

'Nothing, late and analogue': How organizations utilized their websites to respond to issues covered by Swedish mainstream online news

Michael Bo Karlsson, Karlstad University, Sweden

Abstract

The Internet has the potential to change how organizations communicate with the public, both by allowing them to bypass news media by having their own websites and by offering interactive features and multimedia on their websites. Simultaneously, major news media remains an important factor, especially online, where more and more people visit them for information. Online news functions differently compared to traditional news with regards to, for instance, the much shorter news cycle, which implies that issues can surface and disappear quickly. This provides an intriguing setting where online media can report quickly on any issue and where organizations indicated as stakeholders in the issue can reply on their own websites. This study uses three cases, encompassing 14 organizations, to investigate if and how organizations reply on their websites when they have been identified as stakeholders in an issue. The results indicate that organizations are far from realizing the full potential of their websites.

Introduction

The Internet has changed the public sphere indefinitely. Organizations no longer suffer the dictates of news corporations to reach the public as they can utilize their own websites for that. Simultaneously, organized journalism had its foundations changed when it moved online. In the online environment, news can be instantly published in the 24/7 news cycle. This provides an intriguing setting where current news on a plethora of issues can be instantly published on news websites and consequently provoke immediate answers from organizations' own websites, or vice versa. Furthermore, digital characteristics, such as interactivity and multimedia, permit vivid communication between the organizations and their publics on the organizations' websites, thus potentially letting their publics communicate their concerns to both the organization and all other stakeholders.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how organizations utilize their websites to communicate with their publics when the organizations are identified by online news media as stakeholders in an issue. Three case studies, involving four mainstream news sites and 14 organizations, constitute the empirical base. The cases were collected during the fall of 2008.

The paper develops as follows: initially, there is a literature review that is divided into three sections and each of these ends with research questions derived from the review. The paper continues with the rationale for the study and a description of the methodology. This is followed by a presentation of the

results from the three cases. The paper ends with a discussion, conclusions, the limitations to the study, and some suggestions for further research.

Organizational issues, News media and the Internet

An issue is, according to Regester & Larkin (2008, p. 44; see also Jaques, 2009), "a gap between corporate practice and stakeholder expectations." Hence, issues (such as events or conditions), whether originating within or outside the organization (Gaunt & Ollenburger, 1995), can have a major effect on the present and/or future performance of the organization (Coombs, 2007b; Jaques, 2009). How issues are managed by organizations is an important subject, as it can be the difference between a proactive resolution and a crisis out of control (Anderson, 1997; Regester & Larkin, 2008).

Neither issues management nor crisis management, in themselves, nor the difference between them is always clear (Jaques, 2009, 2007), as issues management, for instance, is considered part of crisis prevention (Jaques, 2007). Issues management, however, seems generally to be understood as the measures taken before the organization is affected negatively. Crisis management, on the other hand, is understood as containing more reactive measures, trying to minimize negative impact after the issue has become widely known and is the subject of public outrage (Anderson, 1997; Gaunt & Ollenburger, 1995; Jaques, 2007; Regester & Larkin, 2008).

Failing to successfully manage an issue or crisis can have devastating effects on an organization's image (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2002; Heath, 1998b; Regester & Larkin, 2008). Early warning systems are important in issues management and crisis prevention (Jaques, 2007), and monitoring the news media is one important way to spot surfacing issues before they transgress into a crisis (Regester & Larkin, 2008). News media is also the most important source of information when people form an opinion about an organization (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Coombs, 2007a) or learn of a predicament facing an organization (Coombs, 2007b). How organizations handle crises and their relationships with different stakeholders are conveyed through the media (Heath, 1998b). Consequently, keeping a close eye on the media is a vital part of an organization's issue and crisis management (Kersten, 2005; Regester & Larkin, 2008). Heath (1998b) gives advice to organizations on how to try to control media, as media is a springboard to a big audience. Kauffman (2005) points out that controlling the flow of information is vital for organizations involved in crisis management, as the media will turn to other sources if the organization does not deliver. Thus, disregarding the media when handling issues and crises will (Regester & Larkin, 2008, p.182) "... always prove to be a catastrophic error of judgment."

Organizations find themselves in predicaments wherein their publics expect communication concerning matters such as instruction on how to avoid being harmed (Coombs, 2007b), what measures are being taken to prevent a future crisis (Coombs, 2007b; Stephens & Malone, 2009), or expressions of concern (Patel & Reinsch, 2003). Organizations are instructed to give their own view on the issue and do it fast and to utilize their websites for that purpose (Regester & Larkin, 2008).

Furthermore, news media are more likely to cover issues that are controversial or out of the ordinary (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009); hence, organizations are more likely to find themselves in the media spotlight and consequently exposed to the public when something has gone wrong rather than when everything is fine. Additionally news media will frame their coverage of the organizations behavior putting emphasis on some aspects on the issue and ignoring or playing down others (An & Gower, 2009; Hallahan, 1999). Accordingly, news media will be more important when the organization's performance is in doubt.

Traditionally, organizations have been at the mercy of news media to reach a broad public and inevitably have dealt with the news media in different ways in that process. If the organization's representatives were successful in handling the news media regarding what happened, the organization's perspective would then be published for display through the news outlet without anyone being able to publicly contradict the story unless they were given access to that or other news outlets. On the other hand, if the news organization did not take to the organization's point of view, they effectively cut off the organization's communication with its stakeholders. Either way, news media had a lot of power, both in terms of what issues were brought into public awareness and the way those issues were framed.

Since the media system is a vital part of any organization's relations with the public, changes in it will have consequences for how an organization communicates with the public. The Internet allows both the organizations and the general public to bypass the gate-keeping function of the traditional media and to communicate, for better or worse, without the intervention of organized journalism (Bucher, 2002; Coombs, 1998; González-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Heath, 1998). Greer & Moreland (2003) show that, in the wake of 9/11, airline companies transformed their websites into resource centers for public information, thus converting the function of the websites from delivering information about ticket prices and flights into something else. Kauffman (2005) points out that NASA had a staggering 49 million hits on its website within 24 hours of the Columbia disaster in 2003.

People not only turn to news outlets for information, they also seek information about the involved parties at other places, including the organizations' websites. The Internet, as a result, decentralizes information (Bucher, 2002) and makes communication multidirectional. Accordingly, new tactics (Perry et al., 2003) are necessary to communicate with the public through organizations' websites as well as to work with an increasingly digitized news media.

Against this background, the first research question is aimed at capturing whether organizations being indicated as stakeholders in an issue by online news media have a website at all: *Do the organizations mentioned in online news media have a website?*

The second research question investigates whether the involved organizations utilize their websites to reply to, and consequently try to influence, the issue: *Do the organizations utilize their website to reply to the issue covered by online news media?*

These two research questions survey if there is a website and a reply. The online context does, however, provide further challenges and opportunities for organizations in terms of issues management: the timing and prominence of the reply and the use of two-way communication and multimedia.

The high speed of online news and issues management

In journalism studies, high speed is a well established characteristic of online news (Massey & Levy, 1999; Deuze, 2003). There has been some research on how this affects the content of news (Hall, 2000; Greer & Mensing, 2006; Karlsson, 2006; Kutz & Herring, 2005; Salaverría, 2005; Tremayne et al., 2007) that suggest that the speed is increasing and that that has a significant impact on online news, with some negative consequences for the quality of news content. Additionally, there seems to be an online news culture of publishing news without properly checking facts (Colson & Heinderyckx, 2008; Klinenberg, 2005; Quandt, 2008). The high speed of online news also implies that an organizational issue will be highlighted by media just seconds or minutes after it becomes known (Kauffman, 2005). This speed is also brought forth by public relations researchers (Esrock & Leichty, 1998) as a key factor that is changing the field. Coombs (2007a; see also Bucher, 2002) suggests that the 24 hour news cycle increases the tempo in organizational crisis communication and that the demands on organizations' crisis communication has increased.

Online news is not restricted by time (Bucher, 2002; Gunter, 2003; Krinsky, 2007), as a website is constantly published and there is no need for a reoccurring or preplanned window of publishing, as is the case in the analogue media system. As a result, there is no premeditated point of publication, such as the 8 O'Clock News; rather, an issue can surface publicly at any time of the day (Karlsson & Strömbäck, 2009). Furthermore, online news is not restricted in space (Bucher, 2002; Gunter, 2003; Krinsky, 2007), as the space is theoretically limitless, and news websites can choose to cover as many issues as they want or (more accurately) can fit limited resources and organizational constraints. Consequently, online news can simultaneously cover a great number of issues and keep information up to date on them, introduce

new issues, or drop old issues at any given moment. The traditional news media needs to adjust its news offerings to preplan publication, with predictable and limited windows of publishing.

From an organizational perspective, the speed with which issues can be presented implies that organizations can be identified as stakeholders in an issue at any time of the day or night and that the issue can disappear from the news agenda as fast as it can surface. Furthermore, the high speed of online news media may bring about the publishing of incomplete, unconfirmed, and incorrect accounts of the issue that can be revoked if other facts surface, due to the reprogrammable nature of digital media (Bolter, 1984; Manovich, 2001). These circumstances, stemming from the logic of digital media, make it imperative that organizations continuously monitor online news media to find out if an issue is brewing, if it is being reported accurately, if the issue entails an organizational reply, and whether to provide the organizational view or to correct inaccuracies in the media coverage, especially in view of the account of Regester and Larkins observation (2008, p.196) that, "If a factual error is broadcasted or printed, then no stone should be left unturned to have it corrected." Thus, the constant and revocable publishing of online news offers both new challenges and opportunities.

Regester & Larkin (2008) point out that, when news media is sensing that an organization has behaved erroneously, it is imperative that the organization act swiftly to influence the issue. The high speed of online news adds further pressure to respond quickly. Perry et al. (2003) advocate real-time monitoring as a tactic that organizations can use to handle the challenges posed by new media. Real-time monitoring entails the organization continuously updating their website, minute by minute if needed, with developments and measures concerning the issue, hence serving both media and the public with the organization's actions and views on the issue. This tactic acknowledges both that organizations can and should reply on their websites and that speed is a key issue in the digital milieu.

One consequence of the high speed of online news is that news gets published very fast and then, equally quickly, drops off the news sites' frontpages, losing the attention of a large portion of the news sites' visitors. Thus, the window in which an organization has the opportunity to reply to an issue covered by online news media and can count on the attention of some of the audience is very limited compared to the window for traditional media. The third research question addresses the swiftness of the organizational reply to the issue: *How fast do the organizations reply on their websites?*

Prominence, interactivity and organizational websites

One facet of publishing on the web is that everything ever published can be stored and uncovered online.

For instance, the Swedish news site Expressen.se has over 400,000 searchable news articles (October, 2009) in their web archive. In this context, the prominence of the news items becomes vital, i.e. how visible the news item is to the audience. The frontpage of the news sites is seen as the most prominent place and the place where news organizations can put the news items that they want to get the most attention (Bucy, 2004; van der Wurff, 2005). The same logic should apply to organizational websites – the most important issues should be on the frontpage and the further away from the frontpage the issue is placed, the less important the issue will be seen to be ranked by the organization. Therefore research question four is: *What prominence does the organization give the issue (i.e. does the organization reply on the frontpage or at other layers of the website)?*

On a related topic, websites are often organized into different sections, like shareholders, press, customer service, and so forth. In identifying the section or sections where the reply is published, it is revealed if the organization uses the website as a press contact instrument or if it is working more to addressing the public. This is the basis for the fifth research question: *At whom is the reply aimed, the press or consumers?*

The Internet also changes how organizations can communicate with news media (Taylor & Perry, 2005) and the public. Perry et al. (2003) identified some organizations' new media tactics in handling the unique challenges posed by features of new media, including two-way interactive communication and multimedia. Research (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Greer & Moreland, 2003; Perry et al., 2003; Taylor & Kent, 2007; Taylor & Perry, 2005) shows, however, that the Internet's potential essentially remains unrealized within organizations. Many of these research results are dated and/or from another cultural context, and it would therefore be interesting to see if organizations involved in these issues now make use of interactivity and multimedia. Accordingly, research questions six and seven are: *Does the organization open up channels of communication with the public on its website?* and *Does the organization utilize multimedia in its reply?*

Method

Studying online news content poses many challenges (Deuze, 2008; Karlsson & Strömbäck, 2009; McMillan, 2000; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), and, so far, no standardized or commonly accepted methodology has been created. Subsequently, researchers have been using a grounded theory approach (Kutz & Herring, 2005) or advocated case studies (Kopper et al., 2000), as does this study.

The method chosen for this explorative case study was to monitor established mainstream (reaching between 1 to 4 million users weekly) Swedish news sites (Aftonbladet.se, Expressen.se, Dn.se and Svd.se)

in real time and see if any organization(s) was mentioned in a news item on the frontpage as stakeholders in an issue, like, for instance, wholesalers, producers, authorities, or retailers. If an issue with clearly identifiable stakeholders was found, the news site(s) were downloaded using computer software WinHTTrack and/or screen grabs, as suggested by Karlsson & Strömbäck (2009). The first two layers of the website were downloaded – layer one being the frontpage and layer two being the news items that the frontpage links to. Using computer software enables the researcher to store the website locally as it appeared at the time of download. This method is very helpful given the ever-changing nature of the Internet and permits the researcher to freeze the flow of the news and navigate on the websites in detail without being troubled that information will be changed or lost.

After an organization (for the organizations involved, see 'Results') was mentioned, Google was used to find the organization's website and then the website was monitored and downloaded in the same fashion as the news sites were. To discover if there were any changes to the organization's website, they were downloaded the same day, the next day, then two, three and finally seven days after the issue was first brought up by the online news media (hereafter, the different times of monitoring are labeled T+0, T+1, T+2, T+3 and T+7). Following the download, the content was analyzed employing the variables in the research questions. All of the cases were collected during November and December of 2008.

Sweden was chosen for this study, as it one of the longest internet histories of any country. It also has a very high proportion of the population online, with over 50% of the population online since 2000; in 2009, 83% had an internet connection at home (World Internet Institute, 2009). Consequently, many Swedish organizations are accustomed to the idea of having and using websites to reach a potentially big audience. The four news sites in the study were chosen due to their being the news sites with the longest history, largest resources, and most traffic and their having identified a national audience as their target.

Results

The result section starts with the three cases described in detail and ends with the summarized results structured according to the research questions. Each of the cases is presented with a spreadsheet consisting of seven columns referring to the research questions.

The *Organization* column refers to the organization affected by the issue. *Have website* is a yes/no category and answers whether the affected organization had a website or not. The *Reply/Time of reply* variable illustrates whether there was a reply and when the first replies were posted on the website. The fourth column on the spreadsheet is labeled *Prominence of issue* and reveals if the reply was posted on

the frontpage or in a deeper layer on the website. Another column is the *To whom is the reply* column, which reports to whom the reply was addressed (press, consumers, shareholders, et cetera), if applicable. The two final columns are *Two-way communication*, which answers whether there was a possibility to communicate with the organization on or through the website, and *Multimedia*, which describes if and what kind of multimedia was used in communicating on the issue.

Case one: Lidl employees poisoning discarded food

The first case comprises a news story that hit all four monitored news sites, revealing that employees at a Swedish Lidl store, retailers of food, poisoned discarded food with the intention of keeping homeless people from going through the Lidl stores’ garbage containers. This received quite a lot of attention on the news sites and was covered on two consecutive days. Furthermore, the issue created quite a stir on the news sites’ commentary fields and in the blogosphere. In Figure 1, the organization’s reply on their website is illustrated.

Organization	Have website	Reply/Time of reply	Prominence of issue	To whom is the reply	Two way communication	Multi-Media
Lidl	Yes	No				

Figure 1: Lidl’s reply on their website to the news report that employees had poisoned discarded food. Lidl had a website but did not address the issue on their website.

The *Have website* column in Figure 1 indicates that Lidl did have a website at the time of the issue. Figure 1 also shows that Lidl did not reply to the issue on their website. Lidl did not by any means utilize the website to communicate with the media or public regarding this issue. Rather, their website advertized special offers on various products and their commitment to fair trade during the period. Thus, during the two days the issue was on the frontpages of the online news media, there were two contradictory themes in how Lidl treated the unfortunate in society. The news sites described Lidl as preventing the homeless from eating discarded food and Lidl’s own site portrayed the organization as a champion of decent working conditions and helping people out of poverty. Lidl representatives were quoted in online news media, consequently establishing a means of communicating with the public, although on the terms chosen by the news media.

Case two: Dioxin in meat

High levels of the poison Dioxin was discovered in meat imported from Ireland to Sweden. This issue became a news story for approximately four consecutive days. In this case, seven organizations were initially pointed out as stakeholders in this issue: food producers Findus and Dafgård; wholesalers Menigo and Servera; fast food chain Subway; worldwide gelatin producer Gelita; and the Swedish National Food Administration Authority, who are responsible for supervising all matters related to food and drinking water. On the fourth day, five small food producers were mentioned in the news reports but they are not included here as the issue had already been running for several days at that point (none of the small food producers replied to the issue, two of them did not have websites). In Figure 2, the mentioned organization's handling of the issue is illustrated.

Organization	Have website	Reply/Time of reply	Prominence of issue	To who is the reply	Two way communication	Multi-media
Findus	Yes	T+0	Frontpage	Public and press	No	No
Dafgård	Yes	T+0	Second level	Press	No	No
Menigo	Yes	T+3	Second level	Press	No	No
Servera	Yes	T+7	Second level	Press	No	No
Subway	Yes	T+1	Second level	Press	No	No
Gelita	Yes (English only)	No				
Swedish National Food Administration Authority	Yes	T+0	Frontpage	Press	No	No

Figure 2: Organizations that online news media identified as stakeholders in the "Meat poisoned by Dioxin" issue, as well as the replies of those organizations. All of the organizations but Gelita had websites in Swedish, but only two, Findus and the Swedish National Food Administration Authority, utilized their websites to make swift and high profile replies to the issue. Note that the Swedish National Food Administration Authority site was not accessible during a brief period of time due to heavy traffic.

As indicated in Figure 2, every organization identified by the online news media as stakeholders in the issue had websites, although Gelita did not have a Swedish site, nor did they reply to the issue on their website. The rest of the organizations replied with some form of communication to the issue on their websites at different points in time. Two organizations, Findus and Swedish National Food Administration

Authority, utilized their websites to make swift and high profile replies to the issue, while the others did not. To be more precise, the rest of the organizations waited one or several days and put their reply in the second level of the website, thus requiring the public to click extensively to find it. All of the organizations addressed the press, while Findus also explicitly communicated to its consumers. None of the organizations made use of interactive or multimedia features.

Case 3: Glass in Quinoa

News site *Svenska Dagbladet* covered, for two consecutive days, a story where glass was found in a package of Quinoa. Three organizations were singled out as having part of the responsibility for the glass ending up in the package of Quinoa: producer Risenta, wholesaler Axfood, and retailer Willys – all important actors in the Swedish food market. Figure 3 illustrates the activity on the organizations’ websites.

	Have website	Reply/Time of reply	Prominence of issue	To whom is the reply	Two way communication	Multi-media
Axfood	Yes	No				
Willys	Yes	No				
Risenta	Yes	No				

Figure 3: None of the organizations involved in the issue used their websites to communicate about the glass in the Quinoa package.

None of the three organizations produced any form of communication on their websites concerning the issue during the period their organizations were monitored. Willys, however, ironically has a section on their website labeled “Consumer Safety”, where various claims about the high quality of their products are made, but the website stops short of communicating anything about this potentially harmful issue. Thus, those searching for a reply to the issue on the websites ended up empty handed.

Representatives from the Risenta but not from Willys or Axfood were quoted in *Svenska Dagbladet*.

Summarizing the results

All three cases in this explorative study involve food or related products; however, they do differ in several conditions. The first two cases received a lot of attention from the media over a period of several days, while the latter only had light media coverage. The issues in the three cases also differ in terms of whether they originated within the organizations or not. In the Lidl case, employees actively, albeit perhaps unknowingly, contributed to the issue being created. In the Dioxin case, the Swedish organizations were intermediaries for an issue originating in Ireland. Finally, in the Quinoa case, the issue was understood as a system/routines failure and seen as originating at one of the mentioned organizations. Subsequently, these cases provide various scenarios for the involved organizations, but all cases were demonstrative, as they pointed out "a gap between corporate practice and stakeholder expectations" (Regester & Larkin, 2008, p. 44) in impactful situations, namely selling dangerous or poisonous food or, in the case of Lidl, preventing the underprivileged from eating discarded food. What is, then, the overall picture (figure 4) of how organizations utilize their websites to communicate with their publics when the organization is identified by online news media as stakeholders in an issue?

Organization	Have website	Reply/Time of reply	Prominence of issue	To whom is the reply	Two way communication	Multi-media
Lidl	Yes	No				
Findus	Yes	T+0	Frontpage	Public and press	No	No
Dafgård	Yes	T+0	Second level	Press	No	No
Menigo	Yes	T+3	Second level	Press	No	No
Servera	Yes	T+7	Second level	Press	No	No
Subway	Yes	T+1	Second level	Press	No	No
Gelita	Yes (English only)	No				
Swedish National Food Administration Authority	Yes	T+0	Frontpage	Press	No	No
Axfood	Yes	No				
Willys	Yes	No				
Risenta	Yes	No				

Figure 4: Overview of all the organization in the study and how they replied in their respective issue.

RQ1 *Do the organizations mentioned in online news media have a website?* All organizations that were identified as stakeholders to some degree in the cases had websites allowing them to comment on news media coverage and/or communicate with the public concerning the issue.

RQ2 *Do the organizations utilize it to reply to the issue covered by online news media?* Only 6 out of the 13 organizations utilize the possibility to publish information of any kind regarding the issue. Notably, all of these organizations were found in the "Dioxin in meat" case, which might be due to both the longevity of the media coverage and the seriousness of the issue – deadly poison in food.

RQ3 *How fast do the organizations reply on their websites?* Three out of the six organizations that do reply to the issues do it the same day as the issue is brought up by the online news media. The others wait one or several days before putting information on their websites.

RQ4 *What prominence does the organization give the issue?* Two organizations replied on the frontpage, notably two of the same organizations that replied fast. For the other four organizations, the information is put at the second level of their websites. Notably, users have to navigate to this information by themselves, as no links or indicators of where to find the information were published on the frontpage.

RQ5 *To whom is the reply aimed, the press or consumers?* Five of the six organizations that reply to the issue address their replies explicitly to the press, calling the information press releases or publishing it under the press section on the website. Only one organization, Findus, makes use of the website to promote information directly to the consumers, including what products are affected, what products are safe to buy, how to and when to contact the company, and if there were instructions to consumers on how to get a refund if they wished.

RQ6 *Does the organization open up channels of communication with the public on its website?* None of the involved organizations make use of the interactive possibilities that the digital medium brings. There was generic information on how to reach the organizations through phone or e-mail, but no way for the public to communicate on the website, nor was there encouragement from the organization to the public to voice their concerns on the issue directly to the organization.

RQ7 *Does the organization utilize multimedia in their reply?* Just as interactivity was absent on the websites, no traces of multimedia were found, either.

Discussion

The Internet has changed the arena for opinion making in several ways. It represents unprecedented promise for organizations, allowing them to communicate with the public on their own terms (Bucher,

2002, Coombs, 1998, González-Herrero & Smith, 2008, Heath, 1998). New forms of communication are possible (Taylor & Perry, 2005; Perry, 2003) and new obstacles are introduced, such as the accelerated news cycle (Bucher, 2002; Coombs, 2007a; Esrock & Leichty, 1998).

The organizations in this study fall short, some a lot shorter than others, of realizing the potential of digital media, such as interactive features and multimedia storytelling, just as other research has already indicated (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Greer & Moreland, 2003; Perry et.al., 2003; Taylor & Kent, 2007; Taylor & Perry, 2005). Thus, the organizations do not grab the opportunity to communicate not only to but *with* the public. Additionally, the information published on the websites is very much still bound to the analogue logic of paper and text, not showing any sign of multimedia components.

In online news, speed is an ever-present issue and perhaps even more important than ever before, which means that the window of opportunity for organizations to reply to an issue is probably less than a day, at least concerning smaller issues. Most of the organizations in this explorative study struggle to overcome the challenge that the high speed of online news presents to the public relations worker (Coombs, 2007a; Esrock & Leichty, 1998); if there is a reply, it is late. Accordingly, when the organizations wait to reply on their website, or do not reply at all, they are absent in the initial public discourse, meaning that other actors will influence the important media frame (Hallahan, 1999) in which the issue is told and understood. Additionally, they do not live up to the "Tell it all, tell it fast, tell your own story – tell it truthfully" credo of crisis communication (Regester & Larkin, 2008); rather, it is a case of "Don't tell it at all and if you do, tell it slowly." As an issue develops, it becomes more difficult for the organization to influence it (Regester & Larkin, 2008). Being absent in the opening stage might both lead to the issue developing in an unwanted direction and difficulties in changing it.

Moreover, in view of the immediate character of online news (Massey & Levy, 1999; Deuze, 2003) and the lax attitude towards checking information before publishing (Colson & Heinderyckx, 2008; Klinenberg, 2005; Quandt, 2008), online news are drafts of various quality rather than a finished product. Subsequently, online news reports can be incomplete and/or inaccurate and, thus, fail to keep the news accurate and comprehensive, which can be devastating for the public's knowledge of the issue, the reputation of the organizations involved, and the trustworthiness of the news outlet. Given the elastic nature of online news, putting an organization's reply on a website may possibly result in a change in the news content, either by journalists looking up the website themselves, users pointing towards the website, or representatives from the organization trying to direct media attention to the website. Organizations not replying on their websites or replying late not only miss opportunities to promote their framing of the issue but also opportunities to improve journalism and public knowledge about the issue.

What is apparent from the results is that, at least in these cases, the web is not used as a tool to timely

communicate with the public when the organization is identified as a stakeholder in an issue. This might be due the public relations tactics employed, negligence, or unawareness that the organization is identified as a stakeholder in the issue. Consequently, the organizations involved are not putting out warnings about possibly contaminated foods, which not only puts their reputations at danger but also endangers consumer health (Coombs, 2007b). What is clear is that the organizations' publics will not be unaware of the issue, as media is the most important source for learning about an organization's whereabouts (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Coombs, 2007a, 2007b), and groups other than the organizations will be providing the information.

Furthermore the public is not invited to communicate concerning the issue to the organizations, at least not through the web, which implies that the organizations are effectively blocking a potential channel to let the public have their say. Consequently, the public is more likely to turn to the commentary fields on the news sites or voice their opinions on blogs.

Only one of the organizations in this study, Findus, utilized its website to communicate to its customers; all of the others that did communicate addressed the press. This subsequently indicated that the organizations' websites in these cases were, with a few exceptions, not actively used for issues management. Rather, they worked as ill-updated archives for journalists to search for press releases and more often served the function of a billboard advocating the magnificence of the organization and/or promoting products or services.

Some of the organizations involved in the issues had representatives quoted in news media and did, thereby, communicate through the news media to reach their publics. Not all organizations were quoted, however, and relying on the news media to reach the public entails both being let through the gate and being subject to news media restraints (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

The organizations in this study overlook the use of websites, but it might not necessarily lead to crisis (Regester & Larkin, 2008), threatened reputation (Coombs, 2007b), needs for image repair (Benoit, 1997) or monetary losses (Regester & Larkin, 2008). It could nonetheless be useful for organizations to acknowledge an awareness of the issue, express concern (Patel & Reinsch, 2003); listen to what the public has to say; inform the public of what measures are being taken at the moment and what is being done to prevent something similar from happening in the future (Coombs, 2007b; Stephens & Malone, 2009); as the public most likely expect communication from the organizations.

Conclusion, limitations & further research

In conclusion, this study found, like previous research, that organizations do not fully utilize the Internet as a public relations tool, thus passing on the opportunities that the Internet offers.

Organizations do have websites, but they do not always reply to issues. When they reply, some do it late and do not give prominence to the issues; others act swiftly and put the issue very visibly on the frontpage. The organizations facilitate neither the two-way communication with their publics nor the possibility of multimedia storytelling, both of which are inherent in digital technology.

Future research could investigate the organizations rationale with regards to issues management and communicating through their websites, employing surveys, interviews or ethnographic studies. Are the organizations aware that they are identified as stakeholders in an issue? Is the lack of response an explicit tactic or due to something else? Do they have the proper resources to use the websites as a strategic communications tool?

Another approach could be to monitor a quantity of organizational websites in different countries over time and examine under what circumstances organizations choose to reply or not, subsequently exploring the rationale with which organization websites are operated. A third proposition for future research is to determine and compare the effects of communicating or not communicating through the organization websites.

As this is an explorative case study restricted to online news and a limited number of organizations in Sweden, there are few ways to generalize the results, and it could therefore be valuable to conduct similar and comparative research on a greater scale. Future studies might want to consider reducing the interval between the different monitoring times from days to hours or minutes, as this would give a more meticulous picture of the timelines of organizational reply.

Despite its limitations, the study suggests that Swedish organizations have not fully integrated their websites as public relations tools. Not only does this imply that organizations miss opportunities to communicate on their own terms, but it also infers that the quality of journalism may suffer as the high speed of online news frequently produces errors and a swift organizational reply could correct them.

References

An, S-K., Gower, K. (2009), "How do news media frame crisis? A content analysis of crisis news coverage", in *Public Relations Review*, 35, p.107-112

- Anderson, D. (1997), "Key concepts in anticipatory issues management", in *Corporate Environmental Strategy*, 5(1), p.6-17
- Benoit, W. (1997), "Image repair discourse and crisis communication", in *Public Relations Review*, 23(2), p.177-186
- Bolter, D. (1984), *Turing's man. Western culture in the computer age*, Chapel Hill, NC, The University of North Carolina Press
- Bucher, H. (2002), "Crisis communication and the Internet: Risk and trust in global media", in *First Monday*, 7(4)
- Bucy, E. (2004), "Second generation news: Interactivity and information accessibility in the online environment", in *The International Journal on Media Management*, 6(1), p.103-114
- Carroll, C., McCombs, M. (2003), "Agenda-setting effects of business news on public's image and opinions about major corporations", in *Corporate Reputation Review*, 6(1), p.36-46
- Colson, V., Heinderyckx F. (2008), "Do online journalists belong in the newsroom? A Belgian case of convergence", in Domigo D, Paterson C (eds.), *Making Online News. The Ethnography of new media production*, New York, Peter Lang
- Coombs, T. W. (1998), "The Internet as potential equalizer: New leverage for confronting social irresponsibility", in *Public Relations Review* 24(3), p.289-303
- Coombs, T. W. (2002), "Deep and surface threats: conceptual and practical implications for «crisis» vs «problem»", in *Public Relations Review* 28, p.339-345
- Coombs, T. W. (2007a), *Ongoing crises communication. Planning, managing and responding* (2nd ed.), Los Angeles, Sage
- Coombs, T. W. (2007b), "Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory", in *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), p.163-176
- Deuze, M. (2003), "The web and its journalism: considering the consequences of different types of newsmedia online", in *New media & society*, 5(2), p.203-230
- Deuze, M. (2008), "The changing context of news work: Liquid journalism and monitorial citizenship", in *International Journal of Communication* 2, p.848-865
- Esrock, S. L., Leichty, G. B. (1998), "Social responsibility and corporate web pages: Self-presentation or agenda-setting?", in *Public Relations Review*, 24(3), p.305-319
- Gaunt, P., Ollenburger, J. (1995), "Issues management revisited: A tool that deserves another look", in *Public Relations Review*, 21(3), p.199-210
- Greer, C. F., Moreland, K. D. (2003), "United airlines and American airlines online crisis communication following the September 11 terrorist attacks", in *Public Relations Review*, 29, p.427-441
- Greer, J. D., Mensing D. (2006), "The evolution of online newspapers: A longitudinal content analysis", in Xigen, L. (Ed.), *Internet newspapers – The making of a mainstream medium*, Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- González-Herrero, A., Smith, S. (2008), "Crisis communications management on the Web: How Internet-based technologies are changing the way public relations professional handle business crisis", in *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 16(3), p.143-153
- Gunter, B. (2003), *News and the net*, Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

- Jaques, T. (2007), "Issue management and crisis management: An integrated, non-linear, relational construct", in *Public Relations Review*, 33, p.147-157
- Jaques, T. (2009), "Issue and crisis management: Quicksand in the definitional landscape", in *Public Relations Review*, 35, p.280-286
- Hall, J. (2000), "The first web war: Bad things happen in unimportant places", in *Journalism Studies*, 1(3), p.387-404
- Hallahan, K. (1999), "Seven Models of Framing: Implications for Public Relations", in *Journal of Public Relations Research*, vol. 11(3), p.205-242
- Heath, R. L. (1998a), "New communication technologies: An issues management point of view", in *Public Relations Review*, 24(3), p.273-288
- Heath, R. L. (1998b), "Working under pressure: crisis management, pressure groups and the media", in *Safety Science*, 30, p.209-221
- Karlsson, M., Strömbäck, J. (2009), "Freezing the flow of online news. Exploring approaches to study the liquidity of online news", in *Journalism Studies*, iFirst article
- Karlsson, M. (2006), *Nätjournalistik. En explorativ fallstudie av digitala mediars karaktärsdrag på fyra svenska nyhetssajter* [Dissertation], Lund, Lund studies in media and communication 9
- Kauffman, J. (2005), "Lost in space: A critique of NASA's crisis communication in the Columbia disaster", in *Public Relations Review*, 31, p.263-275
- Kersten, A. (2005), "Crisis as usual: Organizational dysfunction and public relations", in *Public Relations Review*, 31, p.544-549
- Klinenberg, E. (2005), "Convergence: News production in a digital age", in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 597(1), p.48-64
- Kopper, G., Kolthoff, A., Czepek, A. (2000), "Research review: Online journalism. A report on current and continuing research and major questions in the international discussion", in *Journalism Studies*, 1(3), p.499-512
- Krimsky, S. (2007), "Risk communication in the Internet age: The rise of disorganized scepticism", in *Environmental Hazards*, 7, p.157-164
- Kutz, D. O., Herring, S. C. (2005), "Micro-longitudinal analysis of web news updates", paper presented at 38th Hawaii international conference on system sciences
- Massey, B. L, Levy, M. R. (1999), "'Interactive' online journalism at English-language web newspaper in Asia. A dependency theory analysis", in *Gazette*, 61(6), p.523-538
- Manovich, L. (2001), *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press
- McMillan, S. J. (2000), "The Microscope and the moving target: The Challenge of applying content analysis to the world wide web", in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 77(1), p.80-98
- Patel, A., Reinsch, L. (2003), "Companies can apologize: Corporate apologies and legal liability", in *Business Communication Quarterly*, 66(1), p.9-25
- Perry, D. C., Taylor, Maureen, D., Marya, L. (2003), "Internet-based communication in crisis management", in *Management Communication Quarterly*, 17(2), p.206-232

Regester, M., Larkin, J. (2008), *Risk issues and crisis management in public relations. A Casebook of best practice*, London, Kogan Page

Salaverría, R. (2005), "An Immature medium. Strength and weaknesses of online newspapers on september 11", in *Gazette*, 67(1), p.69-86

Shoemaker, P., Vos, T. (2009), *Gatekeeping Theory*, New York, Routledge

Stephens, K., Malone, P. (2009), "If the Organizations Won't Give Us Information...: The Use of Multiple New Media for Crisis Technical Translation and Dialogue", in *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 21(2), p.229-239

Taylor, M., Kent, M. L. (2007), "Taxonomy of mediated crisis responses", in *Public Relations Review*, 33, p.140-146

Taylor M., Perry, D. C. (2005), "Diffusion of traditional and new media tactics in crisis communication", in *Public Relations Review*, 31, p.209-217

Tremayne, M., Schmitz, W. A., Calmon Alves, R. (2007), "From Product to service: The Diffusion of dynamic content in online newspapers", in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 84(4), p.825-839

Quandt, T. (2008), "Old and new routines in German online newsrooms", in Domingo D, Paterson C (eds.), *Making Online News. The Ethnography of New Media Production*, New York, Peter Lang

Van der Wurff, R. (2005), "Impacts of the Internet on newspapers in Europe: Conclusions", in *The International Communication Gazette*, 67(1), p.107-120

World Internet Intitutet (2009), "Internet och bredband i svenska hushåll", available at <http://www.wii.se/>