Council described how their communication in the social media expanded organically, both between citizens, as well as between citizens and the City Council. However in comparison to the QPS, it is important to keep in mind that the civil servants working on the City Council have more complicated and lengthy approval processes due the political nature of their organization. According to one of the interviewees, the City Council employees used for example Facebook to get in contact with and help individual citizens. One such example was a woman who had contacted the City Council on Facebook saying she was stranded in her apartment and that her cellphone battery was dead. The digital media communicator for the Brisbane City Council then "contacted SOS and let them know about the situation, and in 2-3 hours she came back to thank and said that she had been evacuated safely." Even though the social media received a lot of attention, other means of communication such as text messaging, door knocking, and radio announcements were important (Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry Final Report, 2012).

One of the worst events during this period was the unprecedented flashfloods in rural places like Locker Valley. In terms of communication, one of the key problems in Locker Valley was the fact that the area did not have sufficient radio transmitter coverage which severely hampered the use of cell phones. Another challenge was the fact that not all of the residents were literate. Both aspects made relying on the social media or cell phones troublesome. "There are still community members out there who cannot read or write so there is no point in sending them text messages. Again you need to develop other methods and you need to start looking at identifying those people" (Interview with a representative of the Locker Valley Regional Council). Resilient communication then has to include a variety of communicational means beyond text and Twitter messages such as radio, sirens, and door knocking. According to one crisis manager in Locker Valley, a vital aspect of resilience is to provide citizens with the knowledge needed in order for them to make their own decisions. One such example is the ability to correctly read the gauges that measure flood levels and to know how to act in accordance to different kinds of information.

An illustrative example of the importance of resilience is from the flash flood that hit the town of Grantham in 2011. Two hours before the flash flood had swept through the town, an early warning had been issued but not from the authorities but from a local weather amateur who had posted various messages on an internet site.

Operational reputation communication

This next dimension is 'operational reputational' communication. The reputational aim of operative communication can be direct (via planning) or indirect (as a side-effect to operational communication). Direct would here mean that the reputational effects are planned when communicating. On the other hand, information with a resilience operational aim (i.e., functional and instructive) may at the same time have reputational effects since it places crisis

communicators in the limelight. Due to the high level of visibility, the communication of operational information often provides an opportunity to show presence, competence and compassion which in turn significantly benefits reputation. For example, the QPS was praised for their work during the floods by Facebook users, the traditional media and government representatives alike (QPS, 2011). According to a study of Twitter flows during the floods (based on the hashtag *#qldfloods*), five percent of the tweets were written by individuals expressing thanks and appreciation for the QPS's efforts (Shaw et al, 2013). Another example from another case is the Australian state owned electricity company Powerlink. Powerlink were praised for their performance in connection to the Cyclone Yasi in February 2011 for which they also won a reward from the Public Relation Institute of Australia. According to their communication plan, their main objectives during a crisis are to set appropriate public expectations as well as educate, reassure and advice key stakeholders with the final aim "to reinforce Powerlink's reputation as a world leader in the provision of reliable electricity supply".[4] It was obvious that the company understood the image building components inherent in their daily operational information work.

The current case study highlights not only the opportunities inherent for agencies engaging in operative communication efforts but even those for politicians; such was the case for the Queensland Premier Anna Bligh. During the flooding, she was actively engaged in operational communication and, for example, led all of the disaster management group's press conferences which were broadcasted live. According to the Head of Communication at the State Department, the extent to which the Premier engaged in communication was not preplanned but a result of the scale of the event where she ended up fronting all of the disaster management group's press conferences (Interview with the Head of Communication for the State Government). In opinion polls, voter satisfaction rate for the

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[4] Golden target awards 2011. Public relations institute of Australia Cyclone Yasi: Testing the transmission Network. Power Link Queensland.

Premier went up from 25 percent before the flood to 60 percent at the end of February. [5] In the Twitter sphere Bligh was praised for her leadership qualities based on her ability to show emotions, articulate community pride and identity with the victims as well as her ability to provide information and advice (Bussy and Paterson, 2012). [6] According to the Brisbane Times, Bligh's upswing in popularity could be explained by her performance of "true leadership," in contrast to "political party leadership;" Bligh spoke "frankly and sincerely, without a word of spin or obfuscation" and people could tell she was genuine (Brisbane Times, 2011-01-13). [7] Journalists at another local newspaper explained the Premier's rise in popularity in a similar manner; "Bligh got high marks because she told it as it was. She told the truth and there is a lesson for every politician there. /// then she slipped back into an ordinary political speak mode the months after but the big thing was that [during the flooding] she just told it like it was " (Interview Editor Courier Mail). [8] According to these statements, it seems like operational information have the propensity to provide an aura of authenticity which in turn has clear reputational effects.

After having discussed the operational reputation aspects, we will now move on to the strategic reputation category.

Strategic reputation communication

This dimension addresses 'classical' crisis communication issues related to boosting or repairing actor's reputation. One of the biggest threats to reputation on the community level during the 2010-11 flooding was related to Queensland's tourist industry. The tourist industry

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[5] http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/sunday-mail/anna-bligh-back-in-publics-good-books-based-on-how-she-handled-queenslands-natural-disasters/story-e6frep2f-1226008727215

[6] Bussy, N M and Paterson, A (2011) Crisis leadership styles: Bligh versus Gillard: A content analysis of Twitter posts on the Queensland floods. Journal of Public Affairs, 12(4):326-332,

[7] Brisbane Time 2011 January 13, Bligh's tear-filled cry: 'We are Queenslanders. http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/environment/weather/blighs-tearfilled-cry-we-are-queenslanders-20110113-19oxt.html

[8] This same explanation was provided by one of the editors at the Courier Mail in another interview conducted by the current author.

plays a central role in the Queensland's economy and accounts for approximately 122,000 direct jobs and another 100,000 indirectly associated jobs (5.7% of the state's workforce and 4.7% of Queensland's GSP) (Tourism Queensland, 2011). As a result of the floods, tourism dropped considerable. This was to a large extent caused by the sensational international media coverage which gave the impression that a much larger geographical area had actually been affected and damaged by the floods (Beirman, 2012). In fact, major tourist destinations such as the Gold Coast, the Sunshine Coast and the Whitsunday Islands were relatively unscathed. In order to get tourists to return to the region, the Tourism and Events Queensland (TEQ)[9] already at the end of January 2011 launched "aggressive" marketing campaigns in Australia and overseas to revive the struggling tourist industry (ABC, 22-02-2011). The headline of the first campaign was "Queensland Ready to Welcome You" and it made use of print, radio, online advertising and social media channels such as the Visit Queensland Facebook page to encourage Australian tourists to visit Queensland (Duncan, 2011). Subsequent campaigns were also directed towards the international market (Tourism Queensland, April, 2011).

Besides, Queensland has a large university sector which attracts a considerable number of foreign students. In order to ensure potential students that Queensland still was an alternative for the 2011 academic year, foreign students were targeted in various information campaigns. According to a media release by the Minister for Natural Resources, Mines and Energy and Minister for Trade "The government has taken steps to ensure the safety of all Queensland-based international students'' (Media statement, Queensland government 18 January 2011). For example, the University of Queensland worked with Chinese and US students in Queensland and contacted their respective student unions back home as well as sent media releases to international news outlets and posted photos and videos online showing

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[9] TEQ is the Queensland Government's lead agency for marketing, experience development and major events and represents the state's tourism and event industries- .

students at the University of Queensland leading perfectly normal lives (Interview with the Head of Communication at the University of Queensland).

Strategic resilience communication

The fourth and last category is strategic communication designed at increasing resilience. The Queensland Reconstruction Agency was established in February 2011 in order to oversee and coordinate the recovery and reconstruction efforts. Within the overall program, communication was a key concern from the very start. According to the agency "hope, confidence, trust, sense of involvement, and coordination begins with strategic communication which should try to answer questions and impart information on the *When, What, Where* and *How* of rebuilding"[10] (World Bank Report, p, 27). Media briefings, interviews and press releases were frequently used in order to reach the goals of engaging fellow Queenslanders in the rebuilding process as well as managing their expectations in terms of explaining what could reasonably be done within the designated time period, (ibid).

One example of strategic resilience is when messages are created and distributed in order to provide public emotional support. In response to the 2010-11 floods the Queensland State Government felt there was a need for positive stories so they launched a program aimed at identifying local heroes in connection to the floods. "Once the scope of the devastation was known, there was a heavy focus on getting some positive stories out there, immediately, so that people did not just feel that 'this is too big and we cannot cope' " (Interview Head of Communications State Department). Another such example was a program called 'Happiness' that was launched together with the local newspaper Courier Mail. According to a representative of the State Government, the aim was to "engage the

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[10] Queensland Recovery and Reconstruction in the Aftermath of the 2010/2011 Flood Events and Cyclone Yasi. A report prepared by the World Bank in collaboration with the Queensland Reconstruction Authority, June 2011.

media and the community in the process of rebuilding in order to make sure that the community could get back to normal." This was done by trying "to get media partners onboard to tell those stories of hope and provide the communities with a forum for positive inspiration" (ibid).

Another potential component of strategic resilience is boosting positive collective identities. One of the most cited speeches during the floods was when a visibly shaken and teary eyed Anna Bligh said at a press conference, "As we weep for what we have lost and as we grieve for family and friends, we confront the challenge that is before us. I want us to remember who we are. We are Queenslanders. We're the people that they breed tough, north of the border. We're the ones that they knock down, and we get up again".[11] The speech got a lot of attention in the media and Bligh highly praised "for her raw and emotional performance" and for "her tirelessness, honesty and compassion as she leads the state through its worst flood disaster in decades" (Brisbane Times, 2011-01-13)[12]. In terms of resilience, Bligh created a collective identity of Queenslanders and encouraged people to reflect upon who they were, wanted to be and /or had the potential to become.

After having presented the four ideal types of crisis communication, the next section will discuss how to understand these dimensions in regard to public organizational practices.

Dimensions of crisis communication: Priorities, processes, and practices

In this last and concluding section, a few remarks will be made in regard to how communicative dimensions relate to public organizational priorities, processes, and practices.

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[11] QEOC Kedron media conference, 13 January 2011
[12] Brisbane Times, 13 January 2011, "Bligh's tear-filled cry: 'We are Queenslanders'."
http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/environment/weather/blighs-tearfilled-cry-we-are-queenslanders-20110113-19oxt.html

Organizational priorities: In order to understand public organizations' crisis communication, the first task is to identify the rationale behind why organizations need and want to communicate. A key distinction can be made between organizations that perceive communication as controllable through plans, standardized formats and centralized leadership and those organizations that understand communication as a way of sharing experiences with stakeholders and hence rely upon dialogue, decentralization and improvisation. By generalizing, we can expect the former type of organization to be more engaged in reputational aspects and the latter to be more resilience oriented.

There is yet limited research on public organizations and their communication. Some scholars argue that the increase in market-driven communication has resulted in the downgrading of the classical public service ideal (Wæraas, 2010). One of the few studies made on public organizations, in this case Danish municipalities, reveals the existence of two competing crisis communication logics; an *emergency logic* that adheres to classical public service emergency management principles and a *crisis management logic* that focuses on image and reputational aspects which originate from the corporate world. From a democracy perspective, there is a risk that the extensive use of market-driven top-down communication, which stands in contrast to the symmetric dialogue, undermines citizens' trust in public organizations (Nielsen & Salmonsen 2012; Byrkjeflot 2010). On the other hand, crisis communication scholar Eriksson (2013) argues that we are entering a new paradigm where the role of strategic crisis communication is diminishing due to the increase of improvised on-line activities conducted by experienced operational experts who often are the ones closest to the event. In line with this, the Queensland case demonstrated how operational communication had both resilience effects but was also effective in producing reputational aspects (i.e., the increase in support for Premier Bligh and Queensland Police). In fact it might well be that operational communication is a much more effective image tool than deliberative

strategic image building communication and that blame games and political spinning are contra-productive and result in the public feeling manipulated. If so, strategic image building strategies risk having a negative effect on both resilience and reputation assets in terms of diminishing trust for politicians and for those authorities entrusted with handling the crisis (c.f. Longstaff, 2010).

Organizational processes. As previously mentioned, one key distinction can be made between an organization that attempts to control information flows and those that believe in improvisation. Previous research in public relations tells us that there is a link between how organizations understand communication and the nature of their organizational structure and processes (Dozier and Grunig, 1992). Inspired by Burns and Stalker's (1961) classical distinction between organic and mechanistic organizations, Grunig (1989) argues that mechanistic inspired organizations are more inclined towards asymmetric models of commination in their attempts to control their environment whereas organic inspired organizations characterized by a more open culture and mutual dependency to its environment apply symmetric communication modes. Within the crisis communication research, one of the most documented organizational changes in the wake of crises is centralization. The centralization of managerial functions often occurs when there are stronger incentives for control due to increased threat, uncertainty and perceived political stakes (Rosenthal et al, 1991). Yet, centralized structures may not be the most appropriate in times of crisis since they often created bottlenecks in terms of information flows and decision making power and therefore hamper flexibility and speed (´t Hart et al, 1993). Furthermore, centralized crisis management systems run the risk of neglecting individuals and agencies with relevant expertise and as a result diminish problem solving capacities (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

The Queensland case illustrates that new information technologies have the potential to challenge organizational structures and processes. According to the QPS, in order

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to be able to deliver accurate and quick information in social media, the communicators were given substantial freedom in posting information and responding to messages, which in many times ran against the everyday hierarchical procedures. On the other hand, the more politically-driven City Council had somewhat more trouble adjusting to the demands of speedy information due to the need for higher levels of control. In the case of the Queensland floods, the advantages of decentralizing control over information were many. One was the ability to allow information to develop organically which enabled information sharing and distribution across administrative levels and between various actors both within and outside the organization, such as with citizens and other concerned partners (c.f. Smith, 2012). The organically developing communication contributed to the creation of collective intelligence which added to problem solving and joint responses.

Organizational practices. In the realm of the traditional push culture,) centralized authorities and organizations often deliver professional communication contents through traditional mass media channels. The main advice for effective communication during a crisis, according to this logic, would be to quickly build a centralized and tight system in order to gain control over message formulation and transmission. In contrast, in a pull culture environment the organizational image is no longer solely in the hands of the managerial functions but is also shaped by coworkers and clients using blogs and social media (Solis & Breakenridge 2009; Wagnsson & Hellman 2013). The core practices in such environments differ substantially. Instead of asking questions related to the most effective rhetorical strategies, as would be the case in the push culture, questions related to what makes the organization an attractive source of information and partner will be asked in a pull culture environment. The emphasis on public organizations as partners in a pull culture relates to the notion that citizens have a will of their own in choosing who they listen to and interact with. This means that organizations have to work hard in order to become attractive and

consequently includes having to modify their tone and style into becoming less formal and authoritarian. As one digital media officer at QPS pointed out, "Social media is about people, and the team acted as a person. We had all the rules and policies in place but in this medium you need to behave like everyone else is behaving. You need to fit in. We are not the bosses of social media" (Interview with an employee at QPS). During the crisis the QPS altered their communication approach from a transmission mode, which relied upon traditional press releases, to an audience mode of communication that emphasized dialogue. Yet another important aspect for organizations to consider if they want to receive attention in the social media is the issue of transparency. Again the QPS told how their practices needed to be changed in order to include transparency when it came to news that was negative from the police's perspective. "For a little while we did not put out the negative things. But then people started asking about incidents they had heard about in the news, and then we realized that we needed to put up the bad stuff as well; even about police men misbehaving. It is bad, but you get more respect out from it" (Interview with a QPS digital media officer). To sum up, by emphasizing more resilience and operational communication in times of crisis the focus moves away from strategic messages to dealing with issues related to how crisis management actors cope with issues related to control, transparency, speed and tone. According to Gonzáles-Herrero and Smith (2008), in the new media environment "trust is the new currency and people expect authentic transparent conversation in a human voice, not company messages delivered in a corporate tone" (p. 144). This requires a deeper understanding for reputation and operational communication and how these two can be carried out in a pull media culture with the extensive use of new media technologies.

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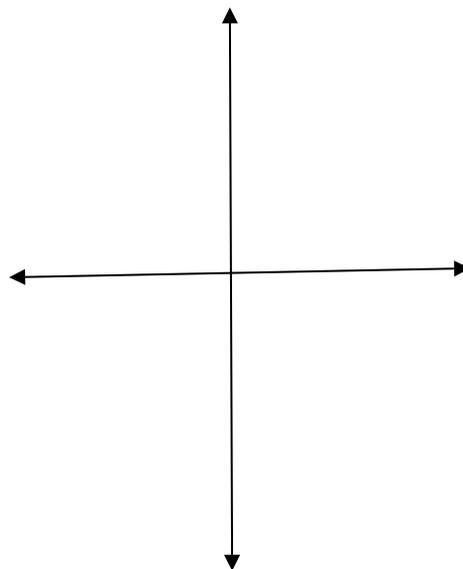
Model I.

Communication aimed at providing people
with information related to their ability to
cope with the situation at hand and that is
provided on an operational basis.

Operational

Communication
aimed at
managing
reputation
aspects.

Reputation ←————→ **Resilience**

Communication
aimed at self-
sufficiency,
networking, and
renewal.

Strategic

Communication that has been
planned with much consideration
and is aimed at achieving long-
term organizational goals.

Model II.

Operational

Operational reputation	*Operational resilience*
Strategic reputation	*Strategic resilience*

Reputation   **Resilience**
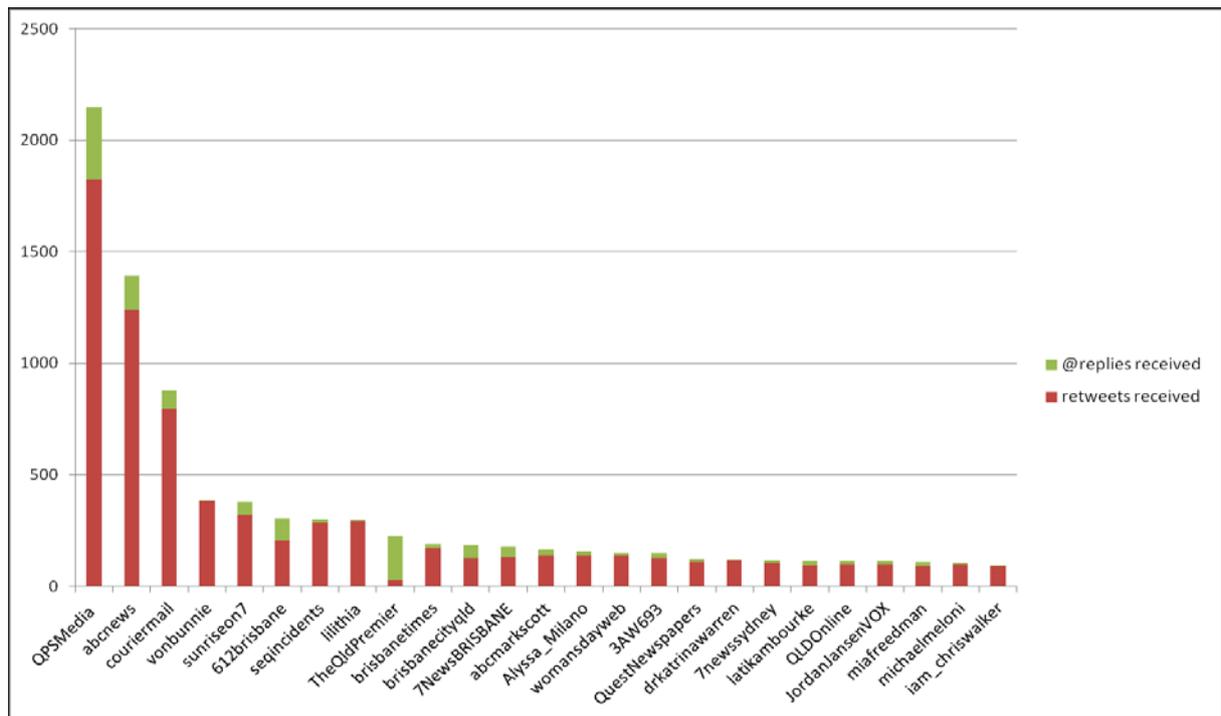
Strategic

Figure I.

Table: Most active contributors to #qldfloods, 10-16 Jan. 2011. In Bruns et al, 2012.