2014

# At the Intersections of Dialogue, Social Media, and Crisis Communication: A Case Study of Consolidated Edison's Communicative Response to Superstorm Sandy

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At the intersections of dialogue, social media, and crisis communication:

A case study of Consolidated Edison's communicative response to Superstorm Sandy

(TITLE)

BY

Nathan Furstenau

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in Communication Studies

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2014

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# At the Intersections of Dialogue, Social Media, and Crisis Communication: A Case Study of Consolidated Edison's Communicative Response to Superstorm Sandy.

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**Abstract**

Crisis is constantly lurking in the shadows for organizations, and leaders must be prepared to respond when it strikes. Traditional organization-stakeholder communication models have largely relied on one-way frameworks, but the advent and widespread adoption of social media is changing the way organizations and stakeholders interact. This project explores how one organization, Consolidated Edison, utilized Twitter to communicate dialogically with stakeholders during the 2012 Superstorm Sandy crisis. Analysis focuses on how the organization's use of dialogue and Sturges' (1994) instructing and adjusting information tactics helped mitigate negative backlash from stakeholders throughout the crisis. Theoretical and practical implications for public relations and crisis communication are discussed, and future research directions are presented.

*For my parents, Nina and Terry, who challenge me to experience.*

*For my sister, Anna, who reminds me to smile.*

*For my friend, Dr. Scott Walus, who never stops encouraging.*

**Acknowledgements**

I owe a great amount of gratitude to Dr. Matthew Gill. I said to him once, "Matt, I wanted to ask you about chairing my thesis..." He cut me off, "Wanted to? Or *are* you? –Which is it?" He had, in one instant, topped my own mother in correcting my English usage, and I immediately knew I had found the right person. Thank you, Matt, for your time, patience, and constant support. This task would have been much less fun without your quick wit and blunt honesty. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Sam Szscur and Dr. Brian Sowa. I could not have asked for a more supportive group!

Johnny Kraps, Amanda Feder, and Emily Vajjala: You have been the absolute best partners in crime.

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# Chapter 1

## Public Relations, Crisis, and the Digital Realm

The Public Relations Society of America defines public relations as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, 2013, para. 3). Within this framework, strategic communication refers to the management of all internal and external communications of an organization in a way that helps it improve its reputation (Jackson, 1987). Public relations is a process in that it is an ongoing and continuous two-way communication function. Because an organization's success or failure is contingent on the relationships it builds and maintains with its stakeholders (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000), such relationships must be managed in a way that are mutually beneficial. This underscores the importance of the organization-stakeholder relationship, and though the management of this relationship is always essential, it becomes particularly vital when an organization enters a crisis.

### Public Relations and Crisis

A crisis has the potential to seriously impact the relationships, and ultimately the reputation, of an organization. Poorly negotiated, a crisis can have overwhelmingly negative consequences, thus the management of crisis situations remains the core of many public relations programs (Fearn-Banks, 1996). In a broad sense, crisis causes the normal order to be undermined, which creates considerable uncertainty and requires intervention. Coombs (2007) writes in terms of crisis:

> A crisis can be viewed as the perception of an event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can impact the organization's performance.

> Crises are largely perceptual. If stakeholders believe there is a crisis, the organization is in a crisis unless it can successfully persuade stakeholders it is not. A crisis violates expectations; an organization has done something stakeholders feel is inappropriate (p. 100).

Thus, a crisis may follow an event, or even the perception of an event, which upsets the organization's relationships with stakeholders. Therefore, how stakeholders perceive an event determines whether or not it becomes a crisis. How a crisis ultimately affects organizational performance is a result of how well, or poorly, it is managed. Unsurprisingly, a significant amount of research has been conducted to locate effective crisis management strategies.

Crisis management is defined as "a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damages inflicted" (Coombs, 2007, p. 5). Crisis management is divided into pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages, with each incorporating unique tactics to combat crisis. Even though crisis communication occurs during each of these phases, the prevalent literature on crisis communication has focused overwhelmingly on the crisis stage, and specifically on the development of crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2009). Within this literature, emphasis is placed on reputation repair, and there is a significant focus on *how* and *what* an organization should communicate. Six dominating theoretical perspectives address these questions: corporate apologia, rhetoric of renewal, attribution theory, contingency theory, image repair theory, and situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2010). Though these frameworks address crisis response from unique perspectives, two functions of crisis communication shared by each are often taken for granted within prevalent research: instructing information and adjusting information

(Sturges, 1994). These functions aim to inform and help stakeholders cope throughout a crisis. Though crucial, these strategies are often taken for granted during crisis (Coombs, 2007) and little research is helping to understand and contribute to the improvement of these tactics. This project addresses the literature gap concerning instructing and adjusting information strategies by examining how they contribute to organization-stakeholder relationship management.

Instructing information is the first and most immediate communication priority in a crisis. As a response strategy, it informs stakeholders how to protect themselves from harm during a crisis. Providing instructing information is especially important during health crises, product recalls, natural disasters, and other events that threaten public safety and well-being. In such situations, instructing information is necessary in order to convince stakeholders that the organization is in control of the situation (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2011). As Coombs (2007) notes, however, instructing information is often taken for granted in most crisis communication research. Some research has considered how people respond to emergency information (Heath & Palenchar, 2000) and the need for instructing information (Gibson, 1997), but it has only scratched the surface. The safety of stakeholders during crisis is obviously important, and organizations must protect their stakeholders in order to protect themselves.

Adjusting information aims to explain what the organization is doing to prevent a repeat of the crisis (Sturges, 1994). Moreover, it facilitates coping with the crisis. Organizational transparency and a steady flow of information on how the crisis is being handled are critical to that coping. Research suggests that both the organization and its stakeholders benefit when management expresses concern for victims and explains what corrective actions are being taken (Cohen, 1999; Fuchs-Burnett, 2002; Patel & Reinsch, 2003). As suggested by Sturges (1994), adjusting information plays a vital role in crisis communication and is second in importance after instructing information. This project focuses on the employment of both instructing and adjusting information tactics in the digital realm to understand how organizations can mitigate negative backlash during crisis.

**The Digital Realm**

The last decade has seen significant advancement in communication capability, and the adoption and availability of the Internet is changing the landscape of the public relations industry. Forty-one percent of Americans receive the majority of their news from the Internet, and sixty-five percent of people aged 18-29 cite the Internet as their main source of information (Rosenstiel et al., 2011). In stride with, or perhaps in reaction to, the online stakeholder, the public relations industry is advancing into the digital realm, learning to develop and maintain the organization-stakeholder relationship in the online arena.

This shift creates greater opportunity for organizations to engage in dialogue with their stakeholders, especially considering the rise in social media adoption. As Theunissen and Norbani (2011) postulate, "The term 'dialogue' has become ubiquitous in public relations writing and scholarship, and even more so in the light of the ever-evolving Internet and its social media application" (p. 5). The importance of creating dialogue with stakeholders is becoming more clearly defined as social media applications continue to be adopted in public relations. In fact, it has been argued that the Internet is compelling public relations practitioners to move toward two-way communication models:

> Public relations will be increasingly about dialogues and conversation rather than traditional one-way monologues of the past, adapting to the free exchange of opinions across groups and collectives that previously were merely recipients of communication messages. (Mersham et al., 2009, p. 10)

In the past, public relations practitioners have relied heavily on one-way communication media such as print, radio, and television to communicate with stakeholders. Though these media still hold unique value, practitioners will be progressively adopting to two-way forms in the online arena. At the conclusion of their study of the Turkish public relations industry, Aliklic and Atabek (2012) write:

> Research findings show that public relations professionals in Turkey have started to facilitate dialogues with their publics by using social media. It also shows that the value of engaging in social media can be seen in every aspect of public relations. We can assume that public relations professionals have realized that they need to stop talking at their constituents and begin to talk with them. (p. 63)

As social media continues to be adopted by stakeholders and organizations alike, a dialogic approach to public relations is becoming increasingly necessary for the public relations practitioner.

**Social Media.** Social media has been called many things: new media, media 2.0, user-generated media, consumer-generated media, or the live web (Hart, 2014). Though social media is arguably the broadest of these terms, there is little consensus in their usage. These terms are often used interchangeably and the preferred term changes as the environment and medium changes. Universally, however, this media is defined by user interaction and contribution. Smith (2011) defines social media as a term "that is used to refer to a new era of Web-enabled applications that are built around user-manipulated content, such as wikis, blogs, and social networking sites" (p. 3). Similarly, Sweetser and Lariscy (2008) define social media as being ''centered around the concept of a read–write Web, where the online audience moves beyond passive viewing of Web content to actually contributing to the content'' (p. 179). The dialogic function of social media makes it a unique communication tool, and has opened the door for organizations to communicate not only to, but also *with*, publics and stakeholders.

The advent and popularity of social media is impacting the ways in which organizations respond to crisis. Clear communication with stakeholders during crisis is a primary concern, and managing stakeholder interactions is crucial to organizational survival (Coombs, 2007). Social media allow practitioners to quickly spread information through a variety of channels to diverse stakeholder groups, and encourage these groups to help further disseminate such information. In essence, social media can be used to transmit information quickly and efficiently, and even be leveraged to ease the public relations practitioner's burden during a crisis.

Social media also impacts how stakeholders respond to organizational crisis. For immediate information, individuals more frequently rely on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter than traditional forms of media like newspapers or television (Rosenstiel et. al., 2011). Moreover, stakeholders rely on social media during crises for needed information and support, including emotional support (Macias, Hilyard, & Freimuth, 2009; Stephens & Malone, 2009). While social media can accelerate the spread of communication and need-to-know information, it also increases the risk of information overflow, which can lead to confusion and increased bias. Thus, the usage of social media during a crisis must be approached carefully. This project focuses on the usage of social media platform, Twitter, to communicate with stakeholders before, during, and after crisis.

**Twitter.** In 2006, the social networking platform Twitter was launched. Since then, Twitter has grown to incorporate over 100 million users, and by the end of 2011 there were an estimated 21 million active Twitter users within the United States alone (Bennet, 2011). Thirty-six percent of users within the United States tweet at least once a day and spend nearly twelve minutes on the online platform each visit (Skelton, 2011).

The Pew Research Center reports, 18 percent of online adults in the United States utilize Twitter (Duggan & Smith, 2013). While adoption levels are particularly high among adults (under 49) and African Americans, there is little disparity among users in relations to sex, education level, or salary range. Considering these demographics, Twitter offers public relations practitioners a unique medium to reach a large number and range of stakeholders. It comes, then, as no surprise that this platform has been touted as a valuable and advantageous public relations tool.

Research suggests that the nation's leading public and privately traded companies are developing their Twitter networks (Barnes, Lescault, & Wright, 2013; Barnes & Lescault, 2012), suggesting that organizations within the United States have made social media a priority. A significant amount of research supports that social media, specifically Twitter, is beginning to play a substantial role in organizational public relations strategy.

Less research has investigated how organizations should use this tool, however, particularly during a crisis.

This project focuses on Consolidated Edison of New York (Con Edison), a power company that provides electric, gas, and steam to approximately 4.5 million customers in New York City, Westchester, Manhattan, the Bronx, and parts of Queens. It considers the organization's crisis communication tactics before, during and post Superstorm Sandy, which occurred in the fall of 2012. Superstorm Sandy wiped out power across New York, and approximately 90% of Con Edison's stakeholders were left in the dark. During this time, communication channels were limited, and Con Edison ultimately chose to communicate necessary information with stakeholders via Twitter.

This project specifically investigates the dialogical communication used by Con Edison to communicate instructing and adjusting information to stakeholders during crisis. While significant research has been conducted on crisis response strategies, existing theoretical frameworks take instructing and adjusting information tactics for granted, and little research has attempted to explain why and how these tactics help maintain organizational-stakeholder relationships. This project aims to fill this gap by analyzing messages sent by Con Edison via its Twitter handle during the Superstorm Sandy crisis. The next chapter reviews current and relevant literature. Then, the study's methodology is presented, followed by the analysis of collected data. Findings, along with theoretical and practical implications for public relations, conclude.

# Chapter 2

## Literature Review

This literature review will survey four paradigms: public relations, crisis communication, dialogue, and social media. First, public relations is considered from a relational management perspective. This is followed by a review of crisis response research, as well as Sturges' (1994) instructing and adjusting information strategies. Dialogic communication is then considered, and a survey of growing trends in social media concludes.

### Public Relations: Relational Management

For some time, public relations has been shifting away from an emphasis on managing communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) to an emphasis on communication as a tool for negotiating relationships (Botan, 1992; Broome et al., 1997; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). Three decades ago, Ferguson (1984) began exploring the construct of "relationship" and its usage for both organizational advantage and practice. According to Pearson (1989), public relations is conceptualized as the management of interpersonal dialectic; the practice of ethical public relations is to have a dialogic system rather than monologic policies (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Grunig (1992) suggested reciprocity, trust, credibility, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding as key elements of the organization-public relationship. Subsequently, Cutlip et al. (1994) defined public relations as a "management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the public on whom its success or failure depends" (p. 2).

Building from these understandings, this project engages a relationship management perspective. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) operationalized five relevant dimensions of relationship management: Trust, openness, involvement, commitment, and investment. Within this typology, trust refers to a general feeling of reliability, while openness refers to the degree to which an organization is willing to communicate. Involvement refers to the organization's participation in the community, commitment involves the decision to continue the relationship, and investment refers to the time, energy, efforts, and other resources that are given to build the relationship. Conceptualized in this way, public relations is defined as the "effective and efficient management of organization-public relationships, based on common interests and shared goals, over time, to engender mutual understanding and mutual benefit" (Ledingham, 2003, p. 184).

This perspective has been further developed (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Ledingham et al.,1999; Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham, 2006;) and by 2003 it incorporated eleven dimensions: trust, openness, credibility, intimacy, emotion, similarity, immediacy, agreement, accuracy, common interests, and relational history. These dimensions are categorized into five types: symbolic, behavioral, personal, professional, and community (Ledingham, 2003).

This perspective shifts the focus of public relations away from communication-centric approaches and toward relationships. Waymer (2013) explains this necessity:

> Not all challenges can be solved communicatively and/or via public relations, and to assume that effective public relations is the elixir that can yield positive public relationships can lead us down a path of public relations as

paternalistic behavioral adjustment/modification at best and at worst returning the practice to the focus on engineering consent/acceptance. (p. 322)

Thus, successful public relations initiatives will maintain positive relationships with stakeholders, and communication becomes a device for the "initiation, nurturing, and maintenance of organization-public relationships" (Lendingham, 2001, p. 466). In this framework, public relations is more concerned with the quality, rather than the quantity, of messages being produced. The evaluation of public relations initiatives and the quality of the relationship between an organization and its publics becomes the focus of public relations practitioners.

**Crisis Management, Communication, and Theory**

Coombs (2007) defines crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p. 2). Crises are largely based on perception, and can be damaging to an organization, even threatening its existence (Fearn-Banks, 1996). Thus, a crisis is a distinctive turning point in organizational life (Regester, 1989; Fink, 1986), made difficult by its "unexpected, negative, and overwhelming nature" (Barton, 2001, p. 2).

Crisis management is defined as "a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damages inflicted" (Coombs, 2007, p. 5). The set of factors that comprise crisis management are divided into pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis categories. Pre-crisis involves efforts to prevent crises, crisis is the response to an actual event, and post-crisis are efforts to learn from the crisis event (Coombs, 2007). During each of these categories, managers will employ various types of crisis communication. Crisis communication is defined as the "collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (Coombs, 2010, p. 19). During the pre-crisis phase, communication focuses on collecting information about potential risks, developing strategies to manage such risks, and training individuals that will play roles in the crisis management process. While experiencing crisis, communication focuses on collecting/analyzing information for crisis management and disseminating crisis messages externally. Post-crisis communication considers and critiques the crisis management effort for future circumstances.

Though crisis communication is important during each of these phases, the majority of published research has focused on the crisis phase. A bulk of research has concentrated on developing effective crisis response strategies and has culminated in the development of six dominating theoretical perspectives: corporate apologia, rhetoric of renewal, attribution theory, contingency theory, image repair theory, and situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2010). It is important to note that even though each of these perspectives uniquely approach crisis response, the first step in *any* crisis is to protect stakeholders from harm – not reputation repair (Coombs, 2007). Sturges (1994) referred to communication that served to protect stakeholders as instructing and adjusting information messages; instructing information aims to help stakeholders physically cope with crisis, while adjusting information aims to help stakeholders cope psychologically with crisis. Because these tactics heavily influence reputation repair (Sturges, 1994; Coombs, 2007), Coombs (2010) note that it is "surprising how researchers frequently overlook instructing and adjusting information" (p. 29). Before examining instructing and adjusting information messages further, crisis response theories are reviewed.

**Corporate Apologia.** Apologia is a "rhetorical concept that explores the use of communication for self-defense" (Coombs, 2010, p. 30), and was originally developed as a framework to defend against personal attack (Ware & Lingkugel, 1973). When one's character is under question, one of four communication strategies may be used in defense: denial (not involved in any wrongdoing), bolstering (stressing own good qualities) differentiation (remove the action from its negative context), and transcendence (place the action in a new, broader context that is more favorable). Dionisoplous and Vibbert (1988) first linked this framework with corporate communication; crises are caused by wrongdoing and create a need for the organization to defend its reputation. Corporate apologia has been most often utilized to restore organizational social legitimacy during and beyond crisis (Hearit, 1994; 2001; 2006).

**Rhetoric of Renewal.** During a crisis, the rhetoric of renewal emphasizes a positive view of the organization's future rather than focusing on past action/present discussions of responsibility. The focus remains on helping victims and how things will be better in the future for both the organization and its stakeholders. Coombs (2010) outlined four criteria necessary for the use of rhetoric of renewal: (1) the organization has a strong pre-crisis ethical standard; (2) stakeholder-organization relationships are favorable prior to crisis; (3) the organization can focus on life beyond the crisis rather than seeking to escape blame; (4) the organization desires to engage in effective crisis communication. Rhetoric of renewal has been used in case studies to understand first-hand accounts of crisis managers' communicative processes (Ulmer, 2001).

**Attribution Theory.** Attribution theory attempts to explain how people make sense of events, and suggests the possible consequences of attributions on punitive responses (Weiner, 1995). When an event happens, particularly a negative event, people try to determine why it occurred and make attributions of responsibility while doing so. Attributions may be internal (blaming the actor) or external (blaming the situation/environment). The theory predicts that people are more likely to punish an actor who caused a problem when people make higher internal attributions and lower external attributions. This is because the actor is viewed as more responsible for the problem when internal attributions are made, whereas the actor is perceived to be less responsible for the problem when external attributions are made. Attribution theory has been applied to product recalls (Jolly & Mowen, 1985), product tampering (Stockmyer, 1996), accidents (Jorgensen, 1996), and unethical behavior (Bradford & Garrett, 1995).

**Contingency Theory.** Contingency theory seeks to explain how public relations operates as a whole, and specifically what guides policy-level decisions an organization makes about goals, alignments, ethics, and relationships with publics and other forces (Botan, 2006). While contingency theory remains very broad, a line of inquiry focusing on crisis communication is being developed. Stance is a key variable in contingency theory, and refers to how an organization responds to competition and conflicts with other parties (Coombs, 2010). Stances are based in advocacy and accommodation; advocacy is when an organization argues for its own interests, while accommodation is when the organization makes concessions to other parties. Contingency theory draws on a plethora of variables to determine what an organization's stance should be in a given situation, and a number of studies have applied this to organizational crises (Hwang & Cameron, 2008; Jin & Cameron, 2007; Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2007).

**Image Repair Theory.** IRT assumes that organizational communication is a goal-driven activity and that maintaining a positive reputation is a goal of such communication (Benoit, 1995). IRT is heavily influenced by rhetorical theory and uses communication to defend organizational images seen as under attack. Benoit and Pang (2008) describe "image" as a subjective perception of an organization by others: its reputation. A communicative entity's reputation is normally damaged or threatened when it is held accountable for an undesirable event (Benoit & Pang, 2008). Because image is subjective, audience perception is all that is needed to damage a reputation. Thus, whether or not claims against an organization are actually true or fair is irrelevant. Managing reputation via organizational communication becomes the focus of crisis response.

Five image repair strategies have emerged from or been extended within this line of research: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit & Pang, 2008). When engaging in denial, an organization may either use simple denial – claiming that it did not perform the act – or shift the blame by arguing that someone else is responsible. An organization may evade responsibility by claiming its actions were in response to the act of another, that its actions were due to a lack of information or ability, that its actions were accidental, or that its actions were based on good intentions. Organizations may reduce the offensiveness of an act by bolstering (stressing own good qualities), minimization (the act is not as serious as presented), differentiation (the act is not as offensive as other similar ones), transcendence (there are more important considerations), attacking the accuser, or compensating the victim. Corrective action refers to the organization's promise to change and prevent a repeat of the act. Organizations engage in mortification if and when admitting guilt or apologizing for the act. These strategies are seldom used in isolation, and organizations responding to crisis may engage multiple strategies simultaneously.

Most image repair strategies have been studied in the context of an communicative entity's reaction to crisis (Benoit & Pang, 2008); the framework has been applied to organizations (Benoit, 1995; Benoit & Brinson 1994; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997), celebrities (Benoit, 1997), and politics (Benoit & McHale, 1999). Holtzhausen and Roberts (2010) point out that one of the problems with this approach is that image repair strategies "have often been studied in the context of descriptive rhetorical case analyses, with the authors ultimately arguing for or against the success of specific strategies" (p. 166). Thus, IRT is limited in that it often fails to consider the multiple issues that affect an organization's ability to repair its image after crisis. In response, Coombs (1995, 1999; Coombs & Holladay, 1996) identified crisis responsibility, crisis type, and prior organizational reputation as key factors that affect image repair strategies. This developed framework is known as situational crisis communication theory.

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory.** Drawing on attribution theory (Weiner, 1986) and IRT (Benoit, 1995), situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) assumes that people will assign responsibility for negative events, and that understanding such perceptions are fundamental to assessing the threat to an organization. At the core of SCCT is crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2010); attributions of crisis responsibility have significant effects on how stakeholders perceive the reputation of an organization in crisis, and how they will interact with the organization following crisis. Crisis history and prior reputation are also used to evaluate the overall threat of a crisis to an organization's reputation.

Crisis threat is assessed via a two-step process. First, an organization must understand the way in which stakeholders perceive the threat. To do this, the model suggests crisis types that are defined as "victim" (low crisis responsibility/threat), "accident" (minimal crisis responsibility/threat), or "intentional" (strong crisis responsibility/threat) (Coombs, 2010). After determining the frame in which stakeholders understand the crisis, organizations must consider two intensifying factors: 1) crisis history and 2) prior reputation. A history of crisis enhances crisis threat. Prior reputation refers to the general state of the organization-stakeholder relationship before the crisis. An organization with poor prior reputation will be attributed more crisis responsibility for the same act than an organization that is unknown or has positive prior reputation (Coombs, 2010).

Public relations practitioners should match crisis responses to the level of crisis responsibility and reputational threat posed by a crisis. Based on the level of crisis responsibility SCCT divides crisis response into three primary strategies: deny, diminish, and rebuild. Each of these categories vary from trying to protect the organization to helping crisis victims – the level of accommodation. The higher the threat level is determined to be, the more accommodating the response. Deny strategies are the least accommodating and seek to completely avoid responsibility for the crisis. Diminish strategies attempt to minimize the perceived severity of the crisis. Rebuild strategies are the most accommodating and accept blame and an attempt to improve reputation is made via apology or compensation. Organizations may use reinforcement as a fourth, supplemental strategy by praising others (ingratiation) or reminding stakeholders of past good works (bolstering).

SCCT has been applied to corporations (Choi & Lin, 2009), non-profit organizations (Sisco, 2012; Fussel Sisco et al., 2010), celebrities and politics (Liu, 2010). While this framework has produced reliable strategies for reputation repair, it relies, as does IRT and other crisis response frameworks, on the usage of instructing and adjusting information tactics (Sturges, 1994), which have been left largely underdeveloped and taken for granted (Coombs, 2010). The following section reviews Sturges' (1994) articulation of instructing and adjusting information messages as it relates to organizational crisis.

**Instructing and adjusting information**

As previously discussed, the majority of crisis communication research has focused on the crisis phase, and the development of effective ways to repair damaged reputations. Sturges (1994) notes, however, that "planning only for damage control results in activities that may be too late to secure positive relationships important to the organization" (p. 307). Moreover, most crisis communication "remains relegated to generalities about accuracy and timeliness without regard to meeting the audience's psychological and physical needs during the passage of a crisis" (p. 300). Accordingly, *before* crisis managers begin to focus on reputation repair, they should first attend to the physical and psychological needs of affected stakeholders (Coombs, 2010). Two crisis communication foci have been developed to this end: instructing information and adjusting information (Sturges, 1994). The purpose of instructing information is to communicate to stakeholders how to cope physically with the crisis while adjusting information communicates to stakeholders how to cope psychologically with the crisis. These concentrations are important because they focus on the needs of stakeholders during a crisis and will directly influence their perceptions of the organization (Newsom & Carrell, 1986), and thus, directly influence reputation repair strategies.

Supported by the social norm development process (Oskamp, 1977) and Sherif and Cantril's (1947) *Laws of Public Opinion*, Sturges (1994) suggests that information communicated with the intent "to influence the development of internalized opinions that will influence constituents' behavior toward the organization" (reputation repair) is *least* effective when deployed immediately following the breakout of a crisis event (p. 307). Instead, reputation repair messages should be communicated after stakeholder debate has subsided, and a "time lapse occurs when people on each side of the issue consider what has been said and done" (p. 301). It is during this time that information reinforcing desired opinions is most effective; negative opinions receive no reinforcement and (ideally) move towards a neutral state.

During the initial crisis outbreak, communication should instead focus on two primary objectives: 1) to appease third-party interveners (Barton, 1993; Ressler, 1982; Sturges, 1994), and 2) to keep stakeholders informed about the situation (Sturges, 1994). It is important to communicate timely, accurate, and productive information to third parties, such as the media, to avoid reinforcing any negative opinions that are being formed. To keep stakeholders informed about the crisis, managers should focus on communicating instructing and adjusting information messages. Admittedly, these objectives are becoming increasingly challenging to meet in today's fast-paced media environment, especially considering the current 24-hour news cycle. Accordingly, digital communication and social media are becoming a growing focus in crisis communication research (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014; Ruggiero & Vos, 2014; Romenti, Murtarelli, & Valentini, 2014).

Instructing information is the first and most immediate priority in a crisis. As a response strategy, it should aim to inform stakeholders how to physically react to the crisis situation. Providing instructing information is especially important during health crises, product recalls, natural disasters, and other events that threaten public safety and well-being. For example, a burst water main results in messages designed to advise stakeholders to boil tap water until further notified. Though necessary, Coombs (2007) notes that instructing information is often taken for granted in most crisis communication research. Some research has considered how people respond to emergency information (Heath & Palenchar, 2000) and the general need for instructing information (Gibson 1997), but it has only scratched the surface. The safety of stakeholders during crisis is obviously important, and organizations must protect their stakeholders in order to protect themselves.

Adjusting information aims to help stakeholders psychologically cope with the crisis at hand (Sturges, 1994). Messages may also explain what the organization is doing to prevent a repeat of the crisis in the future. Organizational transparency and a steady flow of information communicating how the crisis is being handled are critical to helping stakeholders adjust to the crisis. Research suggests that both the organization and their stakeholders benefit when management expresses concern for victims and explains what corrective actions are being taken (Cohen 1999; Fuchs-Burnett 2002; Patel & Reinsch

2003). As such, adjusting information plays a vital role in crisis communication and is second in importance after instructing information.

As Coombs (2009) notes, "it is important to understand the relevance of instructing and adjusting information to provide a complete picture of crisis response communication" (p. 105). There is little research, however, helping to understand and contribute to the improvement of these tactics (Coombs, 2009), particularly in the online arena. To explore this research gap, this project will investigate the usage of instructing and adjusting information strategies when employed dialogically, and how the combined employment of these tactics helps develop and maintain organization-stakeholder relationships during crisis.

**Dialogue**

Public relations has been shifting away from an emphasis on managing communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) to an emphasis on communication as a tool for negotiating relationships (Botan, 1992; Broome et al., 1997; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). The successful negotiation of any relationship requires dialogue (Johannesen, 1990; Stewart, 1978). Kent and Taylor (2002) examined the theoretical evolution of dialogue within public relations theory and attribute its initial consideration to Pearson (1989), who suggested that public relations is best conceptualized as the management of interpersonal dialectic:

> The important question becomes, not what action or policy is more right than another (a question that is usually posed as a monologue), but what kind of communication system maximizes the chances competing interests can discover some shared ground and be transformed or transcended. This question shifts the

> emphasis from an areas [sic] in which practitioners do not have special expertise – ethical theory – to areas in which they do have expertise – communication theory and practice. (p. 206)

Grunig (1992) adopted this conceptualization of the public relations practice in his development of Excellence Theory, which features open and honest, two-way symmetrical communication and a mutual "give-and-take" rather than one-way persuasion. Botan (1997) separated dialogue from two-way symmetrical communication suggesting, "dialogue manifests itself more as a stance, orientation, or bearing in communication rather than as a specific method, technique or format" (p. 192). Similarly, Leitch and Neilson (2001) suggested that symmetrical communication is more comparable to systems theory rather than dialogue.

Kent and Taylor (2002) further developed dialogue as an orientation for public relations in their discussion of its principles and practical applications. They outlined five features of dialogue: mutuality, or the recognition of organization-public relationships; propinquity, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; empathy, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; risk, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and commitment, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics. The authors postulate that for organizations, the engagement of dialogue can lead to increased public support and enhanced image/reputation. For stakeholders, dialogue can lead to increased organizational accountability, a greater say in organizational operations, and increased public satisfaction.

Kent and Taylor (1992) suggested that organizations should "reinforce their commitment to dialogue and foster more interaction with publics by using mass mediated channels to communicate with publics" (p. 31). While the authors emphasized the power of the Internet for its incorporation of "text, sound, image, movement and the potential for real-time interaction all in one package," (p. 31), they could not have anticipated the rapid advancement of the public relations industry into the digital realm – nor the application and adoption of social media. This shift creates greater opportunity for organizations to engage in dialogue with their stakeholders. As Theunissen and Norbani (2011) postulate, "The term 'dialogue' has become ubiquitous in public relations writing and scholarship, and even more so in the light of the ever-evolving Internet and its social media application" (p. 5). The importance of creating dialogue with stakeholders is becoming emphasized as social media continues to be adopted in public relations. In the past, public relations practitioners have relied heavily on one-way communication media such as print, radio, and television to communicate with stakeholders. Though these media still hold unique value, practitioners will be progressively adapting to two-way forms in the online arena. In fact, it has been argued that the Internet is compelling public relations practitioners to move toward two-way communication models:

> Public relations will be increasingly about dialogues and conversation rather than traditional one-way monologues of the past, adapting to the free exchange of opinions across groups and collectives that previously were merely recipients of communication messages. (Mersham et al., 2009, p. 10)

As social media continues to be adopted by stakeholders and organizations alike, a dialogic approach to public relations is becoming increasingly necessary for the public relations practitioner. At the conclusion of their study of the Turkish public relations industry, Aliklic and Atabek (2012) write:

> Research findings show that public relations professionals in Turkey have started to facilitate dialogues with their publics by using social media. It also shows that the value of engaging in social media can be seen in every aspect of public relations. We can assume that public relations professionals have realized that they need to stop talking at their constituents and begin to talk with them. (p. 63)

Twitter is designed to inherently bolster dialogic communication. Its platform allows stakeholders to communicate freely with organizations and vice versa, constantly and with very limited restriction. In a content analysis of Fortune 500 Twitter profiles, Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) found that approximately sixty percent of the organizations analyzed utilized Twitter in a “dialogic fashion,” creating discussion with online stakeholders (p. 338). They postulate that as organizations become more familiar with social media platforms, this number will increase:

> Social media should not be used to push one-way messages advertising products – this should be left to other traditional communication channels…Instead, social media tools like Twitter should be used to engage in dialogue with stakeholders. (p. 341)

Unlike traditional, one-way communication forms, social media, and specifically Twitter, create an ideal arena in which organizations can, and should, communicate with stakeholders in a two-way relationship.

The move of organizations toward two-way communication with their stakeholders is already changing the landscape of the public relations industry. Focus is shifting toward online social networks as businesses and stakeholders begin to rely more heavily on social networks, like Twitter, for communication. Though this shift will undoubtedly affect many aspects of public relations, this project will focus specifically on crisis communication strategy, and how Con Edison utilized the dialogic capabilities of Twitter to manage relationships during Superstorm Sandy.

**Social Media**

Social media has changed the way we communicate, interact, share, and ultimately consume information and knowledge, allowing users to communicate with thousands, perhaps billions, of individuals all over the world (Williams et al., 2012). Social media are unique platforms that encourage active participation in the creation, development, and dissemination of information (Universal McCann, 2008). Active participation is vital in social media; participants play an integral role in both the production and consumption of information through social media networks. Thus, social media users interact within a digital realm of exchange. As Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) explain, social media may be considered as "a group of internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (p. 61). Similarly, Marketo (2010) defines social media as "the production, consumption and exchange of information through online social interactions and platforms" (p. 5). The concept of exchange is key, and shifts the online communication landscape from monologue (one to many) to dialogue (many to many).

This is no small trend. At present, nearly 72 percent of individuals online – roughly 1.8 billion (World Bank, 2013) – utilize social media networks (Brenner, 2013). Current examples of social media platforms include social networking sites like

Facebook, photo sharing sites like Instagram and Flickr, video sharing sites like YouTube, business networking sites like LinkedIn, and micro blogging sites like Twitter. Many of those accessing these networks are seeking and sharing information (Whiting & Williams, 2013). When immediate information is needed, users more frequently turn to Facebook and Twitter than traditional forms of media (such as newspapers or television) (Pew, 2010). Social media networks such as blogs, Facebook, and Twitter, which allow users to engage in dialogue, are also heavily used for information sharing (Baron & Philbin, 2009; Heverin & Zach, 2011; Wigley & Fontenot, 2010). These trends result in a plethora of information exchange, as well as increased time spent on social media networks. In fact, Experian Marketing Services (2013) recently reported that 27 percent of time spent online – sixteen minutes of each online hour in the U.S. – is spent on social media networks.

When crisis strikes, social media usage increases (Hampton et al., 2011), which may suggest that social media participation is becoming fundamental for successful crisis management. In fact, social media users assign a higher level of credibility to social media crisis coverage than to traditional mass media crisis coverage (Horrigan & Morris, 2005; Procopio &Procopio, 2007; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Moreover, social media provide emotional support during and after crises by enabling stakeholders to band together, share information, and demand resolution (Choi & Lin, 2009; Stephens & Malone, 2009). It has been suggested that such online participation during crises is often replicated in offline venues (Dutta-Bergman, 2006), so that more traditional public relations actions can be shared by publics during crisis (Smith, 2010)

This research suggests crisis managers must consider social media when developing crisis communication strategies. Though plenty of research has supported social media adoption (Coombs, 2009; Baron & Philbin, 2009; Jin et al. 2014), and many public relations practitioners are beginning to utilize social media more frequently (Duhe, 2012), research has failed to produce "evidence-based guidelines…for integrating social media into crisis management practices" (Jin et al., 2014, p. 77). In fact, Taylor and Kent (2010) found that 66 percent of the articles on social media in the Public Relations Society of America's *Public Relations Tactics* started with the assumption that the value of social media was a given. This project aims to fill this gap by exploring how one social networking platform, Twitter, can be used dialogically to communicate during crisis.

**Twitter.** In 2006, the social networking platform Twitter was launched. Twitter is a micro-blogging social networking site that allows users to create individual statements (called Tweets) of 140 characters or less, which forces statements to be concise, direct, and to the point. Users may "follow" a person or organization, and they can be alerted on their computer, mobile, or other compatible device when new tweets are posted. This allows information to be nearly instantaneously distributed to networks of followers across the platform, creating "trending" topics of discussion.

Since its launch, Twitter has grown to incorporate over 100 million users, and by the end of 2011 there were an estimated 21 million active Twitter users within the United States alone (Bennet, 2011). Thirty-six percent of users within the United States tweet at least once a day and spend nearly twelve minutes on the online platform each visit (Skelton, 2011). As previously mentioned, 18 percent of online adults in the United States utilize Twitter (Duggan & Smith, 2013), and while adoption levels are particularly high among adults (under 49) and African Americans, there is little disparity among users in relations to sex, education level, or salary range. Considering these demographics, Twitter offers public relations practitioners a unique medium to reach a large number and range of stakeholders. It comes, then, as no surprise that this platform has been touted as a valuable and advantageous public relations tool.

The nation's leading publically traded companies are developing their Twitter networks. Each year, Fortune Magazine compiles a list of America's 500 largest corporations, popularly known as the Fortune 500 (F500). Due to the influential role that these companies play in the business world, considering their social media adoption provides a look at emergent Twitter trends among America's most successful companies. Of those companies listed in the 2013 F500, 77 percent had active Twitter accounts, up 4 percent from 2012 and 15 percent from 2011 (Barnes, Lescault, & Wright, 2013). Of those corporations that had active Twitter accounts in both 2011 and 2012, all reported positive Twitter followership change (Barnes et al. 2012). For example, Disney saw an eighty-four percent increase in Twitter followership. This shows that as public corporations increase their social media usage, a larger number of stakeholders are also relying on online platforms for organizational communication.

A growing reliance on Twitter is also documented among privately traded companies within the United States. Similar to the F500, Inc. Magazine publishes a list of the fastest growing privately held organizations each year, commonly referred to as the Inc. 500. In 2009, 91 percent of the Inc. 500 were utilizing at least one social media tool and 52 percent of responding organizations reported utilizing Twitter (Barnes & Mattson, 2009). These figures increased to 92 percent and 67 percent, respectively, in 2012 (Barnes & Lescault, 2012).

It is obvious from this research that organizations within the United States are beginning to consider social media adoption as a priority. This shift is even beginning to spawn growth within the public relations industry. Spending on public relations hit over three billion dollars in 2010, an increase of three percent over 2009 (Bush, 2010). That number is expected to rise to over four billion by 2014. According to Bush (2010) the catalyst for this increased growth, particularly during economic turmoil, is tied to social media usage. He postulates, "…growth in the industry is being accelerated by a significantly increased rate of client adoption of social media and word-of-mouth marketing techniques" (p. 4). This assertion is supported by the fact that job postings requiring social media skills rose 87 percent from 2011 to 2012 (Holmes, 2012) while the unemployment rate hovered at eight percent (Department of Labor, 2012). The industry is growing despite an economic recession, and in large part due to continued reliance on social media as a communication platform. A significant amount of research supports the idea that social media is beginning to play a substantial role in organizational public relations strategy, but fewer sources have investigated how organizations should use this tool, particularly during crisis. This project fills this gap by examining Con Edison's use of Twitter to communicate with stakeholders during Superstorm Sandy, and the public perceptions that resulted from this strategy.

This research investigates Con Edison's crisis response strategy, and analyzes the content of the messages it produced before, during, and after Superstorm Sandy. Stakeholder perception was affected by Con Edison's usage of dialogue to communicate instructing and adjusting information tactics in the online arena, and it is the goal of this thesis to better understand how organizations can use these tactics to mitigate negative backlash during crisis. The following chapter will pose research questions and discuss the methods utilized to reach drawn conclusions.

# Chapter 3

## Methodology

The purpose of this project was to examine how the dialogical aspects of the social media platform Twitter can be used to maintain organization-stakeholder relationships, and ultimately, support the claim that the employment of instructing and adjusting information tactics can be used during crisis to mitigate organizational backlash. To pursue this endeavor, this thesis examined Consolidated Edison of New York (Con Edison) and its reaction to the devastating effects of Superstorm Sandy. This chapter begins with an overview of Con Edison and Superstorm Sandy, describes the method of data collection, and introduces the guiding research questions. It concludes with justification for data analysis and research limitations.

### Consolidated Edison, Inc.

Consolidated Edison, Inc., is one of the largest investor-owned energy companies in the United States, headquartered in New York City. The organization operates five subsidiaries: Con Edison Company of New York, Con Edison Solutions, Con Edison Development, Con Edison Energy, Orange and Rockland Utilities (Con Edison, 2013a) Though Consolidated Edison, Inc. controls each of these companies, each subsidiary operates its own communication/public relations initiatives. This project focuses on the activities of one such subsidiary as they relate to the devastating effects of Superstorm Sandy: Con Edison Company of New York.

#### Consolidated Edison of New York (Con Edison)

Con Edison provides electric service to approximately 3.3 million customers and gas service to approximately 1.1 million customers in in New York City and Westchester

County, and natural gas service in Manhattan, the Bronx, and parts of Queens and Westchester (Con Edison, 2013b). Con Edison also owns and operates the world's largest district steam system, providing steam service to most of Manhattan (Con Eidson, 2013a). Other than Con Ed, the only other energy company operating in New York City is the Long Island Power Authority.

During Superstorm Sandy and the days following its departure, Con Edison of New York chose to communicate with its stakeholders via its Twitter handle, @ConEdison (Twitter 1, 2013). Consolidated Edison, Inc. subsidiaries Con Edison Solutions and Orange and Rockland Utilities also utilized their Twitter accounts to communicate with stakeholders during the storm, but not to the extent of Con Edison of New York. This project focuses on the overwhelming surge in communication output by Con Edison of New York before, during and after Superstorm Sandy.

**Superstorm Sandy**

Superstorm Sandy brought disaster to the doorstep of many people in the fall of 2012. Sandy demolished parts of Central America, Cuba, and the Bahamas, before wreaking havoc along the entire eastern seaboard of the United States during the last week of October 2012. Within the United States, much of the east coast was devastated by massive flooding and hurricane-force winds that resulted in the deaths of over one hundred people. Airports, hospitals, and transit systems were shut down as fifteen states experienced power outages, with New York and New Jersey being the most severely affected (Duke, 2012). As of October 31, the media were reporting that approximately 8 million people were without power as a result of Sandy, with over half of those outages being reported in New York and New Jersey alone (CBS, Duke, Columbia Tribune, 2012).

With so many people left without electricity, communication became a central concern in the aftermath of the storm. Many turned to online sources and social media platforms for much needed information updates, easily accessible from cell phone networks unaffected by electrical outages (Brenzel, 2012). Utilizing the Twitter handle @ConEdison, Con Edison of New York began posting messages at an average rate of one tweet every six minutes to its 800-follower audience – a number that grew to over 21,000 – as the storm hit New York City. On November 2, 2012 alone, @ConEdison sent 236 tweets, more than what the account had produced in all of July, August, and September 2012 combined (Bosker, 2012). The @ConEdison account offered safety tips and updates on company progress restoring power around the city, as well as individual responses to nearly all of the questions posed by activist stakeholders to the company Twitter handle.

For Con Edison, the situation became a public relations crisis as desperate publics demanded power restoration. Some Con Edison customers were still without electricity more than two weeks after the storm (The Wall Street Journal, 2012). This project investigated Con Edison's usage of Twitter to present instructing and adjusting information messages during the Sandy crisis, and how it used Twitter dialogically to mitigate negative backlash from activist publics.

## Method

To examine the usage of instructing and adjusting information tactics as they were used on the social media tool Twitter, a case study approach was utilized. Yin (1993) defines case study research as an empirical inquiry that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and addresses a situation in which the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 59). Thus, case study is regarded as a "comprehensive research strategy" (Yin, 2003, p. 14), which allows the study of organizational phenomena in a real-life setting with an in-depth, holistic study of few or single cases (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Hammersley & Gomm, 2002; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003). The approach is particularly useful for responding to *how* and *why* questions about a contemporary set of events (Leonard-Barton 1990; Yin, 2003), focusing on particular instances of some concern (Merriam, 1998).

Case study research has been one of the dominant forms of research in public relations (Coombs, 2010). In fact, Cutler (2004) found that case studies made up as much as a third of the research in public relations journals. Because public relations, and specifically crisis communication, is largely contingent on many situational factors, "case study research offers a more direct, convenient approach to examine the context of crisis" (Coombs, 2010, p. 81). Accordingly, to most appropriately examine Con Edison's activity and response to the Superstorm Sandy crisis, I utilized a case study approach.

**Data collection**

This research focuses on the analysis of data collected from the social media networking site, *Twitter.com*. Consolidated Edison posted approximately 2,000 messages to its Twitter account in the weeks surrounding Superstorm Sandy. These messages ranged in intent, shifting from promotional to safety to instructional, and engaged a growing audience of stakeholders in dialogical communication. The demand and necessity for this communication was illustrated by the large increase of Twitter followership observed during the storm; by November 3, five days after Superstorm

Sandy hit New York, the @ConEdison Twitter handle jumped from 800 followers to over 21,000 (Bosker, 2012). The messages sent by stakeholders to Con Edison during the crisis were also considered. These messages were analyzed for shifts in thematic content throughout the crisis as a whole. By analyzing the messages sent by Con Edison and the responses and interactions they garnered, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How can dialogical communication be used to maintain organization-stakeholder relationships during crisis in order to mitigate negative backlash?
2. What instructing information tactics are used on social media during a crisis?
3. Why does the employment of instructing information tactics help maintain organizational-stakeholder relationships during crisis?
4. What adjusting information tactics are used on social media during a crisis?
5. Why does the employment of adjusting information tactics help maintain organizational-stakeholder relationships during crisis?

**Analysis**

A thematic analysis was utilized to pursue these research questions. Thematic analysis refers to the process of categorizing qualitative data into themes (Boyatzis, 1998). A thematic analysis was best suited for this study because it allowed me to identify, examine, and record patterns of communication within my data set. The data set was compiled of the messages sent by Consolidated Edison between September 1, 2012 and December 1, 2012, as well as the responses, interactions, and conversations that the messages spawned from and with stakeholders. Identifying and evaluating patterns of communication within these dialogues allowed the data to answer the research questions.

Thematic analysis relies on themes to label and evaluate text segments (Owen, 1984). To be considered a theme, three criteria must be observed: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). Recurrence is observed when two or more data segments originate from the same thread of meaning. Repetition refers to when the same words, phrases, or ideas are observed repeatedly within the data. Forcefulness refers to the extent that particular ideas are stressed or emphasized within the data. These three criteria guided the location of themes within the data set.

The data set was divided into three segments: pre-storm, storm, and post-storm. The analysis was divided along Superstorm Sandy's timeline, rather than examined as a whole, so that shifts in organizational communication and stakeholder response could be observed throughout the crisis. Once the data set was divided, each segment was then open-coded. To do this, codes were applied that accurately described observed tweets throughout the segment. For example, all tweets that offered safety information were labled as "welfare" and those that offered power restoration information as "repair." Following this step, codes for each segment were clustered and redundancies were removed, ultimately creating a more manageable list. With this list as a guide, the data was revisited and axial coding was used to locate themes. Ultimately, ten unique themes emerged throughout all three crisis segments that were utilized to answer my research questions.

The observed themes helped dissect the relationship between Consolidated Edison and its stakeholders, and explained how and why that relationship was maintained using dialogical communication during Superstorm Sandy. After identifying themes commonly used by both Consolidated Edison and stakeholders, it was possible to examine how themes were used in relation to each other. Ultimately, it is revealed how Consolidated Edison used dialogue, and in what way that dialogue was received, throughout the crisis. This illuminated the value of dialogical communication during crisis, and provided data to respond to the first research question.

This study also investigated how Consolidated Edison engaged instructing and adjusting information tactics, and how these tactics helped maintain organization-stakeholder relationships. After using themes to signify the usage of both instructing information and adjusting information tactics, as well as stakeholder reaction to each, significance was assessed in maintaining the organization-stakeholder relationship. Dialogue between Consolidated Edison and stakeholders before, during, and after Superstorm Sandy was coded. After examining the usage and reception of these tactics on a continuum, it is revealed how Consolidated Edison regulated communication throughout the crisis and how stakeholder response adjusted as a result. By considering this dialogue, how it was regulated, and the effects of that regulation, this study provides evidence as to how instructing and adjusting information helped maintain the organization-stakeholder relationship during crisis, and fully answered the remaining research questions.

# Chapter 4

## Analysis

Con Edison first acknowledged Superstorm Sandy on the morning of October 26, 2012 in a message circulated via its Twitter account: "#ConEdison is closely monitoring Hurricane #Sandy and is preparing for possible damage in the company's service area: bit.ly/UMCyFA" (Con Edison, 2012d). The linked press release informed readers that Con Edison was preparing for "high winds, heavy rains, and flooding conditions that could wallop electric, gas and steam systems" when the storm reached New York City and Westchester County (Con Edison, 2012e). In the subsequent days, the realization of these conditions would throw Con Edison into the worst organizational crisis in its history.

In the remainder of this chapter, a thematic analysis of nearly 2,000 messages sent by @ConEdison before, during, and after Superstorm Sandy is provided to address posed research questions. First, instructing information themes, adjusting information themes, and dialogical themes are examined during the time leading up to Sandy's arrival. This section is immediately followed by an analysis of themes observed during the storm, and then a discussion of themes observed after the storm's departure. The analysis is divided along Sandy's timeline, rather than examined as a whole, so that shifts in organizational communication and stakeholder response can be observed throughout the crisis.

### Pre-storm: June – October 29, 6:35 p.m.

During the sixty days prior to Superstorm Sandy's arrival, @ConEdison posted a total of 62 messages to its Twitter feed, at an average rate of one tweet per day, to a followership of around 800 accounts. The vast majority of these messages were general updates, addressed to no single twitter account specifically. Many messages resembled home energy tips with links for more information on the Con Edison webpage. For instance, on October 4, 2012, @ConEdison tweeted, "#ConEdison Energy Tip #3: Protect your home this winter by installing storm windows and exterior doors. Learn more: http://bit.ly/VWfy4Q" (Con Edison, 2012c). Other messages commonly sent from @ConEdison during this time were promotional in nature, as when it posted, "Join #ConEdison & @CrainsNewYork for a panel to discuss how non-profits can gain donors! 10/9 at 8am. Register online: http://bit.ly/W9xZTD" (Con Edison, 2012b). In times of inclement weather, @ConEdison would also offer news and safety updates. During a storm in September 2012, for instance, it posted, "#ConEd is tracking storms in the tri-state area. Stay alert and read our safety tips here http://bit.ly/Pouoyh" (Con Edison, 2012a). This style of message was replicated when @ConEdison first acknowledged Sandy's impending arrival on Friday, October 26: "#ConEdison is closely monitoring Hurricane #Sandy and is preparing for possible damage in the company's service area: http://bit.ly/UMCyFA" (Con Edison, 2012d).

On that same day, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo declared a state-wide emergency, which President Obama quickly acknowledged (FEMA, 2013). On Saturday, area airports suspended travel and schools began to announce closures. By Sunday, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), too, was preparing for the worst; all public transportation was halted and bridges were closed. Great steps were being taken to prepare New York City for Sandy's arrival.

In the days leading up to the storm, noticeable shifts were made in @ConEdison's message deployment. Message frequency increased; the organization posted seventeen messages on October 28 alone. Message design also shifted. In the days just before the storm's landfall, messages effectively flipped from general updates to targeted messages. In total, 30 tweets were posted between @ConEdison's first acknowledgement of Sandy on October 26 and when the storm reached landfall in the evening of October 29. Of these, only six were general, non-targeted messages: two offered instructing information and four offered adjusting information.

**Instructing information (pre-storm).** Before Sandy's arrival, it was clear that significant wind and rain would reach New York City. To help stakeholders physically respond to downed service, Con Edison sent two tweets on October 28 offering instructing information. A single theme was observed after analyzing these tweets: individual response. These tweets informed online stakeholders how they should react to potential outcomes of the upcoming storm. One tweet read, "To report outages call 800-75-CONED or visit conEd.com using a mobile device. Outage map: bit.lyQjuxm6" (Con Edison, 2012f). The second message emphasized the same points, adding, "avoid down power lines" (Con Edison, 2012f). These messages aimed to prepare those in the storm's path with information that would return any loss of power as soon as possible.

These messages were received positively by @ConEdison's followership. Though no direct dialogue was spawned due to these messages, they received increasing attention. The first message received 41 retweets, which was significant for @ConEdison at the time, and the second received 76 – even more so. This suggests that publics were increasingly following and valuing the information being provided by the organization in preparation for Sandy's arrival. The fact that only two instructing information tweets were posted prior to the storm, however, suggests that the organization was not yet fully invested in its Twitter account as a main channel of communication.

**Adjusting information (pre-storm).** Four messages sent prior to Sandy's arrival included adjusting information, and aimed to help publics cope psychologically with the impending storm. A single theme was observed after analyzing these tweets: organizational preparedness. These messages emphasized Con Edison's awareness of Superstorm Sandy and outlined its potential response.

The first tweet was sent on October 28 and emphasized Con Edison's awareness of the impending storm: "#ConEdison continues to monitor Hurricane #Sandy & is bracing for damage to overhead and underground equipment: bit.ly/S6qvhj" (Con Edison, 2012g). The provided link offered publics the organization's most recent online press release, which outlined possible service outages and safety tips. The second message, posted the same day, underscored Con Edison's preparedness: "#ConEdison will have thousands of company employees working around the clock ready to respond to any problems (more): bit.ly/s6qvhj" (Con Edison, 2012h). The link provided routed stakeholders to the same press release as the first tweet. Combined, these messages received a total of seven retweets and produced no direct online dialogue. Though this response should not be considered negative, at least from a standpoint of hostility, it is markedly less significant than the reception of the two instructing information messages.

Similar to how instructing information tweets directed *stakeholder* response to Sandy, two published adjusting information messages outlined the *organizaiton's* potential response and its impact on stakeholders. These identical messages warned that certain parts of Con Edison's service area may need to be deliberately powered down upon Sandy's arrival: "IF the storm surge floods low-lying areas in NYC, then #ConEdison MAY shut down underground electrical equipment: bit.ly/S6qvhj" (Con Edison, 2012i). Con Edison proposed potential shutdowns to "avoid extensive damage to company and customer equipment, and allow company crews to restore power to customers more quickly" (Con Edison, 2012j).

These messages spurred much attention, the first one generating 25 retweets and the second – sent the morning before the storm arrived – 256. These messages threw @ConEdison into lengthy dialogue with a multitude of concerned publics. In almost all cases, @ConEdison repeated, clarified, or justified its original message. For example, when @caitlinweiskopf questioned whether Manhattan specifically might be powered down, Con Edison clarified in a direct confirmation: "@caitlinweiskopf Majority of Manhattan is underground electrical equipment" (Con Edison, 2012k). The company sometimes justified its messages with responses that offered more context: "@nyctigers Shutting down underground equipment may avoid extensive damage to company and customer equipment" (Con Edison, 2012l). Though some stakeholders issued concern, most accepted the information is a positive manner, some even wishing Con Edison good luck in the coming week.

**Dialogue (pre-storm).** Excluding the six general updates @ConEdison published prior to Sandy's arrival, all other tweets specifically engaged online stakeholders in dialogue. While most of these messages were direct responses to posed questions, repeating, clarifying, or justifying previous messages as discussed, some attempted to cultivate conversation by directly thanking users for retweets. As company posts began to draw attention, @ConEdison began to send group thank you messages to keep up:

"@divinepearlz @Edison_Electric @SquawkStreet @nycarecs @hernandezfranci @AntDeRosa @HarborSchool @ncXIII Thanks for the mentions and RTs" (Con Edison, 2012m). By doing so, Con Edison was able to show appreciation, and thus incentive, for sharing pertinent information and made a personal connection with concerned stakeholders. Messages of this style received both positive and negative feedback prior to Sandy's arrival. While some praised Con Edison for its communication efforts, others raised concern. @martinamartina joined the dialogue, in this instance, "@ConEdison pls stop with the 'thx for the RT' during an emergency. We're following u for much needed time sensitive info & it's getting lost" (Con Edison, 2012o). Possibly due to the growing influx of messages that required response, or possibly in an acknowledgement of @martinamartina and others' concerns, @ConEdison sent fewer and fewer "thank you" messages as the storm grew in severity.

While some users offered words of encouragement, and others words of critique, most tweets sent from stakeholders to @ConEdison remained completely neutral prior to the storm's arrival. These messages generally requested region and time-specific information regarding the possibility of a power shut down. But as the storm neared the coast, @ConEdison avoided any confirmation of whether there would be a power shutdown, or when it may take place. Even so, @ConEdison maintained neutral, even positive dialogue with online publics prior to the storm's arrival.

During the pre-storm phase of the Sandy crisis, decisive shifts in the way @ConEdison managed communication are easily observed. Message frequency increased dramatically and message design shifted from general updates to user-targeted posts. Prior to the storm's impact, dialogue focused on repeating, clarifying, and justifying general updates surrounding the possibility of a power shutdown. @ConEdison also attempted to reach out and thank those who helped spread the word, and while some stakeholders commented on this, the vast majority of feedback from online publics was neutral. This pre-storm activity helped initiate a dialogue that would continue throughout the crisis.

**Storm: October 29, 6:35 p.m. – October 30, 10:05 p.m.**

Superstorm Sandy reached New York City on the evening of Monday, October 29, 2012. By late afternoon it was clear devastation was imminent as storm surges reached upwards of thirteen feet, breaking previous records by more than thirty-six inches (FEMA, 2013). By 6:00 p.m. Mayor Bloomberg warned that Sandy would be the "storm of the century" and by 9:00, the New York City Mayor's Office tweeted, "Mayor: Right now, 911 is receiving 10,000 calls per half hour. Please, please, please only call 911 for life-threatening emergencies. #Sandy" (New York City Mayor's Office, 2012). An hour later, the MTA was reporting that subway systems were flooded, and by Tuesday's end more than 8.5 million people would be left without power (FEMA, 2013).

This segment of analysis begins with @ConEdison's 6:35 p.m. announcement that certain low-lying neighborhoods would be powered down, and spans the 28 hours thereafter. It concludes with the last message sent by the organization on Tuesday, October 30 as restoration efforts were being organized. During this time, @ConEdison continued to increase message frequency and focus on targeted response. Throughout this period, 208 tweets were sent roughly one every eight minutes, to an increasing @ConEdison followership. Of these, just 33 were general, non-targeted messages: five offered instructing information and 28 offered adjusting information.

**Instructing information (storm).** A total of five general, non-targeted messages in total were sent during the storm offering instructing information. The content of these messages resembled the same theme witnessed in instructing information tweets sent prior to Sandy's arrival: individual response.

Four of these messages mirrored tweets published in the time prior to Sandy's arrival; two instructed publics to call in to report service outages and two asked publics to avoid and report downed wires via the provided customer service number. The fifth message offered a safety tip, instructing those with lost power to turn off all lights and appliances to prevent overloading circuits when power was returned. These five messages combined received a total of 69 retweets; significantly lower than the 117 retweets earned by similar messages published prior to the storm's arrival. It is likely this decrease can, in part, be attributed to the early time of day – the first of these was sent at 3:41 a.m. Tuesday – but another factor may have been the inability of many publics to reach anyone via the phone number provided.

Many publics reported jammed phone lines and never-ending queues. User @Triskaidekaphiliac responded to one of these tweets, "@ConEdison calling your number is pointless, your IVR [interactive voice response] is not working properly" (Con Edison, 2012o). In another instance, @docluke56 responded, "@ConEdison I have no power and can't get in touch with you by phone or internet. I live in Staten Island" (Con Edison, 2012p). Con Edison, however, continued feverishly to divert concerned stakeholders to the customer service number, often to the complete frustration of stakeholders. @olimasssociates replied, for instance, "@ConEdison Have been calling - did you read my message? BUSY. Don't have a smart phone. I reported it to you - use your internal channels" (Con Edison, 2012q). While some stakeholders hoped to report outages online, the organization insisted that no service outage could be reported via Twitter.

While response to instructing information remained positive prior to Sandy's arrival, responses were mixed during the storm. Some users, like @Chuck_Suffel, remained upbeat: "@ConEdison thanks for the info, outage reported" (Con Edison, 2012r). But even after publics got through, response time was slow. For instance, @JeanLouiseFinch, who returned to Twitter after initially being told to call the customer service line, responded, "@ConEdison I did all the reporting u said to do. Live wires still on Revolutionary Rd. Are u ever coming?" (Con Edison, 2012s). Though Con Edison was effectively communicating needed instructing information, the organization's inability to accept and respond to calls in a timely fashion caused publics to return to Twitter to communicate. All @ConEdison chose to prescribe, however, were messages reinforcing publics to continue calling the customer service number. In this way, Con Edison created for itself a cyclical problem that added pressure to the crisis already at hand.

**Adjusting information (storm).** Thirty-three messages sent during Sandy's onslaught included adjusting information, aimed to help publics cope psychologically with the crisis. Three themes were observed after analyzing these tweets: organizational response, power restoration, and empathy.

As the storm settled in, Con Edison continued to communicate its Sandy response initiatives with online stakeholders. As discussed, prior to Sandy's arrival, Con Edison mentioned the possibility of shutting down power to low-lying areas with underground electrical equipment. This became a reality at 6:35 p.m. on October 29; the organization tweeted, "#ConEd has begun shutting off electrical service to part of Lower Manhattan – to protect equipment and allow for quicker restoration" (Con Edison, 2012t). This message received 380 retweets, circulating quickly around the web, and was followed up with messages informing the public of specific areas and numbers affected. At 7:19 p.m., @ConEdison announced that it was also powering down parts of Brooklyn for the same reasons, and similar follow up tweets were later sent – messages that received 114 retweets combined. Initially, @ConEdison reported that these power downs would affect 6,500 customers in total.

Posts describing Con Edison's response initiatives were supported with messages describing the organization's continued supervision of the storm. In one message, @ConEdison wrote, "#ConEdison continues to monitor underground electrical equipment" (Con Edison, 2012u) In another, the organization tweeted, "We are evaluating other areas as the storm progresses" (Con Edison, 2012v). Together, these types of messages built off of themes established prior to Sandy's arrival, which acted to maintain a consistent message that painted Con Edison as aware and reactive to the ongoing crisis. Even so, many online stakeholders became concerned they might be next to lose power as more and more neighborhoods where shutdown; by around midnight @ConEdison was reporting that 650,000 individuals had lost electricity – ten-fold initial estimates (Con Edison, 2012w). Immediate feedback requested area specific information and Con Edison quickly responded to these requests, identifying certain neighborhoods that could expect to be shut down. But with so many people losing power, it was not long before conversations moved away from "who will be next" and shifted toward "when will it be fixed?" As such, two additional adjusting information message themes emerged as Monday evening progressed into Tuesday morning: power restoration and empathy.

The majority of all messages sent by @ConEdison during the storm were in regards to restoration efforts. An underlying theme within many of these messages was the notion of "hard work." This is easily identified in the first mention of restoring Lower Manhattan, "#ConEd Manhattan outages were caused by flooding in company substations and engineers are working hard to correct the problem" (twitter). A message frequently re-circulated by @ConEdison also underscores this notion, "#ConEd crews are working around the clock to assess the damage from #sandy and restore service" (Con Edison, 2012x). Not only was Con Edison restoring power, it was "working hard" and "around the clock" to do so. Some publics, like @AmyTate01, retweeted in support: "Prayers for crews: RT @ConEdison: NYC outages were caused by flooding in company substations; engineers are working hard to correct problem" (Con Edison, 2012y). Numerous others, however, requested concrete answers to when the lights would turn back on. @Pacovell, for instance, wrote "@ConEdison I know you're working hard and I appreciate it, but you are repeating yourself. Looking for news when you have it #nonews #Sandy" (Con Edison, 2012z). @ConEdison was being pressured to give realistic timelines.

Con Edison began to give estimated restoration timelines on Tuesday morning. The first of these read, "For some #ConEd customers who are out, it may take more than a week to get power restored. #Sandy" (Con Edison, 2012aa), and received nearly 200 retweets. Within an hour, a follow up tweet offered more specific information: "Those in BK [Brooklyn] and Manhattan should have power back w/in 4 days. All others in areas served by overhead lines will take at least a week. #ConEd" (Con Edison, 2012bb). This second message was retweeted over 1,000 times among @ConEdison's ever-growing followership. This difference between overhead and underground restoration time triggered many stakeholders to inquire as to how they could determine what type of service area they were within. Accordingly, @ConEdison spent much time engaging in dialogue to send the same message repeatedly: "If you walk outside and see utility poles, you have overhead power" (Con Edison, 2012cc).

While these restoration estimates gave stakeholders a very general idea of when power may be restored to their neighborhoods, many still wanted more specific time frames. @MarrisaK728 asked, for instance, "@ConEdison can you share details regarding which neighborhoods u plan to restore and when? Is a 4 day window the shortest timeframe posibl?" (Con Edison, 2012dd). To this and many similar questions, @ConEdison responded, "#ConEd first restores lines that will return power to the most customers at once, then small groups, then individuals" (Con Edison, 2012ee). This message, repeated frequently during this period, communicated a utilitarian approach to restoration; priority was given to fixing equipment that would restore the greatest numbers of stakeholders first. While many continued to thank Con Edison for its communication and restoration efforts, countless others were growing worried; how would anyone know if they were part of the "most customers" or "small groups," or neither? How long, exactly could they expect power to remain off, and what would they do in the mean time? As @AnthonyCurtis68 put it, "@ConEdison Can U provide more guidance? I doubt all underground customers will turn on at the same time? We need to know if we go or stay" (Con Edison, 2012ff). Despite these frequent requests for more detailed information, @ConEdison remained vague.

Con Edison did, however, begin sending messages that seemingly aimed to influence empathy among publics. As neighborhoods were either actively shutdown or disabled due to storm damage, @ConEdison would update its followers with the number of customers without power. First, after powering down parts of Lower Manhattan, the organization announced that 6,500 customers were without electricity. Later, after parts of Brooklyn were shutdown and an explosion at a Manhattan substation knocked out part of the grid, the organization announced that 250,000 customers were in the dark. By late Monday night, after the worst had passed through, @ConEdison tweeted that 650,000 individuals were experiencing power loss. Published alongside these tweets were messages emphasizing Sandy's unprecedented status. This message, for example, was recycled frequently: "#ConEd: 'This is the largest storm-related outage in our history,' said Con Edison Senior Vice President for Electric Operations John Miksad" (Con Edison, 2012gg). These statements do not necessarily attempt to excuse Con Edison from blame, but shift focus to the severity of the storm and how many Sandy – not Con Edison – had negatively impacted. Whether or not this was the organization's conscious intent is not known, but it can be determined based on lackluster response that these messages had little impact on public perception. Few retweets and no dialogues were established by these types of messages within this phase of the crisis.

**Dialogue (storm).** As discussed, @ConEdison published 208 tweets between when Sandy first reached New York City and when restoration efforts began on October 30. Of these, 33 messages were general, one-way communication updates. The other 175 messages all engaged particular users in dialogue. Similar to dialogue cultivated prior to Sandy's arrival, most of these messages repeated, clarified, or justified information provided in @ConEdison's general updates. "Thank you" messages, often sent to users who retweeted @ConEdison content prior to Sandy's arrival, were absent during the storm. A growing theme that did emerge from these dialogical messages, however, was "safety."

@ConEdison's first mention of "safety" occurred on October 29, soon after power had been shut down in Lower Manhattan and parts of Brooklyn: "@cait_omalley Please report any trouble to 311 or 911 where applicable. Safety is the #1 priority" (Con Edison, 2012hh). While @ConEdison reminded @cait_omalley of instructing information provided earlier, it also underscored the value and priority of customer safety – a notion that it would repeatedly communicate. The organization would also utilize safety as a way to justify the restoration process. For instance, in a response to @katisquilting, @ConEdison explained, "our crews are cleaning sea water out, drying equipment and testing for safety before restoring" (Con Edison, 2012hh). In this way, @ConEdison often justified the amount of time expected to return power to concerned publics. In total, the organization included the words "safe" or "safety" in 10 percent of the dialogical messages it published during the storm.

Response to this theme was mixed. Some responded positively, such as @ijillibean, for instance, who replied, "@ConEdison you are doing an amazing job despite this chaos. Keep up the great work and thanks for your dedication. #staysafe" (Con Edison, 2012ii). Others, however, were underwhelmed by Con Edison's message, demanding to know when workers would be able to restore power. @KatIsQuilting responded in a way replicated by many during this time: "@ConEdison sorry, but that doesn't help me! We are far away from sea water in Northern Westchester. Sad that no one is working around here!!" (Con Edison, 2012jj). While some publics commended the organization for its efforts, criticisms began to surface as more and more people awaited power restoration.

Between the arrival of Sandy on the evening of October 29 and the following night, Con Edison continued to increase its Twitter communication, as well as its focus on dialogical message design. These messages, in part, communicated instructing information that directed individual, stakeholder response. Many other messages offered adjusting information that communicated the organization's response, power restoration processes and timelines, as well as empathy and blame shifting. Throughout this period, dialogical messages continued to repeat, clarify, or justify previously published messages, but also focused on stakeholder and worker safety. Some public response remained positive during this time, but, overall, Con Edison was engaging in dialogues with unhappy customers. Initially, publics communicated frustration with overloaded phone lines, but criticism shifted toward slow response time as more and more people lost power.

**Post-storm: October 31 – November**

On the morning of Wednesday, October 31, the New York Stock Exchange reopened its doors and Mayor Bloomberg rang the opening bell. By the next day, most area airports began offering limited service and public schools were scheduled to reopen on November 4. The worst had passed; what was left of Superstorm Sandy was dissipating to the west as it moved across Pennsylvania and further inland (National

Weather Service, 2012). Though the storm was over, recovery was still far from reach; Sandy caused an estimated $62 billion in damage in the U.S., making it the second most-costliest storm in our country's history, leaving several million without power (Centers for Disease Control, 2012).

Con Edison was reeling, anxiously trying to restore electricity to several thousand stakeholders left in the dark. Immediate recovery efforts had returned power to 109,000 customers, but as of 11:00 a.m. on October 31, 786,000 customers were still waiting to be restored (Con Edison, 2012kk). As crews scrambled to reestablish power across the city, a secondary storm on November 7 caused further damage. In all, over 1 million Con Edison stakeholders would lose power, and it would take until November 11 to complete the majority of restoration efforts (Con Edison, 2012kk).

The organization had secured over 1,400 external contractors and mutual aid workers from utilities across the country to assist in the restoration process. Due to more than 100,000 downed primary electric wires, blocked roads, and flooded facilities, however, Con Edison reported the path to restoration would be a slow one (Con Edison, 2012kk). Not surprisingly, waiting stakeholders grew anxious as days passed and electricity failed to be restored, and many thousand were now relying on Twitter for needed information. A week prior to Sandy's arrival, @ConEdison had approximately 800 followers; this number peaked at approximately 23,000 by November 3, underscoring the value of Con Edison's online communication efforts (Bosker, 2012).

This data characterized as "post storm" begins with messages posted by @ConEdison starting on October 31 and continues through the end of the November, when the crisis – or at least online conversations pertaining to the crisis – subsided. The vast majority of this communication occurred between October 31 and November 3; the organization posted messages to its Twitter feed at a rate of 1 tweet every 6 minutes before slowly tapering off. The rate dramatically decreased after November 9 – by which time most stakeholders' power had been restored – and dipped to an average of 1 tweet per week by the end of the month. Following a pattern established early in the crisis, the organization continued to post both instructing information and adjusting information messages while engaging in dialogue with online stakeholders. Instructing and adjusting information themes, as well as dialogical themes, are discussed.

**Instructing information (post-storm).**

In the days following the storm's departure, @ConEdison frequently posted messages to its Twitter feed that included instructing information. These messages, continued to mirror activity witnessed during and prior to the storm, reflecting a single theme: individual response. The vast majority of these messages continued to focus on instructing stakeholders to report outages to the organization by calling the customer service number. Other messages provided links to the Con Edison webpage for those unable to call or get through, or for those requesting specific outage information. A smaller percentage of messages communicated relief efforts made available by Con Edison for those in need.

Between October 31 and the end of November, 127 messages were posted that encouraged stakeholders to report electrical outages and downed wires via either the organization's customer service number or website. Only eight of theses messages were general, non-dialogical updates. The 119 other posts were responses to questions, which often repeated or emphasized the need to report service outages via the customer service number. Many stakeholders continued to raise concerns, as they did during the storm, that customer service lines were jammed and outages could not be properly reported. Others started to tweet that their phone batteries were either dying or already dead, and that a phone call – especially one that required waiting in queue – was an impossibility. At this point, @ConEdison began to respond to these concerns by suggesting that customers report their concerns via the Con Edison webpage.

The webpage was also shared with frequency for those stakeholders requesting area-specific restoration times. During the storm's initial arrival, @ConEdison replied to such requests with general timeframes. It reported on the 29th, for instance, that parts of Manhattan and Brooklyn, would be restored within a 4-day window.

Days later, Con Edison began reporting that parts of the city would not be fully restored until November 11, more than a week after the storm's departure. For many, such a wide window was unacceptable. In response to the number of tweets demanding neighborhood-specific restoration times, @ConEdison began directing stakeholders to its website to view an outage map it had made available: "See #ConEdison's outage map for area power restoration updates: http://bit.ly/Qjxum6 #Westchester #NYC" (Con Edison, 2012yy). While this offered those demanding more information a response, many were still not pleased. Numerous users reported that the map failed to load, or that it failed to offer any information more specific than what @ConEdison was already providing via Twitter. @egami_obscura, for instance, replied, "@ConEdison seems like the estimated restoration time for the entire map says "pending" can we expect more details anytime soon? #Sandy" (Egami Obscura, 2012). This frustration prompted many to question why the map was created in first place, and how the organization expected it to help customers manage the crisis at hand (Anthony Curtis, 2012). Ultimately, the outage map may have created more questions that it actually ever answered.

Con Edison also began instructing stakeholders to take advantage of relief efforts being made available by the organization throughout the city. The first group these messages focused on was Con Edison's dry ice distribution. The organization began offering dry ice as a way for those without power to preserve perishable foods. Con Edison offered free dry ice daily from October 31 – November 8, and regularly posted the changing locations of the distribution stations. While these messages received significant attention, the only theme that emerged from stakeholder response is discontent; almost all replies requested more dry ice distribution, and at more convenient locations.

Beginning on November 6, @ConEdison also began tweeting daily updates of the locations of Con Edison Customer Outreach Vans. These vans were stationed in areas hit hardest by Sandy and offered a place for stakeholders to speak with organizational representatives. Claims could be filed and general information regarding the crisis and its restoration could be obtained. Similar to how the dry ice distribution messages were received, the only theme that emerged from stakeholder response is discontent. Many stakeholders demanded to know why outreach vans were not designated for their own neighborhoods. While dry ice and outreach van efforts by Con Edison may have been well-received on the ground, responses via Twitter remained quite negative.

Overall, Con Edison remained fairly constant in its dissemination of instructing information messages throughout the entirety of the crisis. Before, during, and after the storm, Con Edison focused on stakeholder response, encouraging stakeholders to report outages and seek customer-specific information via the customer service number. In the wake of Sandy, Con Edison began to encourage customers to utilize its website as well, especially for those unable to get through the overwhelmed or unavailable phone lines. The website also provided stakeholders an outage map that supposedly offered neighborhood-specific restoration timeframes, though this feature was not nearly as well-received as the organization likely hoped. Finally, Con Edison began to offer regular updates of organization-sponsored relief efforts, including the locations of dry ice and outreach van locations. Online, these updates were met with discontentment, as the majority of responses sought more outreach and in more locations.

**Adjusting information (post-storm).** The vast majority of messages sent after Sandy passed focused on offering stakeholders adjusting information. As hundreds of thousands of stakeholders waited for the lights to turn back on, Con Edison utilized its Twitter feed to communicate messages aimed to help them cope psychologically. During and before the storm, similar messages focused on organizational response, power restoration, and empathy. In the days following the storm, messages pertaining to power restoration remained the strongest focus; other major themes included positive remarks, the lost stakeholder, and avoidance of fault.

***Power restoration.*** Messages relating to power restoration efforts were the focus of content published by the organization following the storm. Only a very small percentage of these messages were general updates; most posts continued to engage in dialogue with online stakeholders. Similar posts made during the storm included underlying themes of “hard work” and “safety,” and while such posts remained, they were much less emphasized. In the days following the storm, messages pertaining to power restoration focused primarily on communicating estimated restoration schedules.

These communications initially focused on the restoration of stakeholders with underground service. In congruence with previously made estimations, Con Edison continued to communicate that those with underground service could expect restoration by Saturday November 3. The organization remained vague when estimating restoration times for customers with either overhead or steam service, often stating to "expect at least a week" wait (Con Edison, 2012mm). The goal for total restoration would quickly change to November 11, however, which would be repeatedly communicated in the days following the storm (Con Edison, 2012nn).

By Saturday, November 3, Con Edison had restored power to most stakeholders with underground service, meeting its three-day goal. In fact, by the next morning the organization was reporting that 75 percent of all those who had lost power due to Sandy had been restored (Con Edison, 2012oo). As underground service was returned, communication shifted in focus to those with steam service, and by November 5 restoration messages began to focus heavily on those with overhead service. In the days following, @ConEdison would continue to update its Twitter feed with messages reassuring stakeholders that it was on schedule to meet its global restoration goal of November 11.

Published restoration schedules prompted stakeholder response that was confused and discontent. The separation between underground and overhead service, and the difference in restoration time, continued to cause puzzlement among many stakeholders. In response, @ConEdison continued to offer routine communication explaining that, "if you walk out your door and see utility poles, you have #ConEdison overhead service.

Underground = #ConEdison manholes" (Con Edison, 2012pp). Such messages were sent with consistency through November 9.

Also similar to communication sent during the storm, responses continued to seek more specific restoration estimates. @ConEdison consistently referred to its utilitarian approach to restoration, explaining that the largest clusters of customers were being restored first, followed by smaller clusters (Con Edison, 2012qq). While all underground customers would be restored by Saturday, for instance, certain groups would have power sooner. But, in the same way these messages were received during the storm, this approach created a cyclical conversation in which stakeholders were left with further questions: "@ConEdison Is there a way to know which are the bigger clusters?" (Allard, 2012).

This confusion among stakeholders eventually led to discontentment. Stakeholders from all over the city indicted Con Edison of failing to restore power fast enough, and many responses suggested the organization was wrongfully prioritizing certain neighborhoods over others. @Lolyziia, for instance, posted on November 4: "Still no power in #Yonkers, sucks that @ConEdison forgot about us #Westchester #StillintheDark" (LoriiZilla, 2012). Other stakeholders believed service could be reinstated faster if only the organization cared more. @Edinwestchester wrote: @ConEdison maybe more trucks and crews would help? One crew in Scarsdale area is a joke" (Ed, 2012).

In the days following the storm, Con Edison continued to receive numerous requests for neighborhood restoration times. Though the organization made these schedules available, and even met these timelines, little gratitude was communicated in stakeholder response. Instead, stakeholders responded with confusion or discontentment, even anger. Demands for more precise restoration times were common and stakeholders began suggesting that the organization could be doing more than it already was. Overall, organizational messages were met with negative response.

Three other themes emerged within the messages posted by @ConEdison following the storm, possibly in response to the overwhelmingly negative feedback in stakeholder response. These include messages offering the following themes: positive remarks, the lost stakeholders, and avoidance of fault.

***Positive remarks.*** Beginning on October 31, Con Edison began to circulate messages focusing on progress made. The vast majority of these messages reflected empathetic messages sent during the storm, which articulated the growing number of stakeholders that had lost power. During the post-storm period, however, these messages switched to focusing on the number of stakeholders that had been restored, as well as their locations. For instance, on November 2, @ConEdison published, "#ConEdison has restored over 39,000 customers in #Bronx. Crews will continue to work 24/7 until all are restored" (Con Edison, 2012rr). Similar messages were circulated with regularity through November 11.

Response to these messages was largely positive. Some replied with gratitude or acknowledgement of hard work, while others explicitly recognized the organization's communication efforts. On November 2, for instance, @CarolineBMullen responded, "@ConEdison thank you so much! Its been a long 4 days but you have done a great job and kept us very informed. Best of luck in the next weeks" (Mullen, 2012). Similarly, @DaveMatz replied the following day, "@ConEdison You've done a brilliant job communicating via #twitter during #sandy recovery. Thx and way to write the playbook for the future!" (Matz, 2012). As stakeholders' power was restored, many gracious comments were published in response – some going so far to suggest that Con Edison had used exemplary communication. In fact, this is the first time throughout the entirety of the crisis that strong positive feedback is observed from stakeholders, underscored by user @JSKLM on November 4: "@ConEdison Way to go, guys. Your service is invaluable to so many and perhaps underappreciated...until now" (Sandy, 2012).

Not everyone was completely won over, though. Many stakeholders were still without power and, as the days passed, verbalized discontentment became more and more common in responses to such "number restored" messages. For example, @LastBrainLeft responded on November 5: "Still dark in Howard Beach, Queens. RT @ConEdison #ConEdison has restored over 140,000 customers in #Brooklyn following hurricane #Sandy" (Ar, 2012). This and similar responses drew attention to locations still without power. As Con Edison continued to announce the number and location of those restored, many stakeholders without power began suggesting that the organization had forgotten them – or worse, were purposely ignoring them. A tweet posted by Westchester Magazine emphasized this concern: "Our [Facebook] comment thread about @ConEdison has gotten heated. Do you think they're diverting resources to NYC? Have you seen them [in Westchester]?" (Westchester Magazine, 2012). As comments similar to this became more common, @ConEdison's communication began to focus on reassuring stakeholders that all areas of the city were a priority.

***The Lost Stakeholders.*** Beginning on November 1, @ConEdison began to regularly publish messages that insisted its fair allocation of resources. The first of these was sent on November 1: "#ConEdison is not diverting resources to NYC alone. We are allocating crews as necessary to all areas of our service territories" (Con Edison, 2012ss). These messages were sent with regularity until November 9, and eventually began to target specific stakeholder groups – sometimes even providing video or photographic evidence. On November 4, @ConEdison tweeted to one concerned stakeholder in Queens, "@Lilsaaruun3: Every region and customer without power is important. See #ConEdison crews working in #Queens ow.ly/f0LsU" (Con Edison, 2012tt). The link took online stakeholders to the Con Edison YouTube channel, which featured video of crews working not only in Queens, but in several neighborhoods around the city.

The organization's dissemination of these messages suggested that every stakeholder was important and that no person or group had been forgotten or overlooked. As discussed, Con Edison communicated its initiative to fix equipment that would restore power to the most people first. This ultimately created confusion among stakeholders that led many to worry when they may be restored. As individuals waited, fears that the organization had either forgotten them or simply did not care began to be communicated. As such, messages documenting restoration efforts in areas throughout the city underscored the notion that every stakeholder remained a priority, and acted as a response to backlash received from Con Edison's utilitarian approach to restoration.

***Avoidance of fault***. A final adjusting information theme that emerged from the messages posted by @ConEdison in the post-storm period is avoidance of fault. Several messages posted between October 31 and mid-November focus exclusively on blame shifting. These messages were, in large part, a response to individuals upset about restoration delays, and pointed a finger at privately owned equipment, usually maintained by stakeholders' building management. On November 2, for example, the organization tweeted, "#ConEdison will begin restoration to low/mid Manhattan today. Bldgs w/ flooding/damaged electrical won't be restored until bldg mngmt fixes" (Con Edison, 2012uu). Con Edison accepted responsibility for restoring power to its customers, but only so long as their electrical equipment was *able to be restored.* For those stakeholders ravaged by flooding or other damage, Con Edison pushed attention toward building owners and management personnel. By doing so, Con Edison was able to alleviate pressure and negative attention directed at the organization. Blame and backlash became less targeted and, thus, less intensive. Most of these tweets were individualized responses to particular stakeholders in areas were restoration was already, or near, being completed.

Other messages frequently disseminated by Con Edison in the post-storm period reminded stakeholders of the unprecedented damage caused by Sandy. These messages were first published during the storm and continued throughout the entirety of the crisis. @ConEdison regularly reminded stakeholders that Sandy was the "largest storm-related outage in [the organization's] history," and delivered "unprecedented damage" to the company's service area. As discussed, these statements do not necessarily attempt to excuse Con Edison from blame, but shift focus to the severity of the storm and how many Sandy – not Con Edison – had negatively impacted.

During the storm, few tweets from stakeholders were published in response to @ConEdison's blame shifting messages. In the days following the storm, however, the organization's attempt to avoid fault was met with increased response. Though stakeholders voiced both discontentment and encouragement, no clear theme(s) emerge within these responses. This lack of focused stakeholder response is possibly explained by the fact that most of @ConEdison's blame shifting messages were posted in direct response to individual questions or concerns, thus received differing responses based on particular situations and rather than the event as a whole.

**Dialogue (post-storm).**

Between October 31 and the end of November, @ConEdison published more than 1,400 messages to its Twitter feed; more than half of all tweets made by the organization during the crisis were published after the storm had passed. Of these messages, the vast majority were targeted messages that engaged individual stakeholders in dialogue. In this way, @ConEdison followed a communication pattern it established during and just before the storm. Similar to dialogue cultivated during the storm, most of these messages repeated, clarified, or justified information provided in @ConEdison's general updates. Established dialogues focused on supporting instructing information and adjusting information disseminated throughout this period. The "safety" theme – witnessed in messages sent during the storm – subsided in the days following its retreat, but "thank you" messages, which were seen only during the pre-storm period, reemerge during the post-storm. This remains the only common theme within established dialogues.

Prior to Sandy's arrival, @ConEdison often tweeted "thank you" messages to online stakeholders who mentioned or retweeted its general updates. By doing so, Con Edison was able to show appreciation, and thus incentive, for sharing pertinent information and made a personal connection with concerned publics. Messages of this style received both positive and negative feedback prior to Sandy's arrival. Possibly due to the growing influx of messages that required response, or possibly in an acknowledgement of concerns, @ConEdison sent fewer and fewer "thank you" messages as the storm grew in severity – eventually ceasing all-together.

During the post-storm period, however, @ConEdison began sending similar messages again. "Thank you" tweets focused on acknowledging those stakeholders who shared positive updates in relation to the restoration process. For example, when @KatieSchlientz tweeted, "@ConEdison Know you are working hard and appreciate all your efforts! Please hit Eastchester soon!," the organization responded: "@katieschlientz Thanks for the kind words! Our crews will continue to work as quickly and safely as possible until everyone is back" (Con Edison, 2012vv). In this way, @ConEdison was able to make a personal connection with a concerned stakeholder, recirculate her positive comment to its larger followership, and reemphasize – both to her and the larger followership – previously published adjusting information. This tactic was replicated with frequency throughout the post-storm period to neutral and positive response.

Throughout the post-storm period, @ConEdison mimicked many of the communication patterns utilized throughout earlier segments of the crisis. Before, during, and after the storm, instructing information messages focused on stakeholder response. Adjusting information messages continued to focus on power restoration and empathy, but also included messages aimed to shift blame and remind online audiences that all stakeholders were being attended to. Similar to communication witnessed during the onset of the crisis, dialogue in the post-storm period focused on thanking individuals who shared positive updates in relation to the restoration process.

On the morning of November 12, Con Edison announced via its website and Twitter feed that restoration efforts were largely complete (Con Edison, 2012ww). More than 1 million stakeholders who had last power due to Sandy, as well as the secondary storm which followed it, had been restored. The organization was careful to note, however, that only those customers whose equipment *could* be restored had been attended to. Approximately 16,300 customers in flood-ravaged areas of Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island were still without power due to inoperable, privately owned equipment. By November 16, this number would dwindle to under 2,000 (Con Edison, 2012xx), and by December the organization would cease nearly all online Sandy-related communication. In the next chapter, research questions are responded to and theoretical contributions are discussed. Practical implications are offered in conclusion, as well as limitations and directions for future research.

# Chapter 5

## Conclusion

This project sought to answer five research questions. The first of these asked how dialogical communication can be used to maintain organization-stakeholder relationships during crisis in order to mitigate negative backlash. Throughout the Superstorm Sandy crisis, Con Edison utilized its Twitter account as a primary medium to communicate with stakeholders. While the organization published some general, non-targeted messages, these tweets either initiated conversations or were in response to individual stakeholders (or groups of stakeholders). Accordingly, the vast majority of all @ConEdison communication analyzed in this research was dialogical in nature. These dialogues generally centered on repeating, clarifying, or justifying instructing and adjusting information messages being published.

Specific dialogical themes emerge throughout the crisis, as well. The functionality of Twitter empowered @ConEdison to offer individualized feedback to thousands of stakeholders before, during, and after Superstorm Sandy. In this way, the organization was able to monitor stakeholder feedback and adjust its crisis response communication accordingly. As such, shifting themes emerged as the crisis progressed; thank you messages were published in the pre-storm phase; safety messages emerge during the storm; and thank you messages reemerge in the post-storm period. Initial stakeholder response was negative during the pre-storm period, but shifted to positive by the crisis' end. This suggests that by engaging in dialogue, monitoring stakeholder feedback, and adjusting messages accordingly, Con Edison was able to successfully maintain stakeholder relationships, ultimately mitigating negative backlash resulting from the crisis. This conclusion is supported in the analysis of both instructing and adjusting information messages, as well.

The second question posed by this project asked what instructing information tactics are used on social media during a crisis. Prior to, during, and after Superstorm Sandy, Con Edison's instructing information messages focused exclusively on stakeholder response. These messages repeatedly instructed stakeholders to report power outages via the organization's customer service number or website, and to take precautionary measures.

Instructing information messages were received positively prior to the storm's arrival, but negative stakeholder response became much more common during and post-Superstorm Sandy. Negative response during the storm centered on the inability of stakeholders to follow guidelines set forth by Con Edison. Stakeholders attempting to report power outages via the customer service number articulated frustration because they could not successfully get through overloaded Con Edison phone servers. Negative response in the post-storm period focused on the lack of information and response initiative provided by the organization. When Con Edison prompted stakeholders to utilize its website for power restoration timeframes, responses focused on the little amount of new information being provided. Backlash also criticized Con Edison's community relief efforts for failing to provide dry ice distribution/community outreach vans to all parts of the city. The organization largely ignored such negative feedback throughout the crisis, using dialogue to repeat, clarify, or justify messages already sent.

It is important to note that not all responses to instructing information were negative. In fact, a plethora of stakeholder response remained very positive. Stakeholders that got through the customer service phone queue, received specific restoration timeframes, or were able to take advantage of the organization's community relief efforts offered very encouraging responses throughout the crisis. This suggests that backlash was not the result of instructing information messages, but instead due to the inability of Con Edison to receive stakeholder response to those messages. In this sense, backlash resulted from a structural failure rather than a communication failure. Accordingly, the need for instructing information messages during crisis is supported by this research, though messages should advise response that does not exceed structural limitations of the organization.

The third research question asked how the employment of instructing information tactics helps maintain organizational-stakeholder relationships during crisis. While overall stakeholder response shifted from positive to negative throughout the crisis, instructing information messages prompted stakeholders to participate in developing dialogues with the organization. This alleviated stakeholder desire to share frustration with the organization and helped Con Edison adjust its message response. Moreover, by focusing stakeholder attention on safety and outage reporting, the organization was able to decrease restoration time and keep stakeholders from becoming hurt or killed. These efforts did not go unnoticed, as witnessed by the abundance of positive stakeholder response by the crisis' end. Thus, the employment of instructing information tactics helped sustain ongoing organizational-stakeholder dialogues, made the restoration process more efficient, and offered stakeholders information that kept them safe. In these ways, the employment of instructing information tactics helped maintain organizational-stakeholder relationships.

The fourth research question posed by this project asked what adjusting information tactics are used on social media during a crisis. Adjusting information themes fluctuated throughout the crisis: pre-storm themes focused exclusively on the organization's response; the addition of restoration and empathetic themes emerge during the storm; and positive, inclusive, and blame-shifting themes are witnessed during post-storm communication.

Con Edison altered adjusting information messages throughout the crisis in reaction to shifting stakeholder response. Prior to the storm's arrival, Con Edison's communication efforts were received very positively by stakeholders, many of whom wished the organization "good luck" in the coming week. But, as an increasing number of people lost power due to Sandy's landfall, stakeholder response began to focus on when power would be restored. Subsequently, organizational response during the storm began to incorporate power restoration timelines – a theme that remained prevalent throughout the remainder of the crisis – and empathetic messages. Response to empathetic messages was lackluster, and such messages ceased to be published as the crisis shifted in to the post-storm period. Power restoration messages were received strongly by stakeholders, yet response demanded more specific neighborhood timelines. Though the organization never offered those timelines, it did begin publishing the growing statistics of restored customers throughout the post-storm period. Stakeholder response to these messages was initially very positive, but those that remained without power began to voice increased discontentment as time wore on – even suggesting that Con Edison had forgotten them or was purposely diverting resources to other parts of the city. Consequently, the organization began communicating "you are not forgotten" and blame-shifting messages during the final segment of the crisis.

The vast majority of all messages published by Con Edison throughout the crisis can be categorized as adjusting information. While these messages received some negative backlash throughout the storm and post-storm periods, overall stakeholder response remained positive. This success can be attributed to the ability of the organization to shift its message output as needed and appropriately respond to changing stakeholder feedback via Twitter. This ultimately allowed Con Edison to sustain organization-stakeholder dialogues, which – in a cyclical turn – helped stakeholders psychologically cope throughout the entirety of the crisis. In this way, the need and value for adjusting information messages during crisis is supported by this research.

The fifth research question posed by this project asked how the employment of adjusting information tactics helps maintain organizational-stakeholder relationships during crisis. Throughout the crisis, the organization effectively altered adjusting information themes in reaction to stakeholder response. Overall, these messages helped stakeholders understand what the organization was doing in response to the crisis and how other stakeholders fared in comparison. Other messages focused on reminding stakeholders that assistance was being devoted to all and that the circumstances were not the fault of the organization. In this way, adjusting information messages created a sense of community; these messages framed everyone, including the organization, as victims of the storm and actively reminded online stakeholders that they were not alone in the crisis. This resulted in very positive stakeholder response by the crisis' end. Thus, the employment of adjusting information tactics can help maintain organizational-stakeholder relationships when utilized dialogically. By granting voice to those affected, altering adjusting information messages accordingly, and removing the organization as a target, Con Edison was able to successfully mitigate negative backlash from stakeholders during crisis.

**Theoretical implications**

This research substantiates the need for crisis communication to be approached from a dialogical orientation. Key to Con Edison's success throughout the Superstorm Sandy crisis was its engagement in dialogue with stakeholders. The organization's usage of Twitter during the crisis allowed it to elicit feedback from stakeholders and adjust its crisis response and communication as needed. Kent and Taylor (2002) outlined five tenants of dialogue: mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment. The findings of this project articulate the organization's embodiment of these tenants and expounds upon the authors' approach to creating a mediated dialogic communication system within the organization, explicitly linking their deliberations to social media application.

*Mutuality* involves two features: collaboration and a spirit of mutual equality. Dialogues engaged by Con Edison never attempted to negotiate terms in any way. Instead, the organization exemplified collaboration by acknowledging intersubjectivity; stakeholder positions and concerns were accepted and responded to by Con Edison in a consistent and deliberate manner. Furthermore, Con Edison's communication style acknowledged stakeholders as equals, often explicitly showing concern for the needs, desires, and views of the individuals with whom they engaged in dialogue. In this way, Con Edison exemplified the tenant of mutuality.

*Propinquity* encompasses three characteristics: immediacy of presence, temporal flow, and engagement. Con Edison, communicating in real-time throughout the entirety of the crisis, engaged in very strong immediacy with stakeholders. Temporal flow refers to the focus of dialogue on a continued and shared future for all participants; it is not rooted solely in the present. Con Edison's constant focus on the restoration of power for its constituencies and an equitable future exemplified appropriate temporal flow. Finally, Con Edison's attempt to respond to all individual tweets relating to the crisis illustrates the extent to which the organization practiced dialogical engagement.

*Empathy* is characterized by three features: supportiveness, communal orientation, and confirmation of others. Con Edison offered supportiveness by creating a climate in which stakeholders' participation was not only encouraged, but also facilitated. The organization took on a communal orientation when it attempted to involve and address all groups of stakeholders affected by the crisis. Finally, it showed empathy by confirming all stakeholders that entered into dialogue with the organization, addressing with regularity even those that were very upset or angry.

Implicit to dialogical exchange is *risk*, which involves: vulnerability, unanticipated consequences, and the recognition of strange otherness. Con Edison voluntarily entered the digital arena and participated in open and un-scripted dialogue with thousands of stakeholders throughout the entirety of the Superstorm Sandy crisis. In doing so, the organization made itself vulnerable and opened itself up for unanticipated consequences. Moreover, the organization's engagement with a multitude of stakeholder response recognized and accepted difference, or "otherness," within affected groups.

Finally, *commitment* involves three characteristics: genuineness, commitment to the conversation, and commitment to interpretation. Throughout the crisis, Con Edison approached dialogues in earnest and with an honest outlook, exemplifying the characteristic of genuineness, even when such an outlook was highly criticized. The organization's dedication to dialogical engagement, as well as its consistency in response, illustrates both commitment to conversation and interpretation.

The findings of this project offer strong support for the dialogical orientation of public relations as outlined by Kent and Taylor (2002). The authors postulate that for stakeholders, dialogue can lead to increased organizational accountability, a greater say in organizational operations, and increased public satisfaction; for organizations, the engagement of dialogue can lead to increased public support and enhanced image/reputation. This research supports this conclusion whole-heartedly. Throughout the crisis, Con Edison was often held accountable for restoration timelines, adjusted its crisis and communication response after eliciting feedback from stakeholders, and ultimately enjoyed positive feedback from stakeholders at the conclusion of the crisis.

A dialogic approach to public relations has significant implications for crisis communication, and specifically instructing and adjusting information tactics. As Coombs (2007) has noted, these tactics are vital and necessary in any crisis, yet most research and practice take their usage for granted. Sturges (1994) suggested that communication following a crisis outbreak should first focus on helping stakeholders physically and psychologically cope before moving toward reputation repair strategies. Reporting timely and accurate updates becomes increasingly challenging in today's fast-paced media environment, however, especially considering the adopted 24-hour news cycle. The answer to this challenge may lie in an organization's use of social media during times of crisis. This project's focus on Con Edison's usage of Twitter to communicate instructing and adjusting information messages throughout the entirety of a crisis offers unique and valuable insight to how these tactics can be successfully utilized in real-time application. This research supports the conclusion that instructing and adjusting information tactics will be increasingly successful in mitigating negative backlash during crisis when utilized dialogically.

Crisis theory should begin to consider the dialogical engagement of instructing and adjusting information tactics as a viable and necessary strategy for organizations experiencing crisis. Until now, these tactics have been given little regard within crisis communication research – possibly because traditional one-way communication models limited their resolution capability. As organizations and stakeholders continue to move into the digital realm, however, the ability to dialogically communicate instructing and adjusting information tactics becomes realistic. As this research has shown, the dialogical engagement of these tactics can result in the successful management of organizational crisis. Accordingly, pressure on developed reputation repair strategies – such as corporate apologia, rhetoric of renewal, attribution theory, contingency theory, and situational crisis communication theory – to fix damage done can be alleviated; focus and energy can shift toward the dialogical engagement of instructing and adjusting information tactics, which can help mitigate negative backlash as it is occurring.

**Practical implications**

This project offers very valuable and pragmatic insight to how organizations may approach crisis communication in the future. Findings suggest that organization-stakeholder dialogue is important for the public relations practitioner to establish. The development and maintenance of organizational social media networks is one way to create an open, two-way communication channel with stakeholders. While many public and private organizations have already begun to establish online social media networks, many companies – mostly in the automotive and utilities industries – have been slow to adopt (Barnes et al., 2013). This project offers an exemplary case for why social media adoption is important for all organizations, and how online networks can be used dialogically to mitigate crisis.

Not every crisis will warrant the all-out Twitter blitz utilized by Con Edison during Superstorm Sandy. Power outages eliminated access to nearly all forms of communication, and traditional one-way channels, such as television and radio, were not an option. Thus, Con Edison was forced to rely on the Internet, and ultimately Twitter, to communicate with stakeholders. Important to note, however, is that it was Con Edison's choice to *communicate*, and also its choice to communicate *dialogically*, that saved its relationship with thousands of stakeholders. In doing so, the organization was able to communicate responses that shifted in theme throughout the crisis event, mirroring the needs and attitudes of affected stakeholders. Ultimately, this allowed the organization to be much more effective at helping stakeholders physically and psychologically cope, which resulted in the successful mitigation of negative backlash by the end of the crisis. While organizations may not necessarily utilize Twitter in all crisis situations, this project shows that immediate, dialogical communication is very effective for crisis management.

**Limitations**

This project has investigated the usage of online dialogue to communicate instructing and adjusting information messages during crisis. To this end, this project has focused extensively on the usage of Twitter. Though findings strongly support the usage of Twitter by organizations to communicate during crisis, the usage of other social media networks is left in question. Future research must investigate the capabilities of Facebook, Youtube, blogs, and other networks to determine their applicability and value to crisis communication.

The circumstances surrounding Superstorm Sandy also eliminated availability and access to traditional channels of communication. Thus, the conclusions drawn from this research may be limited when considering crises in which communication mediums such as television and radio are available. Future research should consider investigating the usage of dialogue to communicate instructing and adjusting information tactics during crises in which traditional channels of communication are available and utilized.

The type of organization examined may also limit the applicability of researched findings. Con Edison is a subsidiary of Consolidated Edison Company, Inc., which is one of the largest investor-owned utility companies in the country. While the usage of dialogue, as well as instructing and adjusting information tactics, is likely valuable for organizations of different size, in different industries, or in countries outside of the United States, research should be conducted to substantiate such assumptions.

**Future Research**

This project kick-starts a long awaited conversation about instructing and adjusting information tactics, and their applicability within crisis communication research. For some time, these tactics have been taken for granted – often assumed as a first step in crisis response before reputation repair strategies do the heavy lifting. The findings of this research substantiate the positive outcomes of dialogically engaging instructing and adjusting information tactics, yet cannot substantiate any relationship between dialogue and instructing and adjusting information, and reputation repair strategies. Future research should begin to unpack this relationship to better understand how dialogue and instructing and adjusting information tactics fit within larger crisis communication frameworks.

Many of the conclusions drawn from this research hinge on Con Edison's usage of dialogue throughout the crisis event. As such, future research should explore the implications of a dialogic approach to crisis communication. Specifically, researchers should consider how dialogue, whether established via social media or elsewhere, is utilized in tandem with more traditional (one-way) approaches to communication during crisis; how are messages created and disseminated across varying channels and what does this mean for the maintenance of organization-stakeholder dialogue? Beyond social media networks, research should consider how organizations might develop dialogue with stakeholders during crisis. If dialogue is key to mitigating negative backlash, then research should seek out creative and inventive ways in which organizations may create and sustain organization-stakeholder dialogues in a variety of contexts and across a variety of channels.

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