

Elina R. Tachkova and W. Timothy Coombs, **Communicating in Extreme Crises: Lessons From the Edge**, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2022, 170 pp., \$160.00 (hardcover).

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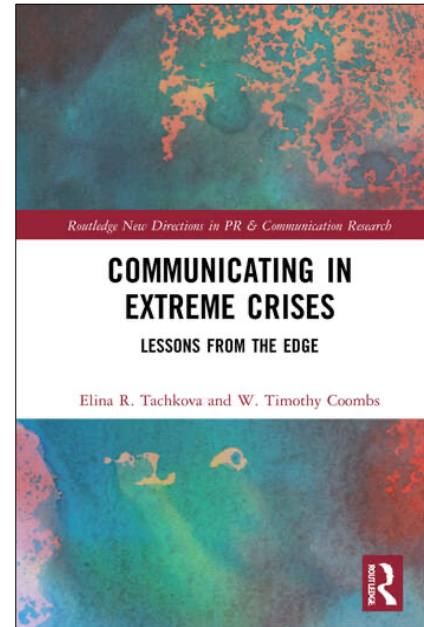
Extreme crises are crises with a high-intensity threat level, and they emerge frequently, according to the Institute for Crisis Management’s tracking of crises (p. 1). This justifies the need for **Communication in Extreme Crisis: Lessons From the Edge**, by Elina R. Tachkova and W. Timothy Coombs, which describes the nature of extreme crises and the corresponding strategies in a holistic way. This volume contributes to crisis communication research and praxis by especially focusing on extreme crises that existing scholarship has rarely explored.

The book is organized into three sections, with an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction opens with the statement that much of the traditional advice for common crises does not apply to extreme crises, thus pointing out the necessity to understand extreme crises and develop appropriate strategies for pertinent management.

The first section (chapters 1–3) provides background on crisis communication and management. Specifically, chapter 1 elucidates that an evidence-based approach is used in crisis communication research to guide practitioners by creating intervention evidence via case studies, content analyses, and experiments. It emphasizes that crisis communication research and practice mutually reinforce each other, with the former building theories like situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) to provide evidence-based guidance for practitioners and the latter improving the theory through substantial case studies.

Chapter 2 introduces the three-stage and regenerative models to clarify the crisis management process. It is claimed that crisis management is a complex and dynamic process (p. 21), including three main stages: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis, and the regenerative model explains how severe crises develop. It suggests that crisis managers integrate the three key areas of issues, risk, and reputation management to achieve effective crisis management.

SCCT divides crisis interventions into three categories: instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation management. The first two categories, known as the ethical base response in SCCT, are the foundation for any crisis intervention while reputation interventions can be used after them. Based on SCCT, chapter 3 discusses the different effects of optimal and suboptimal crisis interventions. “The terms optimal and suboptimal denote how effective the strategies are in minimizing damage from the crisis for both the organization and stakeholders” (p. 31). Stealing thunder is a typical optimal strategy, referring



to the admission of a mistake or failure before its exposure to the public. An ethical base response, including instructional and adjusting information, is also an optimal intervention, as it addresses the victim's needs and concerns. Examples of suboptimal strategies are denial that a crisis exists and relaying an excuse that intends to minimize an organization's responsibilities. Optimal interventions may "initially increase negative outcomes by accepting responsibility for the crisis" (p. 31), but their accommodative nature can allow for a faster and more robust recovery eventually. On the contrary, suboptimal strategies may minimize short-term losses related to a crisis but will magnify damages later once stakeholders learn of its concealment.

The second section (chapters 4–7) covers the understanding of extreme crises and the related strategies for coping with them. Chapter 4 identifies factors distinguishing common and extreme crises and explains the importance of preparing for extreme crises. It demonstrates that attributions of crisis responsibility, trust violations, perceptions of moral outrage, and designation of racism all provide ways to distinguish between common crises (low intensity) and extreme crises (high intensity). SCCT categorizes crises into three types (victim, accidental, preventable), and the attributions of crisis responsibility vary in each type. Compared with very low crisis responsibility in victim crises, accidental crises have moderate amounts of crisis responsibility, and preventable crises produce strong crisis responsibility. Intensifiers such as crisis history and prior reputation will increase the crisis responsibilities. Thus, preventable and accidental crises coupled with an intensifier can be considered extreme crises. Another factor employed to identify extreme crises is the idea of competence-based or integrity-based trust violation. Competence-based crises bear low intensity while integrity-based crises are high intensity, as the former is caused by poor motivation while the latter violates moral principles. Moreover, contextual amplifiers such as racism and moral outrage can trigger extreme crises. Crisis communication plans (CCPs) and crisis teams are the primary elements of crisis preparation, and crisis preparation begins by identifying the type of crisis that is occurring, focusing on the organization's vulnerabilities. Therefore, specific CCPs for extreme crises must be developed, and crisis team members should receive special training to meet the unique communicative demands that extreme crises pose to an organization.

Chapter 5 defines two types of extreme crises, namely management misconduct and "scansis," and explores why extreme crises frequently occur. Management misconduct is organizational wrongdoing, and scansis is the intersection between an organizational crisis and a scandal (p. 51), both of which share the ability to provoke moral outrage, a critical appraisal for extreme crises (p. 48). It further analyzes that the moral minimize unpleasant message (MUM) effect, whistleblowing, and cover-ups are three factors contributing to the frequent emergence of extreme crises. Moral MUM effect inhibits risk management, as it involves intentionally not reporting a crisis to whoever can address the risk. Similarly, the reluctance or inability to redress wrongdoing through whistleblowing, and the cover-ups designed to hide wrongdoing, will allow the risk to continue and serve to facilitate additional wrongdoing, which will eventually result in severe extreme crises.

Chapter 6 points out that current crisis communication research has not articulated the boundaries of its theories, resulting in crisis managers' dangerous choice of suboptimal crisis interventions due to their attempts to limit loss and receive short-term gains. The authors argue that such suboptimal interventions as denial and minimal information may intensify the damage, leading to a double crisis or organizational

infamy. In contrast, an optimal crisis intervention like stealing thunder is a more effective way to respond to an extreme crisis with its long-term gains for both financial and reputational assets.

Chapter 7 provides crisis communication guidance to practitioners embroiled in extreme crises and discusses the future direction of crisis communication research. It proposes that managers in extreme crises should make optimal interventions that feature long-term effects, empathetic responses with a recognition of the moral violation, and corrective action plans. Crisis managers should also look to value congruence and transient impressions as the desired outcomes. As is told, the best way to understand the stakeholder's reaction to crisis intervention is to utilize an evidence-based approach to crisis research, as the research reveals the cause-effect relationship between an intervention and desired outcomes (p. 77). As for future crisis communication research, additional study is required to verify and extend the current findings regarding interventions, outcome variables, and factors triggering extreme crises to offer more effective advice for practitioners.

The third section (chapters 8–16) includes nine case studies of extreme crises, eight of which are examples of organizations facing extreme crises, while the final case is a general report about how organizations communicated during the pandemic. The first eight cases sketch out a panoramic view of the causes, interventions, and outcome evaluations concerning each extreme crisis. Chapter 16 narrates the characteristics of messages conveyed by organizations to their customers and employees. It advocates short, simple, clear, and empathetic messages to create easier comprehension for stakeholders under anxiety.

Chapter 17 is the conclusion, with a review of extreme crises, highlighting that the guidance for extreme crisis communication is rooted in experimental research that serves as the best way for practitioners to learn more about extreme crises in a more reliable way.

Since extreme crisis has not received due attention in preceding scholarship, this book makes academic contributions by extending the research scope of crisis communication and management. It also boasts practical values by helping practitioners to work out the most appropriate interventions especially developed for handling extreme crises.

The book's most remarkable merit lies in its extensive and rigid citation of academic literature, following terminology and scholarly opinions, which accommodates interested readers with more relevant sources of reading. Moreover, this volume features an integration of both systematic theory input and detailed case analysis, which may not only improve crisis managers' practical abilities but also appeal to a wider audience. When crisis managers approach the cases, they can refer to the theories explained in the book based on empirical research findings, thus producing optimal interventions. For audiences with no prior knowledge of extreme crisis, they can apply what they have learned from the book to real-life situations.

However, although crisis scholars and practitioners are all familiar with SCCT, the guiding theory in crisis communication, novice readers outside the field may be confused. For this reason, a general review of SCCT might have been included in the book.

In conclusion, this volume is highly recommended to crisis managers in organizations, as well as to advanced undergraduates and graduates of communications, public relations, and strategic management. It also provides guidance for handling conflicts that occur in daily communication.