The benefit of issue management: anticipating crises in the digital age

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to find out how issue management and media monitoring is exercised in the digital age to anticipate crises. More specifically, it was investigated how these practices differ across communication professionals, organizations, and sectors in the Netherlands. Organizations are nowadays confronted with a fast-changing environment. Anticipating dicey issues, being in control of the flow of messages, and managing various stakeholders on diverse channels becomes a primary concern for organizations these days.
Design/methodology/approach – The study relies on qualitative interviews with 17 communication professionals working in various industrial sectors in the Netherlands. Professionals were recruited from distinct organizations and from diverse sectors, including media, public affairs, technology, consultancy, municipality, lottery, oil/gas, cultural, insurance, and the financial industry. The interview data were analyzed by means of an inductive analysis and in-depth reading.
Findings – Practitioners seem to acknowledge the importance of issue monitoring. However, professionals differ with regard to their expertise in online media monitoring, depending on the sector they work for. Stakeholder mapping and the monitoring of competitors has been found to be crucial for issue management, but also to vary among large and small organizations. Eventually, monitoring in times of crises was seen indispensable. It also has the potential to empower practitioners within their organizations.
Originality/value – New technologies, external services, and automized monitoring processes have facilitated issue monitoring for professionals to a great extent, making it possible to analyze great amounts of data efficiently in short time and with fewer resources. Furthermore, the focus of media monitoring is increasingly moving toward the online sphere, including the active engagement of stakeholders. Eventually, the empowerment of practitioners through online monitoring practices in times of crises can be considered as a further step toward the positioning of communication professionals within the dominant coalition.

Keywords Social media, Issue management, Crisis communication, Strategic communication, Communication management

Paper type Research paper

The financial crisis, lawsuits, consumer criticism, or simply technological innovations – monitoring such issues, and identifying and reacting to them at an early stage is crucial for the success of an organization these days (Elenkov, 1997; Taylor *et al.*, 2003). In today's highly competitive environment, organizations need to pay attention to their changing environment in order to develop and to maintain a favorable reputation among the public and to secure their legitimacy in the market (cf. Jones and Chase, 1979; Coombs, 1999). This necessity has become even more decisive with the rise of digital technologies, the importance of social media communication, and the power of online communities in forming and affecting an organization's reputation (cf. Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2013).

In addition, the growing amplitude of media and communication channels has put organizations in the need of controlling the flow of messages to prevent false presentations of the organization on the one hand, and strengthening the effectiveness of corporate communication on the other hand (Coombs, 1999; Cornelissen, 2011). Particularly in times of crises, anticipating dicey issues, being in control of the flow of messages, and managing

various stakeholders becomes a primary concern of organizations (cf. Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2013). However, little is known about how organizations screen their environment in practice, where they put their focus, and how this differs across organizations from diverse sectors and among public relations practitioners with various levels of experience.

Although research on issue management has a long history (e.g. Heath, 1990; Jaques, 2009b; Jones and Chase, 1979; Taylor *et al.*, 2003), there are only few studies that discuss the practice in recent times and specifically with regard to online media and its contingencies on organizational and individual factors. Therefore, there is a need – for scholars and communication practitioners alike – to scrutinize how issue management is performed in the current communication environment. This becomes particularly relevant amid a digitized world where crises evolve quickly and where the online sphere has become a major platform for public relations and communication management.

Theoretical background
Issue management
Over the past 40 years, issue management has attracted considerable attention from research in the field of communication management, public relations, and related disciplines, (e.g. Gaunt and Ollenburger, 1995; Taylor *et al.*, 2003). The earliest attempts to define issue management trace back to the late 1970s and to Howard Chase's book, dealing with issue management as a discipline onto itself (Chase, 1984, p. 38). In the past 30 years, scholars and practitioners have defined, categorized, and conceptualized issue management in various ways (e.g. Hainsworth and Meng, 1988; Heath, 1990; Taylor *et al.*, 2003), revealing similarities and overlaps to other disciplines, such as crisis management (Jaques, 2007) or strategic issue management (Jaques, 2009a).

Definitions. Heath and Nelson (1986) understand issue management as "the identification and monitoring of trends in public opinion that may mature into public policy and the regulation of corporations or industries" (p. 13). Taylor *et al.* (2003) take a more organizational approach and define issue management as "one tool that helps organizations to identify trends, select courses of action, and guide external communication with a variety of publics" (p. 257). Heath (1990) focuses on the result of issue management, asserting that "[i]ssues management can assist their organization's efforts to obtain information from their environment. This information is used for decision-making and adjusting purposes, including yielding to external forces or seeking to influence them as means for achieving harmony" (p. 43).

Although Heath (1997) has come to the conclusion that no consensus definition of issue management exists, we dare to formulate a working definition of issue management for this paper based on the definitions cited above: issue management encompasses the monitoring or scanning of the organizational environment in order to identify issues and trends, adapt to changes, and/or to decide for managerial or communicative actions that are aimed at creating mutual understanding with relevant stakeholders.

Development. Up to now, Jones and Chase (1979) have defined the most prominent model of issue management, as "a tool for predicting the effect of internal and external environmental changes on the performance of the overall corporate system" (Chase, 1984, p. 34). More specifically, the model describes five steps to be taken when applying issue management: issue identification, issue analysis, issue change strategy options, issue action program, and evaluation of results. Following Taylor *et al.* (2003), several other models on issue management were developed after Jones and Chase publication (e.g. Crable and Vibbert, 1985). More recent research dealing with issue management has shifted its focus from its purpose to serve organizational management, to a more ethical and public-centered approach. For example, Place (2010) introduced the deontological theory of ethical issue management, whereas Taylor *et al.* (2003) advocated for the integrated "engagement" framework of issue management that emphasizes active dialogue between an organization and its publics. In a

similar way, Jaques (2006a) discussed the convergence between activism and issue management, and argues that both disciplines can mutually benefit from each other.

Systems approach. In line with our working definition, issue management in this paper is understood as a systemic process, where issues are managed in an organized and systematic manner that serves strategic decision-making. Within the systems approach, communication is seen as a "tactical response to environmental concerns" (Taylor *et al.*, 2003). Issue management considered from this perspective provides two purposes then: on the one hand, it functions as an "early warning system" to prevent organizations from facing surprising issues that might be considered as threats or opportunities (e.g. Choo, 2001). On the other hand – through its integrating forces – it provides crucial information and assessments for the formulation of effective and systematic management strategies (e.g. Taylor *et al.*, 2003). In that sense, it corresponds with the first step of the original model of issue management by Jones and Chase (1979), namely, issue identification. Hence, issue management as defined in this paper deals with the monitoring of relevant media and information to inform strategic management. In that way, issue management becomes closely related to the concept of environmental scanning (e.g. Choo, 1999).

Environmental scanning

Choo (1999) defines environmental scanning as "the acquisition and use of information about events, trends and relationships in an organization's external environment, the knowledge of which would assist management in planning the organization's future course of action" (p. 21). Similar to issue management, the scanning and interpreting of changes in the environment is considered decisive for the performance and success of an organization. It is seen vital for the implementation of adaption processes within organizations as reactions to external changes and future orientation (e.g. Hambrick, 1981). Hence, in order to survive in today's fast-paced environment, organizations are in need of screening their surroundings effectively and timely, being able to interpret the dynamics of stimuli (Sutcliffe, 2001). In fact, Vos and Shoemaker (2006) have defined environmental monitoring as "the investigation of the social surroundings with the purpose of observing any developments" (p. 89), which also involves media monitoring.

Media monitoring. Following this, media monitoring can be seen as a more specific yet pivotal form of environmental scanning. Media monitoring is known as a technique to scan the media environment of an organization for relevant events, heated discussions, or upcoming trends that are of importance for the organization and which might eventually arise to an issue (Cloudman and Hallahan, 2006). It includes the screening of how public opinion and the socio-political environment changes as well as the identification of developments that require close or constant observation (e.g. Sumser, 2001). Media monitoring, hence, works as an early warning system (Taylor *et al.*, 2003) and becomes particularly important in anticipating crisis situations (Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2013).

Online media monitoring. In the mid-1990s, commercial online databases or information services were already seen as useful tools to identify issues earlier and to invigorate issue management (Thomsen, 1995). While in the past, media monitoring has mainly covered print media and TV, today it seems that the screening of the internet and social media networks has gained additional significance for organizations (Grunig, 2009; Luoma-aho and Vos, 2009, 2010; Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2013). The role of the internet and digital media for public relations and communication management practices and its potential for media and issue monitoring has been discussed widely in management, corporate communication, and crisis communication research (e.g. Coombs, 2002; Crawford, 1999; Jaques, 2006b).

Given that the internet provides an extended platform for publics to connect and exchange each other's opinions on certain issues, Grunig (2009) has argued that digital media offer organizations unique opportunities to identify and engage with stakeholders.

www.

In fact, the internet provides an abundance of information on certain issues that practitioners can use to identify and formulate effective issue management strategies (Perry *et al.*, 2003; Thomsen, 1995). In that sense, Perry *et al.* (2003) pointed out that the internet could help organizations to scan the environment for relevant information, thereby anticipating crises. Heath (1998), for example, investigated how the public debate on the "decommission of Brent Spar" between Shell in the UK and Greenpeace had emerged and how it was dealt with online. He concluded that the internet provides a new platform where issues can be discussed and where they take on a more democratized character.

Challenges. However, the online sphere also presents new challenges for issue management. As Luoma-aho *et al.* (2013) have pointed out, the social media environment demands organizations to monitor their environment on a constant basis, interpreting and being able to spot and adapt to new information or weak signals. In studying the swine-flu discussion in Finland, Luoma-aho *et al.* warn that a "lack of monitoring and belated activity may lead to online issue arenas being dominated by extreme groups, who then strongly shape public opinion" (p. 239). Individuals have gained more power to exercise pressure on organizations through the web by publicly expressing criticism or spreading rumors in a fast and self-perpetuating way. Because of that, crises nowadays can both originate or become enlarged through the interactions of stakeholders on the web (Coombs, 2007).

Although these recent developments and challenges of issue monitoring are known from theory and practice, empirical research on the actual employment of issue monitoring by corporate communication professionals in the new media environment is limited. Recent studies on issue management have focused on issue arenas in the online sphere (Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2013), on case studies such as the Tylenol campaign by Johnson & Johnson (Veil and Kent, 2008) or on Merck and the AIDS activists (Taylor *et al.*, 2003), the convergence of activism with issue management (Jaques, 2006a), or ethical issue management by public relations practitioners (Place, 2010). However, research that focuses on how issue management is employed by communication professionals in recent times, on a daily basis, and with regard to the challenges of monitoring online and social media, is absent. In addition, there is a lack of empirical research in studying the differences across practitioners from diverse organizations and from various sectors. Hence, this study seeks to advance existing research in elaborating on the following two research questions:

RQ1. How do communication professionals manage and monitor issues in the digital age?

RQ2. What differences across professionals, sectors, and organizations can be observed?

Contingency
From literature on environmental scanning and monitoring, it can be argued that issue management is contingent on several factors (Choo, 2001). This can directly be related to the contingency theory of conflict management (Cancel *et al.*, 1997). The origin of this theory emerged from a critique on Grunigs' four models of public relations and particularly from the normative character of the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig and Grunig, 1992). Supporters of the contingency theory argue that Grunigs' model "fails to capture the complexity and multiplicity of the public relations environment" (Cancel *et al.*, 1997, p. 33).

Instead, Cancel *et al.* (1997) plead for a more realistic picture of strategic communication that considers public relations practices as contingent on a number of factors. Rather than an "either-or" perspective, the contingency theory supports the idea of a continuum based on which public relations practices can be situated. According to Cancel *et al.* (1997), excellence in public relations cannot be found on either side of the continuum, but the positioning might vary depending on the situation the organization is facing. Hence, following Cancel *et al.*'s (1997) reasoning, we assert that a single model of issue management

in the digital age might not exist as such, but might also depend on several internal and external organizational factors. To find out about these contingencies of issue management, we conducted interviews with several corporate communication professionals from diverse sectors and differing levels in expertise in the Netherlands.

Method and data

Sample

The data for this study are based on a convenience sample of 17 Dutch communication professionals. Most of them are holding a senior or leading position and have several years of experience. The professionals were recruited from distinct organizations and from diverse sectors, including media, public affairs, technology, consultancy, municipality, lottery, oil/gas, cultural, insurance, and the financial industry (see Table I for an overview).

Such an encompassing sampling approach allows researchers to cover a broad range of contexts to investigate communicative practices, such as issue management (cf. Thomsen, 1995). In this study it was particularly useful, as the aim was to unravel the contingencies of issue management and media monitoring among diverse organizations and sectors, but within this specific Dutch context. Although convenience sampling has the advantage of easy and low-cost accessible data, this method is also likely to yield inherent biases, especially compared to probability sampling (Zikmund *et al.*, 2013). To counteract this tendency and to secure a balanced sample, all potential respondents were reviewed and discussed within the research team before the actual interviews were conducted.

Data collection

For the implementation of the interviews, an interview guide was developed with general and specific questions concerning communication and issue management, involving topics such as daily routines, professional role, media orientation, and experience with issue and crises management (cf. Place, 2010)[1]. In line with the approach used by Cancel *et al.* (1999), we made use of semi-structured interviews to collect our data in an organized and fairly controlled manner. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview guide served as a checklist: if all pre-defined topics were discussed and the interviewees had nothing to add to his/her responses, the interviews were brought to an end (cf. Cancel *et al.*, 1999). The 17 practitioners were interviewed by eight individual members of the research team through direct contact

Function of interviewee	Sector
Editor-in-chief	Media
Management advisor for legal/communication	Insurance
Team leader of corporate communications	Lottery
Liability manager	Insurance
Senior corporate communication advisor	Municipal
Coordinator of European policy (in the field of rare disease and cancer)	Health
Support team member crisis/issue management	Gas/oil
Head of communication department	Media
Internal communication advisor	Bank
Head of communication department and spokesperson	Media
Marketing and communication consultant	Consultancy
Manager of corporate communications	Technology
Senior communication consultant	Consultancy
Head of marketing and communications	Cultural
Director of public affairs	Consultancy
Head of crisis communication and media relations	Technology
Advisor in communications	Consultancy

Table I.
Overview of interviewees

at the practitioners' office or via telephone. All interviews were recorded with permission of the respondents and transcribed by the research team members afterwards. The average interview time was approximately one hour; the interviewees were not paid for their participation.

Data analysis
The interviews were analyzed by using the constant comparative method for the inductive analysis of interview data, as employed by Cancel *et al.* (1999) and Place (2010). First, one coder performed an in-depth reading of all transcripts. Second, this coder made a summary of the interviews, along with an extensive list of patterns and themes related to the respondents' answers. The themes were linked to the topics discussed in the theory section and the general overarching research questions. A second coder reviewed the summary and gave "scholar-to-scholar feedback."

Results

"[I]t is obviously impossible to manage issues that are the predictable results of unforeseen trends" (Jones and Chase, 1979, p. 3). This dilemma has also been mentioned by the 17 communication professionals interviewed in this study. The interviews have given useful insights regarding how communication professionals from diverse sectors in the Netherlands tackle this problem and how they exercise issue management in the digital age.

Relevance of issue management
Most of the interviewees reported that issue management is crucial for their daily work and that they employ a broad scope in order to be aware of a range of possible issues that could concern their companies. Having "an oversight of a number of important issues we (the organization) will face" (team leader of corporate communication, lottery) was perceived as important by most of the interviewees. Practitioners also seemed to be aware of the fact that an organization has to "be prepared for everything" (editor-in-chief, listed media company) that could impact the organization. In that sense, the interviewees agreed that no issue should be excluded *per se*. Instead, some of the communication professionals indicated that they are focusing on issues that are beyond the primary scope of the organization, and not only on those that are directly linked to the organization (e.g. products/services, stakeholders, buildings, etc.). This might relate to issues arising in another geographical area or even legislation issues on diverse political levels (regional, national, EU) that could somehow have an effect on the organization.

A director of public affairs from a consultancy with six years of experience called this the "outside-inside thinking," meaning to observe the outside world, knowing what stakeholders think about the company, and how they perceive the company from various perspectives. Hence, this does not only include the scanning of stakeholders, but this could also involve global issues or overall societal development, such as the "aging society," as stated by a liability manager at an insurance company with more than 25 years of experience.

Restrictions. However, at the same time, the practitioners in the interviews also admitted that it is oftentimes impossible to have a complete overview of all potential crises. The head of the communication department and spokesperson of a media company with more than a decade of experience reported: "We really look per situation, what happened and what is going on. And yes, then we reflect what is reasonable in this particular case, how severe the situation is." In some cases, it was explained that it is useful to connect recent crises with past experiences. In a similar sense, the head of marketing and communication from a cultural institute with five years of experience indicated that when something unexpected would happen, one would try to relate it to crises that have already been thought of and where communication strategies have already been prepared.

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Media monitoring

Media monitoring has often been used to describe the process of screening the environment for potential issues that could possibly arise to a crisis. In that way, media monitoring was not only perceived important to identify an issue at an early stage; but it has also been seen crucial to be prepared for a crisis. In fact, media monitoring was identified as the "first pillar of good issue management" (manager of corporate communication, technology firm).

Most of the practitioners understood monitoring as a means of screening their surroundings, to find out who is talking about the organization, what these people are talking about, in what context, and to identify attitudes toward the organization. Professionals oftentimes described the process of monitoring by using words of observation, such as "we keep an eye on that" (management advisor for legal/communication concerns, insurance) or by using metaphors such as "antennas" (corporate communication advisor, municipality) or "radar" (liability manager, insurance). These words were used to explain how monitoring can work as an alarm system that signals professionals immediately when something is mentioned about the company in the media.

However, while for some practitioners issue monitoring was perceived as a challenge, for some communication experts – particularly for professionals with long years of experience and from large companies – it was seen as a "running course of business" (e.g. manager of corporate communication, technology). These differences in professionalization have particularly become clear when taking a closer look at the different modes and foci of media monitoring and the actual processes of issue monitoring in times of crises, as reported by the interviewees.

Monitoring traditional media

Media monitoring can be exercised by means of various tools and by putting differing foci to news outlets and information. Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that traditional news media still play a crucial role in screening the environment for relevant issues that concern the organization. Overall, most of the communication professionals reported to monitor newspapers, TV, radio, or magazines on a regular basis. Especially programs that are popular among the citizens were perceived very important, since they are watched and trusted by a large audience and likely to be picked up by other media sources.

Nevertheless, depending on the organization and product of the company, the focus on traditional media was more or less pronounced in their daily monitoring activities. For example, a practitioner from a municipality (senior corporate communication advisor) admitted that they rather focus on social media. In fact, the monitoring of traditional media was reported by this practitioner to be more important in times of crises. This goes along with the statement of a coordinator of European policy in the field of health. The practitioner explained that the traditional media (newspapers, TV, radio, etc.) are still "the essential one" to monitor, particularly in times of crises. At the same time, the expert explained that they do not put too much focus on media content, but rather rely on trusted information sources (e.g. information from every EU member's state agencies).

Monitoring tools. Monitoring all traditional media in a timely and appropriate manner can require a lot of time and resources from an organization. In comparison to earlier days, practitioners have highlighted and reported to make use of a range of tools and techniques that facilitate the process of issue monitoring for traditional media. A director of public affairs reported: "Tools can make your life very easy. In the old days, scanning all the media, all the articles, I mean it's undoable." However, particularly for big companies or companies with many brands, it was reported to be very difficult to track the media presence by their own communication team (editor-in-chief, media). Therefore, the monitoring process was reported as being more and more outsourced to external monitoring services (e.g. Publistat in the Netherlands).

External monitoring services. According to the interviewees, communication practitioners would name these external monitoring services keywords that are related to the organization as well as media sources they are interested in. The monitoring services would then screen the print media (e.g. newspapers, magazines, etc.) for those keywords and send the communication professionals a daily (or less frequently) press clipping that contains all relevant articles related to the organization. Moreover, such external monitoring services sometimes provide reports about the overall evaluation of what is written about an organization in the media, particularly assessing media attention and the tone of voice.

Yet the extent to which organizations make use of these external monitoring services depends on the organization's focus and their resources available for outsourcing these monitoring activities. A liability manager from a listed insurance company said: "Once in a while we get to see a report about the monitoring. Our organization is not actively involved in this process, you could say." In comparison, the head of crisis communication and media relations from a big technology firm stated that they receive press clippings and media analysis of print and online media on a daily basis. In addition, every quarter they would be provided with a report on how the organization is presented in the media. The practitioner from this organization also indicated to receive daily social media monitorings as well as weekly competitor assessments. While other practitioners from the insurance, lottery, and technology sector also stated to receive daily monitoring clippings, some practitioners reported to employ such external monitoring services only in critical situations or crises. For example, the head of a communication department at a media company stated they would engage an external company particularly with regard to specific events, announcements or in times of crises.

Monitoring social media

Most of the interviewees agreed that monitoring social media constitutes an essential part of one's daily routines. The head of communications from a media company with 13 years of experience, for example, claimed: "Look, if someone says it is not [important to monitor social media], then he should choose another profession, I think." An editor-in-chief from a listed media company with less experience also pointed out that it is very important nowadays to know how people talk about you on the web, and in order to be able to anticipate growing issues or trends and to react to the needs of stakeholders in a timely and direct manner. Factors such as the "fastness" of the media, the danger of spreading negative information quickly like a "virus" (director of public affairs, consultancy), anonymity (manager of corporate communication, technology), as well as the inability to control information dissemination were named as driving forces for employing social media monitoring. Nevertheless, depending on the organization, the sector and the level of professionalization of the interviewees, it became clear that social media monitoring is not yet fully implemented in all organizations and varies with regard to the focus and tools employed. The fact that some practitioners called those tools "known search tools" (head of communication department and spokesperson, media) highlights that for some companies monitoring social media is already a matter of course, while for others it is still perceived as a challenge.

Status of social media monitoring. When being asked about the role of social media monitoring, a liability manager from an insurance company with 25 years of experience, for example, stated, "No, we are not that far yet. I do think this (social media monitoring) will receive more attention – soon. I think X (insurance company) will definitely develop a modern monitor strategy, some day." The practitioner explained that this reluctance in monitoring and interaction on social media channels might have something to do with the specific sector his/her company is situated in: "The insurance sector is a traditional one […] So, I don't know if these kind of interactions suit our sector." Similarly, a liability manager from a listed insurance company reported that they are lacking in monitoring new and

social media: "The monitoring of social media is still at an early stage." Similar answers were given by the head of crisis communication and media relations from a big technology firm, dealing with rockets and satellites, as well as from a team leader of corporate communication from a lottery.

On the other hand, a young professional from a gas/oil company, who has only been employed in his/her position for half a year, reported to be involved in a new project dealing with social media – particularly focusing on crisis communication. The practitioner pleaded for a move in crisis communication toward more social media within the energy sector: "So what you see now in crisis management especially in energy and oil is that it is shifting and that social media is used in order to educate people." According to the interviewee, the organization tries to get their stakeholders engaged in recent projects by responding and interacting with them on a regular basis (e.g. crowdsourcing ideas).

Interaction on social media. Interacting on social media was indeed seen as an important factor during social media monitoring practices. However, the extent to which social media messages (e.g. on Twitter or Facebook) are considered relevant for interaction was said to be very dependent on the situation and scope of the message (e.g. public affairs, consultancy). Practitioners reported that this has something to do with your connectedness with other social media personages (e.g. politicians, journalists, opinion leaders) and the presence and impact you have on those social media channels. To get their followers and stakeholders involved, the head of communication department at a media company with 13 years of experience explained that they try to post pictures, videos, or news that their stakeholders can share with their friends (e.g. on Instagram). Similarly, a marketing and communication consultant reported that they recently have employed an online strategy, including guidelines regarding what to communicate on social media (e.g. client cases) and how to interact with stakeholders on diverse platforms.

Social media platforms. In fact, the practitioners reported they monitor a range of social media platforms, with particular focus on Twitter and Facebook. For example, a senior corporate communication advisor from a municipality indicated that Twitter and Facebook are the most important social media networks for them. Besides, YouTube was seen as a channel for posting press conferences, while LinkedIn was considered a popular acquisition channel (e.g. marketing and communication consultant, consultancy). Blogs were also perceived as important outlets for monitoring online content (e.g. head of crisis communication and media relations, technology). More specifically, a liability manager from an insurance company referred to a recent incident, in which a blogger posted a rumor about the company and which quickly spread to a crisis. Although the message was removed quickly by the blogger himself, the information was picked up by others and became a widespread hoax.

Monitoring tools. Similar to traditional media, professionals work with keywords or specific platform tools, such as the hashtag (#) on Twitter, to monitor online media. In doing so, practitioners track events, conversations, comments, questions, complaints, but also sentiment (e.g. on Twitter). Twitter has been considered very useful to scan sentiment and to find out "where questions are and what is being criticized" (head of communication department, media company). Besides monitoring the platforms themselves, a senior corporate communication advisor from a municipality as well as a senior communication consultant reported to make use of tools like hootsuite, Talk Walker, or Google Alert. By means of such tools, it is possible for them to retrieve information concerning the organization as soon as it appears online, for example, via push mails. Push mails are e-mails that provide an overview of what has been published or said about an organization online, e.g., on online news media or blogs.

Webcare teams. However, monitoring social media and online content is challenging, as information gets spread instantly and on a continuous basis. Therefore, according to the

practitioners, monitoring issues online is often the task of a webcare or customer service team of an organization. A practitioner working for a big insurance company reported, for example, that they screen Twitter, blogs, and forums. Furthermore, they also watch out for complaints or questions by customers that need to be dealt with. In a similar vein, the manager of corporate communication from a well-known technology firm reported that they have a large web team (about 70 employees) that is responsible to get into conversations with clients online and respond to questions and inquiries. In addition, a few interviewees indicated that they have social media monitoring teams that regularly organize meetings in which they discuss social media messages, interactions, and conversations with clients, and assess them in light of the organization's positioning.

Monitoring stakeholders
Of particular relevance in spanning a scope for monitoring practices was the identification of relevant stakeholders according to the interviewees. By working with "stakeholder maps," practitioners are able to identify the most important stakeholders related to their organizational focus as well as relevant issues that have the potential to grow into crises. In so doing, they evaluate whether a story is of relevance and whether communicative action should be taken. However, according to the interviewees, the scope of these stakeholder maps might depend, once again, on the operational focus of the organization and the organizational resources that are available for monitoring their stakeholders.

A team leader of corporate communication at a lottery clarified: "In our case, you have retailers who sell our tickets, customers who need to buy it, the Ministry of Justice and Finance, the Authority on gambling." Depending on what stakeholders they want to reach (e.g. politicians), they would then focus on specific media outlets for communication (e.g. NRC, a quality newspaper in the Netherlands). Yet, a senior communication consultant from a communication consultancy pointed out that the scope of these stakeholder maps is limited to the size of the budget that is provided for each client. While big corporations take advantage of this service, small companies do not always see the urgency of these stakeholder maps, as stated by the practitioner. As he/she reported, they rather take the attitude of "wait and see."

Only a few of the interviewees reported to make a step beyond the simple analysis of stakeholder maps, and actively engage with them. The head of crisis communication and media relations from a big technology firm, for example, reported to be in active dialogue with their stakeholders. This includes having interviews with relevant stakeholders on possible negative outcomes of a crisis, and providing information about these scenarios on the web. Similarly, a young professional from a gas/oil company, who referred to their new social media strategy, pointed out that they try to get in direct contact with their stakeholders to explain the situation of new projects and the problems and issues that could arise. In so doing, they do not only try to "understand their point of view" (stakeholders), but they also try to prevent the emergence of rumors.

Monitoring competitors
When communication professionals reflected upon the role of competitors in monitoring processes, it became clear that there seems to be a discrepancy among the practitioners and the organizations they work for. In the financial industry, for example, monitoring competitors appears to be crucial and common practice. In addition, two practitioners from insurance companies reported that they monitor competitors vigorously, but rather with a focus on campaigns and advertisements, or by comparing the results of competitors with reference to a benchmark model.

In the technological or governmental sector, though, practitioners reported a lack of interest or insignificance of monitoring competitors. A manager of corporate communications from a technology company with 15 years of experience stated: "I don't

believe in looking at the competitors. I think it's important to have a very strong focus on what we can do and believe in our strength." In a similar vein, the head of a communication department from a small media company explained that they do not extensively monitor competitors, but rather the general developments in their field. In addition, the senior corporate communication advisor of a municipality explained, "(a)s a municipality we don't have real competitors." Yet overall, the practitioners perceived it as important to position an organization among other firms and to find out how stakeholders think about competitors.

Monitoring in times of crises
"Crisis communication is actually continuous monitoring." This citation of a head of communications at a media company highlights that monitoring is not only important to anticipate crises, but that it also plays a critical role in the actual crisis management. In comparison to the practices of media monitoring during normal times, however, communication professionals have to adapt their monitoring practices to the insecure and fast-moving environment that an organizational crisis demands.

Interviewees often referred to a 24/7 readiness in times of crisis and the continuous checking of traditional and social media for updates and news concerning the crisis. In that sense, a communication advisor from a communication consultancy suggested to use social media in an adaptive and responsive way – in other words, by being constantly present on these channels during a crisis. To realize this in practice, the organization does not only have a particular team assigned to do the social media monitoring, but the head of marketing and communication himself and the director are "constantly checking Twitter." In a similar vein, a practitioner from a large technology company and a senior corporate communication advisor from a municipality reported that they have one person responsible to monitor online media in a crisis. He/she is also directly reporting to the manager of corporate communication and the crisis team.

Crisis communication strategy. Hence, media monitoring in times of crisis also serves the organization to plan its crisis communication strategy. By retrieving as much information and facts as possible on the issue, practitioners are able to position their organization and develop a stance and strategy for a response (head of marketing and communications, cultural institute). In this regard, a management advisor for legal and communication concerns at an insurance company stated that they try to react immediately to upcoming issues on social media by communicating the right story, and thereby preventing the unfolding of rumors. More specifically, a senior communication consultant explained that the communication team would sit together with the social media manager and discuss the posts and comments and decide how the company would respond in these cases. According to a practitioner from a municipality, there are lists of tweets ready that work as examples for the crisis team to respond to people on Twitter. In that vein, some of the practitioners also highlighted that it is important to start dialogues with important stakeholders on social media, particularly in times of crisis. However, this interaction should not only take place in the name of the organization but should also reflect direct personal exchange, for example, by having executives communicating with their stakeholders through their personal accounts.

Discussion
The aim of this study was to find out how issue management and media monitoring is exercised in the digital age in order to anticipate crises and to find out how these practices differ across professionals, organizations, and sectors. In line with the contingency theory (Cancel *et al.*, 1997), the interviews with 17 communication professionals from diverse sectors in the Netherlands implied that there seem to be commonalities, but also discrepancies among practitioners concerning the application and foci of media monitoring and issue management.

First, the interviews have shown that all the interviewees seemed to acknowledge the importance of monitoring trends and being aware of uprising issues. Furthermore, most of

the interviewees reported to not only focus on single topics or selected geographical areas, but to employ a broad scope when monitoring issues. In fact, this open approach of organizational scanning goes along with what Choo (1999) defined as "environmental scanning." Practitioners scan their environment broadly in order to detect changes that could be of relevance for the organization. Although the search for information is not defined in detail here, it includes a variety of sources and information that is not restricted to the direct environment of the organization. Hence, the focus of monitoring can also include stakeholders, economic, political or regulatory conditions, as well as social trends.

Furthermore, most of the practitioners admitted that it is impossible to be prepared for every possible crisis and having an overview of all potential issues. The interviewees indicated that they therefore sometimes try to relate new issues with previously experienced issues, thereby drawing from their past encounters. In fact, Choo (2001) also refers to the reliance on previous monitoring experiences when reflecting on the concept of environmental scanning. According to him, the interpretation and construction of meaning from the data collected through environmental scanning is dependent on past encounters of the organization as well as on current beliefs of practitioners and the organizational culture.

Second, the finding that traditional media are still perceived relevant for corporate communication professionals goes along with conclusions drawn by Sallot *et al.* (2004). The practitioners in their focus groups also indicated that "the prestige of being published in a print still means a lot to people" (p. 274). Yet, the interviews from the present study imply that particularly corporations that are dealing with intangible services, or on a specific policy level (e.g. regional municipality, European policy), are less focused on monitoring traditional media on a regular basis, but rather in times of crises.

In line with this, the findings of this study suggest that the usage of external monitoring services seems to be contingent on the size and sector of an organization. According to the interviewees, particularly large corporations who are dependent on a favorable image among the public, are more involved in outsourcing the daily monitoring of traditional media to external services. This finding complies with one of the factors that Moss *et al.* (2000) identified regarding the public relations practitioners' role enactment at the senior management level. Public relations practitioners were ascribed more importance within organizations that operated in "rapidly changing or extremely competitive" (p. 298) industries. In a similar vein, the practitioners in Cancel *et al.*'s (1999) focus groups also indicated that the large size and the visibility of their organizations require them to respond to public criticism and questions more quickly when compared to smaller companies. Correspondingly, the organizations in the present study, such as the listed oil or technology companies, are also more likely to be exposed to critical stakeholders and activist groups due to their negative impact on the environment and responsibilities toward their shareholders. This, in turn, might explain why the practitioners from these organizations were reporting to outsource their monitoring practices to professional external services, while others did not.

Third, there still seems to be a discrepancy with regard to the professional execution of social media monitoring among the communication professionals interviewed. In this study, the less experienced professionals belonged to the sector of insurances and technology companies that are less known in the public and that deal with intangible products and services. In contrast, practitioners from listed companies from the media, gas/oil and technology sector with long-term experience stood out in this study by means of their regular and institutionalized monitoring processes of online media. These companies are also more professionalized when it comes to the employment of webcare teams and having regular meetings to discuss their (interactive) social media strategies. Hence, while Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) have shown in a survey that exercising issue management in the digital age had presented a challenge for PR professionals in Australasia and Europe a couple of years ago; in this study, it was found that particularly young professionals and

practitioners with long-standing experience reported to be actively engaged in issue management on social media.

In that sense, Twitter and Facebook were reported to play a crucial role in monitoring issues and anticipating crises by the interviewees. In addition, some of the practitioners referred to blogs. In fact, some of the bloggers can be considered opinion leaders in specific areas, and therefore play a crucial role for organizational reputation. As the example of a liability manager from an insurance company has shown, bloggers' opinions matter, and as such it is likely that their viewpoints and (negative) comments become quickly spread across other (online) media channels. The relevance of blogs and their value for public relations has recently been discussed by Kent (2008). He has also stressed that blogs are powerful in framing issues and in functioning as persuasion tools.

Fourth, all of the practitioners reported to make use of stakeholder mapping to be aware of the unfolding of issues, potential crises, and the involved stakeholders therewith. However, while large and well-known corporations try to fully map out their stakeholder grids; small companies rather seem to deal with crises reactively, according to the interviewees. In a similar vein, practitioners from large and listed companies (e.g. oil/gas company) reported to be involved in active stakeholder management by responding and communicating with their stakeholders directly via social media channels. This active stakeholder management goes along with Taylor *et al.*'s (2003) engagement framework for issue management. According to these scholars, the engagement approach "is the most effective way to manage issues" (p. 260), because it gets the most relevant stakeholders involved in organizational decision-making processes. Similarly, the practitioner from the listed oil company in this study reported to make use of their stakeholders to generate crowdsourcing ideas that are related to their organizational operations.

Fifth, the sector of banks, insurances, and communication consultancies reported to rely heavily on the assessment of competitors. This might have something to do with the fact that the success of these businesses is dependent on their performance in comparison to their competitors (e.g. prices for insurances, financial conditions at a bank, etc.). Choo (1999) calls this monitoring strategy "competitive intelligence," meaning that organizations monitor the competitive environment of an organization, including the analysis of the competitive conditions of the region and the industry associated with the organization. However, according to the interviewees, practitioners from the technological, governmental or media sector were less involved in monitoring competitors. The reason for this might be that these interviewees worked for smaller organizations that have a limited operational scope, and given that their work is less affected by the competitive environment (e.g. local media company, regional municipality).

Lastly, monitoring in times of crises was reported to require additional resources and time from communication professionals. This does not only involve a 24/7 readiness, but also the constant monitoring of traditional and social media and the direct interactive engagement with stakeholders. Here, differences among sectors were less pronounced, since all practitioners indicated to be particularly attentive and involved in monitoring processes in times of crises, specifically with regard to social media.

Interestingly, it seemed that social media experts have the potential to become empowered, as they are required to report directly to the communication management or even to the executives when crises emerge. In fact, Sallot *et al.* (2004) have also highlighted the empowerment of communication professionals through the internet in times of crises. The scholars infer from their focus groups that the practitioners' expertise in web use for research purposes could promote their role and status within the organization (e.g. becoming part of the dominant coalition). In that way, the findings of this study suggest that corporate communication professionals with an expertise in online media monitoring have the potential to become part of the dominant coalition (cf. Berger, 2005).

Limitations

However, given that this study is only based on 17 interviews with communication practitioners from various industries in the Netherlands, these findings need to be evaluated with caution. It is not only the restricted amount of interviewees that was available for the qualitative analysis in this paper, but also their Dutch cultural background that make generalizations difficult.

Yet, the Netherlands present itself as an appropriate choice to examine issue management. Like other European countries, organizations in the Netherlands are traditionally and to a large extent involved in public debates related to socio-political and economical issues (Van Ruler and Verčič, 2005). In fact, and in line with the findings from this study, research on European countries has shown that traditional media are still the most important orientation for communication professionals, but digital and social media are increasingly considered as important tools for monitoring stakeholder communication (Verhoeven *et al.*, 2012).

Nevertheless, given that the findings of this study are very specific for the convenience sample selected, future research could test the findings from this study in a standardized format. For example, scholars could conduct a national, European, or international survey among communication professionals to find out about the role of issue management and media monitoring in the digital age. Furthermore, observational studies could be employed to find out about the actual processes of media monitoring within a range of organizations from diverse sectors. Another related field of research on issue management that might need more empirical insights is dealing with the so-called boundary spanning. Here, more timely research is needed in studying the factors that explain internal and external scanning (cf. Leifer and Delbecq, 1978; Tushman and Scanlan, 1981).

Conclusion

Concluding, the interviews have shown that the way practitioners prepare, identify, and manage issues to anticipate and manage crises in the digital age is contingent on the sector, the product/services the organization provides as well as on the experience level of the communication professionals themselves. Nevertheless, media monitoring processes and the anticipation of crises in the digital age can overall be considered more and more professionalized and standardized – at least with regard to the particular selection of Dutch organizations that have been subject for this study.

More specifically, new technologies, external services, and automized monitoring processes have facilitated issue monitoring for professionals to a great extent, making it possible to analyze great amounts of data efficiently in short time and with fewer resources (cf. Choo, 2001). In addition, this study has given evidence that the focus of media monitoring is increasingly moving toward the online sphere, including the active engagement of stakeholders. Eventually, the empowerment of practitioners through online monitoring practices in times of crises can be considered as a further step toward the positioning of communication professionals within the dominant coalition (cf. Berger, 2005).

Note

1. The interview guideline can be requested from the corresponding author.

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