Practitioners and academics are buzzing about the impact of the blogosphere on public relations practices. Emerging evidence indicates that strategically managing blog-mediated public relations may be especially critical for crisis managers. Yet, no known research provides a comprehensive, theoretically sound approach indicating how crisis managers should engage with the blogosphere. Therefore, this study proposes a new conceptual model to help public relations professionals navigate the evolving blogosphere: the blog-mediated crisis communication model. This model helps crisis managers monitor the blogosphere and respond, when appropriate, to influential bloggers. Future research will test the model in applied contexts, working with corporate, government, and nonprofit organizations.

In September 2008, a popular public relations online trade journal declared “corporate blogging is now in vogue” (Daily Dog, 2008, par. 1). Yet, a recent study found that only 16% of Fortune 500 companies have a public facing blog. The same report found that corporations are more slowly adopting blogging, compared to nonprofits. On the public sector
side, the Congressional Management Foundation (2008) recently called on Congress to improve its online communication with citizens. Despite the varying levels of blog adoption, some organizations, such as General Motors and the San Diego Regional Airport Authority, are finding that blogs are, perhaps, the most effective tactic for managing crises (Analore, 2008; Sebastian, 2008b).

This study proposes a new model to help public relations professionals navigate the rapidly expanding and evolving blogosphere: the blog-mediated crisis communication model. The model—primarily grounded in blog-mediated crisis communication (BMCC), opinion leadership, word-of-mouth communication, and rumor/crisis response research—helps crisis managers monitor the blogosphere and respond, when appropriate, to influential external blogs. Future research will test the model in applied contexts, working with corporate, government, and nonprofit organizations.

BACKGROUND

State of the Blogosphere

On average, 1.4 blogs are created every second, and 1.5 million blog posts are made every day (Sigfry, 2007). Half of all US Internet users read blogs ("State of live blogosphere," 2008a). Nearly three-quarters of all Internet users have read a blog (Young, 2009). Perhaps most significantly for public relations professionals, eight in ten bloggers post product or brand reviews, and almost nine in ten bloggers blog about brands they love or hate ("State of blogosphere," 2008b). In addition, consumers place a higher level of trust on third-party blogs, compared to company blogs: Only 16% of online consumers who read corporate blogs say they trust them (Bernoff, 2008). However, during a crisis, recent empirical evidence suggests that the public equally rates the credibility of third-person blogs and blogs sponsored by organizations experiencing crises (Bates & Callison, 2008).

During crises, the public also increasingly turns to blogs for both immediate and in-depth crisis information. For example, Procopio and Procopio (2007) found that 36% of their survey respondents selected blogs as their most visited source for information the week after Hurricane Katrina. The Pew Center found that half of online Americans turned to the Internet for news and information during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (Rainie, 2005). Industry professionals noted that blogs are especially ideal for building relationships with publics during crises (Bates & Callison, 2008; Hanson, 2006; Smudde, 2005), as blogs can reduce complaints, improve reputation and services, as well as increase sales, loyalty, and customer satisfaction (KDPaine & Partners, 2008; Rubel, 2005). They also provide
the opportunity for top management to communicate with and, hopefully, better convince affected publics that the organization’s positions, directions, and actions are in the publics’ best interests (Marken, 2005). In fact, publics who read blogs (both personal and organizational) perceive a lower level of crisis for an organization than those not exposed to blogs (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Exposure to organizational blogs also decreases the feeling that a company is in crisis (Sweester & Metzgar, 2007). In terms of blogs’ contribution to the communication technology and crisis message strategy development, Stephens and Malone (2009) recently found that organizations frequently used blogs to communicate emotion-laden messages to gain emotional support from affected stakeholders. In fact, blogs are not only a tool for communication, but also a primary information source for certain key publics (Xifra & Huertas, 2008).

Despite this reality, public relations professionals largely have been reticent to embrace blogging (Kent, 2008). For example, a recent survey revealed that only 20% of practitioners strongly agree that social media have enhanced the public relations practice (D. K. Wright & Hinson, 2008). Also, only 5,000 of the approximately 112.5 million blogs on the Web are corporate blogs (Halzack, 2008). Similarly, only 8% of Fortune 500 companies have blogs (Fuller, 2008), and only 9.8% of public relations professionals blog (Porter, Trammell, Chang, & Kim, 2007). Even more worrisome, recent experimental data reveals the disconnection between the potential for blogs to improve organizational–public relationships and public relations professionals’ willingness to use blogs (Kelleher, 2008). Potential reasons for why public relations professionals are reticent to adopt blogging include: (a) key personnel’s limited time, skills, and/or knowledge; (b) belief that the benefits do not outweigh potential negative consequences; and (c) lack of consensus among executives that blogs are a credible communication vehicle (Kelleher, 2008; Makovsky + Company, 2006; van der Wolf, 2007).

Definitions

Before introducing our model, we lay the groundwork by defining several key concepts: (a) blogs; (b) blog-mediated public relations; and (c) blog-mediated crises. First, a blog is a personal publishing or content management system on the Internet at which an author, or multiple authors, can publish information on a variety of topics (J. Wright, 2006). There are two primary types of blog content that crisis managers need to monitor: (a) official organizational blogs, if any, created by and affiliated with organizations; and (b) external blogs created and maintained by third parties (i.e., individuals or groups outside of the organization). On both
types of blogs, publics can post comments, allowing organizations to respond to these comments as well. The focus of our model is the external blogs, created by organizations’ publics and focusing on related crisis information. We selected external blogs because these are the blogs that crisis managers have the least amount of control over and, thus, have the potential to yield the most significant reputation damage.

Second, blog-mediated public relations is the strategies and tactics organizations use to foster relationships with their primary publics through engaging in third-party blogs and/or creating blogs. Given the challenges public relations practitioners face navigating the evolving blogosphere, the principles of effective blog-mediated public relations have been widely discussed among practitioners, with well-debated topics ranging from storytelling, dialogue, credibility, transparency, authenticity, authority, and interactivity (Scoble & Israel, 2006). As Yang and Lim (2009) pointed out, the difficulty and complexity of measuring intangible outcomes (e.g., relational trust or publics’ loyalty) leads to public relations professionals focusing more on tangible outputs, such as comments, trackbacks, and links generated.

Finally, and most important, we define blog-mediated crises as crises either initiated by a blog (or blogs) or escalated by communication transmitted through blogs. A blog-mediated crisis, like a traditional crisis, is the “ongoing dialogue between the organization and its publics” prior to, during, and after the crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2002, p. 2), the goals of which are to restore organizational normalcy, influence public perception, and regain and repair reputation (Stocker, 1997). As Row (2005) indicated: “Blogs don’t change the fundamental nature of a crisis. They change the basics of how we can respond to them” (par. 2). We now discuss our conceptual model, which identifies the changed basics and how crisis managers can better respond to these changes.

STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO INFLUENTIAL EXTERNAL BLOGS

This section reviews the three areas of literature that contributed to the theoretical constructs of our conceptual model (see Figure 1). In addition, this section introduces three of the model’s four sets of propositions.

Influential External Blog Identification

Before crisis managers can effectively choose appropriate strategic responses to blog-mediated crises, they must first identify which blogs are more influential in the eyes of the key publics so to prioritize which ones to monitor, as they cannot examine every external blog. This influential external blog
FIGURE 1 Blog-Mediated Crisis Communication Model.
identification process occurs at different stages of organizational crisis management practice. It can be part of the organizational crisis preparedness prior to the actual onset of crises, which serves as the issues monitoring function. It can also be an assessment tool during a crisis in terms of implementing response strategies to communicate with influential bloggers and followers. It can even be an imperative during crisis recovery to keep track of how the crisis is resolved on the blogosphere and how the organizational response is received by the key publics. Thus, we define an influential external blog as any blog that initiates and/or amplifies a crisis for an organization. These blogs may be ones that organizations monitor as part of their regular issues management process or may be new ones that emerge during a specific crisis. For example, during the recent “Motrin-gate” crisis, an influential blog that likely was not on the company’s radar screen sparked a crisis. In November 2008, a mother criticized Motrin’s ad campaign targeting new mothers on her business’ blog: Perfectly Naturally Photography. This single post ignited a firestorm of criticism on the micro-blogging site Twitter, eventually resulting with Motrin pulling the ad and issuing an apology (Neff, 2008). This is just one of many examples of how blogs can initiate crises for all types of organizations. To prevent, or at least mitigate, these crises, organizations must identify influential external blogs through evaluating their outputs (e.g., number of posts about the crisis), outtakes (e.g., search engine blog rank), and outcomes (e.g., key publics’ awareness of blogs; Paine, 2007). We discuss these criteria as they relate to applying the proposed model to a blog-mediated crisis at the end of this study.

Thus, to comprehensively understand the function and influence of these blogs, we need to further examine the content generators of these blogs—the influential bloggers—and how their online opinion leadership is established and implemented.

### Key Publics in Blog-Mediated Crisis Communication (BMCC)

From a crisis manager’s perspective, it is necessary to prioritize key publics due to limited time and financial resources. Publics are a “group of people who face a common issue” (González-Herrero & Pratt, 1996, p. 84). For crises, publics have been defined differently, according to their importance to resolving the situation, their functional roles, and their long-term influences. Jin, Pang, and Cameron (2007) proposed that the primary publics in a crisis display the following characteristics: (a) They are most affected by the crisis; (b) they have shared common interests, and destiny, in seeing the crisis resolved; and (c) they have long-term interests and influences on the organization’s reputation and operation.
Adopting this definition of publics for a crisis, we propose the following key publics for a blog-mediated crisis, all affected by the same organizational crisis and demanding attention from crisis managers: (a) publics who blog about the organizational crisis, (b) publics who follow the crisis information-laden blogs, (c) publics who are not exposed to the influential blogs, and (d) media (both traditional and emerging media) publics who follow and cover the relevant crisis information. In the BMCC model (see Figure 1), we examine how, if at all, these key publics interconnect with each other through the crisis information flow generated by influential external blogs.

Influential Blogs and Blog-Mediated Opinion Leadership

In a BMCC context, influential blogs are produced by crisis information generators and/or transmitters. In contrast to official organizational blogs, which are organization-generated content, external blogs represent forms of user-generated content (UGC) or public-generated content (PGC). One prominent feature of influential blog PGC lies in its credibility. When PGC is negative (created by opposing blogs), followers of the PGC may consider the content more credible than content created by the organization (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). Also blog readers judge blogs as highly credible, especially compared with traditional media (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Sweetser, Porter, Chung, and Kim (2008) found that high users assign more credibility to blog as a medium.

Another related concept in blog-mediated communication is eWOM (eWord-of-Mouth Communication). UGC and eWOM are related, yet distinct, concepts: If the content conveyed has been generated by users (blogs written by bloggers), it can be both UGC and eWOM; if the content is only conveyed (i.e., the link to the certain blog or parts of blog posts are sent by another user, not the content creator, to others), it is not UGC but eWOM (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). Although eWOM depends on the dissemination of content, UGC has less influence without eWOM. Thus, for BMCC, it is important for crisis managers not only to identify blog content (influential blogs), but also the dissemination process (how the influence is achieved) by blog content via eWOM.

Influential bloggers and involvement. More than 40 years ago, Dichter (1966) noted that opinion leadership is motivated by product interest, individual needs/selfish factors, and factors relating to helping others. Involvement theory (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1993; Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998) further proposed that Dichter’s categories can be taken as motives based on four involvement-driven intentions among opinion
leaders in a consumption context: product-involvement, self-involvement, other-involvement, and message-involvement. In terms of blogging and public relations, Park, Jeong, and Han (2008) proposed a model to identify bloggers as an important target public in public relations and identify influential bloggers, labeled as power bloggers, defined by the level of issue involvement and communication activities in terms of message production and consumption. In BMCC context, we propose two influential blogger involvement types: (a) issue-involvement and (b) self-involvement.

First, issue-involvement is the positive or negative direct or indirect (from news media, employment history, or other people) experience related to dealing with an issue that motivates a blogger to talk about the organization to others as a kind of mental repetition to relieve the excitement or disappointment driven by the issue itself and balance his or her normal mental state. Issues are topics around which publics are formed (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), which can be used to identify issue publics and predict their communication behaviors. One of the key predicting factors is level of involvement, which refers to the perception that one can do something about an issue (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

In BMCC, influential bloggers perceive the importance of the issue and have the ability and drive to talk about the issue. Cho and Cameron (2005) applied the contingency theory of strategic conflict management to identify netizen as a new contingency factor that affects online crisis communication given the power of collective opinions and advocacy online. In BMCC, we propose that blog-driven opinion leadership is issue specific, as blog opinion leaders (i.e., influential bloggers) are highly interested in discussing particular issues and have the power to do so. More specifically, these bloggers: (a) have more knowledge and experience regarding a specific issue than the average public, and/or (b) are more interested in learning about a specific issue than the average public (Perlmuter, 2008).

Second, self-involvement is related to a blogger’s need for self-confirmation. By talking to others about a product or an organization, bloggers can carry through their insecurities and build up authority and leadership. Trammell (2005) identified self-expression as the main motivations of bloggers. Miura and Yamashita (2007) found intention to continue blog writing was positively affected by bloggers’ being satisfied with benefits to self, relationships with others, and skill in handling information. Self-documentation and self-expression emerged as two of the seven motivations for blogging (Li, 2007). Therefore, we suggest that this kind of involvement and motivation include gaining attention, feeling like a pioneer, knowing an inside story, enhancing self-image, confirming judgment, and assuming leadership (Dichter, 1966; Engel et al., 1993;
Sundaram et al., 1998). Consequently, we propose the BMCC’s first set of theoretical proposition:

Proposition 1.1.a (P 1.1.a): Influential bloggers likely engage themselves in blogging about organizational crisis out of their issue involvement.

Proposition 1.1.b (P 1.1.b): Influential bloggers likely engage themselves in blogging about organizational crisis out of their self-involvement.

Influential blogger credibility and blog effectiveness. The primary effectiveness of eWOM lies in the opinion leader’s lack of material interest, opinion leader’s genuine care for others’ well-being, and his or her knowledge and experience. Johnson, Kaye, Richard, and Wong (2008) found that blogs were judged as moderately credible, but more credible than any mainstream media or online source. When bloggers’ perceived trustworthiness as high, argument quality has a greater impact on brand attitudes than when bloggers’ perceived trustworthiness as low (Chu & Kamal, 2008). According to Ditcher (1966), there are seven types of influential groups for a consumer’s purchase decision: (a) commercial authority, (b) celebrity, (c) connoisseur/mavin (i.e., groups that have lots of knowledge and experience but not professionally connected with the product), (d) sharer of interest, (e) intimate (empathic adaptation of intimates’ buying and consumption behavior as habit), (f) person of good will (out of altruism, truly understands the consumer’s needs and attitudes), and (g) person carrying tangible product efficiency evidence. Although the psychological mechanism and basic human needs for WOM apply generally to blog communication, there are many contextual, situational, and personal factors fostering the distinction between blog WOM factors from traditional WOM factors. Therefore, it is extremely important for public relations professionals to understand blogger–follower relationships, blogger–issue relationships, and follower–issue relationships for an effective blog-mediated communication model. To understand information processing on blogs, Chu and Kamal (2008) investigated how perceived blogger trustworthiness affects blog readers’ elaboration of brand-related messages and interaction effects with argument quality. The results suggest that when perceived blogger trustworthiness is high, argument quality has a greater impact on brand attitudes than when perceived blogger trustworthiness is low. In a related vein, Kelleher (2009) found that relational maintenance strategies as perceived by public interacting with organizational bloggers correlate positively and significantly with relational outcomes.
In BMCC context, we propose two key factors contributing to the influence of external influential blogger’ effectiveness in persuading blog followers in a given organizational crisis: first, the blogger’s information authority, whether bloggers are insiders of the organization or the issue; second, the blogger’s information credibility, whether bloggers convey a genuine sense of community and public interest. Therefore, we propose:

**Proposition 1.2 (P 1.2):** Influential blogs exert more influence when the blogger’s information authority and credibility both are high.

The Direct Influence of Influential Blogs on Blog Followers and Media Coverage

Influential external blogs can impact other key publics directly or indirectly (see Figure 1). Direct influence occurs through the crisis information that is generated by influential bloggers and conveyed by their influential blogs to blog followers via e-opinion leadership and to other media (both traditional and social media) via issue agenda building. Indirect influence occurs through offline WOM communication.

**Blog followers’ motivation and use of influential blogs in crisis.** Through virtual communities, consumers extend their social networks to people they have never met in person and then seek out these people regularly for their opinions about products and services (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). Therefore, crisis information-laden blogs provide a new platform for online WOM communication, working as an informal communication channel through which personal-, product/service-, or organization-related information is conveyed, shared, and processed. Consumers who share their opinions online utilize online opinion exchange platforms in five ways (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004): (a) topic-related utility, which is the utility consumers experience when they make a contribution that adds value to the community; (b) consumption utility, which is created when consumers use the contributions that other community members have provided to benefit themselves personally; (c) approval utility, which relates to the satisfaction consumers feel when they are commended by others; (d) moderator-related utility, which occurs after a third party helps make it easier for a community member to make a complaint; and (e) homeostasis utility, which is founded upon the desire people have for equilibrium or balance in their lives. Kaye (2005) identified six primary motivations
for readers’ accessing blogs: information seeking and media check, convenience, personal fulfillment, political surveillance, social surveillance, and expression and affiliation.

From BMCC perspective, we propose that blog followers use influential blogs out of the following three motivations: (a) issue relevance: Blog followers are interested in the current issue discussed by the blogger; (b) information seeking and sharing: Blog followers search for additional information that is not available from other public channels such as news media. In the meantime, blog followers’ comments and responses posted on the blogs are responded to and evaluated by the blogger and other blog followers; and (c) emotional venting and support: Blog followers share their positive experience and/or venting negative experience regarding the issue or organization with the influential bloggers and other blog followers, which creates a sense of compassion, understanding, comfort, and excitement.

Examining the motivation of both speakers (opinion leaders) and listeners (opinion seekers), Dichter (1966) emphasized that effective WOM communication or opinion leadership influence depends on the fitness between opinion leaders, opinion seekers, the product, and the quality of the message itself. In BMCC context, in addition to the blogger’s information credibility and authority discussed earlier, we propose that blog influence on blog followers also lies in the issue fit between the content provided by the influential blogs and the blog followers’ interest and attitude. Therefore, we propose one of our second sets of theoretical propositions:

Proposition 2.1 (P 2.1): Influential blogs affect blog followers by providing issue-fit opinion leadership to address the followers’ motivation for informational and emotional needs of the crisis issue.

Influential blogs’ issue agenda building on media crisis coverage. There is no doubt that bloggers do not cover crises identically as do journalists. For example, bloggers are not required to follow journalistic standards such as fact checking, seeking out alternative views, comprehensively covering the news, maintaining independence from those they cover, and attempting impartiality (Raine et al., 2002; Xenos, 2008). Nevertheless, bloggers provide crisis-related information that can be useful for journalists working for traditional media. Several recent high profile crises, such as the 2005 CBS “Rathergate” and the 2008 “Bittergate,” incidents were first reported by bloggers, not journalists (Bruns, 2007). Also, bloggers are becoming increasingly interested in covering crises. In an analysis of more
than one million blogs after the 2005 London bomb attack, Thelwall (2006) found that the attacks were the most significant event in the English-language blogosphere for 2 weeks. As Robinson (2006) argued, the mainstream journalism blogs are now reifying traditional journalistic norms and the j-bloggers are shifting standard journalistic values, as readers and other nonjournalists now can help craft the story, which might have a great impact on crisis news coverage.

Some scholars describe a symbiotic relationship between bloggers and journalists (e.g., Tremayne, Zheng, Lee, & Jeong, 2006), partially due to the fact that bloggers are dependent on the mainstream media for content (Lowrey & Latta, 2008). Others, however, find that bloggers serve as watchdogs to the traditional media by identifying inaccuracies in their reporting (Sousa, 2006) and removing the information gate keeping traditionally associated with mass media (Rosen, 2005; Singer, 2005). Those in the second camp assert that bloggers challenge journalists’ privilege of agenda-setting by developing alternative agendas (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008). Chaffee and Metzger (2001) noted well before the rise of the blogosphere that the “key problem for agenda-setting theory will change from what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about” (p. 375). Only a handful of scholars have followed up on Chaffee and Metzger’s insights (e.g., Domingo & Heinonen, 2008; Xenos, 2008), providing initial evidence that blogs may, in fact, disrupt the agenda-setting function of the traditional mass media. Therefore, we propose that influential blogs can indirectly affect key publics in a crisis in a two-step flow. News content related to the blog-mediated issues will affect blog-resist publics (those who do not read those influential blogs) as well as blog followers’ perceptions, attitudes, and behavior toward the organization. The blog-content-related news coverage can further motivate bloggers to generate more content about the crisis. Thus, given the issue agenda-building function influential blogs demonstrate in crisis media coverage, we propose:

**Proposition 2.2 (P 2.2):** Influential blogs created by influential bloggers affect media coverage by building/suggesting crisis issue agendas and providing alternative crisis information to journalists.

**Indirect Blog Influence through Media and Offline WOM**

Influential external blogs can also impact key publics indirectly (see Figure 1), which refers to the process that: (a) the crisis information generated by influential bloggers first influences the media (mass media and other
social media) via journalists’ news information search and processing, and then the media-selected information is consumed by influential bloggers, blog followers, and those publics not exposed to blogs; and (b) the offline WOM among the key publics regarding the crisis topics.

**Media effects.** For publics not exposed to influential external blogs, unless the organization discloses the crisis information directly to the public, mass media tend to be the main source of information (Littlefield & Quenette, 2007; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). Based on the agenda-building function of influential blog discussed earlier, if reporters choose to cover crisis topics based on influential blogs or use the blogs as references, reporters are indirectly influenced by issues provided by influential bloggers. The same mass media effects also impact influential bloggers and blog followers, once they are exposed to the mass media coverage. In addition, there are also media effects through other social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. Therefore, we propose one of our third sets of propositions:

Proposition 3.1 (P 3.1): Influential blogs exert influence indirectly on key publics’ issue awareness by providing the media with newsworthy content that is later edited and disseminated to general news audiences.

**Offline WOM.** According to Lazarsfeld and Menzel (1963), people tend to be influenced more by face-to-face contacts with other people. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) defined opinion leaders as those people who are interested in new issues and tend to diffuse their opinions about them. In BMCC setting, influential blogs’ content is likely to be incorporated and conveyed by bloggers to other publics, or by blog followers to other publics, in an interpersonal communication setting. Therefore, we propose:

Proposition 3.2 (P 3.2): Influential blogs exert influence indirectly on key publics’ issue awareness through offline word-of-mouth communication of issues among bloggers, blog followers, and other publics.

**APPLYING THE BMCC MODEL**

Now that we have reviewed the conceptual model’s key constructs, we turn to a discussion of how crisis managers can use the model to identify influential external blogs and engage influential bloggers, introducing the
model’s last set of propositions. The study concludes with some observations about the future of blog-mediated crisis communication research.

Issue Monitoring and Influential External Blogs

As we defined earlier, influential external blogs may be ones that organizations monitor as part of their regular issues management process, or may be new ones that emerge during a specific crisis. Based on previous discussion, organizations cannot respond to all issues and must prioritize issues through environmental scanning, monitoring, forecasting, and assessment (Hallahan, 2001). Heath and Palenchar (2009) defined an issue as a “contestable point, a difference of opinion regarding fact, value, or policy, the resolution of which has consequences for the organization’s strategic plan and future success or failure” (p. 93) and a crisis as “an event that creates an issue, keeps it alive, or gives it strength” (p. 278). These scholars suggest the following guidelines for when an organization should decide to monitor an issue: (a) The issue is listed in standard indexes, suggesting that journalists believe it is legitimate; (b) a case can be made that the issue will threaten an organization’s operations or offer a market opportunity; and (c) the issue is associated with at least one identifiable group that has the ability to bring it to the legislative agenda. In addition, organizations should prioritize issues by rating them on two dimensions: (a) likelihood of becoming a crisis and (b) potential impact if the issue becomes a crisis (Coombs, 2007).

It is especially important to monitor issues that emerge online because online issues can take dramatic turns and multiply more quickly than issues that emerge offline (Coombs, 2002, 2008). Also, the Internet facilitates more effective issues management by making environmental scanning more efficient and allowing public relations practitioners to directly engage publics (Coombs, 2008) using more effective crisis intervention strategies. Thus, we add to existing issues monitoring guidelines that an organization should also monitor an issue when it is legitimated online by influential bloggers through the content they generate on the influential blogs.

*Issues as rumors.* In many respects, blog-generated issues are rumors (Kang, GarciaRuano, & Lin, 2008; Keren, 2006) that organizations must manage before they turn into crises. Public relations professionals generally consider rumors harmful or potentially harmful because they are extremely difficult to control, potentially activating crises (Kang et al., 2008). Rumors also can lower morale, generate bad press, result in loss of trust between management and key publics, increase employee stress at work, decrease productivity, and sully an organization’s reputation (DiFonzo, 2007). The
hallmarks of a rumor (i.e., lack of certainty and circulation) are even more evident in blog-mediated crisis communication, as the impact and spreading speed of rumors has become quicker due to Internet technology (Kang et al., 2008). From a crisis manager’s perspective, it is critical to monitor rumors as ongoing issues either generated or conveyed by an influential external blog.

**Rumors as a crisis type.** According to DiFonzo (2008), a rumor is “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arises in contexts of ambiguity, danger, or potential threat and that function to help people make sense and manage risk” (p. 13). Coombs and Holladay (2005) identified rumors as victim crises and define rumors as false information about an organization and/or its product that is circulated in the marketplace. Some rumors require immediate responses (e.g., rumors about poor customer service, such as the ones experienced by Dell since the late 1990s), yet others legally cannot be addressed (e.g., rumors about mergers and acquisitions, such as the one experienced by Yahoo and Google in 2008). Jin et al. (2007) noted that for rumors, publics demand more cognitive coping to figure out what is going on, as well as moderate the level of organizational engagement. The major types of organizational rumors include: turnover, pecking order, job security, and job quality; costly error; and consumer concern (DiFonzo, 2008). Accordingly, rumor publics can be either primarily internal or primarily external. DiFonzo proposed four emotion-based types of rumors: (a) dread, fearful of a negative event; (b) wish, hopeful of a positive event; (c) wedge-driving, expressive of hostility toward a people or group; and (d) curiosity, intellectually puzzling. In BMCC context, they are highly relevant to blog followers’ motivations, such as issue relevance, information seeking, and sharing, as well as emotional venting and comfort. A rumor generated or spread on an influential blog can be especially critical when it fits into blog followers’ needs. Therefore, in the following, we discuss blog-mediated organizational rumor as the most manifested crisis type initiated/amplified by influential external blogs and the communication process they are embedded.

**Monitoring blog-mediated organizational rumors.** The life cycle of rumors includes generation, evaluation (or belief), and transmission (DiFonzo, 2008; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2002). These three rumor life-cycle stages can be applied to effective organizational blog communication in times of crisis. Based on rumor psychology, the public’s belief in a blog-mediated rumor is associated with: (a) consistency with attitudes (i.e., if a rumor supports or accords with what a public already hold to be true, it is plausible that the public would assign greater credence to it); (b) rumor
source credibility, which is directly related to trust; (c) rumor repetition (i.e., frequency of updates); and (d) rumor response (by the organization or by others; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2002). Yang and Lim (2009) also noted that perceived credibility has a strong effect on whether blog followers trust bloggers (and, by extension, the rumors generated and/or supported by bloggers); these researchers add that blogs’ interactivity and bloggers’ dialogical self-portrayal further contribute to the effectiveness of blogs. Finally, blogs’ frequency of updates affects how influential blogs are (Lowrey 2006; Sweester & Metzgar, 2007; Xenos, 2008). Based on these factors, we propose a matrix summarizing the factors that help predict which blogs are likely to become influential in any given crisis, including blog-mediated rumor (see Table 1).

The matrix also offers initial suggestions for how crisis managers can evaluate each of the blog factors, given that there currently is not a consensus as to the most effective way to evaluate blogs (Gillin, 2008b). We divide the metrics into three common measurement types: outputs, outtakes, and outcomes (Paine, 2007). Outputs measure how many people are paying attention to organizations’ blogs; outtakes measure social capital and social networking; and outcomes measure how blogs affect people’s behaviors and relationships (Lindenmann, 2003).

The majority of blog measurement metrics focus on outputs. These include the (a) number of posts or comments on blogs, (b) number of unique visitors to blogs, (c) number of links from other sites to blogs, (d) number of RSS subscribers, and (e) number of links to and from other sites (“State of blogosphere,” 2008a; Gillin, 2008a; WebProNews, 2007). Of these output metrics, the first one—the number of posts or comments—receives the most attention, but also is the most challenging to evaluate (Gillin, 2008a, 2008b; “State of blogosphere,” 2008a). Merely counting numbers for this category is meaningless unless organizations also rate the valence (positive, neutral, or negative) and the subject matter of the comments. Paine (2008a, 2008b) recommended dividing comments into three categories: comment primo (a comment that launches a discussion on someone else’s blog); comment grande (a long comment posted on a peer blog that is advertised via a cross-blog posting); and comment informative (a comment that expands on a general or incomplete statement made in a peer’s blog entry).

Outtake metrics include: (a) search engine authority and/or rank number of each blog, (b) endorsements from traditional and/or social media, and (c) business/media affiliation of the blogger. Finally, outcome metrics are the most difficult to quantify and, not surprisingly, are the least frequently mentioned when discussing blog measurement. Outcome metrics that have been suggested are: (a) key publics’ awareness of blogs and (b) key publics’
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of comments about crisis by valence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of unique visitors</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of RSS subscribers</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of crisis-related links to and from other sites</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outtakes</strong></td>
<td>Search engine blog rank</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third-party endorsements</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Business/media affiliation of the blogger</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>Key publics’ awareness of blog</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Key publics’ post-crisis trust of blog</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By linking the blog characteristics and blog measurement tools, this matrix (see Table 1) provides a practical guide that crisis managers can utilize in influential blog identification and prioritization, which will pave ways for more effective rumor assessment and crisis response strategy making.

Strategies for Engaging Influential External Blogs

Once crisis managers identify which influential blogs to monitor routinely and during a crisis using the metrics just discussed, they must decide how, if at all, to respond to these blogs. Not all blogs merit direct responses, but we argue that influential blogs must be monitored for issues that can become crises. Once these blogs and issues are identified, crisis managers can apply different response options depending upon the crisis (i.e., rumor) generation phase (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response options</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Rumor phases</th>
<th>Crisis recovery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Base</td>
<td>Instructing information</td>
<td>Generation</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adapting information: Corrective action</td>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base</td>
<td>Adapting information: Emotion</td>
<td>Transmission</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deny</td>
<td>Attack the accuser</td>
<td>Crisis recovery</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Denial</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scapegoat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ignore</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diminish</td>
<td>Excuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebuild</td>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforce</td>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Victimage</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Endorsement</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punish*</td>
<td>Legal action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Not a recommended blog-response strategy.
Rumor psychology and blog response strategies. Rumor psychology is one theoretical framework that can be applied directly in understanding crisis responses in the blogosphere, because rumor is the most manifested form of blog-mediated crisis as discussed earlier. DiFonzo (2008) suggested a set of rumor-quelling strategies that can help public relations professionals manage each stage of the blog-mediated rumor cycle: (a) rumor generation, (b) rumor belief, and (c) rumor transition. During the rumor generation stage, organizations should reduce uncertainty by providing accurate and timely information through open channels of communication. Organizations also should facilitate emotional and economic security among employees and inculcate trust in leaders. During the rumor belief stage, organizations should attempt to reduce belief of the rumor through rebuttal, especially by gathering the support of neutral spokespersons. Other strategies are increasing skepticism and cultivating a cooperative and trusting environment. During the rumor transmission stage, organizations attempt to dissuade people from spreading the rumor, including taking punitive steps (e.g., police investigations and lawsuits) if necessary. This final recommendation reflects a legal approach, rather than a public relations approach to crisis management and generally is not recommended for effective crisis management (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995; Huang & Su, 2009). Given a rumor’s negative impact on any organization, we recognize that organizations attempt to recover from blog-mediated crises throughout the life cycle of a rumor. In the crisis management literature, recovery is considered critical for mitigating long-term reputation and financial damage (Coombs, 2007; Seeger et al., 2003). We also note, however, that a rumor may never go beyond the rumor generation phase and, likewise, an organization may never fully recover from a rumor. Nevertheless, we propose that throughout the life cycle of a blog-mediated crisis, organizations should attempt to repair their reputations through whatever ethical means necessary. Thus, the rumor transmission stages coupled with crisis recovery strategies can be used to plan for effective crisis preparation and responses in BMCC context.

Crisis management and blog response strategies. Existing crisis management literature can be well applied in BMCC practice. The literature first states that not all crises generate intense interest from the media (including blogs). Coombs and his colleagues (Coombs 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002) noted that the crisis type, crisis severity, organizations’ crisis history, and the public’s attribution of crisis responsibility directly affect how organizations can respond to any given crisis. Other scholars have noted that the duration of a crisis affects how intensively and extensively media outlets (including blogs) cover issues and crises (e.g., Downs, 1972; Liu, 2010).
Crisis duration also is partially related to how quickly and effectively organizations respond to any given crisis (Huang & Su, 2009; Taylor & Kent, 2007).

Two dominant crisis management theories outline options for response strategies: Benoit’s (1997) image repair theory and Coombs’ (2007) situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). Given that Coombs developed SCCT from image repair theory, we discuss only SCCT’s response strategies, which are divided into four categories: deny, diminish, rebuild, and reinforce (Coombs 2007; Heath & Coombs 2006). Before selecting a response option, however, SCCT states that the first priority for any crisis response is to protect stakeholders from harm through providing instructing and adapting information (Coombs, 2007). Instructing information notifies stakeholders what actions they should take to protect themselves from physical threats generated by crises. Adapting information helps stakeholders cope with any psychological threats generated by crises. Through disseminating adapting information, organizations express concern for those affected by the crisis. Organizations also inform stakeholders about corrective actions, which are how organizations plan to solve or prevent problems that cause crises. Therefore, instructing and adapting information are base responses required for all crises and are combined with the other four response options: deny, diminish, rebuild, and reinforce.

SCCT’s deny response option includes three strategies: attack the accuser, denial, and scapegoat (Heath & Coombs, 2006). Organizations attack the accuser to confront the person or group that claims a crisis exists. Denial occurs when organizations state that a crisis does not exist. Scapegoating is used when organizations state that someone else is responsible for the crisis. Liu (2010) adds ignoring as a fourth deny option; organizations use ignoring to implicitly state that a crisis does not exist by disregarding the crisis. SCCT recommends that organizations use denial strategies to respond to rumors and unwarranted challenges (Coombs 2007).

SCCT’s diminish response option includes two strategies: excuse and justification (Heath & Coombs, 2006). Organizations excuse by providing an explanation for the crisis that limits the organizations’ responsibility. Justification is when organizations explain why the crisis occurred. Liu (2010) added separation as a third diminish option; other scholars (e.g., Benoit & Brinson 1999; Hearit, 2005) also have proposed separation as an image repair strategy. Organizations use separation to disconnect themselves from the responsible parties within their organization. SCCT recommends that organizations use diminishment strategies for two crisis situations: (a) accident crises when there is no crisis history and no unfavorable prior
reputation and (b) victim crises when there is a crisis history and/or unfavorable prior reputation (Coombs, 2007).

SCCT’s rebuild response option includes two strategies: compensation and apology. Compensation occurs when organizations financially support crisis victims. Apology is used when organizations express regret for the crisis. Liu (2010) added transcendence, which is when organizations shift the focus away from the immediate crisis to a larger concern or issue (Benoit, 1997). SCCT recommends that organizations use rebuilding strategies for any preventable crisis (Coombs, 2007).

Finally, SCCT’s reinforce response is supplemental and must be used with at least one of the other response options (Heath & Coombs, 2006). This option includes three strategies: bolstering, ingratiation, and victimage (Coombs, 2007; Heath & Coombs, 2006). Bolstering occurs when organizations highlight past good deeds. Ingratiation is used when organizations praise stakeholders. Victimage occurs when organizations state that they are a victim of the crisis. Liu (2010) adds endorsement, which organizations use to identify third-party support. Therefore, we propose that crisis managers should primarily treat blog-mediated crises as rumors and combine rumor-management strategies with traditional crisis response and reputation repair strategies (see Table 3).

Proposition 4.1 (P 4.1): Crisis managers should engage in issue monitoring at every stage of the rumor generation process (generation, belief, and transmission) involving blog followers, blog-resist publics, and mass media outlets.

Proposition 4.2 (P 4.2): Crisis managers should focus on crisis management strategies to circumvent rumor generation, belief, and transmission on and through influential blogs.

FUTURE OF BMCC RESEARCH

Public relations professionals and academics have only just begun to measure the impact of the blogosphere on public relations practices. Given that a recent survey of public relations professionals found that only 39% are measuring what their publics are communicating about their organizations on blogs, there is a documented need for more metrics (Wright & Hinson, 2009). Such metrics are especially important for managing crises, events that if not handled properly can radically alter an organization’s future. However, metrics not tied to theory provide limited predictive validity and generalizability.
The proposed model is an initial attempt to help public relations professionals better manage blog-mediated crises. The model is based on the assumption that engagement is the most effective way to manage crises, which researchers agree is the ideal way to measure Internet-based social media channels (Paine & Kowalski, 2008; Scoble & Israel, 2006; Trammel, 2006). As the model is only conceptual, it requires testing for validation. As an immediate next step, we will interview public relations professionals to receive feedback on the model. These interviews will help evaluate the model and identify missing components. Future research will then include case studies as well as experiments and surveys to quantitatively test the model. As the first known model for managing blog-mediated crisis communication, our model provides a strong foundation for future research on best practices in blog-mediated crisis communication.

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Bruns, A. (2007). Methodologies for mapping the political blogosphere: An exploration using the IssueCrawler research tool. First Monday, 12, article four.


