

**10-2 Final Project Submission: Crisis Communication Plan**

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## **Crisis Communication: St. Luke's Health System & The Baby Cyrus Incident**

This paper presents a comprehensive crisis communication plan for St. Luke's Health System, prompted by the "Baby Cyrus" incident, which drew significant public and media attention. As Coombs and Holladay (2022) discussed, effective crisis communication is essential for maintaining public trust and protecting an organization's reputation during times of crisis. Through a detailed SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), the current communication strategy used by St. Luke's during the crisis is critically assessed, with an emphasis on the organization's use of digital platforms and its approach to diverse cultural perspectives. Building upon this analysis, the paper proposes a redesigned public relations campaign to improve transparency, combat misinformation, and foster engagement with key audiences. The redesigned campaign utilizes new media platforms to deliver clear, authentic messaging tailored to various stakeholders and includes a strategic implementation plan that addresses ethical and cultural considerations. Enhancing the crisis communication strategy seeks to protect, maintain, and restore St. Luke's brand reputation in future crises (Sprout Social, 2023).

Effective crisis communication is essential for organizations, particularly in the healthcare sector, where the stakes are exceptionally high. St. Luke's Health System encountered a significant crisis with the "Baby Cyrus" incident, which became a focal point of public and media scrutiny. This incident involved complex allegations about the treatment and custody of a child, drawing in anti-government activists and resulting in widespread protests and threats against hospital staff. The situation highlighted the crucial role of timely, transparent, and coordinated communication strategies in managing public perception and maintaining organizational trust during a crisis. This evaluation will analyze St. Luke's response, identifying

strengths and weaknesses in their communication strategy, and provide recommendations for future crisis preparedness.

St. Luke's Health System faced a significant crisis involving allegations concerning the care and custody of a child known as "Baby Cyrus." This situation, fueled by anti-government activist Ammon Bundy and his associate Diego Rodriguez, escalated in early 2022 and culminated in a high-profile civil trial last year (Briquelet, 2023; Clendenon, 2023). Bundy and Rodriguez accused St. Luke's of wrongfully treating and detaining Baby Cyrus, turning the incident into a focal point for their anti-government rhetoric. This led to public outrage, protests, and legal actions against the hospital initially and Bundy and Rodriguez subsequently (AFLN, 2023; KIVI Staff, 2023). The protests outside the hospital, telephone threats, and threats against hospital staff and medical providers further exacerbated the situation. The hospital's phone system was overwhelmed, disrupting patients with appointments and those seeking emergency care.

Consequently, the hospital was forced to shut down the Emergency Room for a time, rerouting ambulances to other local hospitals. This situation centered around their main flagship hospital in downtown Boise, Idaho. This is also noteworthy because the main St. Luke's Children's Hospital is located on this campus and the Ronald McDonald House is steps from the emergency room entrance, all adding increased stress and potential danger to the situation (Holmes, Romero, & Bringhurst, 2023).

Evaluating St. Luke's response to the Baby Cyrus incident provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of digital crisis communication strategies. St. Luke's can enhance its preparedness for future crises by addressing the identified weaknesses and building on the

strengths. This analysis will form the basis for developing a comprehensive crisis communication plan to improve the organization's response to similar incidents.

St. Luke's Health System's crisis communication strategy during the Baby Cyrus incident exhibited several strengths and weaknesses.

**SWOT Analysis**

As provided by Coombs and Holladay (2022), effective communication is essential for maintaining public trust and protecting an organization's reputation during a crisis. St. Luke’s Health System faced such a challenge during the Baby Cyrus incident, which drew intense public and media scrutiny. Allegations concerning the hospital’s treatment and custody of a child, further amplified by anti-government activists, created a volatile situation. This analysis of the hospital’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) examines the effectiveness of St. Luke's crisis communication response, focusing on their use of social media and cultural considerations.

**SWOT Analysis**

Strengths	Weaknesses
<b>Timely Communication:</b> Regular updates helped manage public perception and maintain trust (LibraReview, 2024; Crisis communications, 2023).	<b>Handling Misinformation:</b> Struggled to counteract the rapid spread of misinformation by anti-government activists (Holmes, Romero, & Bringhurst, 2023), which was particularly problematic on less monitored platforms like YouTube and Telegram.

<p><b>Multi-channel Approach:</b> Effective use of social media (Facebook, X, Instagram), emails, and traditional media to reach a broad audience (Mailchimp, 2024; Wilcox, Reber, Shin, &amp; Cameron, 2022).</p>	<p><b>Internal Coordination:</b> Challenges during heightened security highlighted a need for better internal alignment and communication strategy (Cardon, 2021; Wilcox et al., 2022).</p>
<p><b>Stakeholder Engagement:</b> Engaging stakeholders through various channels, including culturally tailored communication efforts for the Hispanic community, helped address concerns and manage misinformation (Holmes, Romero, &amp; Bringham, 2023).</p>	<p><b>Resource Limitations:</b> The prolonged crisis stretched the marketing team's resources thin, impacting the overall response. Additionally, there was a lack of targeted communication for other culturally diverse groups (Guffey &amp; Loewy, 2023).</p>
Opportunities	Threats
<p><b>Enhanced Digital Strategy:</b> Expanding proactive social media use for crisis communication, including addressing misinformation on less monitored platforms like YouTube and Telegram (Berry, 2023).</p>	<p><b>Ongoing Misinformation:</b> Persistent misinformation campaigns pose a continual threat, especially on platforms with less oversight (Holmes, Romero, &amp; Bringham, 2023).</p>
<p><b>Community Support:</b> Strengthening ties with the community, including culturally diverse groups, to enhance trust and support (Mind Tools Content Team, 2021).</p>	<p><b>Reputation Damage:</b> Potential for long-term reputation damage if poorly managed crisis communication, particularly among diverse communities (Guffey &amp; Loewy, 2023).</p>

Opportunities	Threats
<b>Training Programs:</b> Developing culturally tailored training programs to improve internal coordination and crisis response, focusing on communication strategies for diverse audiences (Berry, 2023).	<b>Resource Constraints:</b> Future crises could further strain organizational resources, limiting the ability to manage effective communication across all platforms and communities (Mind Tools Content Team, 2021).

### Strengths

St. Luke's strengths included timely and transparent communication, crucial for maintaining public trust during the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2022). The organization effectively used multiple channels, such as social media, emails, patient apps, and traditional media, to ensure consistent messaging. Their use of platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram helped disseminate accurate information and mitigate some of the misinformation. Additionally, Instagram was employed to share stories, infographics, and support messages for patients and community members, reinforcing positive outcomes during the crisis (Berry, 2023).

### Weaknesses

Despite these strengths, St. Luke's struggled to manage the rapid spread of misinformation, particularly on less monitored platforms like YouTube and Telegram, exposing gaps in their social media strategy. The strategy lacked the speed and scale necessary to counteract misinformation effectively. Internal coordination and resource allocation were also strained, highlighting the need for a more robust communication strategy to align staff with the response plan (Cameron, 2019). The organization also faced challenges in quickly adapting

messages for internal stakeholders with diverse internal cultures (J. Thompson, personal communication, August 25, 2024). Furthermore, St. Luke's had to tailor communication to meet Boise's diverse community's varied linguistic and cultural needs, including a significant population of refugees and native Spanish speakers (City of Boise, n.d.).

### **Opportunities**

St. Luke's can build on its identified weaknesses by leveraging established communication channels to engage more effectively with community leaders and influencers who can help disseminate accurate information. Developing robust training programs for staff to handle misinformation and high-pressure situations better will enhance preparedness. Implementing culturally tailored communication strategies will improve engagement with diverse communities, reducing the risk of reputation damage (Cameron, 2019).

### **Threats**

St. Luke's continues to face significant internal and external threats. Internally, resource strain during prolonged crises could diminish the organization's ability to respond effectively (Guffey & Loewy, 2023; Skillsoft, 2020). Externally, the persistent spread of misinformation and the influence of anti-government activists pose ongoing threats to the hospital's reputation and public trust (Holmes, Romero, & Bringham, 2023). These threats emphasize the need for a comprehensive communication strategy incorporating culturally tailored messaging to build community trust.

This SWOT analysis of St. Luke's response to the Baby Cyrus incident underscores the importance of addressing strengths and weaknesses in crisis communication strategies. Key strengths include timely communication, a multi-channel approach, and stakeholder engagement. However, challenges in handling misinformation, internal coordination, and resource limitations

highlight areas for improvement. By addressing these issues and seizing opportunities, St. Luke's can better prepare for future crises, ensuring a more resilient and effective response.

### **Crafting Authentic, Transparent Messages**

An essential component of the redesigned crisis communication strategy for St. Luke's Health System is crafting authentic, transparent messages tailored for new media platforms. These messages will foster trust, provide timely updates, and counter misinformation. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) will play a critical role in disseminating these messages, amplifying key information, and engaging with the audience in real-time (Sprout Social, 2023).

Recent studies highlight the effectiveness of social media platforms like Instagram during crises, particularly in the public health sector. Malik, Khan, and Quan-Haase (2021) found that leading health organizations such as the CDC and WHO effectively used Instagram to communicate preventive measures, counter misinformation, and engage the public during the COVID-19 pandemic. These organizations successfully used infographics, clarification posts, and celebrity involvement to boost engagement and provide clear, actionable information. Applying these insights to St. Luke's crisis communication plan, Instagram can serve as a key tool for delivering vital health information and clarifying misunderstandings, all while increasing public engagement and trust.

For St. Luke's, the primary target audiences during the crisis include patients, their families, healthcare professionals, and the broader community. Each of these groups requires specific messaging that addresses their unique concerns.

Example Messages:



- **Patients and Families:** "At St. Luke's, your safety is our top priority. We closely monitor the situation and implement every necessary precaution to ensure your well-being. For real-time updates on operations and safety protocols, follow our official channels."
- **Healthcare Professionals:** "As we navigate these challenging times, we want to keep you fully informed. Please refer to our staff portal's latest updates on internal procedures and security protocols. Your role is critical, and we are here to support you."
- **Broader Community:** "In times like these, accurate information is key. Stay informed by following our verified updates here. Together, we can ensure our community remains safe and resilient."
- **Culturally Diverse Groups:** "We value the diversity of our community and provide updates in multiple languages to ensure everyone has access to critical information. Visit our website for updates in [Spanish/other languages]."

Transparent messaging is critical in healthcare crises, where maintaining public trust is paramount. As Coombs and Holladay (2022) highlight, transparency and immediacy in communication can significantly change public perception during a crisis. St. Luke's messaging strategy will emphasize real-time updates, directly addressing misinformation and offering verified information across all digital channels. By utilizing these platforms effectively, St. Luke's can control the narrative, reducing the spread of false information and maintaining credibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2022).

Real-world examples of successful crisis communication support the rationale for these authentic, transparent messages. Brands such as Slack and Carrefour have demonstrated the effectiveness of clear, honest, and timely communication during crises, helping them rebuild trust and engage positively with their audiences (Sprout Social, 2023). Similarly, St. Luke's will

focus on crafting messages that resonate across different platforms, ensuring that the messaging is consistent, accessible, and aligned with the values of transparency and community support.

St. Luke's will strengthen its crisis communication strategy by prioritizing clear, transparent messaging across new media platforms. This will ensure that it can effectively reach its target audiences while preserving its brand reputation during and after crises.

### **Campaign Redesign**

Effective crisis communication is crucial, especially in healthcare, where public trust is vital. St. Luke's Health System faced a significant challenge during the "Baby Cyrus" incident, involving allegations regarding the treatment and custody of a child. The resulting public outcry and misinformation underscored the need for a proactive crisis communication strategy. This redesign aims to improve St. Luke's response by focusing on transparency, multi-channel communication, and community engagement.

The new campaign emphasizes using digital media platforms to deliver prompt, accurate information and counter misinformation. A key component is creating a dedicated crisis communication hub on the hospital's website, offering real-time updates, FAQs, and official statements. The hospital will also bolster its social media presence to maintain control of the narrative and foster trust within diverse communities. Additionally, the campaign will improve internal coordination to ensure staff alignment with the messaging strategy.

St. Luke's previous response demonstrated strengths in using multiple communication channels but revealed weaknesses in managing misinformation (Holmes, Romero, & Bringhurst, 2023). Coombs (2022) emphasizes the importance of timely, transparent communication during a crisis to maintain public trust, which supports the campaign's focus on real-time updates. This

redesign leverages lessons from successful crisis strategies in healthcare, emphasizing the importance of proactive messaging and stakeholder engagement (Wilcox et al., 2022).

By enhancing its social media strategy, St. Luke's can effectively counter misinformation, a critical step in protecting its reputation. Research indicates that monitoring social media and crafting culturally tailored messages are vital in managing public perception (Ozanne, Ballantine, & Mitchell, 2020). This campaign will incorporate these practices to reach a diverse audience and foster a supportive community response.

### **Technologies and Tactics: Recommendations**

- **Social Media Platforms:** Utilize Facebook, Instagram, and X for real-time updates and community engagement. Live Q&A sessions will address concerns and foster transparency (Crisis communications, 2023). This directly addresses the threat of misinformation by providing verified, timely information.
- **Crisis Communication Hub:** Establish a hub on the hospital's website as the central source of accurate information, directing social media users there for official updates (Berry, 2023). This will mitigate threats related to information fragmentation and ensure a single reliable source of truth.
- **Social Media Monitoring:** Use tools like Hootsuite to track public sentiment, detect emerging misinformation, and respond in real-time (Hansell, 2022). This addresses the weakness of slow reaction times by enabling immediate engagement with misinformation.
- **Internal Communication:** Implement Microsoft Teams to keep staff informed and aligned with the crisis messaging strategy (Skillsoft, 2020). This will help overcome internal coordination weaknesses and ensure consistent messaging across all channels.

- **Culturally Tailored Messaging:** Develop multilingual content and collaborate with community leaders to meet the needs of diverse groups (Ozanne et al., 2020). This addresses the opportunity to enhance engagement with diverse audiences, improving St. Luke's connection with local communities.

These strategies address the issues identified in the SWOT analysis. A proactive approach using digital media and monitoring tools will allow St. Luke's to manage misinformation effectively. The crisis communication hub serves as a reliable source, building public trust. Additionally, improved internal coordination ensures a unified response, while culturally tailored messaging strengthens community support (Coombs & Holladay, 2022; Wilcox et al., 2022).

This redesigned campaign for St. Luke's Health System emphasizes the critical role of proactive communication and community engagement during a crisis. St. Luke's can effectively counter misinformation and rebuild trust by utilizing digital platforms, fostering transparency, and tailoring messages to diverse audiences. Addressing past weaknesses, this strategy positions the hospital to navigate future challenges more confidently and cohesively. In a world where public perception can change rapidly, this comprehensive approach will serve as a solid foundation for protecting St. Luke's reputation and ensuring public trust.

### **Conclusion**

This integrated crisis communication plan positions St. Luke's Health System to navigate future crises more effectively by addressing both internal and external challenges. By leveraging digital platforms, fostering transparency, and tailoring messages to diverse audiences, St. Luke's will be better equipped to counter misinformation, build stronger community ties, and protect its reputation. The emphasis on real-time communication and cultural sensitivity ensures that the

organization can respond rapidly and authentically, maintaining public trust and ensuring long-term organizational resilience.

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