“SARS-free, now to fine-tune crisis handling”: A Contingency Approach to Analyzing the Singapore Government’s Management of the Perception and Emotion of Its Multiple Publics

Abstract

Using a content analysis of SARS news coverage, the contingency theory of conflict management and current crisis management literature are integrated to examine how crisis is communicated and managed at the macro level and what kinds of strategies arise through the various stages of the crisis life cycle. Findings show that an organization can play a predominant role in managing how various publics perceive the crisis when that is extensively communicated through news coverage. To effectively manage the perception and emotion of the publics and for the publics to support the organization, the organization must utilize more accommodative stances. Advocacy can be embedded in accommodation if the organization wants its publics to move in the same direction of stance along a continuum from advocacy to accommodation.
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Introduction

For months in 2003, the world laid under siege, by a strain of virus that masqueraded as pneumonia but inflicted a far more lethal effect. By all accounts, the mystery of how the virus in the Severe Respiratory Acute Syndrome, or SARS, has come to be has remained largely unsolved (Bradsher, & Altman, 2003). What began as routine fever and cough in a Chinese physician, later identified as a super-carrier, rapidly spread to people who had cursory contacts with him, spiraling into a worldwide crisis that spanned across Asia and the North Americas (Rosenthal, 2003).

On March 18, 2003, Singapore, a cosmopolitan city-state nestled at the tip of Malaysia, joined Canada, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in the World Health Organization’s (WHO) list of SARS-hit countries. The following months marked the frenetic pace at which the Singapore government worked to contain and communicate the SARS crisis with its different publics, eventually leading WHO to declare Singapore SARS-free on May 31. WHO praised the government’s handling of the crisis “exemplary” (Khalik, & Wong, 2003, p. 1).

Most studies on conflict management in public relations have focused on the local level, between the organization and its publics (Dougherty, 1992; Seegar, & Ulmer, 2002; Wigley, 2003). These studies analyze how the strategies organizations use to communicate with its publics, such as employees, stakeholders, the media, and the community, when the organization appears to be culpable (Walters, Wilkins, & Walters, 1989; Fink, 1986; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Pauchant, & Mitroff, 1992; Henry, 2000). However, few studies have sought to examine how crisis is communicated at the national level, between the government and its people, understanding the kinds of public relations strategies used by the government, and the response of the publics when they are more dynamic and varied, and when culpability is not immediately known. Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1997) argue that governmental intervention is crucial when a serious threat exists in the socio-political system, when there is a necessity
to respond to the threat, when there is a necessity for government decisions, when promptness is required of governmental decisions, and when the government needs to engage the publics in its decision-making.

The crisis literature has illuminated several insights on crisis communication. Some have focused on communication strategies (Lukaszweski, 1997; Booth, 1993; ten Berge, 1988; Barton, 1994; Davis, & Gilman, 2002; Cohn, 2002; Henry, 2000; Pincus, & DeBonis, 1994; Ray, 1999); communications planning (Marra, 1998; Ferguson, 1999); others have focused on relationship/issues management and media relations (Ulmer, 2001; Seegar, & Ulmer, 2002; Cowden, & Sellnow, 2002; Barton, 1993, Pauchant, & Mitroff, 1992; Harrison, 1999; Massey, 2001). We propose to study how the Singapore government manages its publics, and the stances taken by the government and its publics leading to the resolution of the crisis, using the contingency theory of conflict management. Cameron and his colleagues (1997; 1998; 1999; 2001; 2002) takes an alternative perspective from the thought that crisis communication is characterized as a two-way symmetrical model, where communication flows both ways between the organization and the public and both sides are prepared to change their stances, with the aims of resolving the crisis in a professional, ethical and effective way (Grunig, & Grunig, 1982; Grunig, & Hunt, 1984). Cameron (1999) proposed a crisis communication model that is examined through a continuum whereby organizations practice a variety of stances at any given point, and these stances change, depending on the circumstances. The continuum has two ends, at one end of the continuum is advocacy. Between advocacy, which means one pleading one’s own case, and at the opposite end, accommodation, which means building trust with the publics (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998).

The present study attempts to examine the Singapore government’s crisis communication of SARS at three levels: 1) At the organization’s level, to identify what strategies the Singapore government employed to manage the perception and emotion of the different publics, and what contingent factors under-gird these strategies; 2) At the publics’ level, to identify the key publics and their type transitions in this crisis, to examine the publics’ perception and emotion in respond to the government’s performance in the crisis, and the contingent factors under-gird these strategies; 3) Taking a contingency approach to
examine how the organization and the publics moved along the continuum throughout the life cycle of the crisis. Data come from a content analysis of the population of SARS stories in *The Straits Times*, Singapore’s prestige newspaper, a newspaper of record (Turnbull, 1995), and Singapore’s highest circulating newspaper (“A turn-on for more,” 2003, p. H2) throughout the duration of the SARS outbreak, from March 18, 2003, till June 7, 2003, one week after Singapore was declared SARS-free by WHO.

A solid line of crisis research has developed along the lines of organizational culpability and crisis responsibility. What remain less clear, however, is how organizations should respond to crisis when it is not culpable and when the locus of control rests externally, particularly when the organization is the government. By integrating the contingency theory of conflict management with current crisis literature, this study seeks to examine how crisis is communicated and managed at the macro level, between the government and its diverse publics, and understand the kinds of strategies used through the various stages of the crisis life cycle, by content analyzing the SARS crisis in Singapore.

The key findings of the study show that the government, as the organization, can play a predominant role in managing how the publics perceive the crisis when that is extensively communicated through news coverage. To effectively manage the perception and emotion of the publics and for the publics to support the organization, the organization must utilize more accommodative stances. Advocacy can be embedded in accommodation if the organization wants its publics to follow the same direction of stance as the organization did. The findings suggest support for the contingency theory that the organization and its multiple publics move along a continuum from pure advocacy to pure accommodation over time in a crisis. Besides building on the contingency theory literature, this study has practical implications for governmental public relations practitioners on the appropriate strategies to use in managing its diverse publics in a crisis.
Literature Review and Research Questions

*Development of Crisis Theories in Public Relations Research*

Much of the literature on effective public relations in crises have been built on Grunig and Grunig’s (1992) and Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) public relations’ excellence theory, which Fearn-Banks (2002) argues, forms the “bedrock of most crisis communications theories” (p. 15).

Four models of excellence have been posited: (1) Press Agentry/Publicity model: Here, the organization is only interested in making its ethos and products known, even at the expense of half-truths (p. 16); (2) Public Information model: Predominantly characterized by one-way transfer of information from the organization to the publics, the aim is to provide information “journalistically” (p. 15); (3) Two-way asymmetric model: Instead of a rigid transference of information, the organization uses surveys and polls to persuade the publics to accept its point of view (p. 16); (4) Two-way symmetric model: Here, the organization is more amenable to developing a dialogue with the publics (p. 16). Communication flows both ways between the organization and the public and both sides are prepared to change their stances, with the aims of resolving the crisis in a professional, ethical and effective way. The two-way symmetrical model have been positioned as normative theory, which states how organizations should be practicing public relations that is regarded as the most ethical and effective manner (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2001; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Plowman, 1995).

Further, Murphy (1991), Dozier, L. Grunig and J Grunig (1995), Cancel, Cameron, Sallot and Mitrook (1997) argue that public relations strategies are more accurately portrayed in a continuum. Moreover, because of the fluidity of the circumstances, which, in turn, may affect an organization’s stance and strategies, a continuum would be far more grounded to reality that is able to “more accurately portray the variety of public relations stances available” (p. 34). The continuum, argue Cancel, Mitrook and Cameron (1999), thus explains “an organization’s possible wide range of stances taken toward an individual public, differing from the more proscriptive and mutually exclusive categorization” (p. 172) found in the four models.
Cameron and his colleagues take the idea of continua further, one, which they argue, that emphasizes a more realistic description of how public relations is practiced. It examines how organizations practice a variety of public relations stances at one point in time, how those stances change, sometimes almost instantaneously, and what influence the change in stance (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997, p. 33). Instead of clustering and pigeonholing public relations practices and techniques into strait-laced models, Cameron and his colleagues came up with a continuum model whereby communication techniques and stances chosen by an organization can actualize at any point along the continuum, depending on the circumstances (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998, p. 51).

The organizational response to the public relations dilemma at hand, according to the contingency theory, which has, at one end of the continuum, advocacy, and at the other end, accommodation, is, thus, it depends. The theory offers a matrix of 87 factors (see appendix 1), arranged thematically, that the organization can draw on to determine their stance. Between advocacy, which means one pleading for one’s own, and accommodation, which means building trust with the publics, the authors argue, is a wide range of operational stances that influences public relations strategies and these “entail different degrees of advocacy and accommodation.” (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997, p. 37). Along this continuum, the theory argues that any of the 87 factors, culled public relations literature, excellence theory, observations, and grounded theory (Cameron, 1999, p. 31), can affect the location of an organization on that continuum “at a given time regarding a given public” (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999 p. 172; Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998, p. 40; Cameron, 1999, p. 30).

The theory seeks to understand the dynamics, within and without the organization, that affect an accommodative stance. By understanding these dynamics, it elaborates, specifies the conditions, factors, and forces that under-gird such a stance, along a continuum, so that public relations need not be viewed by artificially classifying practice into boxes of behavior. It aims to “offer a structure for better understanding of the dynamics of accommodation as well as the efficacy and ethical implications of accommodation in public relations practice” (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998, p. 41).
This study aims at identifying the strategies and contingent factors that affect the organization’s stance towards its multiple publics. The organization, in this case, is operationalized as the Singapore government, or any government-related agencies, such as the Ministry of Health, National Environment Agency, or Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority, that is involved in fighting SARS.

By the same token, while the contingency theory recognizes that there can be numerous publics to be addressed at a given time, any attempt to deal with the public relations stance that encompasses all the publics is “difficult at best.” (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997, p. 37). Ray (1999) supports this observation. “[W]hat works in one situation does not necessarily work in another” (p. 10). What is known, however, is that the public is dynamic and can take different forms, and hence the stances taken towards it must be equally, if not, more dynamic. New insights that the contingency theory has found that the publics are not “monolithic”, and the issues and the publics can be interwoven to form a cohesive whole that is dynamic, and often “long-lived” in public memory (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998, p. 54). Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1996) assert that the publics “differ in the degree…they respond to the it [the crisis]” (p. 84).

Thus, another purpose of this study is to identify, inductively, who the publics are in this crisis, and to understand what contingent factors appear to move the stances of the organization, and what contingent factors appear to move the publics on the continuum. Therefore,

**RQ1.1**: How does the stance of the organization toward the publics differ over time as presented in the news coverage?

**RQ1.2**: How do the stances of the different publics toward the organization differ over time as presented in the news coverage?

**RQ1.3**: What contingent factors appear to affect the stance of the organization as presented in the news coverage?

**RQ1.4**: What contingent factors appear to move the organization as well as the publics on the continuum as presented in the news coverage?
Crisis Communication Strategy Along the Accommodation Continuum

Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot and McWilliams (1998) argue that a central point of the contingency theory is that the degree of accommodation “depends upon the weighing of many factors found in the theory” (p. 50). While practitioners agree that the continuum is an accurate representation what happens in public relations (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999; Shin, Cameron, & Cropp, 2002), they agree that some of the 87 variables feature more prominently than others. Studies on the contingency theory have shown that certain key variables predispose an organization to accommodation while others prohibit any form of accommodation. Then, there are also those that are in between, depending on the prevailing circumstances, that steer the organization towards more accommodation or advocacy.

Here is a broad overview of the predisposing and situational factors which are conducive for accommodation to take place. Predisposing variables, argue Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot and McWilliams (1998), are most likely to influence an organization prior to interaction with specific external public. The predisposing variables “influence an organization’s location along the continuum before it enters into a particular situation involving an external public” (p. 41). Among the factors that affect are the organization’s exposure to the crisis; the political will, and enlightenment of organization to resolve the crisis public (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999; Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001).

Situational variables, argue Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot and McWilliams (1998), can determine the degree of accommodation an organization takes. “Those variables that were labeled as situational are most likely to influence how an organization relates to an external public by effecting shifts from a predisposed accommodative or adversarial stance along the continuum during an interaction with the external public” (p. 43). Some of the situational variables that have received support include the urgency of the situation; characteristics of the external public; potential or obvious threats; and potential costs or benefit for the organization from choosing the various stances (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999; Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001).
Cameron, Cropp and Reber (2001) argue that an organization may not move from its predisposed stance if the situational variables are not compelling nor powerful enough to influence the position or if the opportunity costs of the situational variables do not lead to any visible benefits.

Using contingency theory to study how the United States and China resolve the crisis over the collision of a US Navy reconnaissance plane with a Chinese fighter jet in the South China Sea in April 2001, Zhang, Qiu and Cameron (2003) found that some of the factors that support accommodation over advocacy include the nature of the organization’s (in this case, the state’s) leadership, its ethos, and how the organization regarded the threats to be.

Cameron (1999) argues that there are times when accommodation is not possible at all, due to moral, legal, and regulatory reasons. He labels them prescriptive variables. Six have been identified so far. When there is moral conviction that an accommodative or dialogic stance towards a public may be inherently unethical; when there is a need to maintain moral neutrality in the face of contending publics; when legal constraints curtail accommodation; when there are regulatory restraints; when senior management prohibits an accommodative stance; and lastly, when the issue become a jurisdictional concern within the organization and resolution of the issue take on a constrained and complex process of negotiation. Studies by Cameron, Cropp and Reber (2001) found that of the six, four, moral conviction, contending publics, legal constraints, and jurisdictional issues, do preclude accommodation “on some occasions” (p. 255).

To study the full range of advocacy or accommodation undertaken by the organization towards its publics and vice versa, we have adapted and modified Coombs’ (1998) crisis communication strategies into the contingency framework.

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Therefore,

RQ2.1: What strategies utilized by the organization are in evidence in the management of the SARS in the news coverage?

RQ2.2: What contingent factors that affect the strategies of the organization in the crisis are in evidence in the news coverage?

Publics in a Crisis

While the previous section discussed the variables that are conducive to and/or curtail accommodation or advocacy, this section deals with the other key tenet of the contingency theory: Who forms the publics during a crisis? Publics are “specific audiences” targeted by the organization. Grunig and Hunt (1984) defined a public as a “group of people who face a common issue” (Gonzalez-Herraro, & Pratt, 1996, p. 84). They include a broad range of people, employees, customers, members of the community, unions, stockholders, and other stakeholders (Fearn-Banks, 2002, p. 3).

Davis and Gilman (2002) argue that a key role the organization should embark on in a crisis is to identify the publics and develop appropriate messages to reach out to them. This can help de-escalate the crisis situation. “The antidote to crisis is not good news. It is established relationships” (p. 41) with the publics. Ray (1999) posits that because the publics have different perceptions of what caused the crisis, the organization’s communication with them can ameliorate any unfounded anxieties. Plowman (1995) suggests that the role of public relations in a crisis is all about “management of conflict between the organization and its important stakeholders” (p. 238). Coombs (1999) argues that an organization thrives or survives by “effectively managing the stakeholders” (p. 20).

In a crisis, the publics have been defined differently, according to their importance to resolving situation, their functional roles, and their long-term influences. Lukaszewski (1997) argues that there are four key publics that the organization must communicate with, and priorities must be made to communicate with them as soon as possible. They are: (1) Those most directly affected, the victims; (2) The employees, who may bear the brunt of the wrath from the publics; (3) Those indirectly affected like families and relatives; (4) The news media and other channels of external communication. Harrison
(1999) argues that local community and pressure groups, and the government can form the next
significant layer of the publics. Dougherty (1992) prefers to examine publics in terms of their functional
roles. Enabling publics, which include shareholders, board of directors and regulatory agencies, have the
power and authority to control the organization’s resources. Functional publics mainly consist of the
organization’s consumers. Normative publics are formed because of shared values, like political or
interest groups. Diffused publics are people who are not members of a formal organization, yet,
nonetheless, powerful groups. They include the media and interested citizens. “[T]he media have the
power to define a situation as a crisis…sometimes, a conflict arises between the mandate of the media to
provide information to the public and the need of the organization to control the flow of information…If
the organization decides to restrict access to information, the spokesman must explain the rationale”
(Ferguson, 1999, pp. 105-108). Ulmer (2001) categorizes the publics in terms of their long-term
influences. He sees the primary public as the community in which the organization works in, and the
employees. The customer and the media would be classified as a secondary public.

Therefore,

\[RQ3\]: What is the process of type transition of the publics (aware and active publics) in the whole
life cycle of the crisis as evidenced in the news coverage?

Publics’ Perception and Emotion of the Publics in a Crisis

Fink (1986) has developed a four-staged model of a crisis life cycle: (1) The “prodromal crisis
stage”, or the warning stage; (2) The “acute crisis stage”, or when the crisis happens; (3) The “chronic
crisis stage”, or the clean-up stage; and (4) The “crisis resolution stage”, or when dust has settled and
evaluations are made to assess how the crisis has been handled and what can be done to deal with the next
one (pp. 20-25). Mitroff (1994) argues for a five-staged model that includes (1) Detection of the crisis, or
looking out for warning signs; (2) Prevention/Preparation of the crisis, or what can be done to prepare for
its occurrence; (3) Containment, which refers to efforts to limit the duration of the crisis and localize it;
(4) Recovery, which refers to restoring order and normalcy to the organization; and (5) Learning, the
process of evaluating the crisis and examining what lessons can be learnt from it.
In his three-stage model, Coombs posits a “unified system” (p. 14) that could “accommodate all the various models plus additional insights” of crisis management experts (p. 14). The three-stage model comprises the precrisis, crisis and postcrisis stages. The pre-crisis stage entails actions that organizations “should perform” before a crisis hits. It involves three sub-stages: signal detection, prevention, and crisis preparation (p.15). Among the measures suggested here are issues management, risk aversion, and relationship building (p. 15). The crisis stage involves the actions the organization can perform from the onset of the crisis to the time it is resolved. Coombs (1999) further divides this into three sub-stages: crisis recognition, crisis containment, and business resumption. Critical to this phase is communication with the publics (p. 16). Coombs argues that the last stage, the post-crisis stage, is equally important even though the crisis is officially “over” (p. 16). Organizations must consider how it can be better prepared for the next crisis and make sure that stakeholders are left with a “positive impression” of the organization’s crisis management efforts (p. 16).

In this study, though we are not going to precisely plot the exact life cycle of the crisis by coding news stories, we do propose to utilize Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt’s (1996) paradigmatic development of a crisis model as a more appropriate reflection of the life cycle of the SARS crisis by generally looking at the crisis from Birth, Growth, Maturity, to Decline. As the strategies the organization employed varies over time, we propose that its publics’ cognitive and affective response to the organization’s performance should also move along the life cycle the crisis.

Perceptions of the severity of the crisis can actualize in two ways: Perceptions of culpability and perceptions of the locus of control of the crisis. Coombs (1998) argues that if the organization is perceived by its publics as culpable, it is more likely to utilize more accommodative strategies to control the damage. Consequently, if the publics perceive that the locus of control of the crisis lies with the organization, the perception of its crisis responsibility increases. Conversely, if the publics perceive the locus of control to be external to the organization, the perception of crisis responsibility decreases.
In this study, besides finding out how the organization and its publics perceive where the locus of control of the crisis is, we are interested to find out how that in turn influence each other’s performance.

Therefore,

*RQ 4.1:* What is the perception of the government and its multiple publics in the crisis situation, regarding crisis attribution and crisis damage severity as evidenced in the news coverage?

*RQ 4.2:* How does the perception of the organization’s performance, as evidenced in the news coverage, vary among the multiple publics involved?

*RQ 4.3:* What contingent factors appear to affect the publics’ perception of the organization’s performance in the crisis as evidenced in the news coverage?

Jin and Cameron (2003) call for greater attention to the construct of emotion in public relations theory by providing an adapted appraisal model of emotion in public relations and a crucial dimension to the conceptualization of the contingency theory. They further propose that any given public relations stance can be assessed as a relational encounter with emotional forces that conform to a model expressed in three dimensions: 1) Emotional tone as the valence of the emotion ranging from negative to positive; 2) Emotional temperature as the intensity level of the emotion; and 3) Emotional weight regarding the importance of the emotional stimulus in strategic consequences. Since the perceived severity works as emotional weight here, we are particularly interested to examine the emotional tone and temperature as two key dimensions of the publics’ emotion toward the organization in the crisis situation. Therefore,

*RQ 5.1:* What is the nature and strength of the multiple publics’ emotion toward the organization in the crisis situation as evidenced in the news coverage?

*RQ 5.2:* What strategies appear to affect the publics’ emotion toward the organization in the crisis as presented in the news coverage?
Method

This study employs the content analysis method to understand the crisis management of SARS from an organizational point of view in dealing with its relationship with multiple publics. This contingency oriented approach has been initially explored by Shin and her colleagues (2003a, 2002b). For example, they conducted a content analysis of news coverage over two years for four major high profile public conflicts and another content analysis for another seven public conflicts, which provide a natural history of the use of the contingency theory in public relations.

In this study, the organization is operationalized as the Singapore Government. It examines how the stances and strategies of an organization and its multiple publics move or change on the continuum over time, and what contingent factors are associated with the organization’s stance and crisis management strategies, as well as that associated with the publics’ stances, perception of the organization’s performance, and the emotion toward the organization.

Krippendorff (2002) argues that to understand the politics of a country, a most common way is to analyze the prestige newspaper read by the political elite of that country. “This choice is grounded on the assumption that political agendas are set and public debates are led by these so-called prestige papers rather than by local newspapers, which are less likely to reproduce the contents of the former and are, hence, less relevant” (p. 14-8). Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998) argue that prestige newspapers are valid instrument for analysis because they play a “key role in history” (p. 86).

In Singapore, of the five main English-language newspapers, the dominant newspaper is The Straits Times (1845). It is the highest circulating English newspaper, with daily circulations averaging 400,000, commanding 42 percent of the readership (“A turn-on for more,” 2003, p. H2). It is a prestige newspaper, and a newspaper of record (Turnbull, 1995). The elites and general readers monitor the newspaper as it often reflects government sentiments and the social reality that the government constructs for Singapore (Turnbull, 1995).

Sample
The population of stories from March 18, 2003, when Singapore was declared by WHO as SARS-hit, to June 7, 2003, when Singapore was declared by WHO as SARS-free, were sampled. Stories were uploaded from Lexus-Nexus by typing in the key words SARS and Singapore. This yielded 2,018 stories. From the stories, the authors screened all of them based on the following criteria: 1) No editorials, opinions, commentaries, and letters to the editors; 2) At least two parties should be involved in the SARS story, with one of the parties being the Singapore Government; and 3) If there were more than one public involved in the same story, the dominant public would be identified as the prominent public for the story under analysis. To further delineate the selection of stories, up to four news stories that fit the criteria stated above were identified from each issue. If there were fewer than four news stories published in an issue, all the available stories were chosen for sampling.

The 2,018 stories were eventually filtered to 258 stories which captured how the organization related to its publics. Seven types of publics were identified: WHO (N=11), medical professionals (doctors and/or nurses) (N=15), taxi-drivers (N=7), neighboring countries (N=34), quarantined public (patients and/or suspects) (N=68), general public (N=93), and others (N=30).

Coders and Training

Two coders, both graduate students and familiar with the content analysis method, conducted the analysis. With the help of a codebook, the coders were given detailed instruction and description of the various categories used. Practice sessions were held using copies of the newspaper not included in the sample. The coders worked independently and were not allowed to consult with each other about the coding. Using Holsi’s formula, the coders achieved an 86 percent agreement.

Coding Instrument

The unit of analysis is defined as any news story. This includes stories by the staff of the newspaper and wire stories. The content analysis instrument is designed to evaluate the stances and strategies of an organization in crisis management, its multiple publics’ stances and perceptual as well as emotional response to the organization’s performance, and the contingent factors associated with the stances and strategies of the above parties. The operational definitions of stance and contingent factors
are framed by the contingency theory, and the crisis management strategy, crisis situation perception, and public types are adapted from crisis management literature. The decision scheme included the characteristics of each variable arranged to make identification of each variable in the news story.

The 258 news stories were coded for 19 variables. They were: Case source, news story number, publics involved in the crisis (WHO, medical professionals, taxi-drivers, neighboring countries, quarantined public, general public, and others); the overall impression on the stance of the organization toward the according public, the overall impression on the stance of a specific public toward the organization (measured on a 7 point Likert scale, where 1 was “very advocate,” and 7 was “very accommodate”), crisis management strategy employed by the organization (attack, denial, excuse, justification, corrective action, ingratiation, cooperation, and full apology); the organization and the multiple publics’ perception of the crisis situation (crisis attribution was measured by 1 “externally controllable” and 2 “internally controllable”, and severity of the crisis was measured on a 7 point Likert scale with 1 as “very in severe” and 7 as “very severe”); type of the public (1 as “aware” and 2 as “active”); the public’s perception of the organization’s performance (measured on a 7 point Likert scale with 1 as “very unsatisfying” and 7 as “very satisfying”), the public’s emotion toward the organization in the crisis (measured on two 7 point Likert scales, one with 1 as “very negative” and 7 as “very positive”, and the other with 1 as “very mild” and 7 as “very intensive”).

Adapting and merging Coombs’ (1998) crisis communication strategies into Cameron’s continuum model of advocacy and accommodation, we propose to measure the strategies in terms of:

1. Attack: This means confronting the party and actively advocating that it follows a certain course of action to help fight the crisis.

2. Denial: This means stating that the culpability does not rest with the party in question, or denying that the crisis is of any consequence.

3. Excuse: This means minimizing the party’s responsibility for the crisis, and/or shifting responsibility of the crisis to an external factor.

4. Justification: This means the party explaining why it has to take a certain course of action.
5. Corrective action: This means the party is actively taking a course of action that is meant to address the problems in sight.

6. Ingratiation: This means the party is actively taking a course of action that is meant to make the other party approve of its actions, which leads to a favorable impression.

7. Cooperation: This means the party makes overtures to reach out to the other party with the goal of resolving the problem.

8. Full apology: This means the party takes full responsibility of the crisis and asks for forgiveness, with the promise of some form of compensation that comes with the apology.

As for the list of contingency factors, for our analysis, we have adapted and modified from Cameron’s original matrix of contingency factors and retained the key factors most appropriate for our analysis. The key factors of analysis are:

1. Threats: Stories that address the SARS virus, how dangerous it is; the SARS crisis and how it needs to be contained

2. Industry environment: Stories that describe the impact SARS had on the economy and market.

3. General political/social environment/cultural environment: Stories that deal with political support for the people, political support for businesses; stories that show the organization wanting to lend the extra help to the people; stories that portray the organization trying to improve the livelihood of the people.

4. External public: Stories that address the unique characteristics of the public. For instance, if the public is the medical professionals, stories about the difficulties medical professionals face vis-à-vis the organization in trying to contain SARS.

5. Issue under question: Stories that address the image and reputation of the organization and its people.

6. Others: Stories that do not address any of the above.

Each story is coded as one entry, as a single primary issue.
Results

A general observation from the data indicates a natural history of the use of contingency theory in Singapore government’s SARS crisis management process. The government’s stance toward different publics changed over time, with external contingent factors associated with the changing level of accommodation. The dominant crisis management strategy employed by the government across the crisis life cycle also varied according to different publics. In terms of the publics’ perspective, different publics demonstrated different stances across time. Their perception of the government’s performance in dealing with SARS and their emotion toward the government also changed as the crisis went. Contingent factors were found to associated with those differences. Also, the types of public showed patterns of transition from being aware to being active in the crisis process. The government and its multiple publics’ perception of the crisis attribution were found to largely match with each other as externally controllable, while the government perceived the crisis as slightly more severe then the publics did.

RQ1.1 examines how the stances of the organization and its multiple publics move on a continuum from pure advocacy to pure accommodation overtime in the whole life circle of crisis. This study has found that, for each pair of the government and a specific public, two parties involved moved on a continuum from advocacy to accommodation in the crisis management process. The descriptive information suggested that their stances in crisis were not static and do change over time. The descriptive information for each pair of parties in the SARS crisis also suggested that the government and some publics accommodated consistently while the government and the other publics advocate more in the process. For example, on the one hand, the government (M=6.64) and WHO (M=5.45), government (M=5.87) and medical professionals (M=6.60), government (M=4.57) and taxi-drivers (M=4.00), government (M=4.03) and neighboring countries (M=4.02), and government (M=4.73) and the others (M=5.73) generally accommodated in the crisis process, with no stance difference showed in paired t-tests. On the other hand, the stances between government (M=2.99) and quarantined public (M=6.38), and government (M=3.35) and general public (M=6.62) were marked by advocacy over time. As paired
samples t-tests showed, the government’s stance advocated more than that of the quarantined public (t=-8.045, p< .01) and that of the general public (t=-8.290, p< .01).

In addition, significant mean differences were found by comparing the stances of the seven publics (F=3.56, p< .01). Post hoc test revealed that medical professionals and the general public were most accommodating as reported in the news coverage, while taxi-drivers and neighboring countries were most advocating across time as described in the news coverage.

RQ1.2 and RQ1.3 examine the contingent factors that affect each paired parties’ stances in the crisis on the continuum. The descriptive information suggested that threat seemed to be the predominant contingent factor in many instances, in (1) The stance of medical professionals toward the government (40%, $\chi^2=32.500, p< .01$); (2) The government’s stance toward taxi-drivers (42.9%, $\chi^2=14.000, p< .05$); (3) The government’s stance toward neighboring countries (44.1%, $\chi^2=68.330, p< .01$); (4) The neighboring countries’ stance toward the government (44.1%, $\chi^2=45.740, p< .01$); (5) The government’s stance toward quarantined public (77.9 %, $\chi^2=25.984, p< .05$); (6) The quarantined public’ stance toward the government (47.1%, $\chi^2=81.163, p< .001$); (7) The government’s stance toward general public (64.5 %, $\chi^2=55.554, p< .001$); (8) The general public’ stance toward the government (32.3 %, $\chi^2=170.633, p< .001$); (9) The government’s stance towards the others (43.3 %, $\chi^2=50.365, p< .01$); and finally (10) The general public’ stance toward the government (33.3 %, $\chi^2=47.469, p< .05$).

RQ 2.1 examines the strategies the organization employs in the crisis management process regarding its multiple publics. The study has found that the predominant strategies the government employed in communicating with WHO were cooperation (54.5%) and corrective action (18.2); the predominant strategies the government employed in communication with medical professionals were ingratiation (53.3%) and cooperation (33.3%); the predominant strategies the government employed in communication with taxi-drivers were corrective action (28.6%), ingratiation (28.6%) and cooperation
(28.6%); the predominant strategies the government employed in communication with neighboring countries were cooperation (33.3%), attack (41.%) and justification (11.8%); the predominant strategies the government employed in communication with quarantined public were attack (47.1 %) and cooperation (19.1%); the predominant strategies the government employed in communication with quarantined public were attack (31.2%) and cooperation (24.7%),

RQ 2.2 examines the contingent factors that affect the strategies of the organization in the crisis. The study has found that threats appeared to predominantly affect attack (85.4%), denial (33.3%), justification (70.0%), corrective action (76.0%), cooperation (47.2%), and full apology (50.0%), while external public and issue seemed to equally affect denial (33.3%), industry environment predominately affected excuse (100%), and general culture affected ingratiation (37.5%) predominantly. The association among the strategies and contingent factors is significant ($\chi^2=50.365, p< .01$).

In addition, the organization’s choice of strategies was found to be associated with its stance ($\chi^2=537.499, p< .001$): Attack, denial, and justification seemed to be predominantly associated with highly advocating stance (86.6%, 100%, and 40%, respectively). Corrective action seemed to be predominantly associated with advocating stance (48%). Excuse seemed to be predominately associated with little advocating stance (100%). Ingratiation and cooperation seemed to be predominately associated with very accommodating stance (87.5%, 43.1%, respectively). Full apology seemed to be predominantly associated with accommodating and highly accommodating stances (50%, 50%, respectively). This suggests that crisis communication strategies were influenced by the organization’s strategy moving along the accommodation continuum.

RQ 3 examines the process of type transition of the publics (aware and active publics) in the whole life circle of the crisis. As the time-series plots illustrate, WHO was consistently perceived as an active public; medical professionals were reported as active public at the beginning and the end of the crisis but as an aware public during the crisis; taxi-drivers, neighboring countries, quarantined public,
general public, and the others began as aware publics at the beginning, but as the crisis progressed, they transited to active publics over time with interesting overlaps, fluctuating from being aware to being active in the middle of the crisis cycle.

RQ 4.1 examines the perception of the government and its multiple publics in the crisis situation, regarding crisis attribution and crisis damage severity. As the time-series plots show, both the government and its publics perceive the SARS crisis as generally externally controllable at the early stage of the crisis, and both perceive it as generally internally controllable at the later stage of the crisis. In terms of crisis damage severity, the government seemed to perceive it more severe (M=6.79) than did the publics (M=6.52). The paired samples t-test showed that the difference is significant (t=2.526, p< .05).

RQ 4.2 examines the multiple publics’ perception of the organization’s performance and RQ 4.3 the contingent factors that affect the publics’ perception of the organization’s performance in the crisis. The publics’ aggregate perception of the government’s performance in dealing with the SARS crisis seem to be satisfactory (M=4.85). The predominant contingent factor affecting their perception is the factor of threats (37.2%). Significant mean difference was found by comparing the perception of organization’s performance among the seven publics (F=4.15, p< .01). Post hoc test revealed that, interestingly, quarantined public and general public felt most satisfied with the organization’s performance, as reported in the news coverage, while WHO and neighboring countries were reported as the least satisfied ones. Also, the publics’ perception of the organization’s performance was significantly associated with the contingent factors ($\chi^2=190.601, p< .001$) and the strategies the organization employed ($\chi^2=125.120, p< .001$).

RQ 5.1 examines the multiple publics’ emotion toward the organization in the crisis situation, and RQ 5.2 the contingent factors that affect the publics’ emotion toward the organization in the crisis. The publics’ aggregate perception emotion toward the government performance in the SARS crisis seems to
be positive (M=4.79) and slightly intensive (M=4.19). The predominant contingent factor affecting both the emotional tone and emotional temperature was the factor of threats (22.5%). Significant mean difference in emotional temperature (intensity) (F=4.74, p<.001) was found by comparing the seven publics, while there was no significant difference in the seven publics’ emotional tone (valence). Post hoc test revealed that general public were reported as the most emotionally intensive public while taxi-drivers the least emotional public. Also, the publics’ emotional tone and emotional temperature toward the organization were significantly associated with the contingent factors ($\chi^2$=268.812, p<.001; $\chi^2$=318.245, p<.001), and the emotional tone was significantly associated with the strategies the organization employed ($\chi^2$=82.386, p<.05).

Discussion

Focusing on the crisis situation faced by a government as an organization, the approach taken in this study may provide possibilities for utilizing contingency theory in crisis communication and crisis management. 

*Proactive Advocacy: A Hallmark of the Singapore Government Management Style*

This study began by asking whether and how the organization and its multiple publics move along a continuum from pure advocacy to pure accommodation over time in a crisis situation, and what strategies the organization employ in managing the crisis and then what contingent factors appear to influence the stance and the strategies as evidenced in news coverage. The results indicate that in the life cycle of a crisis like SARS, the organization and its publics’ stances are constantly moving on a continuum from advocacy to accommodation. To a large extent, most of the publics followed the same stance of accommodation as the organization did. However, the organization seemed to advocate more in dealing with two publics, the quarantined public and general public, while these two publics appeared more accommodating to the organization across time. This may be due to decision-making abilities of the
government to make crisis-time policies that required the adherence of the crucial publics. This is consistent with Sikorski’s (1996) assertion that the Singapore government is proactive in taking the lead and advocating judgment calls when it is confronted with threats to the country’s survival, particularly political threats, which, in this case, can be extended to biological threats as well. The rationale for advocacy for the quarantined public and general public appears to be thus: The quarantined public has to be told what to do so that it does not infect the general public, and the general public has to be told what to do so that the virus is not spread any further.

Political Realism: Dealing with Delicate Publics like Neighboring Countries

On the contrary, with publics such as WHO and neighboring countries the Singapore government appears to adopt more accommodating stances towards them. The political realism in international relations, argued Zhang, Qiu and Cameron (2003), is that even though advocacy may be used at first, to maintain harmonious relations, this would eventually give way to accommodation. Two reasons are proffered on why Singapore accommodated and showed deference towards WHO and neighboring countries. (1) Singapore was cooperating closely with WHO, a world body, to find the antidote for the disease. When the hallmark of a relationship is that of cooperation, accommodation almost always takes precedence over advocacy. (2) An accommodative stance towards its neighbors, particularly Malaysia, is consistent with Singapore’s long-standing relations with Malaysia, based on political realism, national and diplomatic interests (Nathan, 2002). Instead of engaging in politics of one-upmanship on who infected the virus to who, the policy of the Singapore government appeared to be to focus the attention on how the threat (i.e., a common enemy, the SARS virus) could be nullified. This is consistent with Cameron and his colleagues’ argument that the prevailing situational variables that facilitate accommodation are the urgency of the situation and the obvious threats in the environment (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999; Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001).

More Accommodation than Advocacy
The findings further suggest that crisis management is contingent in nature, associated with the contingent factors. Based upon the contingency theory and crisis literature, the stances of an organization and its publics are not static, but rather moving from advocacy to accommodation (Cameron et al., 2001; Cancel et al., 1997; Shin et al., 2003a, 2003b). In this study, we found more instances of accommodation than advocacy, with advocacy towards selected publics, based on power relationships and the stakes involved. A wide range of crisis communication strategies are utilized by the organization in dealing with its multiple publics, whom differed in their power relationship with the organization, occupation, and risk levels in the crisis situation. Obviously, the organization used a different set of predominant strategies which might be assumed to best target each public according to their different characteristics. For example, the predominant strategies the government employed in communicating with WHO were cooperation and corrective action, which may be reasonable communicative response toward a prestigious health organization regarding its power and influence. On the other hand, the predominant strategies the government employed in communication with quarantined public were attack, followed by cooperation, which might be explained that the government had to take demanding measures in controlling the virus but still tried to resolve the problem by collaborating with this key public. Again, threats seemed to be the predominant factor affecting the strategy. This is consistent with previous studies analyzing the nature of conflict in the organization-public relationship, where threat was found to be a predominant factor (Shin et al., 2003a, 2003b).

**Strategies Dependent on Organizational Type**

Shin and her colleagues (2003b) suggest the type of stances an organization takes towards its publics is also dependent on the type of organization involved. They found that non-profit organizations are more likely to be more accommodating towards its publics, and vice-versa, than for-profit organizations. This is because non-profit organizations are usually “seen as the ‘good guys’ of society—high-minded, compassionate organizations whose members work to help people achieve a better life” (Wilcox et al., 2002, p. 410). In this case, since the organization is a governmental organization, particularly one which is inclined to proactive advocacy, the Singapore government has been seen as
advocating when it deems the threat to be the overriding factor while accommodating when it feels the dipping crisis severity allows it to ‘loosen its rein,’ if you will.

How the Publics Perceive the Crisis

The examination of the multiple publics’ type transition and their crisis situation perception compared with that of the organization produces interesting findings. As Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1996) suggests, the publics’ perception of the crisis transit in a dynamic way, depending on the life cycle of the crisis. Our results reveal that most of the publics transited from being crisis-aware to actively taking actions to deal with the crisis. We did not code for possible “latent public” as it is not evident from press reports. The government, on the whole, often perceived the SARS crisis more severe than the publics did. This could be, as Chong (2001) argues, a hallmark of the Singapore government’s handling of issues of survival. By overemphasizing on the severity of a crisis, perhaps, it errs on the side of over-managing rather than under-managing. That probably explained why the government had consistently regarded the crisis to be internally controllable rather than externally controllable. Resolution of crisis, it seemed, like survival, is never left to chance. A key aspect of this strategy, then, is to manage the publics’ perception of the organization’s performance as well as their emotion toward the organization. As an example of successfully dealing with SARS while maintaining its reputation and image during the crisis, Singapore government’s performance seemed to gain understanding and support from its publics in general across time. The publics were reported to be largely satisfied by what the government did, and were reported to have fairly strong positive feeling toward the organization. Chong (2001) argues that the Singapore government, indeed, has built a reputation for “reliability, integrity, and efficacy…in the management for survival” (p. 37).

Implications

Overall, this study suggests both practical and theoretical implications for public relations practitioners and crisis management experts by integrating the contingency theory model with the strategy and publics-related concerns and propositions provided in the crisis communication and management literature. Public relations practitioners, particularly those on the governmental levels, can understand the
opportunities and challenges of crisis management practice by identifying the contingent factors associated with the stances of its different publics, and using appropriate strategies to maintain the organization-public relationship and working together with the publics to resolve the crisis. A key strength of the contingency theory is that it allows us to understand the dynamic nature of the crisis and to make judgments of what stances and strategies are appropriate at every juncture. At the heart of the matter is that it is not so simple to know what works and what don’t. It is the authors’ hope that this initial effort to analyze how a particular government manages a crisis, not just at the local level, but also with worldwide implications, can provide some exploratory information for other researchers. Admittedly, one limitation of this study is that it is focused on one country, which, in turn, limits the generalizability of how the strategies can be extrapolated to other countries. Future research can explore how other countries deal with the similar types of crisis, and assess the contingent factors that influence the stance or strategies of an organization and its publics. The subsequent findings will provide better conceptual understanding of the operationalizations of those key aspects in crisis management.

For the authors, this is the first of a series of studies exploring governmental-publics relations and perceptions of crisis. A follow-up study will explore how Chinese government deals with the crisis together with its diversified publics, and analyze how different this is compared to the Singapore government’s stances and strategies. Further studies can also focus on how the crisis life cycle of a crisis can correlate with the stance and strategy movement of the organization-public relationship along the continuum. Additional research can also be conducted to understand the role of the news media as a third party in organization-public relationship development across the crisis life cycle.

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### Table 1: Stances of the government and its multiple publics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>T-test</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>6.64</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.706</td>
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<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>Medical Professionals</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>-1.127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>Taxi-Drivers</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>Neighboring Countries</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>-0.876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>Quarantined Public</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>-8.045**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>General Public</td>
<td>6.62</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>-8.290**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>-1.355</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *: p<.05; **: p<.01
Figure 1: Stances of the government and its multiple publics

1. Organization vs. WHO

2. Organization vs. Medical Professionals
3. Organization vs. Taxi-Driver

Date of the Story

4. Organization vs. Neighboring Countries

Date of the Story
5. Organization vs. Quarantined Public

Date of the Story

6. Organization vs. General Public

Date of the Story
7. Organization vs. Others

Date of the Story

Overall Impression of Organization toward
Overall Impression of Public toward Orga
Figure 2: The organization’s strategies toward the multiple publics

1. Toward WHO

![Graph showing strategies toward WHO]

2. Toward Medical Professionals

![Graph showing strategies toward medical professionals]
3. Toward Taxi-Drivers

4. Toward Neighboring Countries
5. Toward Quarantined Public

![Chart showing communication strategies for the quarantined public.]

6. Toward General Public

![Chart showing communication strategies for the general public.]

Date of the Story
7. Toward Others

![Graph showing communication strategies over time]

- Communication Strategies
  - Attack
  - Justification
  - Corrective Action
  - Ingratiation
  - Cooperation
  - Others

Date of the Story

Count

0.0
0.5
1.0
1.5
2.0
2.5

04/11/03 04/24/03 05/08/03 05/10/03 05/14/03 05/16/03 05/20/03 05/22/03 05/27/03 05/29/03 06/01/03 06/05/03
Figure 3: Types of the multiple publics

1. WHO

Date of the Story

Count

Date of the Story

Count
3. Taxi-Drivers

![Graph showing the trend of taxi-drivers over time]

4. Neighboring Countries

![Graph showing the trend of neighboring countries over time]
5. Quarantined Public

6. General Public
7. Others

![Graph showing the count of various types of public over time from April 24th to June 6th, 2003. The x-axis represents the date of the story, and the y-axis represents the count. The graph shows peaks and troughs indicating changes in the type of public awareness. The y-axis has labels for count ranging from 0.0 to 2.5. The x-axis has dates from 04/24/03 to 06/06/03.]
Figure 4: Perception of the organization and the multiple publics in the crisis situation

1. Government’s perception of crisis attribution

![Graph showing government's perception of crisis attribution]

2. Publics’ perception of crisis attribution

![Graph showing publics' perception of crisis attribution]
3. Government’ perception of crisis severity

![Graph showing organization crisis severity](image)

4. Publics’ perception of crisis severity

![Graph showing public crisis severity](image)
Figure 5: Publics’ perception of the organization’s performance
Figure 6: Publics’ emotion toward the organization

1. Emotional tone (valence)

2. Emotional temperature (intensity)
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