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Affected Circles: A relational perspective on crisis communication

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ABSTRACT

Crisis communication theory has traditionally emphasized reputation-oriented communication strategies, aimed at protecting and restoring brand value and organizational reputation. This article argues that such an approach is insufficient in situations where corporate or governmental organizations are confronted with people who are directly affected by a crisis, including victims and their next of kin. In these contexts, crisis communication requires a different or additional perspective, one that starts from the relationship between the organization and those affected. The article introduces *Affected Circles* as a framework that supports communication aimed at reducing additional burdens for affected individuals and at incorporating psychosocial insights relevant for coping with and processing crisis experiences. While the framework has been further developed and applied in Dutch crisis communication practice, this article positions *Affected Circles* conceptually within the international crisis communication and psychosocial literature. Drawing on concentric models of psychosocial impact and proximity, as well as principles of audience segmentation, *Affected Circles* conceptualizes affected populations as differentiated communicative communities with distinct needs and vulnerabilities. This implies that organizations carry different relational responsibilities toward affected groups, depending on their degree of impact and proximity. Rather than offering prescriptive communication rules, the framework functions as a heuristic that supports professional judgment and relational sensitivity across public and corporate crisis contexts.

KEYWORDS

Affected; *Affected Circles*; crisis communication; acknowledgment; grief

Introduction

Crisis communication research has long been dominated by perspectives that foreground the management of organizational reputation in times of crisis. Theories such as the discourse of renewal (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002; Seeger et al., 2005; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002), broadened this focus toward ethical reflection and organizational learning in the aftermath of crises. However, such perspectives largely address post-crisis meaning-making, leaving open the question of how organizations should communicate with and about those affected

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during the crisis itself. There, the needs of those affected are commonly addressed through limited symbolic responses, most notably apologies and expressions of sympathy (Coombs & Laufer, 2018), rather than through sustained engagement with their lived experiences.

This article argues that meaningful crisis communication may legitimately involve concerns about organizational reputation, but also requires an approach that seeks to minimize the psychosocial impact of crises on victims and others affected, going beyond symbolic expressions of empathy. This entails engaging with those affected in ways that acknowledge their needs, proximity, and lived experience (Jong & Brataas, 2021). To support such engagement by both corporate and governmental organizations, this article introduces the concept of *Affected Circles* as a relational framework for understanding communicative responsibilities toward those directly affected during and after crises. Rather than prescribing fixed rules for communication, *Affected Circles* offers practitioners a guiding perspective that supports careful judgment and relational sensitivity. In line with Fraustino and Liu's (2017) call for approaches that genuinely incorporate message receivers' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors into organizational decision-making and communication processes, and with Coombs' (2023, p. 201) call to integrate crisis communication practices with victim well-being, we position the *Affected Circles* as a structured way of placing affected publics at the center of crisis response. Consistent with an ethics of care perspective (Simola, 2003), this approach emphasizes that organizations assume responsibility toward those affected not merely out of legal obligation, but out of a voluntary commitment to reduce additional sources of stress during and after crises. While the priorities of responsible actors may differ across institutional contexts, for example in corporate settings shaped by shareholder interests and market considerations, or in public organizations guided by democratic accountability, an ethics of care perspective highlights the relevance of attentiveness to vulnerability when navigating such competing demands.

The contribution of this article does not lie in claiming originality of the underlying idea, but in naming, systematizing, and analytically positioning practices for communicating with those affected as a coherent communicative framework. In this sense, *Affected Circles* functions as a heuristic lens that helps crisis communication professionals acknowledge shifting degrees of impact, responsibility, and communicative obligation over time. In short, this article pursues three objectives. First, it introduces the psychosocial position of those affected as part of a broader spectrum of audiences in crises, building on earlier concentric approaches to impact and proximity. Second, it explores how principles of audience segmentation can be meaningfully applied when addressing affected populations in crisis communication. Third, the article elaborates on *Affected Circles* as a communicative translation of these ideas, originally introduced in 2012 and further developed in Dutch crisis communication practice, and concludes by outlining how practitioners can use this framework to guide communicative judgment during and after crises.

Psychosocial dimensions

From a psychosocial perspective, the primary focus lies on individuals who are directly affected by a crisis or disaster and on what they need to cope with and recover from its impact. Central to this literature is the assumption that crises threaten people's personal, social, and material resources. Building on the theory of the conservation of resources, Hobfoll (1989) argues that individuals seek to preserve, protect, and rebuild resources

such as family stability, housing, financial security, and self-esteem, and that the loss of such resources may trigger escalating stress reactions. In later work, Hobfoll et al. (2007) translated these insights into five empirically supported principles that can help reduce sources of stress among affected populations. These principles emphasize the importance of fostering a sense of safety and calming, strengthening individual and collective efficacy, promoting connectedness, and sustaining hope. Dückers et al. (2017) integrated the principles with crisis leadership tasks in a psychosocial crisis management model, anchoring the focus of crisis authorities and professionals to the well-being and health of the affected. Jong and Brataas (2021) previously adapted these principles to the field of crisis communication, demonstrating how communicative practices can contribute to mitigating the psychosocial impact of disruptive and traumatic events. They discuss, for example, the importance of facilitating and attending memorial and remembrance events, as these create opportunities for those affected to meet and support a sense of connectedness. They also draw on De Bussy and Paterson (2012), who analyzed statements by the then Queensland Premier Anna Bligh following severe flooding. By emphasizing that assistance was on its way and reassuring affected communities that, regardless of where they lived, they “would not be forgotten,” Bligh’s statements addressed the psychosocial importance of fostering hope and acknowledgment among those impacted by the crisis.

At the same time, psychosocial literature consistently stresses that people respond differently to crises and traumatic events (Bonanno et al., 2010; Newnham et al., 2022), which makes a standardized approach to recovery neither realistic nor desirable. A key premise of psychosocial care is therefore to support self-recovery and resilience, combined with a gradual escalation toward more specialized forms of assistance when needed. Individuals are initially expected to rely on their own coping capacities and informal support networks, such as family members, friends, and peers with similar experiences (Dücker et al., 2017, 2022). When these resources prove insufficient, professional psychosocial or mental health care may become necessary.

This so-called echeloned approach was embedded in Gersons’s (1977) doctoral dissertation, where he described a neighborhood community in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, which combined professional and nonprofessional actors to provide mutual support in processes of grief and loss. These early practices formed the conceptual foundation for what later became formalized as Gersons’s concentric Circle Model. This layered approach to psychosocial support underpins the Circle Model first introduced by Gersons et al. (2005, 2006), in which varying degrees of impact and need correspond to differentiated forms of care and support. Initially developed in the context of mental health care for military personnel and veterans, emphasizing proximity to traumatic exposure and differentiated care needs, the model has since been applied more broadly. Figure 1 illustrates the most recent version of the Circle Model as discussed by Dücker et al. (2022), who describe the model as placing the individual at its core, with varying levels of resilience, surrounded by successive layers of social relationships that offer support and care at increasing distance from the center.

A more popularized but independently developed variant emerged later in the form of Silk and Goldman’s (2013), which offered a normative heuristic for directing emotional expression during crises. In her model, Silk and Goldman (2013) positions the person at the center of the concentric rings as the one who may express their stress (“dump”) to anyone,

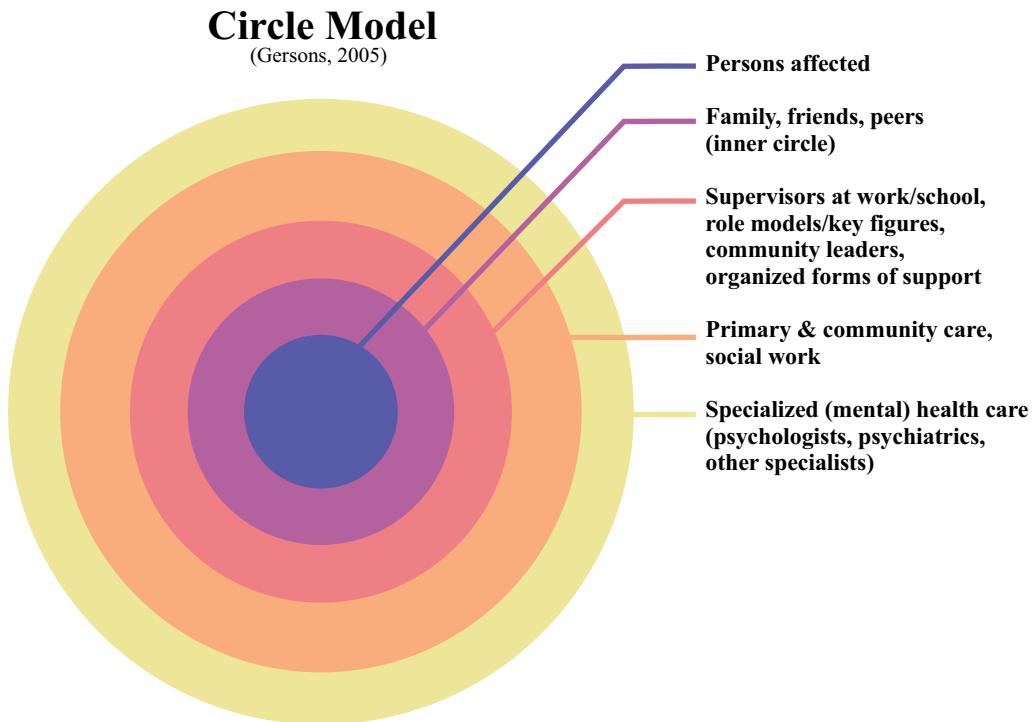


Figure 1. Circle model for psychosocial care.

whereas individuals in outer rings are advised to direct such expressions only toward those in rings farther from the center (“comfort in, dump out”).

These developments resonate with an earlier relational and concentric model, most notably Hodges’s (1994), which also conceptualizes relational closeness as a layered structure of concentric circles around an individual. In this model, degrees of intimacy shape the extent to which individuals are willing to disclose personal information, with intimacy and access decreasing from the center outward. The model (Hodges, 1994) emphasizes individual control over privacy and disclosure, distinguishing between highly intimate relationships, trusted confidants, and broader social and public audiences.

Translating psychosocial concentric models to crisis communication

Previous research has emphasized that psychosocial principles only become effective when they are explicitly embedded in policy and professional practice, rather than remaining abstract guidelines (Benedek & Fullerton, 2007; Dücker et al., 2017). Translating such principles into concrete actions during crises is essential for providing social acknowledgment and for reducing additional sources of stress among those affected. Here, we echo this call by turning to crisis communication policy as a domain in which psychosocial perspectives can be meaningfully operationalized.

While the psychosocial concentric models share a common concern with proximity, impact, and relational differentiation, their application within crisis communication practice has remained fragmented and conceptually underdeveloped. Drawing on the concentric

models discussed above, this article introduces the term *Affected Circles* to capture how such concentric distinctions are increasingly finding their way into crisis communication practice in the Netherlands. These distinctions prevent a one-size-fits-all approach in which corporate or governmental organizations communicate with one single voice to all audiences. While such an approach may feel natural and inclusive, it can create only an illusion of inclusion. By failing to recognize differences in impact, proximity, and psychosocial vulnerability, this approach risks overlooking the relational responsibilities toward those most affected. Relational responsibilities which follow from an ethics of care, acknowledging that people who are directly affected by a crisis often find themselves abruptly confronted with the situation and typically have limited familiarity with media management or crisis communication practices. From that perspective, organizations can deploy their professional expertise in media management and crisis communication in ways that are attuned to the specific needs of different audiences. Whereas those who have experienced a crisis at close range are often deeply involved and emotionally affected, more distant audiences may primarily experience curiosity. This implies that communicative attention should be focused on adequately informing those most closely affected, while at the same time avoiding the unnecessary stimulation of curiosity among third parties when this does not serve the interests of those most affected. In Dutch crisis communication practice, and particularly in the application of *Affected Circles*, it is precisely this relational calibration with audiences that enables a more tailored approach and contributes to a genuinely inclusive form of communication.

Adapting the concentric logic explicitly in terms of audience segmentation, with a focus on those affected, Strating (2012) translated the model developed by Gersons et al. (2005) to the domain of crisis communication. She reframed psychosocial distinctions as differentiated communicative audiences defined by proximity, impact, and relational responsibility. In doing so, the model shifted from a care-oriented logic concerned with allocating psychosocial support to those in need and those able to provide it, toward a communication-oriented logic that differentiates audiences in terms of communicative responsibility, tone, and engagement, with likely psychosocial needs of those affected as the guiding reference point. Central to this translation is the assumption that reputation-oriented communication, which primarily informs society from an organizational perspective, offers little value to those affected, whereas relational communication explicitly seeks to acknowledge their lived experience and supports more constructive processes of loss and recovery (Strating, 2012, p. 4).

The concept of audience segmentation originates in the field of marketing but has since been adopted in risk and crisis communication to recognize differences within the general population (Bartolucci et al., 2023). Rather than addressing the public as a single, undifferentiated audience, this approach assumes that people can be grouped into relatively homogeneous communities with distinct needs, expectations, and informational demands, which must be taken into account to achieve communication that is both effective and responsive to those differences. These communities typically consist of people who are socially and relationally close to those affected, such as family members, neighbors, classmates and parents connected through schools or sports clubs, or members of local religious communities. The translation of audience segmentation into crisis communities with distinctive communicative preferences (Strating, 2012) was subsequently refined by the second and third author through practice, training materials, and presentations among Dutch crisis

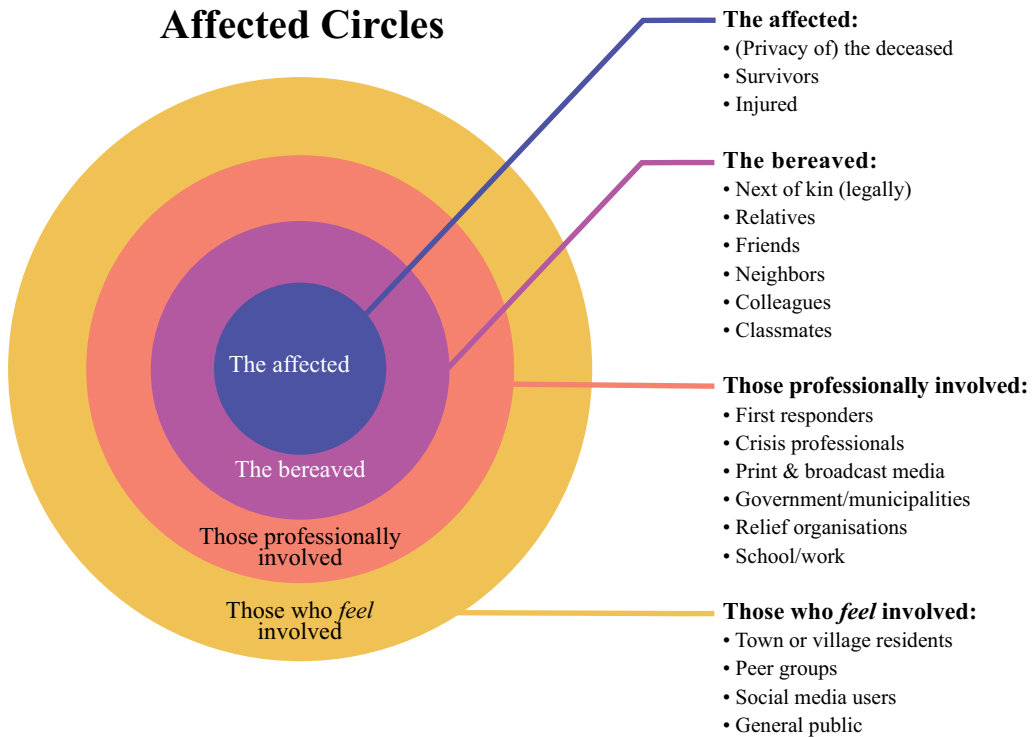


Figure 2. *Affected Circles.*

communication professionals. They further specified how concentric distinctions can guide communication strategies across different phases of a crisis. In *Affected Circles* (Figure 2), audience segmentation is grounded in the interests of those affected, who do not necessarily communicate themselves but for whom communication must nevertheless be conducted with care. This contrasts with more conventional forms of audience segmentation, which typically center on the organization as the primary communicator and subject of the crisis.

In the communicative translation of the *Affected Circles*, four concentric circles are distinguished. The underlying idea is that crisis communication is guided by the well-being of those most directly affected, which functions as the normative point of departure. Communication is therefore organized from the inside outward: messages, tone, timing, and channels are selected in relation to the degree of proximity to the crisis, and are explicitly intended to support the well-being of those at the center. The *Affected Ones*, positioned in the innermost circle, are directly impacted by the crisis and may experience physical harm, psychological distress, or material loss. Communication directed at this group is primarily supportive and protective in nature. Its function is not persuasion or explanation, but acknowledgment, psychosocial care, privacy control and the provision of concrete, actionable information that supports safety, recovery, and psychosocial well-being. Timing is often immediate and channels are frequently interpersonal or mediated through trusted intermediaries.

Surrounding them are the *Bereaved Ones*, who are relationally connected to those affected, such as next of kin, close relatives, team members of sporting clubs or

colleagues in the case of a workplace accident. While they may not have experienced the incident themselves, the crisis impacts them through loss, uncertainty, and emotional proximity. Yzermans et al. (2020) demonstrate that sudden loss is especially impactful for colleagues and neighbors when social ties are close, enduring, and grounded in friendship and trust. Communication for this group is therefore relational and meaning-oriented. It addresses questions of what has happened, what this means for their loved ones, and how they are acknowledged by the responsible organization or authorities. Compared to the innermost circle, communication may be slightly more explanatory, but still prioritizes empathy, acknowledgment, and respect for emotional vulnerability. Also, communication may focus on media management and keeping the media at a distance in order to give the Bereaved Ones time to cope with the situation.

A third circle consists of those who are *Professionally Involved*, including first responders, healthcare professionals, journalists reporting on the event, or institutions such as schools connected to victims or their families through professional roles. Communication with this group is fundamentally task-oriented and role-specific. It focuses on coordination, role clarity, and reliable information exchange that enables professional action. This may also involve organizing dedicated debriefing sessions in which involved professionals can collectively reflect on and discuss their experiences of the incident. Although emotional impact is not absent among these group members, communication here primarily serves operational continuity and responsible performance, rather than direct psychosocial support. Importantly, professional involvement does not imply emotional distance; however, because the psychosocial impact may differ in nature and intensity, it necessitates a distinct communicative approach.

The outermost circle comprises those who *Feel Involved*: members of the broader public, social media followers, and other interested observers who are not directly or relationally affected but nonetheless seek information and meaning. Communication directed at this group serves a public sensemaking function. Its purpose is to provide transparency, factual updates, and interpretive cues that help people understand what has occurred and how authorities or organizations are responding. At the same time, a clear boundary exists between *feeling involved* and *being involved*, and between public interest and relational proximity to the crisis. While this group is often the most visible in public discourse, the framework explicitly positions it as communicatively subsequent to the inner circles. Public communication is legitimate only insofar as it does not undermine, instrumentalize, or overshadow communication aimed at those closer to the center. This may, for example, entail limiting the disclosure of personal information, such as sharing only first names of deceased individuals, in order to protect the privacy and well-being of those in the innermost circles. Under such circumstances, communicators may need to make explicit the grounds on which certain communicative limits are set, for example by clarifying that restrictions on the disclosure of personal information are intended to safeguard the dignity and well-being of those most directly affected. This does not eliminate tensions between transparency requirements, media scrutiny, and the expectations of broader publics, but it explains how and why communicative choices were made. In navigating such trade-offs, a distinction can be made between information that is necessary for public accountability and democratic oversight (a

need to know) and information that primarily satisfies broader curiosity without substantially contributing to those goals (a *nice to know*). While the former constitutes a legitimate demand in democratic contexts, the latter may, at times, conflict with the privacy and psychosocial interests of those in the innermost circles.

Within this balancing exercise, the *Affected Circles* framework does not reject transparency, but positions relational proximity as one of the guiding criteria in decisions about disclosure, timing, and access. In this way, transparency is not treated as absolute, but as one responsibility among others that must be weighed in a crisis communication context.

Linking *Affected Circles* to the five essential elements

Taken together, the five essential elements and the *Affected Circles* describe two complementary facets: the “what” and “how” of communication with and about those affected during times of crisis. The five essential elements identified by Hobfoll et al. (2007) primarily articulate the “what” of crisis communication. This “what” concerns what communication should substantively achieve for those affected, such as fostering a sense of safety, calming, self- and community efficacy, connectedness, and hope. The “how” refers to how these same substantive goals should be communicated differently to various groups, depending on their degree of impact, proximity, and vulnerability. This implies that each circle may require a different tone, timing, and communicative approach.

The inner circle provides a clear illustration. For individuals in the innermost circle, crisis communication is primarily aimed at reducing psychosocial burden. Communication should contribute to a sense of safety, calming, self- and community efficacy, connectedness, and hope, while preventing exposure to additional sources of stress or uncertainty. This communicative aim reflects the “what.” At the same time, it requires restrained and careful communication that largely takes place outside the visibility of media and the general public. This resembles the “how.” The tone is personal and acknowledgment-oriented, the timing is attuned to psychosocial capacity and preferences, and the information shared is selective and directly relevant. Not all externally available information, such as circulating rumors, needs to be communicated, and public authorities or affected organizations may actively reduce public pressure in order to provide protection and calm, for example by appointing a spokesperson who speaks on behalf of the family as a form of “verbal support.”

For individuals in the outermost circle, the communicative focus of “what” lies primarily on informing, interpreting, and legitimizing actions. Communication in this circle contributes to understanding and meaning making, public trust, and societal impact experienced at a collective level. Jong et al. (2016), for instance, describe the impact of the downing of flight MH17 on Dutch society, given that many of the passengers were Dutch nationals. In addition to the profound impact on the immediate next of kin, the event generated collective feelings of uncertainty and unrest, with mayors playing a role in giving voice to collective mourning in affected local communities (Jong et al., 2016). At the level of the “how,” this may imply that a public leader delivering a speech has coordinated the content of his contribution with the next of kin and, for example, explicitly thanks those present on behalf of the families.

The strength of the *Affected Circles* model

In sum, communication follows impact rather than reach. The *Affected Circles* framework therefore does not function as a marketing-oriented audience segmentation model, but as an ordering principle for communicative responsibility in times of crisis. The strength of the *Affected Circles* model lies in the way it systematically translates proximity and impact into the responsibility that corporate and governmental organizations bear, in the aftermath of a crisis, to support those affected in their psychosocial recovery. Crisis communication serves as an instrument in this process. Even seemingly modest communicative acts, such as being present, listening, or choosing words with care, can contribute meaningfully to the psychosocial recovery of those affected (cf. Dückers et al., 2017).

When privacy is compromised or directly affected individuals become part of a media hype, it is plausible that this may hinder their recovery. Rather than approaching audiences on the basis of reach, visibility, or reputational risk, as is common in conventional corporate crisis response strategies such as those associated with Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) and Image Restoration Theory (Benoit, 1997), the model enforces communicative choices that begin with the well-being of those most severely affected by the crisis. This does not imply that reputation-driven crisis communication is inherently inappropriate. On the contrary, in situations involving defective products, service failures, or operational disruptions without direct personal harm, established approaches such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) and Image Restoration Theory (Benoit, 1997), often provide suitable guidance. However, once a crisis involves people who are directly affected, ranging from an organization's own employees to external victims and their next of kin, the communicative purpose fundamentally shifts. In such contexts, the *Affected Circles* offers a more appropriate framework, as it prioritizes the reduction of additional sources of stress among those affected and supports communication that contributes to psychosocial well-being rather than primarily to reputational repair. By consistently organizing communication from the inside outward, the model supports prioritization in timing, tone, content, and channels. It prevents public communication or media spokespersons from taking precedence before the most affected individuals have been seen, heard, and supported. In addition, it offers guidance for prioritizing what can be shared in public settings such as press conferences, by encouraging communicators to begin with the impact of the incident on those affected before addressing more rational or procedural issues located in the outer circles, such as organizational responses to damage compensation or liability. In doing so, the model functions not only as a practical ordering instrument, but also as a moral compass that guides empathic, proportionate, and responsible crisis communication and aligns with an ethics of care approach as articulated by Simola (2003). In such situations, a relational perspective rather than reputational perspective becomes the guiding motive, even though reputational benefits may emerge indirectly when organizations act in accordance with care-oriented and responsible communication practices.

The presence of a moral compass does not automatically turn the *Affected Circles* framework into a normative theory. The normative dimension primarily resides in the origins of the circles within the psychosocial literature, where prioritization is explicitly linked to vulnerability and harm prevention. In its translation to crisis communication, however, the framework should be understood less as a moral doctrine and more as

a structured way of supporting communicative decision-making. It provides organizations that seek to align with psychosocial guidelines with a systematic approach to weighing priorities, identifying affected groups, and reflecting on appropriate communicative strategies. In this sense, the framework functions as a tool to position crisis communication as a “vehicle,” as advocated by Benedek and Fullerton (2007), through which psychosocial principles can be translated into policy and professional practice. By structuring relational attention across different circles of affected publics, crisis communication becomes a means of more firmly embedding psychosocial principles within organizational response practices.

Theoretical contribution

Beyond its practical guidance, the *Affected Circles* framework positions itself between established reputation-oriented theories, such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) and Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1997), and more relationally oriented approaches, such as the Discourse of Renewal (Ulmer et al., 2007).

While Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Image Repair Theory incorporate expressions of sympathy and adjusting information aimed at stakeholder coping, their primary analytical focus remains centered on organizational image restoration and attribution management. As a result, they tend to privilege external audiences and reputational outcomes. In contrast, the *Affected Circles* framework foregrounds the differentiated relational impact of a crisis across both internal and external publics. Its primary unit of analysis is the configuration of relationships between organizations and differently affected groups during the acute crisis phase.

For example, in the case of an industrial accident, the framework encourages communication practitioners to explicitly consider the communicative implications for injured employees and the next of kin of staff members. This does not preclude transparent communication with external stakeholders; rather, it structures reflection on how information can be shared responsibly without compromising the interests, dignity, or privacy of those directly affected. At the same time, other stakeholders, such as shareholders or regulators, may constitute a distinct circle requiring a differentiated communicative approach.

The theoretical innovation of the *Affected Circles* framework lies in introducing a proximity-based prioritization logic that structures communicative attention from the inside outward, thereby systematically integrating psychosocial principles into crisis communication theory. By structuring relational attention during the crisis response phase, the framework complements reputation-oriented models while extending them with a systematic sensitivity to proximity and impact. From this perspective, the relational foundations established through engagement with *Affected Circles* during the crisis phase create the conditions under which post-crisis communication strategies, including those aligned with the Discourse of Renewal (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002; Seeger et al., 2005; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002), can be credibly developed and enacted. In this way, renewal does not emerge in isolation, but build upon the relationships that were acknowledged and cultivated during the acute phase of the crisis.

Acknowledging that a supportive psychosocial context for directly affected individuals can contribute to both individual and collective resilience, the *Affected Circles* framework aligns with the Citizen Crisis Communication (CCC) framework

(Johansson et al., 2023), which conceptualizes crisis communication in terms of strengthening citizens' survival, democratic, and social capabilities. While CCC focuses on the capabilities that crisis communication should enable at the level of citizens, *Affected Circles* operates at the relational—organizational level by structuring communicative attention toward differently affected groups during the acute phase of a crisis. In this sense, the two frameworks are complementary: CCC articulates the resilience-related outcomes of crisis communication, whereas *Affected Circles* specifies the relational preconditions that make those outcomes more attainable.

Potential vulnerabilities and limitations

At the same time, the *Affected Circles* model is not without vulnerabilities. First, the boundaries between the circles are not always clearly delineated in practice. There is no singular or homogeneous group of “the affected,” as individuals may experience the psychosocial impact of a crisis in markedly different ways. Although those affected are positioned at the center of the model, this does not imply that the communicative approach toward all affected individuals should be uniform. Rather, the implications for communication may differ depending on personal circumstances, preferences, and levels of vulnerability. Importantly, legal constraints and disaster management procedures may limit the ability to identify affected individuals, such as eyewitnesses, which complicates the practical “how” of applying the *Affected Circles*, as evidenced in prior work on identification and registration challenges in disasters (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2019; Stene et al., 2022).

In addition, individuals may simultaneously occupy multiple circles or shift from one position to another as a crisis unfolds. A case in point is the position of journalists as representatives of professional groups, whose role and proximity to the crisis are not always unambiguous. As Englund and Arnberg (2018) showed in interviews with 22 survivors of the Estonia ferry disaster, survivors' experiences with journalists were both negative and positive, suggesting that shielding those affected from all media attention is not always necessary. Moreover, in her dissertation, Englund (2008) describes the impact that disasters and crises can have on media professionals who, while performing their duties during events such as the Gothenburg nightclub fire, become eyewitnesses to traumatic events and may face the greatest professional challenges of their lives. Along similar lines, Englund et al. (2023), drawing on the 2010 Haiti earthquake as a case study, found that many journalists described their assignment as difficult and emotionally demanding, yet also as an eye-opening and life-changing experience. In other words, journalists are not merely observers of crises from the second circle, but may simultaneously find themselves positioned close to the innermost circle of those affected. This implies that communicating organizations, whether corporate or governmental, must remain attentive to such shifting positions and be responsive to signals indicating evolving communicative and psychosocial needs, both in how they engage with journalists and in how communication toward stakeholders in other circles is calibrated.

This requires ongoing reinterpretation and may lead to tensions in prioritization, for example when professionals themselves are seriously affected or when public outrage escalates rapidly. Second, there is a risk that the model is applied too statically, as if the circles were fixed, whereas crises are inherently dynamic. Finally, the strong normative

focus on the innermost circles may generate friction with external pressures, such as media attention, political accountability, or legal requirements for transparency. The model therefore warns against essentialism, does not call for mechanical application, but for reflective use. It should be employed as a conceptual lens that supports careful judgment, rather than as a prescriptive formula that automates decision making.

A concrete limitation of the model is that it has, to date, primarily been developed and applied within a Dutch context. At the same time, the five essential elements identified by Hobfoll et al. (2007), as well as earlier concentric models such as those proposed by Gersons et al. (2005) and Silk and Goldman (2013), are grounded in principles that are widely regarded as universal. This suggests that while the underlying logic of concentric differentiation is broadly applicable, its practical enactment inevitably requires contextual tailoring.

In the Netherlands, for example, mayors play a relatively prominent role in crisis communication. They are involved in processes of collective mourning and in maintaining contact with those affected at the local level (Jong et al., 2018), a role that is organized differently in other governance contexts. Comparable functions may be fulfilled by religious leaders or faith-based communities in other countries. This does not call the concentric structure of the circles themselves into question, but it does imply that the interpretation and communicative enactment of each circle may vary across settings. In this sense, the *Affected Circles* are best understood as conceptually transferable rather than procedurally prescriptive.

Although the *Affected Circles* were developed primarily within a governmental context, the model also holds potential for application in corporate crises alongside more established reputation-oriented frameworks. This is particularly relevant once corporate crises involve people who are directly affected. In such situations, the model helps shift the communicative perspective away from reputation and crisis responsibility alone toward concerns that are central to care and psychosocial acknowledgment. In line with Jong and Brataas (2021), we therefore argue that it is an ethical duty of crisis communication scholarship to incorporate the interests of those directly affected and to contribute to communication that is both caring and meaningful for all stakeholders.

Practical implications

In Textbox 1, we provide an overview of the application of the *Affected Circles* framework to demonstrate how the model can guide concrete choices regarding tone, timing, and sequencing. The circles are illustrated using the case of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, which was shot down over an area controlled by Russian-backed separatists (Dutch Safety Board, 2015). All 283 passengers and 15 crew members died, including 193 Dutch nationals. As the examples in Textbox 1 show, relations in the aftermath of MH17 were built on the spot. In some cases, such as communication with residents or employees, relationships are already in place and can serve as a relational foundation during the crisis. In industrial accidents, for instance, existing organizational ties may provide a stronger basis for engagement than relationships that must be established under highly stressful conditions.

However, crises such as MH17 often affect individuals who were previously unknown to the organization or public authority. In such cases, the *Affected Circles* framework does not

Box 1. Applying the *Affected Circles* Framework to the MH17 Disaster.

The downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 in 2014 over eastern Ukraine was a unique crisis with a profound societal impact in the Netherlands. All 298 passengers and crew perished, leaving no survivors in the innermost circle, the directly affected. Instead, the bereaved families and next of kin became the most proximal group and required immediate and sensitive communication. As a lens, the *Affected Circles* framework illustrates the differentiated communication applied in the response by Dutch authorities and organizations. Several key actors, including mayors, the Information and Referral Center (IRC), an online one-stop service environment, and the Dutch Safety Board (DSB), addressed multiple circles simultaneously.

Mayors: Bridging Public and Private Support

Mayors played a dual role by acting as both public leaders and private supporters for the bereaved in Circle 2 and the broader community in Circle 4. Their actions reflected the framework's emphasis on relational proximity and meaning-making. On the one hand, mayors publicly announced and confirmed the names of victims, attended memorial services, and mourned alongside local communities (Jong et al., 2016). These actions provided collective acknowledgment and public sensemaking for the wider public in Circle 4. On the other hand, they prioritized home visits to bereaved families, a practice rarely seen in other crises, which underscored the need for personal and empathetic engagement (Jong et al., 2021). Mayors focused on meaning-making, remembrance, and offering a listening ear, thereby prioritizing the psychosocial well-being of families in Circle 2 (Jong et al., 2016). Their role highlights how geographical distance, since the disaster occurred thousands of miles away, did not diminish the importance of proximity-guided communication.

Information and Referral Center (IRC): Centralizing Support Across Circles

The IRC served as a central hub for information and psychosocial support and addressed the needs of bereaved families in Circle 2, professionals in Circle 3, and the public in Circle 4. For families in Circle 2, the IRC provided reliable and accessible information and coordinated support services, which reduced the risk of them feeling abandoned (van Herpen et al., 2022). Its accessibility and reliability were particularly valued by those navigating grief and practical challenges. For professionals in Circle 3, such as family liaison officers, victim support staff, and healthcare workers, the IRC facilitated internal coordination and consistent information exchange, ensuring that task-oriented roles were supported without overlooking emotional needs. For the public in Circle 4, the IRC offered transparency and factual updates, helping to manage public uncertainty while maintaining clear boundaries to protect the privacy of the inner circles.

Dutch Safety Board: Balancing Technical Rigor and Relational Sensitivity

The DSB's communication strategy addressed both bereaved families in Circle 2 and the public in Circle 4, demonstrating how technical investigations can be aligned with relational responsibilities. Relatives were informed of investigative progress before public announcements, showing deliberate sequencing in the sharing of information. This ensured that families received clear and respectful information directly from the primary source before broader dissemination through the media. The meticulous reconstruction of the aircraft served as a visual and symbolic tool to communicate findings to families, professionals, and the public (Kuipers et al., 2020). Moreover, the DSB published a special and accessible book on the investigation, written in collaboration with a journalist (Kuipers et al., 2020), aimed at both bereaved families in Circle 2 and professional audiences in Circle 3. This approach balanced technical transparency with emotional sensitivity and addressed the needs of multiple circles simultaneously. The DSB's efforts underscore the framework's principle of uncertainty reduction, not only for operational clarity but also to support the well-being of those most affected.

Colleagues and Neighbors: Expanding the Circle of Care

The MH17 disaster revealed the importance of extending support beyond immediate families to include colleagues, neighbors, and wider social networks, groups that are often overlooked in crisis responses and belong to Circle 2. Research in the aftermath of MH17 showed that colleagues and neighbors, individuals with long-standing and trusting relationships with victims, experienced significant distress and at times felt left alone (Yzermans et al., 2020). It was therefore recommended to include colleagues and neighbors in supportive activities, such as public speeches, support websites like the IRC, or through workplace representatives maintaining contact with families (Yzermans et al., 2020). While governments and media often focus on families and close relatives, even relatively small efforts to acknowledge other audiences within the circles can mitigate feelings of isolation and foster community resilience.

The Challenge of Matching Diverse Needs

The MH17 response (for other examples, see Jacobs et al. (2019)) illustrates the complexity of tailoring communication to audiences with markedly different needs. Inner circles, including bereaved families, colleagues, and neighbors, require highly personal, sensitive, and detailed communication that prioritizes empathy, privacy, and actionable support. Professionals, including first responders, support providers, and investigators, operate at the intersection and require clear and role-specific communication that supports both operational continuity and emotional well-being. Outer circles, including the public and media, need general, transparent, and appropriately distanced information that balances public accountability with respect for those most affected.

The case illustrates how the *Affected Circles* framework guides concrete decisions regarding tone, for example empathetic and private engagement with bereaved families, timing and sequencing, such as informing inner circles before public disclosure, and prioritization, meaning placing the needs of directly affected groups before reputational considerations. In doing so, the framework operationalizes relational proximity in ways that differ from reputation-driven crisis communication models, where communicative strategies are primarily organized around image restoration and attribution management.

assume pre-existing stakeholder relations, but rather requires that the organizational system is capable of rapidly identifying and mapping those who become affected. The model therefore presupposes relational capacity: either through sustained engagement before a crisis occurs, or through institutional preparedness that enables swift recognition and engagement once new affected publics emerge.

The focus of the *Affected Circles* framework is on crises involving individuals who experience direct victimization or psychosocial harm. Under those kinds of circumstances, organizations or government officials may hesitate to build relationships with affected individuals, particularly when they are perceived as highly responsible for the crisis. Yet relational engagement should not be understood as a liability. Empirical findings from a survey among mayors indicate that they generally report positively about the social support provided to affected residents, regardless of the specific crisis context (Jong et al., 2021). This suggests that proactive relational engagement can function as a source of legitimacy rather than risk, even under conditions of heightened responsibility.

Conclusion

This article builds on earlier work that translated psychosocial principles into crisis communication. In particular, Jong and Brataas (2021) focused on what meaningful crisis communication toward victims should achieve, by articulating how communicative practices can contribute to a sense of safety, calming, self- and community efficacy, connectedness, and hope. The present article complements this perspective, and deepens the meaning-making assignment for crisis leaders toward affected populations (Dückers et al., 2017), by shifting attention to how these communicative aims can be enacted across different groups of those affected and the people who support them.

By introducing *Affected Circles* as a framework for audience segmentation, this article demonstrates that the translation of psychosocial principles into crisis communication should not be uniform, but differentiated according to degrees of impact, proximity, and relational responsibility among audiences. In doing so, the *Affected Circles* turns psychosocial principles into actionable guidance for crisis communication practice.


As such, *Affected Circles* does not prescribe how organizations should communicate in every situation, but serves as a guiding principle that helps crisis professionals navigate tone and sensitivity across different audiences. Taken together, these contributions suggest that effective and caring crisis communication requires both substantive clarity about its goals and relational sensitivity in determining how those goals can be communicated to different affected audiences.

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