While use of the Internet has increased dramatically in the past few years as a medium for crisis communication techniques, the use of it can vary depending on the organization. Perry, Taylor, & Doerfel (2003) found that organizations of all kinds are taking advantage of the "real time" nature of the medium to quickly convey news to their key publics. As one might expect, this has implications beyond a single industry and seemingly is not limited by the type of crisis that a company is experiencing. In some cases, traditional public relations tools are adapted to match the public's expectation for news on the Internet, even if those traditional methods are still useful for certain audiences. Still, it is important to remember that using the Internet as a means of crisis response is not appropriate for every company or situation and the specific nature of the crisis should be carefully considered to determine if the Internet provides the proper medium for the organization's response.

A number of recent crises illustrate just how organizations are using the Internet to communicate with key stakeholders and no two are exactly alike. In particular, the crisis communication strategies employed by BP after the 2010 Gulf oil spill and Dell's response in 2006 to a potential fire hazard involving the batteries in its portable computers demonstrate that any business can use the Internet as part of a broader crisis response plan. Through these crises, the organizations needed to identify how to respond and quickly determine the severity of the crisis they faced. In addition, each firm serves as an example to their respective industries about what constitutes an appropriate or inappropriate response during a crisis.

While BP was vilified on television and in newspapers for how company officials responded to the oil spill, its efforts involving social media were more successful and gave the public a better understanding of the events that transpired. Communicating in this way allowed the organization to respond quickly to criticism, ensure that company officials were sending the

right message, and correct errors when they occurred. They were able to create a narrative on their own terms, without worrying too much about the media misinterpreting statements made by the company during the crisis.

> When it comes to social media and the Web, though, communications experts give BP high marks. BP created a section of its Web site dedicated to the spill, complete with photos, video, and maps that track the cleanup…The company also posts constant updates to its Twitter feed. (Beam, 2010)

Through these efforts, BP created a narrative structure that served as "a way of ordering the events of the world which would otherwise seem unpredictable or incoherent" (Heath 2003). In addition, Heath posits that all crisis communication (at least that which is successful) is done in a narrative form. This appears to be the case with BP, as most of the negative response to their crisis strategy was related to communication initiatives that were manifested through traditional media. Even with this distinction, a common response to BP's use of the Internet in the aftermath of the oil spill is that it was what people expected them to do. From this perspective, the social media campaign appears less ambitious and no different than what another organization would do if they were confronted with the same situation.

As the researchers indicate, organization type does not appear to play as significant a role in whether or not organizations use the Internet in order to communicate with key publics. If anything, BP and Dell can both be characterized as 'high profile' organizations. The difference between the two lies in the additional risk inherent to BP's business. As such they may be described as a high reliability organization, or HRO. Miller and Horsley (2009) expressed similar views in their observations of the coal mining industry and the two industries do share some of the same concerns when it comes to dealing with a crisis.

Mistakes made in the time leading up to the Gulf oil spill parallel many of the communication problems which caused inaccurate reports to be made in connection with the Sago mine disaster. As it relates to BP, the organization chose not to make use of the flexibility afforded to them by the Internet and elected for other means of communication in an attempt to put a face on the crisis. Ultimately however, this did not work out as they intended. Given the time that has passed since the spill, one could argue that the television commercials that the company shot during the cleanup effort were one way to emphasize the people involved, something that can not easily be conveyed in material posted online. The researchers here also introduce the concept of sensemaking, a process that was absent from any internal communication between employees leading up to the spill.

As we've learned in the time since the accident, emails exchanged between BP employees and the owners of the Deepwater Horizon rig contained numerous discussions about potential safety issues, many of which were ignored. This is just one example of how information posted online is only useful if people decide to act on it. As the researchers indicate, this process allows organizations to continuously improve by learning from their past experiences; BP's actions suggest that they were not able to connect the dots and see that a problem was in fact imminent.

> Organizational members learn by studying their accomplishments and mistakes, planning for crises, and practicing responses to crises. This learning enables them to better recognize future danger cues and respond more effectively to crises that arise. (Miller & Horsley, 2009)

This lack of communication and the actions of company officials (in particular then-CEO Tony Hayward) in the days and weeks after the spill show that the company did not accurately

predict the scope of the crisis and the negative reaction that accompanied it. Viewed through the

Situation Theory of Publics, it is clear that the company did not believe that the reaction to the

disaster would be as strong as it was. As noted above, BP's efforts to communicate via the

Internet were more successful than their use of traditional media, but did not anticipate or

address the variety of reactions to the spill and the company's efforts to contain the damage.

Major's suggestion of targeting the most vulnerable of publics is worth considering here, as it

would have allowed BP to tailor its message to groups (primarily those who worked in affected

industries) that needed the most guidance about what they should be doing to protect their

livelihood and how to get involved in the cleanup effort.

> …less emphasis may need to be directed at the problem facers and routines, who
> appeared to have a better understanding of earthquake preparedness than did the
> constrained and fatals. Messages directed at the constrained and fatal publics need to
> emphasize actions that they can take that will reduce their perceived constraints and
> personalized risk. (Major, 1998)

Although the researcher specifically mentions this approach with regard to earthquakes, it

is clear that in any crisis, certain publics will require more information in order to make the best

possible decision for them. In this case, the individuals who worked in the Gulf region needed to

have this information readily available (which it would have been if posted online). Instead, the

choice to go into the affected communities sends a different message, which in hindsight might

have been a better fit for this audience. However, the fact remains that BP did not realize the

seriousness of the situation or act quickly enough to inform the public about steps they could

take to minimize the spill's impact on them.

A closer examination of the incident shows that BP faced a crisis from the very

beginning. In the case of Dell, it may be more accurate to think of it as a problem that eventually

became a crisis simply due to the scope of the problem. Several of Coombs' (2002) crisis

definitions are present: it had the ability to disrupt the organization and that potentially have a

negative effect on stakeholder perceptions. However, the crisis is perceived as being less serious

overall as the number of affected machines was relatively small. This is in contrast to the large

numbers of wildlife harmed by the effects of the oil spill.

Among other reasons, the Dell crisis is interesting because it challenged them to prove

one of their core competencies. As a technology company, we expect Dell (and those whom

they compete with) to understand the benefits of using the Internet to communicate with

stakeholders. In addition, I was personally impacted by the crisis and can appreciate the steps

that the company took to restore confidence in its brand. As one might expect, consumers were

quick to place blame with Dell for the incidents, as most of the reporting on the issue by the

media centered on the company.

> Dell has been bedeviled by reports of burning laptops in recent months. In June, a Dell
> notebook burst into flames during a conference in a hotel in Osaka, Japan. In that case, an
> analysis showed the fire was probably caused by microscopic metal particles produced
> during the manufacturing process. (Darlin, 2006)

Initially, Dell insisted that only a few incidents had been reported and that by issuing a

recall company officials were "…getting ahead of the issue" (Darlin, 2006). As such, they

believed that there was no crisis and described it as a preemptive measure to reassure the public

and other stakeholders that the situation was being taken care of. The organization's actions

during this time appear to correlate with Coombs and Holladay's work on attribution theory and

a symbolic approach to crisis management. As the crisis unfolded, it became clear that the

problem was the result of a defect in Sony batteries and previous reports were inaccurate. By

"attempt[ing] to place distance between the organization and responsibility for the crisis event" (Coombs & Holladay, 1996), the company avoided significant reputational damage regarding the reliability of its products.

It should be noted however, that once a problem was identified, Dell took the appropriate steps to resolve the crisis. Taking advantage of the distribution provided by the Internet, the company set up a webpage (http://www.dellbatteryprogram.com/) where customers could get up to date information and enter their serial number to find out if their machine was included in the recall. Speaking from experience, the process was quick and provided the information I needed to know and how long it would take to replace the affected parts. Subsequent recalls have taken advantage of this site, resulting in less customer confusion because people already know where to look when a problem arises.

Organizations such as BP and Dell both appear to have an understanding of how the Internet can aid their crisis communication efforts. However, during crises, execution is never easy. As BP discovered, its work using social media was more well received than any interview given by company officials, but mixed messages and a lack of preparation contributed to the attitude that the company did a poor job of trying to contain the crisis. Despite many attempts, it was simply too late to contain the damage done to the company's reputation. It is possible that they would have been more successful if they had made greater use of the Internet, but given the information at hand, it is difficult to determine whether or not this is the case.

By comparison, Dell fared much better when dealing with its crisis, even if they did not realize the scope of the problem that they were dealing with. As a technology company, the public's expectations of them are significantly higher when it comes to using the Internet to communicate and it is can reasonably be said that once the problem was identified, the company

took the right steps in order to resolve the issue. From the work of Coombs (2002), it is clear that this was a problem that eventually became a crisis as more information became available. These incidents should serve as a reminder to all organizations about proper and improper use of the Internet during times of crisis. Dell's response, although less timely than ideal, utilized the Internet as an effective channel of communication and gave the public information that they needed to know. As the two industries described here are very different, it comes as no surprise that their Internet usage falls at opposite ends of the spectrum. How they choose to make use it will depend largely upon their audience and the type of message they seek to deliver, but it undoubtedly has a role to play in how communications professionals develop their crisis response strategies.

References

Beam, C. (2010, May 05). Oil slick. *Slate*, Retrieved from

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2010/05/oil_slick.single.html

Coombs, W.T. (2002). Deep and surface threats: Conceptual and practical implications for

"crisis vs. problem". *Public Relations Review, 28*, 339-345.

Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (1996). Communication and attributions in a crisis: An

experimental study in crisis communication. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *8*(4), 279-

295.

Darlin, D. (2006, August 15). Dell will recall batteries in pc's. *The New York Times*. Retrieved

from http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/15/technology/15battery.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all

Heath, R. L. (2003). Telling a story: A narrative approach to communication during crisis In R.

Heath & D. Millar (Eds.), *A Rhetorical Approach to Crisis Communication* (pp. 167-187).

Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Miller, B. M., & Horsley, J. S. (2009). Digging deeper: Crisis management in the coal industry.

Journal of Applied Communication Research, *37*(3), 298-316.

Perry, D. C., Taylor, M., & Doerfel, M. L. (2003). Internet-based communication in crisis

management. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *17*(2), 206-232.